**The Army**

**Behind enemy lines**

Eventually we moved forward and took up a defensive position in open country where we hastily took out our picks and shovels, and while our vehicles were being driven away to be hidden in the woods about 300 yards away, we took off our jackets and feverishly started to dig in. It was dusk, and being behind enemy lines we knew we had to work fast. Unfortunately we hadn't time to dig down far before down they came, the Moaning Minnies. When they got their range, they were giving us hell with the inevitable casualties.

Yet even during these adversities, in a macabre kind of way one can still get a chuckle now and again. Such was the case when our platoon sergeant, Sgt Meen, ran from his partly built trench close by and was dancing around with trousers and pants down around his ankles shouting 'I've been hit, I've been hit!' There was a wound about the size of an old penny piece in the cheek of his behind. While I quickly applied a field dressing, he was getting the usual unsympathetic remarks from those around, reserved for those deemed to have received a superficial wound. 'You lucky sod', and 'Just like you to get a Blighty', and so on. A vehicle tore out from the woods and whisked him away. We were to hear later that his leg had to be amputated from the hip. Not so lucky after all.

The situation had now become so intolerable, the shelling was so fast and furious it wasn't possible to stand and dig. We just lay low and prayed until eventually we were given the order to get out of there. Our vehicles raced out to us under cover of darkness, we grabbed our digging utensils and jackets and were whisked back into the cover of the woods where we were to dig in again on the outskirts. In the mêlée, I had grabbed another man's jacket - Gdsm Merritt's. He couldn't find his and returned without one. So if anyone should come across my jacket, in the breast pocket was my army-issued Bible with my army number stencilled on the cover, 2615652. Some hope?

The mortaring and shelling continued throughout the night. We were to move off at first light, but we hadn't gone far when we were pounced on from behind by four German fighter planes flying very low, about 100ft. They took no action, thank God, and because it happened so quickly and with surprise we didn't have time to engage them. What that was all about we shall never know.

Leaving our vehicles behind, we continued our advance on foot under heavy enemy shell fire. A Bren gun carrier was racing back carrying two stretchers on top. One of them was Fred Bottom, who had been slightly wounded in the back, I later learned. On his return some weeks later he said that while being conveyed back, the carrier ran over a mine, throwing him and another chappie off the stretchers, but it did not cause any further injuries.

My father had to leave to go to war with the 8th Army Artillery Division (the Desert Rats) on my birthday. He was aged 39. His name was Geoffrey Charles Proctor. I was named as near as possible to him, Georgina.

When he was back from the front, he did not talk much about the war, but one of the things we did find out was the reason the centre crease in his tongue had a split in it, about 1/4 inch wide.

The 8th Army were advancing through the North African desert and dad was in a trench that he had been digging, and which was quite deep with shoring. A bomb dropped close by and the trench collapsed, burying him. It was fortunate that a piece or pieces of the shoring supporting the trench walls kept him from being totally buried, as this stopped him being crushed to death. He started to try and dig himself out, which was successful - but it took three days.

When he managed to free himself, he discovered that he was now on his own as his comrades believed him to be dead and had advanced even further to track Rommel's Spook Division. In order to try and catch them up, and to survive the desert heat and sand, there were certain things that he knew would help keep him alive. He had a piece of muslin into which he put an amount of sand, then he had to urinate into the sand and let it filter into his mug. This had to be done at least three times to semi-purify it, and then he would drink it (he ran out of purifying tablets).

He also had to eat, and the only thing that he could do was to catch lizards etc. He dared not light a fire to cook them as this would have brought attention to his whereabouts, so he had to eat them raw. This, coupled with the lack of clean water and dehydration, was the cause of his tongue splitting.

The Battle of the Somme is one of the most famous military events in British history – synonymous with huge loss of life and costly failure. After months of deadlock on the Western Front, a joint British and French offensive was planned to break through the German lines north of the River Somme in mid-1916. Donald Murray became aware of increasing preparations during the summer.

