

HELL

Ypres Salient: 15th March 1915:

Sergeant Williams volunteered me and eleven others in our battalion, including my pal, Wally Meekins, to support some blokes from the Royal Engineers to a mission into no-man's land. Our job was to protect the sappers as they cut the wire in preparation for an assault on the German trenches which was due to start the following dawn.

As we assembled in the reserve trench, fully kitted and issued with fifty rounds apiece, the usual grumbles started up. This, of course, was before the NCOs were there.

"If Williams wants to be a bloody hero, that's up to him. Why does he have to drag us along?" Garnet Hansen complained about everything: officers, rations, shelling, mud, and just about everything else you could think of. Mind you, we all did at times; but Hansen never stopped until one of lads told him to belt up. Still, for all of his constant moaning, I never once saw him flinch from duty, or try to play sick to get pulled out of the line.

"Somebody's got to do it," one of the sappers said, in answer to Hansen's carping. He was lanky rasher of wind in his thirties, sporting a thick moustache. I found out later that his name was George.

"It'll be you poor sods stuck on the wire, giving Fritz target practice, if everyone had that attitude," George's mate put in. He was a short, wiry Cockney named Harry. He later told us that he was known as 'Cock-Happy Harry' back in civvies, due to his array of lady-friends. I couldn't see what any self-respecting girl would see in a shifty-looking bloke like him, but I'm not really the one to judge.

"I suppose all you sappers volunteered, then?" Hansen demanded.

The four Royal Engineers shrugged and nodded.

"Well, I've done my bit," Hansen went on. "Let one of them blokes back home, you know, those silly buggers who think that Fritz would be a push-over. Let them have a go."

"The way I see it," George mused in a slow Norfolk drawl, "We all got to take our turn. Some of our boys had to do the same in the last big push. Now it's our turn." Harry took a step closer to Hansen. "Listen, mate. We could be back in reserve or billeted in some farmhouse, and still get it. Them bloody German shells aint fussy who they take."

"That's true," Wally agreed. "When it's your turn, it's your turn."

All of us, apart from Hansen, nodded sagely, perhaps in an attempt to convince ourselves that our trip into no-man's land would be no more dangerous than keeping our heads down in the trenches.

Wally's comment probably carried more weight because he had bitter experience of long range German shelling. He and I, and his younger brother, Peter, had all joined up at the same time. Wally and I were both nineteen, had gone to the same school, and both worked for the Co-op, although I worked in the bakery, and he was a delivery boy. Peter was seventeen, the youngest of four brothers. Wally's mum wasn't too pleased when Peter joined up, accusing Wally of encouraging him to do it. She charged Wally with looking after his younger brother, not only in combat with

the Germans, but also to protect him against the hordes of loose women that she had imagined were waiting for us in France. If only that were the truth.

The three of us had gladly joined up, excited by the prospect of seeing foreign places, as well as doing our glorious duty for King and Country. Before the war, the furthest that I had travelled outside of Bristol was a couple of Sunday school trips to Weston Super Mare. Funnily enough, that was a sea of mud, too, when the tide was out. Our high hopes were soon dashed when we found out what war was really like: the wet, the cold, and the mud that seemed to get in everywhere. Then there were the fleas and the rats, which seemed better fed than any of us. In the trenches, there was the constant threat of enemy snipers, and that's when we weren't being shelled. Worse, was the dehumanising sight of human flesh and bone, both of comrades and Germans, given as little thought as joints of meat at a butcher's shop.

At least Peter was spared the worst of this, because he was killed before we had even reached the front line. We were being moved up to the front, and had fallen out on the road from Poperinge near a small village, while our CO had gone on ahead, presumably to receive further orders regarding our deployment. We could see that the village up ahead had taken a bit of a pounding, so our NCOs thought it would be safer to rest up by the side of the road. It was a warm day, and we slumped down on the grassy verge to pass around the fags and water. Wally, known as 'Wally Wingnut' to most of the lads, due to his sticking-out ears, had smoked all of his Woodbines, and asked Peter for one. Peter had a dicky chest, and only smoked occasionally to keep in with the older lads, so he usually had spare fags. Peter stood up to pass Wally a cigarette when the shell hit the road. It was probably meant for the village, but overshot. It did for Peter alright, though, with shrapnel hitting him in the chest and head, taking out his left eye and part of the socket with it. A couple of other chaps were hit in the thighs and buttocks, and we all were covered in dirt and stones, but, as we were laid down, we avoided the worst of the blast.

Wally cradled Peter's head on his lap, his khaki uniform becoming soaked in blood, telling Peter, who was still conscious, but in a state of shock, that he was going to be alright. By the time the medical officer got over to him, Peter had died.

