

FROM COALFIELD



TO BATTLEFIELD

The road to Dunkirk revisited

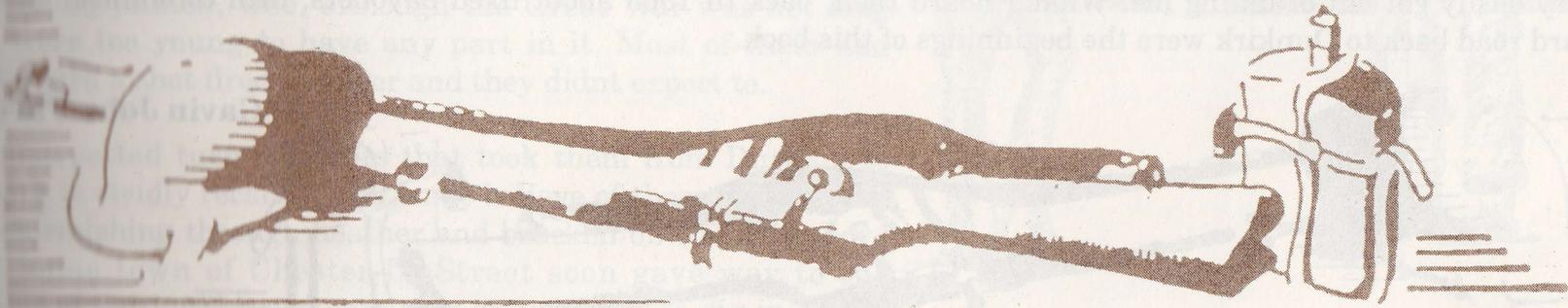


By G. L. Whitehead

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The Beginnings of this Book

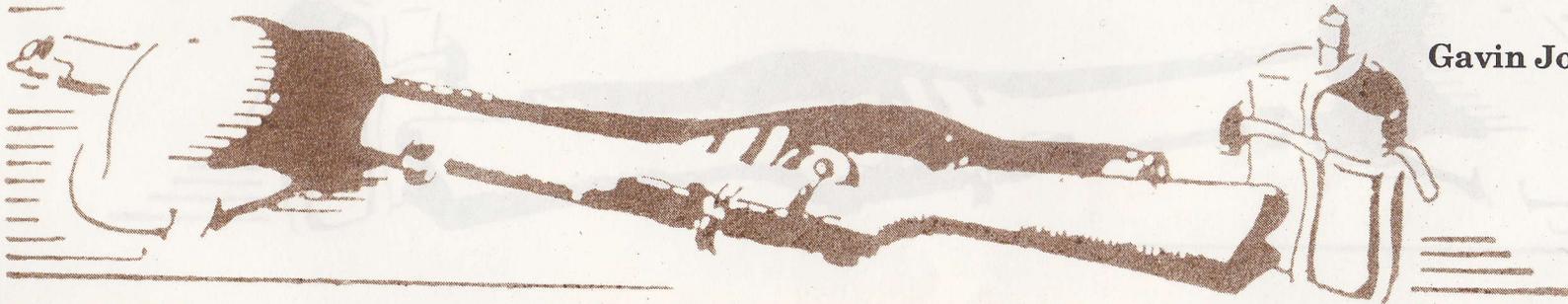
This book owes a great deal to my Uncle Thomas, an old age pensioner now, but in his younger days, a bit of a family black sheep, an artist, a musician, and Durham Light Infantryman.

At the age of 18 he went to War. Posted missing in action at Dunkirk he eventually turned up back home in a French uniform two stone lighter than when the retreat began but otherwise in one piece.

Certainly my Uncle Thomas was no paragon of military virtue. He puts me in the mind of Private John Greene who over a hundred years earlier had soldiered with the Durhams and the "Iron Duke" in Spain. Living to a ripe old age John Greene also told the tale in his own little book of how as a young man in the 68th Foot he'd dodged floggings and firing squads and fought the French when he had to.

I must have been about 12 or 13 years old when I first heard my Uncle Thomas recall the hardships of a soldiers life. Rummaging in my Granny's sideboard I'd found some postcards he'd sent home from France in 1940 and a photo taken of him at the time.

I was keen to know more about it and as Uncle Thomas was upstairs wallpapering the front bedroom he couldn't very easily get out of telling me. What I heard then, back in 1963 about fixed bayonets, fifth columnists and the hard road back to Dunkirk were the beginnings of this book.



