

WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION, LANCASHIRE NORTH BRANCH

DESPATCH: May 2013 - Supplementary Information

A STORY OF LIFE IN WWI BY FREDERICK THOMAS HEMMING

Written in August 1972 at the request of his son Michael.

Dear Mike - as you requested I will do my best to relate my experiences and events in the War of 1914 - 1918. I was a little over seventeen and a half years old when war broke out on August 4th and a bound apprentice at Averys. In the early days the news from the front was grim and the British Expeditionary Force were very hard pressed, so you will understand most young men were anxious to enlist and get out to help.

I had a lot of opposition from my parents and it took me until Christmas to wear them down. First I had to get their permission and then from Avery's, so on the 7th January 1915 I enlisted in the 4th Battalion York & Lancs Hallamshire Rifles, still not quite eighteen but giving my age as nineteen. After having my medical etc. at Hyde Park Barracks in Sheffield I got kitted out with a blue peaked cap with red piping, a khaki greatcoat and a pair of puttees. Some of the chaps got red tunics but the great part about it was the twenty-one shillings pay, made up of one shilling a day plus fourteen shillings a week lodging allowance.

Needless to say this didn't last long. Two or three weeks square bashing then off to Nottingham as a unit. We were billeted in private houses. I had made a home allowance of six pence a day which meant that I only drew three shillings and six pence a week but we were quite happy and anxious to get trained and get out to the front before it was all over! After a few weeks we were transferred to Strensall Camp, near York, (six miles from nowhere). Now we were soldiering properly with miles of plains. Under canvas with sixteen to twenty per bell tent, rifles stacked to the centre tent pole then we all laid down together. It was God help the man at the flap.

We did a lot of field manoeuvres and fired our rifle course on the range where I passed out as a first class shot, not quite a marksman. Life was not bad there; plenty of bull of course and you will probably recollect the incident that I once told you about, of the route march we enjoyed one pleasant afternoon, all round the plain approximately 6 miles in clean fatigue dress. The outcome of which we did not enjoy, having to do it all over again in the evening in full marching order. The reason for this was we were being led on this march by Lt. Firth, who joined up with us, but he was destined to become an officer and the whole Company gave him a real welcome on this his first command with us. As you well know on the march the troops get involved in singing all the popular songs, it helps the feet. Anyway we were within half a mile of the Camp on our return feeling tired and ready for tea and rest when one of the wags led off with that well known song 'And a little child shall lead them'. No need to tell you it went down well. We kept it going right to the entrance to our lines, where we got the order 'March to attention.' At that time we marched on columns of fours and when we got to the halting place we got the order, 'Halt.'

Then instead of the order, 'Right turn, into two ranks.' We were left standing. Lt. Firth, having left us there for the best part of ten minutes returned and said, "B Company right turn." He looked at his watch, and then he bawled out, "Fall in, in thirty minutes time - in full marching order, and this time a little child will lead you on horseback." And he did, needless to say there was no singing on that march.

We were becoming trained and something like soldiers. It would be about the beginning of May 1915 when we marched into York for the Military Sunday Parade, through the City to the Minster. It was a grand sight with all the Garrison troops marching past the Saluting Base where the Command General took the Salute. The Scots Greys lined the route, all mounted, a very impressive spectacle. The Church Service was held with seven Massed Bands playing.

An amusing incident occurred as B Company, my Company, passed the Saluting Base. We were led by our Captain Coombs who was on horseback. You can imagine how particular he would be with his words of command. "B Company, Eyes Right." We continued for some considerable distance like this waiting for the next order. He must have had a lapse of memory. The order didn't come and we were getting dizzy by this time. Suddenly he bawled out, "B Company, Eyes back again." You can imagine his embarrassment. I understood this fully years later when I was giving commands. It was so easy to slip

up. Needless to say we all enjoyed this parade.

We were now becoming a trained unit. It would have been sometime in May that word got around that a Draft was wanted for France to reinforce the 1st Battalion who had gone out in early April. There was no lack of volunteers as we were afraid it might be over before we could get there. They picked twenty-four men but I wasn't included so I reported to the O. C. that Pte. Borbridge, who was one of those picked, was underage and that I should take his place which I did. I was only a few months older than him.

We were kitted out and set off on the long trail from Strensall. We arrived in Southampton where we joined a few thousand more soldiers and then aboard our ship and we set sail, what a journey! We were packed like sardines on all decks. We were on the top deck and just dropped with our kit anywhere we could find a space. Some of the chaps had brought pork pies which they had bought before we set off. It wasn't long before we were rolling about, or rather sliding about with the roll of the ship. This caused sea sickness for many of the men and they were soon bringing up their pork pies and other things, the lot. Weren't we glad when we landed at Le Havre eight hours later. Apparently we had to take a detour to avoid submarines. It was great to be on terra firma, as we marched to the Base Camp there were thousands of troops of all kinds either waiting to go up the line or going the other way.