A few days later, Wally told me that he was dreading going home. He reckoned his mum would kill him for not looking after his kid brother.

The arrival of Sergeant Williams and Corporal Jackson ended any further chat on the merits of our mission. We were divided into two groups, one led by Jackson, but directed by George and Cock-Happy Harry, and the other led by Williams and the other sappers. Me and Wally were in Jackson's group. We were thankful that Hansen was put in the other group – at least we wouldn't have him carping on when ever he had the chance.

After a short briefing, we quickly, but silently as possible, filed down the communication trench to the advance trench. Nobody hung around, because the comms trench was only four feet deep in places, so you felt exposed, even under the cover of darkness.

At the advance trench, Williams' mob went left, and we went right for about one hundred yards before Jackson stopped. A ladder was placed against the parapet to enable us to climb up and over into no-man's land.

My stomach always lurched as I climbed out of the trench and into the open, feeling naked, vulnerable, even though we weren't under fire on this occasion.

Within about eighty yards, we came to the coils of barbed wire, secured to rows of timber posts, erected just a week previously by the same battalion of Royal Engineers that were now going to cut through them.

Corporal Jackson, nicknamed 'Jacko', and respected by all the men in the battalion for his quiet authority and calm demeanour under pressure, made us fan out while the sappers set about cutting the wire, with instructions to remain vigilant. This last instruction was hardly necessary in my case, as my nerves were stretched as tight as a drum.

George and Harry set about cutting a large gap in the barbed wire, to allow our troops to pass through when the assault was ordered. I'm sure that they made relatively short work of it, but we seemed to be waiting about for an age in the dark, hoping fervently that the moon remained behind the cloud. When they had finished, Jacko quietly gathered all together again.

"That's it then," Wally whispered. "We can all go back again." Although I couldn't see his face, I knew that Wally would be grinning.

"It's a nice thought, but sadly wrong," Jacko replied. "Follow me, but stay close, and keep complete silence."

We filed through the newly created gap in the wire, and into the dark beyond.

Keeping low, we scurried around shell-holes and shattered tree-trunks, staying close to the man in front, for fear of getting lost in the dark.

Suddenly, I stumbled into Wally, who had collided with George, who had stopped abruptly in front of him.

"Get down and keep absolutely still," Jacko hissed from the dark, up ahead. We did as instructed, and waited in silence, ears straining to find out why we had stopped.

The Corporal's hearing must have been good, because it was at least half a minute before I heard the faint clink of equipment and murmured voices of a German patrol. Our orders were to avoid engagement unless we were discovered or directly threatened, so we all just had to wait until the enemy patrol has passed by, praying that we wouldn't be seen. We stayed in that position for what appeared to be an age. My heart was pounding, and my hands were slick with sweat, despite the night chill. Yet I daren't move, in case I made a noise.

Eventually, the sounds of the Germans died away and, when he was sure it was safe, Jacko gave the signal to move.

It was not long before we reached the rows of tangled barbed wire nailed to wooden posts, which must have been only one hundred yards or so from the German trenches. Jacko placed us at ten yard intervals, with instructions to keep our eyes peeled, whilst the two sappers laid on their stomachs to work their way through the rolls of wire.

More waiting. With my rifle ready, but laid across my knees, I sat on an exposed rock, straining my eyes and ears against the dark. There wasn't a sound, except the soft snip of the wire being clipped. There was no sound of wild life at all – all of the trees had either been shelled, or used for trench supports and fuel, there was nowhere for birds to nest, or foxes or rabbits to find cover. The bloody rats were the only creatures to benefit from this war.

A breeze had got up, and was starting to break up the clouds, partially revealing a watery moon, providing a pale light across the pock-marked ground. You just stay behind that cloud, I told it. The last thing we wanted was full moonlight to help Jerry snipers pick us off as we made our way back to our lines.

Suddenly, off to our left, there was a shot, followed by the crackle of more shots. Then, two flares went up, and all hell broke loose. Rifle and machine gun fire came from the German lines, and the flash of several hand grenades exploding. I could also hear the chatter of one of our Lewis guns responding, as I could just make out the figures of our blokes from the other advance party fighting a rear-guard action as they retreated back towards our trenches.

Jacko did a kind of stooping run as he went along our party. "Our lads must have run into that patrol," he said. "We got to get back before we're seen as well."

Wally and the other boys in our company had started to move, but the sappers were still at the wire.

"Hang on, Corporal. We're almost finished," George called to Jacko.

But Harry wanted to get away. "Come on George. That will have to do," he urged.

As he rose, a flare burst in the sky above our heads, and a moment later, a sniper's bullet took half of Harry's jaw away.