Gavin John Purdon.

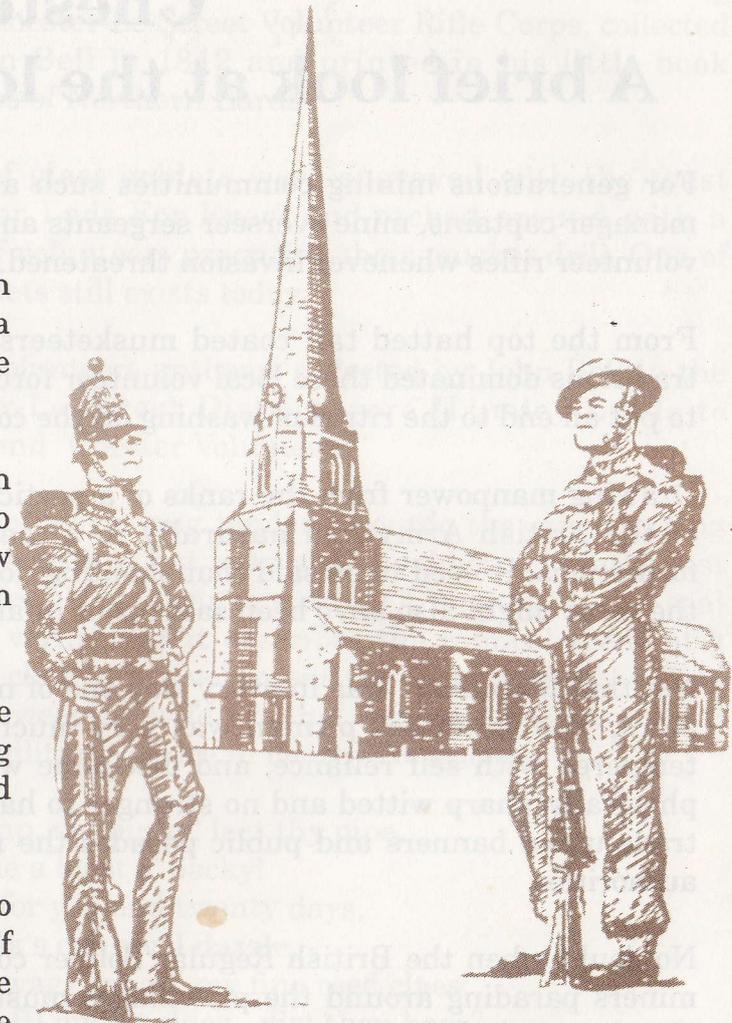
From Coalfield to Battlefield. The Road to Dunkirk Revisited.

Following a brief look at the traditions of the part time pitman soldier in the Chester-Le-Street District, this book moves on to a collection of eye witness accounts gathered locally in which people tell in their own words of how they went to war in 1939.

Although the focus of this book is the Evacuation of Dunkirk in 1940 the story begins in the Great Depression between the two World Wars, when the local Light Infantry unit, broken a few years before in the Battle of the Somme, was reformed in peacetime County Durham.

Being a coal mining area, a big percentage of its rank and file were young pitmen, who, although the Great War was not long over, were too young to have any part in it. Most of them had never heard a shot fired in anger and they didnt expect to.

The unexpected turn of events that took them from Durham to Dunkirk is vividly recalled. The make believe of those first days of war, skirmishing through heather and bracken on the fells above their home town of Chester-Le-Street soon gave way to the realities of battle. Shipped over seas and ordered to dig in on the old killing grounds of the Great War, among the abandoned overgrown trenches and roadside monuments studded with the names of British Army dead, Chester-Le-Street Light Infantrymen found themselves waiting for a very real enemy. The book also tells of how 50 years later, in May 1990, a small group from Chester-Le-Street went back to that Battlefield.



Gavin John Purdon

"Chester Lads Forever!"

A brief look at the local pitman soldier 1803 - 1913

For generations mining communities such as Chester-Le-Street bred their coal owning colonels, their colliery manager captains, mine overseer sergeants and hardy pit lads in abundance to swell the rank and file of the town's volunteer rifles whenever invasion threatened.

