

Almost four years of army life

Hard, dull work and the misery of the trenches

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THIS IS THE FIFTH instalment of the special *GLENER* serialization of the *Notes for a Biography* by the late Rt. Excellent Norman Washington Manley.

I HAD intended to pass over the next four years in silence but once again it is Edna who persuades me that although all this is not for publication, it is an important part of my own record and should not be ignored.

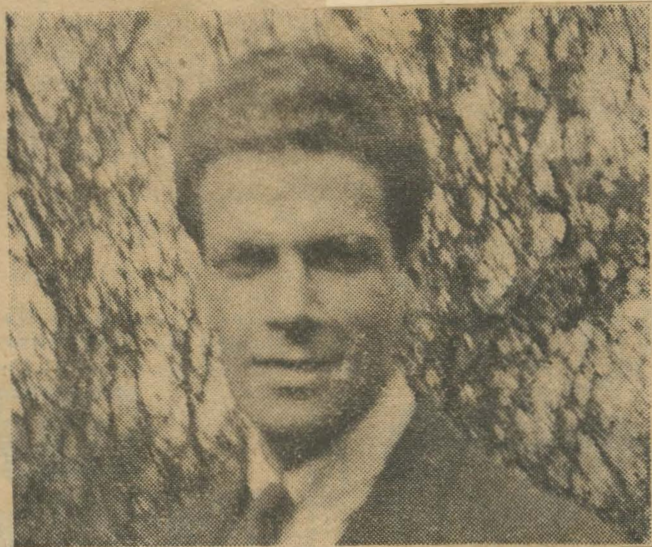
First, about the men I was to live with in such strange circumstances. I joined in East Deptford, a Centre of East End London. Seventy percent of these men were Cockneys with a view of life all their own. I got to know them very well and a great affection developed between us. They were first class thieves and would rob your last farthing if you gave them the chance, but for kindness and generosity I have never met their equal.

If you were broke and did not have a cigarette to smoke they would not hesitate to give you one if they had two. They came to look on "Bill" as they called me as a great oracle and I was to settle a thousand arguments about everything under the sun. When deadlock occurred, the watch-word was "Let's ask Bill." I was careful to plead ignorance unless I really knew and could explain, and so preserved respect and confidence.

They showed an innate courtesy I suppose because we liked each other, and soon found out that I did not like being called "darkie" as came natural to them, and I have heard a real tough guy get hold of a new arrival, a casualty replacement who automatically called me "Darkie", and take him aside and say, "Don't call him that — he doesn't like it. We call him Bill and we like him!" I remember once when I was

ill for about a week with 'French fever' how they looked after me. If I was on guard duty, a friend would take it on for me and when I was real bad they nursed me in a simple way so that I could avoid reporting 'sick' and so leaving my unit by being sent off to hospital. I did not want that to

It was an odd life. Once you grew used to its hardships, hard work, dull work, poor food and hard living quarters, to say nothing of the eternal misery of body lice which were found everywhere that soldiers lived — I have often wondered how, when the War was over, the civilians returning to their old villages and homes got rid of them—we had found it totally impossible; in spite of all these things, there was a strange and fascinating irresponsibility about the life of a private.



happen as I liked where I was. AS I SAY, more than half of our men were East Enders and my own Sergeant was a Covent Garden market porter, and I shared with another Covent Garden market youngster the honour of being reported to be best gun-layer (that was my job) in the division with its six batteries of 4.5 Howitzers.

By some strange chance, I never found out why the rest of our men were Yorkshire miners and there was a small sprinkle of Irish Volunteers, one of whom was from Dublin College where he was light heavy-weight boxing champion. We were very proud of him and whenever we could arrange a match with another Division's Champion we did so and always he won by the K.O. route. He had a devastating punch.

I had for reasons I will explain, finally made up my mind to accept no form of promotion—I was a gunner and a gunner I would remain. So I was not worried about promotion. Nothing in the future gave you concern. Your job was to do your job as a soldier and stay alive if you could. You blessed each day, you prayed to be spared some fear-raising experience like being caught in a severe German artillery barrage or a gas attack with gas shells, but

that aside, to be alive was to have a future and worry about the future had no place. I am often asked what was it like to be afraid. Of course one was afraid because you were intensely concerned with staying alive, but fear was largely an intense awareness of levels of danger and an intense alertness to do what you could to avoid it. Once the danger was passed you largely forgot it except for boasting about a lucky escape — a way of keeping up morale — and I suppose it was that ability to forget 'till next time' that kept me sane. The day you began

to count the escapes and think of how the odds got narrower each time that day you were on a down slope with no hope of peace of mind or the happiness that is found in just being alive.

Cut off

I SPEAK IN A purely personal way when I used the word irresponsible. It did not mean not being a good soldier. Indeed I was sorry to watch the anguish of those who had responsibilities of a severe nature and tried to be really good soldiers. One odd effect of the life on me was that I cut myself off from the outside world. In four years (nearly) I do not recall writing one letter to my friends in Jamaica.

But I go too far ahead. I want to tell the story as well as indulge in reflections that derive from a total experience. I don't want to tell it in too great detail. I have never liked to talk about the actual experiences of war. Though there are very few left who actually know what the 1914 war was like, World War II was a very different matter, just as Vietnam today is something again that does not resemble anything we of another generation can quite envisage.

When I joined, I joined a mounted unit and I was part of the most mobile part of it, the ammunition supply. I had grown up with horses and horse-drawn vehicles, and I knew more about them than miners and town bred Londoners, so naturally enough within a month I was a Lance Corporal or Bombadier as they were called in the Artillery, and by the time we left for France I was promoted Corporal.

Here I came up against violent colour prejudice. The rank and file disliked taking orders from a coloured N.C.O. and their attitude was mild by comparison with that of my



fellow N.C.O.'s Corporals and Sergeants resented my sharing status with them. They were more spiteful and later conspired to get me into trouble. It was only the Officer class that I could expect to behave with ordinary decency and both aspects of this phenomenon I fully understood. To be frank I had the greatest contempt for my fellow N.C.O.'s and I was later to discover that a sense of superiority was

a good protection from the obsessions that colour feelings can create.

However, the short period of training, four months only, passed easily enough and by early January 1916 we were sent off to France spending one night at Le Havre and being sent by slow train to the Ypres Front, then formal and quiet, since preparation for the great battle of the Somme was by then afoot.