"Bloody hell," George muttered as Harry slumped beside him, and scrambled away from the wire, as fast as he could.

Wally made a move to help Harry, who was sat, paralysed with shock, a bloody hand feeling where the part of his jaw once was. Jacko pulled him back. "Wingnut, we got to go. We can't - ."

The machine gun silenced Jacko as its spray of bullets sliced through him and Wally, but, somehow, missed me. I turned and ran. I should have thrown myself on the ground like the others in our company, but I panicked, leaving my comrades to their fate.

With bullets buzzing around my ears, I ran on, stumbling across the rough terrain, my legs feeling as heavy as lead. Mercifully, the flare went out, and the firing subsided, but I kept on going, hoping that I was heading towards our lines.

Gasping for breath, I stopped to lean against a tree stump, and forced myself to calm down. I realised that I didn't have a clue of where I was, and there were no landmarks visible in the dark.

Another flare burst in the sky above, and the firing started again. I ran and slid, feet-first, into a nearby shell-hole. A pale face turned towards me, and I recognised the uniform immediately. The German and I just looked at each other for a moment, not knowing what to do, each as surprised as the other to be sharing the same pit.

Without thinking, I swung my rifle towards him and shot him in the chest. He stared at me, wide-eyed with shock, until the light from the flare died, immersing us in darkness again. But that pale, shocked expression was left, imprinted in my mind.

The firing from the German lines also petered out, and a strange kind of quiet descended. It wasn't a total silence as I slowly became aware of the ringing in my ears and the sound of my own breathing as sat, still gripping my rifle. And there were the faint cries of somebody in no-man's land calling for help, and the wheezing of the German's ragged breathing. I wondered what to do next. I could make out his outline in the weak light of the moon, and he was close enough that our boots were almost touching. What if he had a gun? I thought that maybe I should finish him off.

I pulled back the bolt on my Lee Enfield to eject the spent cartridge and load another into the breach, ready to fire again.

"Nein, nein," the German called through the darkness. I paused, the rifle still levelled at him, breathing hard. Perhaps shooting him would be a bad idea, because the noise would attract attention. But I balked at the idea of using my bayonet, as if that somehow would be worse, more personal. He would still be just as dead.

Another flare went up overhead. There was no firing this time. I supposed that whoever had been in no-man's land was either dead, severely wounded, or had managed to get back to their own lines. Or were cowering in a shell-hole with a man that he had just shot.

The light from the flare gave me a chance to look at the poor bugger. He was just a kid, reminding me of the street urchins back home. I was only twenty myself, but he looked as though he was barely out of school, looking at me, and the barrel of my rifle, with wide, frightened eyes. He certainly wasn't like the beastly Hun, the cruel ogres depicted in our newspapers.

He didn't appear to have any rifle, or any other sort of weapon. I guess, like me, he panicked when the shooting started, and lost his gun and his helmet in the rush to find cover.

My heart sank. If he had a weapon, I could have told myself that it was either him or me. As it was, it turned out that I had shot a defenceless, frightened kid from a distance of three yards.

Hesitantly, I laid my rifle down, well out of his reach, and cautiously approached him, keeping my head down. He never made a move as I loosened his tunic to check his wound, just tracking me with his eyes. It was bad – there was a hole in his chest that I could have put my thumb into, oozing blood with each rasping breath, having soaked his undershirt.

"I'm sorry," I said inadequately in a hoarse voice, like I had just trod on his toe. I found a relatively clean handkerchief and held it against his wound. I knew that it wouldn't do much good, but I felt that I had to do something.

Then, the light disappeared as the flare died. I scurried back to my rifle – I still wasn't going to take any chances.

With my rifle held loosely by my side, I waited. I should have tried to get back to our lines while it was still dark, but I couldn't face being out in the open again. Anyway, I somehow felt duty-bound to stay with the German until he finally succumbed to the wounds that I had inflicted. His rasping, ragged breathing told me that he was still alive. Apart from that, and the intermittent plaintive cry from somewhere in the dark, the night was quiet. I wondered if the incoherent moaning was a desperate call from one of our wounded chaps, Harry perhaps, unable to form words with his lower jaw missing. Maybe it was my pal, Wally, lying alone, crippled by the machine gun fire. I tried to push these images out of my mind.

I needed a cigarette, just to do something – anything. Crouching lower in the shell hole, and cupping my hand over the match, I lit up a fag, hoping, but really past caring too much, that the flame would not be seen.

"Tommy," the German croaked hoarsely. I looked up in his direction. His outline was dimly visible against the opaque, clouded moonlight. "Tommy. Cigarette. Bitte."