*We didn’t realise then what was in the offing, but we soon learned because we started making preparations, preparing for a really big affair. In May they took us from the line, back about 10 km – right away from the fighting. And there they’d got the whole country flagged out, an exact replica of the German lines with little flags. We started practising the attack, ready for the big attack, this big attack that was to come. In the meantime there was a constant procession of guns, guns, guns going up. Instead of the big guns that used to lie right back – miles back – they were bringing them right up, right up into the front.*

Charles Quinnell, of the Royal Fusiliers, also noted the signs of an impending offensive.

*By this time we realised that something big was being prepared because we could see the number of guns – new guns – that were arriving on the front; the amount of shells that were coming. There’d been a great shortage before but now you could see the railways were loaded up with guns; ammunition; wagons and so forth and so on. And we knew something big was coming off.*

British NCO A Wood found out why such a large volume of guns and ammunition was being moved to the front.

*We were taken out of the front line and we were taken to an obscure place – I couldn’t tell you where, it were 60 years ago! – and we were told by the generals of the battle that was going to be on the first of July.* *And we were also told that there wouldn’t be a German within miles because the front line would be flattened by the artillery, which had been bombarding it.*

The British Commander-in-Chief, General Sir Douglas Haig, planned an intensive week-long bombardment of the German lines. He hoped that this would enable the infantry to break through, and be followed up by a strong cavalry advance. Royal Garrison Artillery officer Maurice Laws described his role in the bombardment.

*Well I was an observation officer for the battery in a forward O.P. [Observation Post]. I had a couple of signallers with me and a telephone communication with the battery. My job was to observe the fire of the battery on our various targets all day. I started at dawn and went on until dusk. Every evening a fatigue party arrived with water and food and mail and went away again. We lived there like that and I stayed there until certainly the evening of the first of July. Then I went back to the battery. I could hardly read anything, because my eyes were so strained from looking through prismatic glasses all that time. And you see, shooting at a trench you’ve got to be exact and you’ve got to be very careful. It went on day after day, there were hours and hours of so much daylight, I wished to God it was midnight! It really was very trying.*

John Patrick Connolly was 23-years-old when he went missing during an assault. What follows is an extract from the regimental diary of the 2nd battalion Yorkshire Regiment.

*The Attack on Trones Wood, Somme, 8th July 1916.*

*5-45am – The battalion moved off up the valley by Talus Boisse to a position just west of Bernafay Wood with orders to attack and take the southern portion of Trones Wood.*

*This accomplished the Wiltshires were to attack from Maltz Horn Alley their right joining up with the left of the French who were attacking at the same time.*

*The 19th Manchesters were in trenches behind available for support and the 18th Kings Liverpools were detailed to provide carrying parties, battalion HQ was at the Briqueterie.*

*7-15am – “C” Company under Capt Maude entered Bernafay Wood followed in succession by the bombing sections, “D” Company under Capt Belcher, “B” Company under 2nd Lt Hubbard and “A” Company under Capt Colley.*

*8-00am – Under severe shellfire which caused casualties before starting and added to some confusion caused by the passage through the wood.*

*“C” Company emerged from the wood and commenced to cross the open space between it and Trones Wood.*

*For about 80 yards rising ground gave some cover but immediately this was topped a very heavy machine gun and rifle fire was opened from the edge of Trones Wood and the front line was practically hit to a man.*

*Some men got into Trones Alley a communication trench between the two woods and Lt Field with the battalion bombers made an attempt to bomb up it and get into the wood, snipers in trees defeated this and seeing that without further and more powerful artillery support a direct attack was hopeless and a withdrawal to Bernafay Wood was ordered at 8-30am*

*The Germans now commenced a heavy and constant bombardment of Bernafay Wood with guns of every calibre.*

*Cover was poor and for the rest of the day the battalion could do nothing but hold on under heavy punishment.*

*Casualties were numerous and the removal of wounded was a matter of the greatest difficulty.*

*Mens nerves were subjected to probably the greatest strain the battalion had yet to bear in this war and it was with great relief that at 7-00pm orders were received to withdraw.*

*Casualties were,*

*Officers killed = 3*

*Officers wounded = 4.*

*Other ranks killed = 19*

*Wounded = 116*

*Missing = 17*