

Harry Patch



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A rude awakening

I had a brother who was a regular soldier. He was in Africa when the war broke out. He was a sergeant major in the Royal Engineers, who fought and was wounded at Mons. And they kept him in England after that, as an instructor. He never went back and he used to tell me what the trenches were like. I didn't want to go. I knew what I was going to. A lot of people didn't and when they got to France they had a rude awakening.

The trenches were about six feet deep, about three feet wide - mud, water, a duckboard if you were lucky. You slept on the firing step, if you could, shells bursting all around you. Filthy.

Infected by lice

From the time I went to France - the second week in June 1917 - until I left 23rd December 1917, injured by shellfire, I never had a bath. I never had any clean clothes. And when we got to Rouen on the way home they took every stitch of clothing off us: vest, shirt, pants, everything and they burnt it all. It was the only way to get rid of the lice. For each lousy louse, he had his own particular bite, and his own itch and he'd drive

you mad. We used to turn our vests inside out to get a little relief. And you'd go down all the seams, if you dared show a light, with a candle, and burn them out. And those little devils who'd laid their eggs in the seam, you'd turn your vest inside out and tomorrow you'd be just as lousy as you were today. And that was the trenches.

Fighting for their lives

You daren't show above otherwise a sniper would have you. You used to look between the fire and apertures and all you could see was a couple of stray dogs out there, fighting over a biscuit that they'd found. They were fighting for their lives. And the thought came to me - well, there they are, two animals out there fighting over dog biscuit, the same as we get to live. They were fighting for their lives. I said, 'We are two civilised nations - British and German - and what were we doing? We were in a lousy, dirty trench fighting for our lives? For what? For eighteen pence a flipping day.'

Life in the trenches

You got tots of rum. There were many a man who didn't like rum, didn't drink it. It used to warm you up. Life in the trenches, well, can you imagine now, going out from this room along the corridor and there is a trench dug across the lawn. Six feet deep and three feet wide. There is water and mud in the bottom. You sit on a trench at the side to sleep, don't matter whether it is wet, fine, hot or cold. Four days you are there and you got to stick it. That was the conditions.

If any man tells you he went into the front line and he wasn't scared - he's a liar. You were scared from the moment you got there. You never knew. I mean, in the trench you were all right. If you kept down, a sniper couldn't get you. But you never knew if the artillery had a shell that burst above you and you caught the shrapnel. That was it.

Shell shock

You were in that trench. That was your front line. You had to keep an eye on the German front line. You daren't leave. No. I suppose if you left, and some of them did, they were shot as cowards. That is another thing with shell shock - I never saw anyone with it, never experienced it - but it seemed you stood at the bottom of the ladder and you just could not move. Shellshock took all the nervous power out of you.

An officer would come down and very often shoot them as a coward. That man was no more a coward than you or I. He just could not move. That's shell shock. Towards the end of war they recognised it as an illness. The early part of the war - they didn't. If you were there you were shot. And that was it. And there's a good many men who were shot for cowardice and they are asking now . that verdict be taken away. They were not cowards.

Sleep in the trenches

Rats as big as cats. Anything they could gnaw, they would - to live. If you didn't watch it, they'd gnaw your shoe laces. Anything leather, they would nibble that. As you went to sleep, you would cover your face with a blanket and you could hear the damn things run over you.

As you to sat on the firing step, you could have a doze. Not much more. Half-past seven in the morning, stand-to and you'd have an inspection. Last thing at night, you'd have an inspection. You had to sleep in between.

No Man's Land

Probably you'd hear something in No Man's Land. It might have been a working party. You reported it. The officer would have a look through his field glasses. If it was any good and it wasn't British, give them a burst. Number One would give them a shot or two out of the Lewis gun, and after firing that Lewis gun from one aperture, we would always move down the trench. This was because, if it was spotted by a German observer there, the range was sent back to their artillery. Staying put was an invitation for half a dozen rockets. If you stayed where you were, you chanced it.