We were soon introduced to the well known game of housy-housy. The games were run by old sweats doing staff jobs at the Camp. You can guess that our sixpence a day didn't last very long but it did not matter because where we were going we did not need money. About a week later our party, all twenty-four of us were introduced to L/Cpl H. Foers who had come down from the front to escort us to Poperinge the railhead serving the Ypres sector. What a journey that was. The French trains went so slow we took it in turns to drop out of the cattle wagons onto the line and run foreward up to the engine where the driver would open the hot water valve, we caught the hot water in our dixies and waited for our truck to catch up, hand up the hot water and jump back on. Then we enjoyed a nice cup of tea. We eventually arrived at Poperinge, which is about ten km. from Ypres. It was well populated with very little damage at this time. We had a few hours rest here and then up the line for the first time.

Under cover of darkness we filed into a communications trench, quite near to Essex Farm (you remember it on the map we saw at Hill Sixty). It was situated near the Gsel canal bank, which in this sector was the second line of defence. Our Battalion holding the line which was the extreme left of the British line. We continued our journey up this trench know as Campbell Avenue on the way up to the front line, known as Barnsley Road, where we met our comrades of the 1 - 4th battalion who had been in the Armentieres sector before coming here. I was posted to No. 7 Platoon B Company.

When daylight came I was posted on sentry duty by my Sergeant who showed me how to use a periscope. He gave me one which fitted on the point of the bayonet. I had to stand with my back to the parapet and carefully move the periscope upwards to see what was going on. I carried out the instructions slowly, first seeing the sandbags on top of the parapet then the barbed wire, then the grass of no-mans land and finally the German trenches about fifty yards away when bang went my periscope off the end of my bayonet. I was a bit worried at losing this expensive bit of equipment on my first effort at sentry, but the Sergeant didn't seem to mind. He brought me a metal box periscope this time and showed me how to use same. This time I stood on the fire step facing the parapet and pushing it up as before. As I saw the German parapet bang another periscope gone and blood running down my tunic front and the singing noise of an explosive bullet ringing in my head.

I thought that I had had it, but all that had happened was splinter of glass or metal had cut my chin. Nothing much to see when the blood was wiped away. Not a bad start was it? The Sergeant said, "That'll teach you to keep your head down." And by God it did.

I learned after what an advantage Jerry had over us. They had armoured plates with a small opening for their rifles built into their sandbags whilst our firing point was exposed on top of our parapet. This, you will understand, was trench warfare. We spent eight days in the line and then four days out, three or four km. behind the line, resting and cleaning up. Each night of the four we returned in fatigue parties, either carrying up arms or working under the direction of the Royal Engineers, anything to be at the front in case of a surprise attack.

One night about a month after our arrival at the front we were out in front of the line in Lancashire farm sector which was just to the left of Barnsley Road. We were on a wiring job when Jerry gave us a burst of machine gun fire, Joe Glew got one through the arm. He was the first casualty of our lot that went out

together.

We were now getting used to things which were anything but pleasant but the trenches were dry for which we were very thankful. I remember one night on sentry in this sector. We stood on the fire step looking out into the blackness and listening for any sign of movement. I thought I'll have a go tonight, we had been taught to observe the enemy position by watching the flash from their rifles. So I took a steady sighting on where I saw the flash but before I could fire, a Jerry bullet hit the barrel of my rifle and ricocheted away. By the way when we were training in England the instructors told us that the Germans fired from the hip position and were very poor shots.

One afternoon in this sector Jerry suddenly opened with an artillery bombardment, our second in command, Major Wilkinson was on his rounds, his headquarters being back on the canal bank. He didn't usually stay long up on the front. He said, "Stand steady my men, we have a trench mortar on our right, a whizz bang on our left and the wind is in our favour." He wasn't kidding either, at this time all we had was our rifles and very little artillery behind us. But we did get a ration of scrap iron bits or steel end bits. When things were quiet in the daytime we used milk and jam tins to make our own grenades. We rammed earth then scrap then earth and so on till the tin was full then with a bit of wire on the top we fastened what we considered was 5 second length of fuse pushed into the soil and scrap.

If we left the fuse a bit too long Jerry had time to throw the grenade back at us, which he did sometimes. Anyway the weeks and the months passed by, sometimes we would get back on our rest days to Poperinge. This was great for us, we could have a steam bath and get cleaned up. We could have a few beers in the Estaminets only a penny a glass, we thought we were in heaven. We could hear the bombardment about ten km. away.

It was here that I attended the opening of the first 'Toc H' club by Tubby Clayton the Padre, in an old shop just off the square. Tubby was a grand chap and still is. He used to come round the lines handing out Woodbines and cheer. That's how he got the name of 'Woodbine Willie'. I was only reading about him and the Toe H movement last week.

Well 1915 was getting on and the bad weather came with it. In the line we were usually up to our knees in sludge and water. If we were lucky we might be able to shelter under a corrugated iron sheet when we were off duty. At that time my platoon was actually on the extreme left of the British line. Our line finished in no-mans land with the Gsel Canal and the French Front Line some four or five hundred yards behind and to the left of us. This meant that Jerry could fire or come up behind us, as well as in front of us. Now you will see the need for the jam tin bombs.

Any casualty left his rifle behind and it was the duty of us that were left to keep them clean and in order. We could then intermittently fire off a rapid volley from different positions in the line using the additional rifles to give the impression that here were a lot of us. A game of bluff, you might say, but it worked.