Leaning my rifle at the opposite side of the pit, I crept up alongside the German. Hesitantly, I held the cigarette to his lips. He tried to draw deeply, but immediately went into a spate of coughing, with blood spattering his dry lips.

"Wasser. Bitte," He rasped. I didn't have a water bottle with me, having been instructed to travel light for the night's mission. There was a puddle of rain water at the bottom of the shell hole, so I took a woollen glove from my tunic pocket, bent down, and soaked it in water. I squeezed some drops from the glove on to the German's lips, and he seemed to appreciate the moisture, despite it being muddy. Before we were sent up to the front, we were warned not to take drinks from standing

water, but I thought, that as he was dying anyway, the German wouldn't worry too much. Getting the shits was the least of his concerns.

I soaked up some more water and dripped it on to the German's lips again, careful not to set him coughing again.

"Danke, Tommy," he muttered after swallowing the muddy water.

"Fred," I corrected him. "My name is Fred."

"Ha – Frederick also," he replied, pointing to himself, managing a weak smile. He wiped the blood and dirty water from his mouth with the sleeve of his tunic.

We laid there, side by side, in that slimy shell hole, with is lungs rattling with each breath, and me waiting for him to die, not knowing what else to do.

I guessed that the mission to cut the wire was probably in preparation for a dawn assault on the German trenches. While I laid there, I wondered whether the attack would still go ahead, considering that Jerry had discovered us cutting the wire. The chances were that it would. The top brass wouldn't let a minor detail like Jerry being ready and waiting for us, machine guns at the ready to cut us down, to prevent their half-baked plans to proceed.

The sky was becoming lighter at the horizon, so I would soon find out. The German's - Frederick's - pale face was visible, dirty but streaked with sweat, despite the night chill, as he still fought for breath. I settled back to wait, and didn't have long.

There was the brief tell-tell whistle before the first shell landed, followed quickly by half a dozen more. By reflex, I ducked down in the hole, even though the shell hadn't landed close to us. There was a short pause while the gunners adjusted their range, then they started up again, but with greater intensity. Soon there were explosions all around us, sending dirt and stones raining down on us. I grabbed Frederick's legs to pull him further down into the hole. He screamed out in pain as he was dragged, although his cries were drowned by the cacophony of explosions on all sides. I buried my face in my arms, trying, if it were possible, to get even closer to the ground. The shells were falling all around us, so fast that there was barely a gap between each crushing blow. The ground shook beneath me, feeling as though the crust of the earth was about to break open and swallow me up. The panic welled up inside of me – I couldn't stand it for much longer. I fought the irrational urge to run out into the open, just for the ordeal to be over. I raised my head and screamed at the shelling, tears streaming down my cheeks. "That's enough, now! That's enough, you bastards!"

I felt a light touch on my arm. "Tommy – Fred," Frederick called to me weakly, holding out his hand. I held his hand, and managed to get control over my terror. We stayed like that until the barrage eventually subsided. An eerie silence followed, the smoke hanging in the air seeming to muffle all sound. The ringing in my ears was the only noise I could hear.

I looked up at Frederick to see the light slowly fade in his eyes, his pupils wide and fixed; unseeing. He was dead.

I was shaken from my torpor by the sound of machine gun fire. The attack was in progress. I pulled my hand away from Frederick's dead grasp, and wiped my tear-streaked face with my sleeve. I had crawled back to the opposite side and just picked up my rifle when our lot appeared through the smoke. They were Welsh Fusiliers, bayonets fixed, advancing quickly.

They never noticed me, eyes determinedly set forward towards the enemy lines, blinkered to any distractions, hoping to get across no-man's land without getting hit. The gun fire withered and became more distant, and I guessed that the Germans had withdrawn to reserve positions.

Soon, I became aware that our second wave was coming over, more relaxed than their Welsh forerunners.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing, hiding in a hole?” A muscular sergeant loomed above me. I jumped to my feet.

“I’m not hiding, Sergeant. I was with the patrol last night. I’ve been stuck here ever since.”

He looked unconvinced. A fresh-face subaltern with a downy moustache joined him.

“What’s going on, Sergeant?” The officer looked at me, then at Frederick’s body.

“Oh – you’ve bagged a Hun, I see. Well done.” He started to continue his way to the trenches formally held by the Germans. “Come on, then. Let’s get some Jerry souvenirs before the Taffys get them all.”

The sergeant softened his gaze at me. “You better get yourself back to our lines and clean yourself up.”

“Yes, Sergeant,” I mumbled, as he left me to follow his battalion and the distant sporadic gunfire.

I didn’t go back – not right away. I sat back down in the shell-hole, stared at Frederick’s lifeless body, and wept.

- END -

Jeff Notton

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