Going 'over the top'

Never forget it. We crawled, couldn't stand up - a sniper would have you. I came across a Cornishman, he must have been from 'A' or 'B' companies who were the assault companies when we went over. 'C' and 'D', we were support. I came across a Cornishman, he was ripped from his shoulder to his waist - shrapnel.

Now a bullet wound is clean, shrapnel will tear you all to pieces. He was laying there in a pool of blood. As we got to him, he said, 'Shoot me.' He was beyond all human aid. Before we would pull out the revolver to shoot him, he died. I was with him in the last seconds of his life. hen he went from this life, to whatever is beyond.

Now what I saw in the way of sights at Passchendaele and at Pilkem - the wounded lying about asking you for help - we didn't have the knowledge, the equipment or the time to spend with them. I lost all my faith in the Church of England.

And when that fellah died, he just said one word: 'Mother.' It wasn't a cry of despair. It was a cry or surprise and joy. I think - although I wasn't allowed to see her - I am sure his mother was in the next world to welcome him. And he knew it. I was just allowed to see that much and no more. And from that day until today - and now I'm nearly 106 years old - I shall always remember that cry and I shall always remember that death is not the end.

You've got a memory. You've got a brain about the size of a tea cup. I've got a memory that goes back for 80 or 90 years and I think that memory goes on with you when you die. And that's my opinion. Death is not the end.

At Pilckem Ridge I can still see the bewilderment and fear on the men's faces when we went over the top. C and D Company was support. A and B had had to go to the front line. All over the battlefield the wounded were lying down, English and German all asking for help. We weren't like the Good Samaritan in the Bible, we were the robbers who passed and left them. You couldn't help them. I came across a Cornishman, ripped from shoulder to waist with shrapnel, his stomach beside him on the ground in a pool of blood. As I got to him he said "shoot me" he was beyond all human aid. Before I could even draw a revolver he had died. He just said "Mother" I will never forget it.

The shelling was bad. You could hear the big shells coming, although if you could hear them that was alright, they'd gone over. You never heard the whizz-bangs coming they were just there. And you never heard the shell or bullet that hit you. Of course the whizz-bangs were shrapnel and that was worse than a bullet. A bullet wound was clean, shrapnel would tear you to pieces. It was a whizz-bang that killed my three friends and wounded me. it was just bad luck. They had those four magazines over their shoulders, fully loaded. that's why they all got blown to pieces.

Shooting to kill

I never knew Bob [Harry's friend and gunner] to use that [Lewis] gun to kill. If he used that gun at all, it was about two feet off the ground and he would wound them in the legs. He wouldn't kill them if he could help it.

[A German soldier] came to me with a rifle and a fixed bayonet. He had no ammunition, otherwise he could have shot us. He came towards us. I had to bring him down. First of all, I shot him in the right shoulder. He dropped the rifle and the bayonet. He came on. His idea, I suppose, was to kick the gun if he could into the mud, so making it useless. But anyway, he came on and for our own safety, I had to bring him down. I couldn't kill him. He was a man I didn't know. I didn't know his language. I couldn't talk to him. I shot him above the ankle, above the knee. He said something to me in German. God knows what it was. But for him the war was over.

He would be picked up by a stretcher bearer. He would have his wounds treated. He would be put into a prisoner-of-war camp. At the end of the war, he would go back to his family. Now, six weeks after that, a fellow countryman of his pulled the lever of the gun that fired the rocket that killed my three mates, and wounded me. If I had met that German soldier after my three mates had been killed, I'd have no trouble at all in killing him.

Losing friends

The night we caught it, we were in the front line and we were going back. We had taken the German front line, the German support line and we were coming back from the German support through the German old front line. We had to cross what was the old No Man's Land. It was crossing there that a rocket burst amongst us. It killed my three mates, it wounded me. We were on open ground.

September 22nd, half-past ten at night. That's when I lost them. That's my Remembrance Day. Armistice Day, you remember the thousands of others who died. For what? For nothing. And today you would never get another trench warfare. Never. Today, you got the internal combustion engine, the one like you drive your car and improvement on that. It's entitled a man to fly, and today a trench is no good. He simply goes down the trench with his machine gun - that's it. You'll never get another trench war.