I remember one afternoon, sometime in September; we were in the second line of defence in this same sector when we got the order to 'Stand To.' We had received some new Artillery to support our front line and they were going to register, which means get the range. Don't forget we were only forty to one hundred yards from the Jerry lines, depending on the terrain. You can imagine our relief knowing that we had now got this support. Unfortunately for our lads in the front line the first salvos fell short of the enemy and smack onto them. What a sight when we went forward to take over. Instead of them over ranging for a start they ranged short and the poor devils got it.

The bad weather crept on and conditions got worse. We had to spend more time in the lines now. We were short of reserves and the water in the trenches was getting deeper and colder. There was a period of twenty-eight days when we were only out of the water when we were on patrol in no mans land or putting up barbed wire. On one occasion during this time we had to do fatigue ration carrying to the front line from the canal bank which was as far as the transport could get. With a couple of sand bags full of rations and the odd box of ammunition slung around our neck and, of course, our own equipment and rifle we would struggle back up the communication trenches through the sludge and water absolutely exhausted.

One occasion one of our men went missing. Every so often a sump was dug in the side of the trench to try to get the water to drain away and lower the level in the trench. Sometime later we found the missing man in one of these sumps. He must have slipped down and because he was so exhausted was not able

to extricate himself from the Flanders Sludge. Apart from the aforesaid we had to carry our tea and water in the standard two gallon petrol can. It tasted marvellous when the cans were new. They were obtained from the transport people. To clean them out we dropped a lighted match into the can, the vapour went off with a bang and the can was ready for water or tea.

About the middle of October, when on one of these fatigues down to the canal bank, we were given some boxes to carry up the line. When we opened them we were amazed to find they were full of Mills hand grenades. We had never seen them before and they gave us some confidence, no more jam tin bombs to make. Also we were getting rations of whale oil now. We were supposed to rub our feet with it every morning after 'stand down'. You can't imagine us doing that can you? It was too much trouble to take our boots and socks off under the water conditions.

In late November we got three new men into our platoon, the weather was getting colder. In less than a week each of these men were carried out with trench feet. On spite of not using the whale oil we seemed to be immune from this affliction. I suppose that we had got hardened to it. Some of the chaps would say, "Wish I could get bloody trench foot and get out of this bloody hole."

This is how we carried on, occasionally getting a few days down in Poperinge for a rest and clean up (and a drop of vin-blanc). We were now holding the extreme left of the British Line again with the French Colonial Troops on our left. Their front line was the canal bank. To get to our front line we had to cross the canal on a narrow wooden bridge which dipped under the water with our body weight. We used to hurry across, one at a time as Jerry was continually machine gunning us. We used to cross in the dark as the enemy was in line with us due to the French position.

December came and the weather worsened, but as I mentioned previously we were holding this extreme left forward position as a bombing post. On the night of December 19th Jerry sent over Phosgene Gas. This was the first ever use of this gas. We were very fortunate in that we were the only troops in that area not to be affected. The gas was fired into the air in cylinders and was then carried on the wind for a distance before it settled on the second and third line trenches and, of course, those troops got it bad. We were saved by our forward position.

Those who were left, i.e. not casualties, were relieved the following day by a fresh Division. As we came out of the front line it was not a pretty sight to see the effects of the gas. It turned everything green and caused the skin to swell, both men and rats. The gas masks that we had were very primitive and not very effective. We couldn't wear them for very long, it was difficult to breathe when we had them on. There were no valves in them it was just a bag dipped in Hypo disinfectant. It fitted down the tunic collar with a piece of celluloid let in as a window to see through. I am sure you can imagine why we did not keep them on for very long.

Our Battalion was very much depleted as a result of this so after a day or so, for cleaning up and reorganising. We found ourselves on the sand dunes of Calais, it was like heaven after six months in the Ypres sector and even though we were in bell tents we didn't mind with Christmas upon us and a few Francs in our pockets we began to celebrate.

I believe I have told you about this episode before: It was Christmas Eve and four of us went into Town, into an Estimet where it was nice and warm. We had a couple of hours drinking rum, but we had to leave at 8 o'clock. That was: when I went blank! It must have been the fresh air, and probably, our poor condition - but I lost my mates and the camp. When I woke up the following morning I was on the sand only a few feet from the sea with the sound of the waves in my ears.

I pulled myself together and managed to travel the half a mile or so back into camp without being noticed, and feeling no worse for another night out. We spent a pleasant few weeks in Calais getting reinforcements to bring us up to strength again. We had more training with the occasional leave in the town, but our six pence a day didn't exactly allow us to paint the town red. Anyway we were paraded as a Battalion. We found out it was a special occasion when General Plummer arrived with his staff to inspect us, and to talk to us. He was the Army Commander and he congratulated on our efforts at Ypres. He told us he was sending us for a rest and a change of scenery down to the Somme sector.

We didn't mind this as we had heard that conditions were much better, i.e. hard and dry ground instead of the Flanders mud. He omitted to tell us that we were going to march there, which we did in five days continuous with full pack and everything on. We rested only at night, kipping down in bams. You have

seen something of the cobbled roads so you can imagine what they were like then. Talk about blisters, we had fresh ones every day.

