

NIGHTFALL ON THE SOMME

Chapter 2

The next ten days were some of the most exhilarating of my life. There wasn't enough equipment for us to have one each of anything, but we shared and learned together. Tommo taught us how to strip and clean the rifles, how to load them, how to aim them and how to achieve an accurate shot. I turned out to be a decent sharpshooter and once or twice received an encouraging pat on the back from him.

There were grenades and ammunition pouches to get used to, gas masks to don, tin helmets to wear and haversacks to carry. And of course the famous British soldier's eating tin: perhaps his most treasured possession.

In those ten days, I learned more than I'd learned in all of my years in school, but it wasn't just the education that was vital; it was the camaraderie. The bonds that were built between us were invisible to the naked eye but like tightly spun strands of webbing that joined us together as we learned to look out for the enemy while covering each other's backs.

"You're doing OK," said Tommo one night as we sat around a fire, gazing into its orangey-yellow heart and listening to the crackle of the flames and the crickets in the surrounding fields trying to keep up with them.

I felt a rush of pride. If Tommo thought I was doing OK that was good enough for me.

The only negative thing that occurred during training happened one afternoon when I was loading up a rifle with ammunition, while bad-tempered Duncan Royle stood behind me waiting his turn.

"If you do it at this rate when we're out on the battlefield, the entire unit will be gunned down," tutted Royle rattily.

"I'm doing it as fast as I can," I snapped back, angry at this interruption.

"Well, it's not fast enough," he hissed.

I felt like shouting at him, but managed to rein in my anger.

"Leave the kid alone," hissed Jack, who'd just joined us and had heard this exchange.

Royle said nothing further. It wasn't a massive deal but it still made me feel tense and uneasy. He was sour and infuriating. I didn't like him and I didn't trust him; he wasn't the sort of person I'd have chosen to watch my back.

"Hey, Nev, wake up."

I turned over and slowly opened my eyes.

It was Mickey.

It was the morning of June 11th. He was dressed and had a serious look on his face.

“What’s going on?” I croaked, seeing it was still dark outside.

“We’re moving out,” he said. “I’m going to wake Jack. We need to grab some breakfast and help get everything ready.”

The mood in the dining room of the Caversham lacked the usual banter. Whether we were ready or not, training was over. We were needed in France.

After breakfast we spent the best part of an hour loading our gear onto two trucks. It seemed like a lot of stuff but there were thirty of us and I had no idea how long it was all meant to last for.

And then we were off.

The trucks bumped and jerked their way down the potholed country lanes but then we got a bit of a smoother ride on the bigger roads that led down to Dover. Some of the lads talked, some slept and some sang songs like *Keep the Home Fires Burning* and *I’ll Make a Man of You*.

“Do you think they’ll put us straight out on the front line?” asked Mickey as we neared the coast.

“Unlikely,” replied Jack with that hangdog expression of his. “They normally give you a bit of time to get acclimatised to being out there and then we’ll get our turn. It also depends on how things are going when we arrive. If it’s relatively quiet we might get billeted for longer. If things heat up, they’ll call on us sooner.”

I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what it must be like to be out there in those French fields inside a British trench. Did you live in constant terror of a German artillery shell landing on you and blowing you to pieces? Or were the British defences good enough to withstand attacks? And was it freezing at night? Plus were the rations good enough to keep hunger at bay?

When we got to Dover, a Royal Navy vessel shipped us over to Dieppe and from there it was a ride in a big lorry into the Picardy region of France and to our final destination.

When I got down from that lorry the sight that met my eyes took hold of my brain and my chest and gave them a hearty rattle. In front of me, in the middle of a huge field, an entire tent city had sprung up. There were tents of all shapes, sizes and colours. It looked like an oversized medieval festival. This was a massive British Army base in the Somme.

“I know it seems vast,” said an officer called Pete who was there to greet us, “but you’ll soon find your way around. The most important place is that blue marquee over there. That’s the canteen, where all of your meals will be eaten. If you grab your bags and follow me I’ll show you to your living quarters. It’s not the Ritz, but believe me, I’ve seen worse.”

Our accommodation was a green tent. There were thirty thin mattresses on the ground, fifteen along each of the longer sides, and I grabbed a berth between Mickey and Jack. Duncan Royle started complaining because the only space he could get was nearest the tent flap, where it would be colder at night, but Tommo told him to button it, so thankfully he did.

Pete was right. It wasn’t hard to find your way around the place and for six days we stayed in that vast tented area. On the third day we received our own individual rifles and other pieces of kit and got in as much practice with them as possible under the watchful eye of Tommo. In the distance you could hear shellfire and the odd explosion, but even though it was loud, it still felt a long way away from the ‘safe’ area where we were billeted.

But that all came to an end on the evening of June 19th, when Tommo and Pete gathered us together in our tent after supper and Tommo announced, “I’ve just got the word, boys. We’re moving in.”