Being wounded

You didn't know you were hit. You never heard the bullet or the shell that hit you. All I can remember was a flash, I went down, blew me down. I suppose I had enough sense, I saw the blood, I had a field dressing on. I must have passed out. How long I lay there I don't know.

Next thing I found I was in a dressing station. The field bandage had gone, the wound had been cleaned and a clean bandage on it. Around about it was a disinfectant of some sort, to keep the blinking lice away from the blood.

I lay there all the next day and the doctor came to me. 'You can see the shrapnel - it must have been a ricochet.' It was just buried in. He said to me, 'Would you like me to take that out?' I said, 'How long will you be?' He said, 'Before you answer yes. With no anaesthetic in the camp at all, we'd used it on all the people more seriously wounded than you are.' He said, 'If I take that shrapnel out it will be as you are now.' Pain from it was terrific. I said, 'Alright carry on.' Four fellahs held me down, one on each arm, one on each leg, and I can feel the cut of that scalpel now as he went through and pulled it out.

The doctor came to me some hours later. He said, 'You want this shrapnel as a souvenir?' I said, 'Throw it away,' and I never saw it again. I met his son, who was also a doctor, at Buckingham Palace eighty years later. He told me that if the shrapnel was a quarter inch deeper, it would have cut a main artery and that was it.

Going home

The fellah in the next bed said to me, 'If he writes anything in that book on the table, a green book, you're for Blighty.' Well I didn't believe him, and then some hours later somebody came in, they called my name, my number. I was out on the Red Cross truck down to Rouen. And there we had a bath, got rid of the lice, they burnt our clothing. We could see the hospital ship. We were out on the hospital ship, but never sailed that night.

There was a rumour of a submarine in the Channel. We sailed the next night and came to Southampton. I think if I had gone to the field dressing main station, I don't think I ever would [have sailed]. It was the fact that it was the advanced dressing station and they wanted the beds. Get rid of him.

Mutiny

'E' company were about a thousand strong. We had an officer we didn't like. He used to take us out route marches. We didn't like it. That afternoon he wanted the 'E' company on parade for bayonet practice. The war had been over for months. The sergeant major opened the door. Somebody threw a boot at him. He went back, reported it.

The officer came and they told him flat that they weren't going out on parade. Well, he went back to the company office and about thirty of the men followed him and they asked for him. He came out, he pulled his revolver out and he clicked the hammer back. Nobody said anything. We had all been on the range. I was on fatigue that morning so I wasn't on parade. Nobody said anything.

They all went back to their huts and they rounded up what ammunition they could and went back and they asked for the officer again. He was a captain, risen from the ranks. He came out and he clicked the hammer back on his revolver. He said, 'The first man who says he is not going on parade, I'll shoot him.' No sooner had he said that, when thirty bolts went back and somebody shouted, 'Now shoot you bugger if you like.' He threw the revolver down, disappeared. We were all run up for a mutiny.

We had a brigadier come over from the mainland to hear the officer's side of it. Then he said, 'I want to hear the men.' Twenty or thirty of the men went behind a screen and they told him. They said, 'We don't want bayonet practice. We've had the real bloody thing. Some of us are wounded by bayonets.' The outcome was that there were no parades except just to clear the camp, just fatigues. The officer was moved to a different command. We never saw him again. It's a damn good job we didn't.

The price of war

It wasn't worth it. No war is worth it. No war is worth the loss of a couple of lives let alone thousands. T'isn't worth it . the First World War, if you boil it down, what was it? Nothing but a family row. That's what caused it. The Second World War - Hitler wanted to govern Europe, nothing to it. I would have taken the Kaiser, his son, Hitler and the people on his side . and bloody shot them. Out the way and saved millions of lives. T'isn't worth it.

Breaking the silence

Opposite my bedroom there is a window and there is a light over the top. Now [when the staff go into that room] they put the light on. If I was half asleep - the light coming on was the flash of a bomb. That flash brought it all back. For eighty years I've never watched a war film, I never spoke of it, not to my wife. For six years, I've been here [in the nursing home]. Six years it's been nothing but World War One. As I say, World War One is history, it isn't news. Forget it.