On the fifth day we were within sound of the line on the Somme and that fifth day a young Second Lt. Firth joined us. Straight out from Blighty with brand new kit and a brand new Sam Brown, and damn me if he wasn't posted to our platoon, No. 7 B Company. We recognised him because he had joined up with us at Hyde Park. We were all recruits together in civvies. I am explaining all this to you so you will understand our feelings at what happened next.

The rules when on the march, which we did in columns of fours, were that every hour we halted and fell out on the right of the road for ten minutes rest. Second Lt. Firth was leading the platoon and every few minutes he would bawl out, "Left right left right.", just as if we were on the barrack square. You can imagine me being the left hand man of the last line of our platoon. The right hand side of the road was an embankment. On the command, "Halt!" the chaps on the right just flopped down. It was difficult for the left hand files to find a place to drop in, so I said to myself, "B****r it", and just dropped down where I was. Down comes Lt. Firth (we called him Milky Firth) with his cane tapping me on the shoulder. He ordered me to move over to the other side of the road. I looked at him quietly for a moment, then I jumped up as fast as I could, still holding my rifle with my pack on the barrel and the butt in the air. I threatened to do him if he didn't B****r off. He looked amazed but he did B****r off. Sergeant Dodd was resting just behind me, he jumped up and grabbed me or I am sure that I would have hit the officer.

We resumed the march but there was no more left right left right and within an hour we were in the line. The ground and the trenches were chalky and dry. Lt. Firth did not report me apparently he'd had second thoughts. We found conditions at the front much better than the Ypres and Flanders front. The enemy trenches were further away lessening the chance of surprise attacks and much better ground conditions for patrolling between the lines, a job that I got fairly regularly. We got more regular rest spells out of the line which we looked forward to.

During one of these spells I was in for promotion, drilling a section with the expectation of being a leader NCO under the jurisdiction of the Sergeant Major. He was an ex Navy man and a great chewer of twist tobacco. One afternoon he positioned me just inside the gate in a field then he took the rest of the section to the other side of the field. He then told me to put them through the drill routine. There was I shouting instructions at the top of my voice and the squad just standing at ease and making no movement at all. He came tearing across the field and told me that they could not hear a word I was shouting, so he gave me a piece of twist, "To strengthen my voice,"

It made me heave but drill was over for the day. I was now acting NCO. Then we went back into the line for another spell, it wasn't too bad. I had plenty to occupy my mind for I was now squad commander. It was fairly quiet on this front, of course it was all boiling up for the big push but we didn't know much about it at that time, but we could guess with the amount of armour and fresh troops we saw on our spells out, we had a good idea.

I got twenty eight days No. 1 for a misdemeanour; we were in a village called Talmas about ten km. behind the lines. Our prison was a barn behind an Estimet in the main Street. I made friends with an old regular and the two of us stayed together. He showed me the ropes. We did two hours digging in the mornings, two hours tied up in the afternoon and two hours pack drill at night. Rations were biscuits, bully and water. We got tea once a day under the eyes of a Sergeant MP, but we had more grub during this time than we had normally. The lads of the platoon used to smuggle food to us when the Sergeant tied us up to the trees in the yard and he had gone about his other duties. Also the Madame at the Estimet would watch for him going then she would cone out to us with a glass of beer each and pour it down our throats while we slipped down the tree a bit. We really enjoyed it as the weather was fairly hot at this time.

One afternoon in the last week of my jankers Dick, my fellow prisoner, said to me, "Eh up Fred, aren't tha fed up wi this?" I said that I was, he asked me, "What religion are you?" I said that I was Church of England. He said that he was Roman Catholic and seeing that it was Easter time he could demand permission to attend these Church sessions every night of the week. I am not kidding when I say that he was a rum character. His idea was that the two of us attend the church evening and thus dodge the nightly pack drills. Naturally I agreed.

At 6 o'clock each evening the church bells rang out in the village and the locals answered the call. The Sergeant would parade us two with buttons polished and webbing belts on. He carried side arms and he

marched us down the main street of the village to the church. Occasionally some of our mates would see us and shout out, "Hi Fred", as we passed but we were marching to attention so we could only smile back. I am telling you Mick we did smile; it was far better than pack drill.

This continued each evening through the week and we were laughing. The following Monday morning, much to our surprise, he marched us down to the church again. We could not understand it because the religious festival was over. But we soon found out, when we got to the church he gave us a bucket, scrubbing brush and cloth each and ordered us to scrub the church floor which was stone. I could see the funny side of the episode after the event, but it was a welcome change from digging. Wasn't it?

Very soon after this I was back with my platoon and doing our eight days in the line and four days out so I quickly forgot about the Talmas time. It wasn't too bad in this sector, as I said before, conditions were better than Flanders and I soon got my acting rank back. Very soon after this when we were out of the line for a spell and were put on a fatigue party working for the Royal Engineers under a Canadian officer. He taught us the art of lumber jacking, we had to fell trees to cut a path through a wood so that the Engineers could lay a railway track. We really enjoyed it swinging the axe and we could tell that this would lead up to the big push.

