

*'I was the fastest gun-layer in the battery!'*

# I threw in my stripes

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## and moved

# to a battery of guns

THE WEEK BEFORE we left England I had had a day and night off in London and went to hear a distinguished production of Madame Butterfly. All night long the train that carried us to the front was to echo the rhythm of a famous melody from that opera and set up a completely sentimental relationship. Even now, more than fifty years later, I am still deeply moved just to recollect it.

We settled down to the routine of trench warfare and our training was completed by moving the guns around from place to place and taking up new positions. My job was to locate each battery in the Division on the move, and as map-reading was for me an easy exercise, I was given that special task. I liked the work. You got to know the country very well — flat dull farming country, deserted by those who belonged to it, but fresh and with a beauty of its own in the early morning or later when twilight fell.

On one move I had a lot of trouble finding all the batteries and the job took me from my Headquarters for a good four days. On arrival home an angry Sargeant met me and demanded to know where I had been for four long days. The answer was obvious and the question put in a rude and spiteful way. I decided to have fun. So I concocted a story of being overcome after eight hours in the saddle and fainting and waking up to find my horse gone and my rifle vanished. A comrade rescued the horse but the rifle I had, I feared irrevocably lost. The Sargeant's rage, born of prejudice, knew no limits. He affected to disbelieve the whole story and proceeded to charge me with grave negligence involving the loss of valuable Army material — to wit one rifle. He laid his charge at once and when I showed him the rifle next day, with appropriate comments on spiteful folly, he then charged me with insubordination.

In due course I came before our C.O., a decent fellow with whom I was on good terms. He adjourned the matter and had a long private talk with me afterwards. I explained that the N.C.O.'s resented my status because of my colour and that there would never be a peaceful relationship. He said that if he entertained the charges there would have to be a court-

### THE SIXTH INSTALMENT of the special GLEANER serialization of the notes for a biography by the late Rt. Excellent Norman Washington Manley.

martial and we set to work to think out a solution. I saw that I disliked the unit and would prefer to be in a brigade of guns, and I offered to throw in my stripes if he would transfer both of us to a battery of guns. The offer stood for my brother and myself. The C.O. jumped at this and promised to put through a transfer in a week. So when the transfer was arranged I resigned as Corporal and reverted to the rank of gunner and went off to D battery of the 39th. Division.

#### Clean sheet

I REMAINED AS a gun layer till I left the Army in 1919. Incidentally, I was the fastest gun-layer in the battery. A gun-layer, by the way, is the man who operated a fairly complex unit that sets the gun dead on target when it is fired.

In my new unit I started with a clean sheet, did not repeat my earlier mistakes and built up a most agreeable relationship with everybody. They respected and liked me and would follow my leadership in any circumstances. I liked them as men and human beings.

Later that year we were sent to the Somme, one of the bloody battles fought for four months with a limited advance of about six miles at a cost of half a million casualties. Early the next year an experiment with tanks had a tremendous success when in one day we advanced as many miles as we had done in four months on the Somme, but had no plan to exploit success. That, indeed, was not to come until 1918.

We went back to Ypres where six months was spent in open preparation for the greatest offensive of the War, timed for June 1917. I had a hard time. We all did, including my brother who had been wounded earlier on in 1917 but managed to wangle his way back to the Division, and indeed to the very battery in which I was serving.

The plan of battle was to mass an inconceivable number of guns on a front of about six miles due East of already battered Ypres, breakthrough to high ground beyond and get rolling over the plans of Belgium. Our Division was to fol-

low the first wave of the attack and our guns were about alongside and in front of the second line trenches. So we spent two months preparing gun positions in very dangerous terrain.

It meant building dugouts for six guns about 1,000 rounds of ammunition for the guns, each shell weighed 45 lbs. and they

where the shells had been dumped by lorry. Then, arriving at 9.00 p.m. we kept on till 4.00 a.m. carrying boxes of shells about two miles to where gunpits had been prepared. Then we broke up and got home to camp as best we could. If you could not beg a lift in a lorry going home, you just walked it. The Germans knew perfectly well what we were doing and all cross roads were heavily shelled from early morning till the sun was well up. Usually we got to camp at about 7.00 a.m., had breakfast, slept, had dinner at 4.00 p.m. and off again for another night's work. Twenty miles walking and seven hours carrying a heavy load half the time!



MANLEY in more peaceful time rowing.

came up in boxes in pairs, about 100 lbs. to the box. Since we were to follow the first wave of infantry we prepared nothing for ourselves. We were to move up four to five miles the first night after the battle started — that was the plan. We stayed put for at least six weeks after the start! But that is part of the story I am to tell.

#### Loaded

PREPARATION WAS hard work, for about one month at the start about thirty of us used to leave our camp at about 5.00 p.m. to walk ten miles to

Steady progress was made and the time came when we moved up to about six miles West of Ypres and about four miles from a little wood that lay ahead of us, surprisingly undamaged. We were then in the last stages of preparation and night work was largely a matter of sending a team of about twenty men to put the finishing touches to our advanced gun positions. Every week twenty of us went to the wood where we lived, looking after our cooking, sleeping by day and working by night. I suppose we were careless, but we were soon spotted by the Germans who worried us by raising quite a few guns in our wood one day.

I was not there when they struck, but my brother, then just twenty one years old, was.

It was just at dusk when they opened a terrific artillery fire on the wood. In five minutes half our men were dead or wounded. Those who could ran out and among those running was my brother Roy, carrying on his back a man thought to be wounded — it turned out he was dead — and then he too fell, killed by a shell that burst a little distance off and sent a small fragment of its casing straight into his heart.

We buried him with others next day, all wrapped in blankets and placed in a field already established in anticipation of the battle, not far from where we had our camp. I cannot speak of how I felt. We were good friends and I was to be lonely for the rest of the war — lonely and bitter. Roy had a fine mind and a large and generous love of life and people. He intended to make writing his career and spent all his spare time when he was not talking to people, writing short stories and scenarios for the cinema.

I have never in my long life met anyone who found it so natural and habitual to get in touch with perfect strangers, people seen on the street — men and women — and to get lost in a

talk in which they revealed all they could of themselves, their background, their problems and the things they were worried about. For him every walk in a city by himself was a potential short story taken from life.

Shortly after we moved up to where our gun had been put in the places near the front line with such labour and, for me, sorrow.

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