On one of our front line spells on the Somme sector. It was a quiet afternoon and I was dozing in a cut out in the parador, you couldn't call it a dug out. It was only deep enough to lie in. There was a loud explosion which almost blew me out. The sentry, was a very reliable ex miner named Dave, I asked him, "Where was that one Dave?" He said that it was just in front of the parapet. "Right," I said, "if that's how they want it, they can have it." I got a message off to signals to contact the Artillery for support. Then I opened fire on Jerry with rifle grenades, their line was only about a hundred yards away. We had a real ding dong for two to three hours. Fortunately we had no casualties and when night time came on things settled down and it was fairly quiet.

It was always my policy that if Jerry played it awkward with us, I replied with what we had got very quickly and, in my experience, it paid off! The following morning I was visiting my sentry's. When I got to Dave he said, "Hey up Fred, what was that flare up yesterday." I said "What about it, if Jerry wants to play rough, then we'll play rough." He said, "It wasn't Jerry who caused that explosion." I said, "Who was it then?" He said that it was Windy Nelson in the next fire bay. He had been given a Mills hand grenade with the pin out so he threw it over the top. I had to play it down with Dave and Nelson but time passed with nothing more said, it was just one of those things, best forgotten. But that was my attitude to the enemy. If Nelson saw me preparing the rifle grenades, he would say, "The mad B is off again, he'll get us all blown up."

This sort of trench warfare continued in and out of the line. As we went about our business we could see the build up taking place with lots more artillery, of all calibres, getting positioned and much more troop movement all getting ready for the big push. It was summer time 1916 and the weather was good. One day, out of the line I met an old friend from home, Billy White. He and I were in the same class at school, went to church and played football together. Billy was in the field artillery and he told me that things were definitely hotting up. Being behind the lines he could see a lot more of what was going on.

He asked me if I would like a pair of riding trousers, obviously I said yes because they fit better and look smarter and I was glad to throw my old ones away. Billy and I met only once more and then we were off again into the line for our spell, I did not see him again until after the war. It was fairly quiet in the line this time. It was the lull before the storm. When we came out of the line this time we went a few km. further back where we found troop concentrations and artillery almost wheel to wheel.

One afternoon we were lolling about behind a Howitzer gun emplacement, it was a fairly big one, with the barrel pointing almost straight up. When they fired the howitzer we could see the shell leave the gun and follow it's trajectory. It was a most unusual sight for us, normally we were on the receiving end. Anyway it was now time for action. We were marched up in short stages under cover of darkness to our position of attack for the 1st July 1916 for the Battle of the Somme.

We were positioned in Theipval Wood, which was on sloping ground. The ground sloped upwards away from us and the front line was on top of the rise in front of the wood. We stood to in the early hours before dawn, with bayonets fixed, waiting for the signal. This was happening with thousands of troops all along the front and for many thousands it would be their last.

Suddenly the biggest ever known bombardment opened up. I can assure you Mike it was like hell, the

whole front lit up with bursting shells of all calibres. Then Jerry knew that we were coming and their bombardment replied. When I think about it now I wonder why, or rather how, we got through it. Anyway the word came for us to go over the top and being in the Company bombing section, we were the first out led by Lt. Wilson of the Sheffield Smelting Co. Our objective, of course, was the German front line which as far as I can remember was four to five hundred yards away.

We did it in short rushes, dodging the shell blasts as best we could. Anyway we arrived at the Jerry front line - clearing it with a few grenades and getting down into the trenches. Lt. Brown asked me, "Hemming, where is the rest of the Company?" I replied, "As far as I know they were following me, Sir when I got over the top." He said, "Well we are here on our own. Do you think you could find your way back and bring them over?" I said that I could and he asked me how. I said, "Well Sir I noticed a stunted tree with just a single branch on it about halfway across no-mans land. It was the only thing left standing in that territory. "Right," he said, "get going and try to get them over here." It was still some time before daybreak and I assure you I wasn't hanging about. I found the tree and the place where we left our line. I passed the word to the others to follow me across and we made it, well most of us anyway. So B Company reached it's objective and we manned the enemy front line.

Daylight came and we found the trenches were so blown in that if we stood up our heads were above the parapet level and that was fatal so we did a lot of digging and made a block in the trench, posted a sentry in the prone position and got working on our rations as we were without water and the weather was hot. You can imagine we were all pretty tired so we laid down in the bottom of the trench dozing.

We knew that Jerry still occupied the trench on our left because two hours after we got into this position a bomb hand grenade, known as a 'tater masher', landed right in the middle of our little group. There were seven of us and if Corporal Tom Bashforth hadn't been fully alert we would all have been casualties. But Tom picked it up immediately and threw it over the parapet where it exploded before it reached the ground, a very close shave.

We could only see about twenty yards along the trench before it turned at right angles and we knew that Jerry was still just round the corner, so we did half hour spells on sentry keeping very alert and watching all round, don't forget we were in enemy territory and we were not sure where they were. About mid-day when I was off duty and resting my eyes when a tall good looking young Officer crawled into the trench gasping for a drink. He said that he was the last surviving Officer of the Iniskilling Fusiliers who had been attacking on our left. They had been badly cut up.

I took my water bottle out of it's straps and handed it to him. He shook it and gave it me back. There was only sand rattling inside it. He smiled and crawled away. A short while later we heard the sound of an explosive bullet. The Corporal crawled towards the sound, he found the young Officer lying dead. We presumed that he must have been at the end of his tether and shot himself.

Later that day I was on sentry duty, laid in the prone position looking down towards the bend in the trench when I thought I saw a movement, but you know that you can stare at an object until you think that it moves. But this time I was not mistaken. First I saw a leg, then an arm then a 'tater masher' and finally a head. I squeezed the trigger, poor 'B', he did not stand a chance. But remember Mick a few hours earlier we almost shared one between us but for the quick actions of Tom Bashforth.

The day wore on and the afternoon heat was terrific, we were all gasping for a drink but we knew that no one could get to us from the rear. And we knew that about half a mile back the River Ancre was flowing with lovely clear water. My tongue was so parched I opened a tin of plum and apple jam and had a couple of spoonfuls. That was a mistake; I was more parched after that. I cannot remember how long we stayed in this position but I think it was about two days.

On the second night we were ordered to withdraw under cover of darkness back to our original position. So in effect, like many other Regiments, we suffered many casualties for very little or no gain. We were taken back a few kilometres fed, cleaned up and rested. One afternoon we lined up in a village, whose name I can't remember, where Field Marshal Lord Kitchener inspected us. A week or so later on his way to Russia on board HMS Hampshire the ship struck a mine and all were lost.

Our time to return to the line soon came round and this time we went on the attack at a place to the right of Theipval called the Leipzig Redoubt. This was a fortification still held by Jerry but whereas at Theipval the enemy were on our left, now they were on our right so we were driving them out with Mills hand

grenades. During one of these 'do's', whilst I was throwing grenades at Jerry, my mate, a young chap called Corbridge from the St. Mary's Road area of Sheffield was pulling the pins out of the grenades and handing them to me when one of theirs came over and landed between me and my mate. He got the worst of it and I got the splashes. This happened on the on the 21st July 1916 and we were taken to the first field dressing station.

I was given an injection in the chest which, at the time, gave me more pain than the wounds, which were scores of small shrapnel pieces in various parts of my body. I mentioned earlier about the riding trousers which Billy White gave me, they were a godsend and prevented many more injuries in vital places.

We were taken by horse ambulance down country to a casualty clearing hospital where we spent a short while before they moved us further South to a hospital at Dannes Camiers. The wards were huge marquees and were very nice. I stayed there for a couple of months or so and was then brought back to England. Things were getting better we were put on board a Hospital Ship in Calais and brought to Dover. We arrived very early in the morning and were transferred to the Railway Station where a train was waiting. I asked one of the medical orderlies where the train was going. He said, "Where do you want to be chum?" I replied, "Yorkshire." "Right," he said, "I'll see you get there."

I gave him a franc for his kindness. We travelled on from train to ambulance eventually reaching the hospital just as day was breaking. We got settled in and I asked the orderly where we were. He said, "You are in Brighton." I said, "Do you mean New Brighton?" He said, "No, Brighton on the South Coast!" We stayed there about two months before I was discharged and sent home on convalescent leave.

When my leave was over I had to report to Clipstone Camp which "was about four miles from Mansfield and transferred to what they called the B. E. F. Co. for all men who had been wounded out in France. I quickly found out what a nice place this was, on the first day at 9 o'clock we were paraded, inspected by and lectured by a Captain who's opening remarks were, "Well, my men, you have all been to France, you have been in hospital and you have had your furlough. You come here expecting to have a good time. Well I am here to get you fit and well and get you out to the front again, and I will."

What a nice man eh? Then he walked through the ranks on an inspection, he tapped me and another chap on the shoulder with his cane. The sergeant said, "You two report to the Orderly Room after the parade." So there we were, you know the routine Mick, cap off, quick march, left right left right, halt, and right turn in front of the CO. We were charged with being on parade improperly dressed. We had two pairs of shoes one dubbed for on parade and one pair highly polished for walking out. "I only have the one pair Sir so how can I do that?" He wasn't impressed one day confined to barracks (CB). "Left turn, quick march.", and I was marched out. I waited outside for the other chap.

When he came out he told me he had been given seven days CB, his crime must have been much worse than mine, not a bad start was it? Any how we soldiered on, Xmas time was approaching and we learned on the grape-vine that the Training Regiment was going to march to Sheffield with the band leading them for the holiday. The B. E. F. Company were confined to camp, you can imagine our feelings seeing that we were in Ypres the Xmas before.

I wrote home to tell them that I wouldn't be able to get home for Xmas and my Mum sent me a parcel full of Xmas fare and a £1 note. The morning of Xmas Eve arrived and most of the camp was deserted we were really browned off. We decided to break camp, eight of us and a L/Cpl. Lined up and marched out of the camp, apparently on a route march. We kept the formation up until we reached the camp perimeter which was about four miles. Then we paired up and set out variously for either, Worksop, Creswell or Clowne. We were beginning to feel hungry so Johnny Frogatt, who I paired with, and I bought a pork pie each and munched as we trudged in through the snow which was a good foot deep. Darkness was coming on so we found it anything but pleasant. We got to the top of a hill and Johnny said, "Look over there Fred."

About a mile away nestling in a valley we could see the twinkling light of a village. Johnny said that it was Killamarsh and that trains from Chesterfield passed through there. He said, "I have had enough." He had been wounded in the foot. It was very dark by the time we reached the railway station so we hung around outside until we heard a train coming down the line. I pushed half a crown through the pigeon hole and asked for two to Sheffield, without showing my uniform because we had no passes. We got on the train and managed to find an empty compartment and were mighty relieved. We sat back with our feet up and enjoyed the ride.

We arrived at Sheffield Victoria and handed our tickets to the ticket collector. Lo and behold about twenty yards in front of the station were two Redcaps, one on each entrance. I had a quick recollection of steps and a bridge over Fumival Road. We were down there in record time with the Redcaps chasing us but we managed to lose them. I knew the district well so went towards Attercliffe, then we got on a tram to back into Town and then to Heeley, and up to the top of Gleadless Road and home.

Johnny lived at Highfields. When I got home the door was locked, Mother was just about to go to bed, when she saw me there she wouldn't let me in. She knew that I did not have a leave pass and I had a hell of a job to persuade her to unlock the door and let me stay. She eventually relented and I stayed over Xmas.

I went back on the Tuesday, after I had called to pick up Johnny. We had previously agreed with the Sergeant to do this and he would mark us present on the roll each day, providing nothing untoward occurred before the Tuesday night. Johnny said that he wasn't going back so I went back alone. When I arrived back at camp I checked with the Sergeant that everything was OK and gave him half a crown. Johnny came back two days later and was put straight into clink. He did his time and was sent off to France, I never saw him again and learned later that he had been killed.

I didn't exactly enjoy my service at Clipstone; they made it as awkward as they could for us. One day they asked for thirty volunteers for Salonika. I had my hand up for this and was glad to be leaving. We were supposed to be leaving that night at 11-0 pm but at 7 O'clock they learned that they needed thirty men for France, so there I was off to the old place again.

This time I found myself attached to the 6th Battalion York and Lancs who had just returned from the Dardanelles, 11th Division. There I was with No. 7 Platoon B Company again on the Somme for a few months trench warfare, in and out of the line. It was during this period that I met my brother Alg. He came and found me in New Le Mines; you remember the next village to Bally Le Mines. Alg. was in the Kings Regiment, who were also on the front, but to our left. It worried me when they were getting strafed and I did not see him again until after the war.

I was a full Corporal now and one afternoon Lt. Garrison told me to get three volunteers for a raid on the enemy lines that night. G. H. Q. want you to capture a prisoner so they can find out who we are facing. We were used to going out on reconnaissance duty but this was different. They wanted us to go out and capture a Jerry from their own lines. Night time came; the Lt. had already taken a compass bearing, so we crawled over the top. Officer leading and I bringing up the rear. It was the worst night that I can remember, pitch black and belting down with rain. We had been searching for an hour or more and we were lost so Lt. Garrison gathered the five of us together, in no-mans land, for a pow-wow, to find out what was the best course of action. He asked me if I knew the direction of the enemy line, I asked him if he had any idea. He pointed out his way, I said that I thought it was exactly the opposite direction.

Bob Lee, one of my best men said, "Get the compass out Sir, we can hide under a ground sheet, for cover, and then strike a match." I said, "You Bloody fool, we will get mown down." I know he only wanted to light a fag but there is no way we could allow that. We had been out hours and the position regarding getting a prisoner was out of the question so we decided to return to our lines, but the question was which way? Bob said that his way was a different direction to both the Officer and me so it was decided that I should make a recce. I crawled away in Bob's direction. After some distance I decided that I was crawling parallel to the lines, so I crawled back and set off in the Officers way. After just a few yards I had reached the German wire and they had heard me.

Up went the Very Lights and over came the hand grenades and machine gun fire. We all knew where we were then. We froze on the ground in shell holes until it quietened down. Then I crawled back to them and we crawled back to our lines after a most unsatisfactory operation. The following day Lt. Garrison said to me, "Corporal, how did you know the direction of our lines?" I said, "Well Sir, when we left the trenches I noticed, a mile or so to our left, the Very Lights coming from the enemy lines. On fizzing out they lit up the ground showing a large area of stunted trees. I knew that part of the line having been there previously, so keeping that position in mind, I had a good idea where our lines were. If I hadn't we would have walked or crawled straight into the German lines, without realising it and we would not have fared very well I am sure.

Well Mike this sort of trench warfare carried on month after month and I recall one night in particular just as it was getting dark. The German planes used to fly over in large numbers, bombing the Artillery lines

behind us. There were not many anti aircraft guns so the Infantry did what they could with rifle fire to divert them. This would be about the middle of 1917, as near as I can remember and one night I decided to try the Lewis gun on them. I got down on my knees in the bottom of the trench with the butt of the gun resting on the firing step and pointing up into the sky.

Over they came, as usual. I had a full magazine so I let go guessing their position and hoping. I think every seventh or tenth bullet was a tracer (it glowed in the dark). I had the great satisfaction of seeing my tracers going through the starboard wing of a plane but, unfortunately, it did not stop him, I was just that bit off target. Still it gave me some pleasure as it was awful to see the dead and wounded men and horses after these nightly raids.

Time passed on and we were taken from the Somme and moved way behind the lines of the Ypres sector again. We could tell that something big was about to happen by the type of training we were doing, and we weren't far wrong, as troops of all kinds were massing on this front. We were positioned to the left of Ypres, the same area that I wrote about earlier in this story, which at that time was our front line. Now our front line was two to three km. forward of that position.

It was now October 1917 and the attack was on through Flanders sludge, shell holes and water. Jerry had been holding this position with a series of concrete 'pill boxes', as we called them, and they were the only places of cover, so when one was captured it became the defence HQ staffed by one Officer, one NCO and six men. On the second day of the attack together with an Officer and six men we were ordered to relieve one of these pill boxes, the men had been holding it for twenty-four hours without any rest. We did it in short rushes as we were under constant shell and rifle fire. We eventually got in and then it was the turn of those that we had relieved to make their dash back to safety. It took quite some time because of the shell fire and we were so cramped we were almost sitting on each others laps.

After a while the shelling abated somewhat and the Officer told his men to follow him, one at a time. I had been sitting almost on their Sergeant's lap so I got up and said, "So long Sarg. Be seeing you." But he didn't move. He was dead, a shell splinter had come through one of the observation slits and killed him instantly. We laid the Sergeant down in a corner and so the others left us and we had a little more space.

We held on for a few more days and were then assembled, just below the summit of some rising ground. This was the Passendale Ridge, we were at Poelkapelle. Next morning we were ordered to form lines and fix bayonets. I was in the first wave, the second wave would follow about seventy yards behind. Suddenly the Artillery opened up and we got the order to advance. The terrain was sloping downwards with sludge and shell holes from the previous bombardments, but we had no time to admire the scenery. It was one mad dash forward and no use hanging about.

I think that we had made three to four hundred yards but men were falling right and left of me I thought this is it. About thirty yards in front of me I saw three German helmets, the wearers were manning a machine gun which was spitting out death. I dived headlong into a shell hole and threw a Mills grenade at them. I made a bit of a firing position for myself and waited for developments, i.e. some of my mates to join me or whatever. But nothing happened and I certainly harboured no thought of going forward alone and committing suicide.

I was absolutely on my own, nobody in sight. I scooped the shell hole out, to make it a little deeper, with my entrenching tool, made a fire step to keep my rifle out of the water which was about eighteen inches deep. There I stayed for five days and four nights and the only good thing about it, as far as I was concerned was that Jerry did not mount a counter attack. I guess they were, like us, in no condition to do so. During this time I had nothing to eat and my water bottle was empty. On the third day I fished out my emergency ration bag.

I found the biscuits were all modged up and soggy and mixed slightly with tea and sugar. But the tin of bully was OK except that the paper wrapper was also mixed with the biscuits etc. I proceeded to make a drink of tea. I found half a candle in my haversack and, with my dixie, I skimmed some of the water I had been stood in, and done everything else in! It didn't look too bad so I stood the dixie on two small mounds of compressed earth, wrapped a piece of 4 x 2 round the candle and lit it under the dixie. I watched and waited as the candle burned down and then flickered out. I decided that the water must have boiled, so into it I emptied the contents of a ration bag and lo and behold I had the best drink that I had had for many a day.

Later that day I was joined by some men from my platoon, they had spotted me from behind and under cover of darkness they crawled into my hole. We had to excavate a bit more to make room for them and I was glad for their company I can tell you. Just after dark the next night we heard somebody crawling towards us. With rifles cocked, I called out, "Halt, who goes there?" fully expecting it to be one of the enemy. But the voice that answered was British. He said, "I am a runner of the East Surrey Regiment."

I pulled him in amongst us and he told us that their Battalion had relieved the 6th battalion York and Lancs. By God was I glad. He told us that they had lost many men coming in and there were no more reserves to take our position. As we watched him crawl away I briefed the others as to our next move. We were to crawl, as low as possible, quietly, slowly in single file back over the ridge from where we had started.

We gave time for the East Surrey's runner to get clear then I set our lot off on the long crawl with me bringing up the rear. I was so glad to be leaving that shell hole. After we'd travelled some fifty yards the chap in front of me cried out, "Oh I am hit." I quietened him down best I could, but by now the Very Lights were lighting up the sky and machine guns were sweeping the ground all the time. He had been hit in the backside when he raised it too high to climb over a dead body. After what seemed like an eternity we reached the safety of the ridge, where we could stand upright and get the casualties to a first aid post.

Now we were on velvet as the saying goes. All we had to do was make our way back to the Menin Road, where much to our delight we found some old London buses waiting to take us back down country. Thinking back I am sure that was the best ride I ever had. I have to tell you that as I crawled up the steps into the bus a voice said, "Hemming, What the devil are you doing here?" I looked down at him and saw that it was my Company Commander, Major R.R. Willis VC. I said, "Why shouldn't I be here Sir?" He replied, "I put you on the casualty list after the first day of the attack. I saw you go down in the first wave."

I explained that to you earlier in the story. We soon fell asleep with the motion of the ride and by the time the sun came up we had reached our destination. We tumbled out with ourselves, our rifles and our equipment covered in Passendale sludge. We were waited on by the cooks with hot tea, soup, the lot. Then we were allotted tents and allowed to go to sleep properly. It was great.

It is not known whether this was the end of his story, Frederick Thomas Hemming passed away in December of 1973 aged 76.