From the top hatted tail coated musketeers of the 1800's to the khaki clad "Terriers" of the 1900's pitmatic traditions dominated these local volunteer forces. It took the decline of the coalfield and the closure of the collieries to put an end to the ritual of washing off the coal dust and dashing down to the Drill Hall for evening parade.

Drawing manpower from the ranks of a particular trade or profession was common enough in the volunteer forces of the British Army and naturally in a coal mining county the pits moulded the character of the Durham formations. It used to be said that shouting down the nearest pit shaft could summon up a first rate football team, the same might also have been said about infantry platoons.

Not that the miner was in every way one of nature's military men. For a start blind obedience was not his strong point. The volunteer pitman was very much a soldier in his own terms. A strong sense of comradeship was tempered with self reliance, and discipline with an irreverent sense of humour. As an individual he was tough physically, sharp witted and no stranger to hardship or danger. As a body of men with their own marching bands, trade union banners and public parades the militant potential of the miners did not escape the attention of the authorities.

No doubt when the British Regular Soldier could put the fear of the ungodly into the Duke of Wellington, armed miners parading around the pit villages must have given local squires of lesser metal than the Iron Duke some sleepless nights. Giving muskets to miners however tended to coincide with periods of industrial plenty and foreign threat when fears of invasion overrode misgivings about domestic friction.

How seriously the volunteers took themselves isn't known. In the eyes of local folk they were often viewed as comical, dangerous more by accident than design when their well off the mark musketry felled the occasion grazing cow or frightened innocent passers by. Not without good reason were Chester-Le-Street volunteers musketry practice butts designed to face away from the town and onto the far bankside of the River Wear!

CHESTER LADS FOR EVER

THRO' Durham County, fam'd of old,
Thro' England, be it ever told,
That Chester lads stood forth so bold,
And Chester lads for ever.

When Frenchmen heard of their intent,
To Bonaparte in haste they sent,
And said, since Chester thus is bent,
We are ruin'd, sirs, for ever.

O dreadful news! said Bonaparte,
Enough to break each Frenchman's heart;
But let us try, with all our art,
Those Chester lads for ever.

Then firmly spoke Monsieur Otto,
The Chester lads you little know,
If them you think to overthrow;
For they will fight for ever.

The millions you have slain,
Yet what you've done is all in vain;
You'll never beat the Chester man,
Nor cope with them - no never.

The Consul call'd a council straight,
And long and learned the debate;
Each Frenchman tried, with all his weight,
How France he might deliver.

The issue of this parliament
Was peace - the glorious grand event,
Which gave each British hear content
And Chester lads for ever !!!

A curious relic of the Napoleonic Era, the drinking song of the Chester-Le-Street Volunteer Rifle Corps, collected by John Bell in 1812 and printed in his little book "Rhymes of Northern Bards."

A set of glass goblets were engraved with the toast "Chester Lads For Ever" and etched around with a scene of volunteers practicing their musket drill. One of the goblets still exists today.

Other volunteers anthems collected by John Bell in the Chester-Le-Street District were "Lumley Leads to Glory" and "Chester Volunteers."

One volunteer's song tended to outdo the other in long winded boasting, but head and shoulders above the rest is the gem "Bob Cranky's Adieu." Written in the coal mining vernacular it describes the comical scene of a pitman clad in his volunteer finery leaving behind at home a weeping wife and his ragged pit clothes for 3 weeks military service in nearby Newcastle.

"Cheer up, ma hinny! leet thy pipe,
And take a blast o' backy!
It's but for yen and twenty days,
The foulk's een aw'll dazzle, -
Prood swagg' ring I' my fine reed claes:
Odd's heft! my pit claes - dist thou hear?
Are waurse o' wear; Mind clot them well, when aw's
away:"

To be fair some volunteers were prize shots and could see off the best of competition, Regular Army or otherwise. Not that military prowess was ever really put to the test. In the mock battles at Lumley Castle there were plenty of rifle volleys, bugle calls and glinting bayonets. The noise of "battle" was deafening and gunsmoke hung thicker than the powder reek on a coal face. But on those sunny afternoons of military make believe Chester-Le-Street's "fallen" always "rose from the dead" and walked home afterwards. If anything the dangers of the miner's own calling far outweighed the hazards of his military pastimes.

With campaigns confined to capturing pit heaps and skirmishing about colliery yards the coal field left its mark on the local volunteers in more ways than one. The grime of the collieries was said to be the reason for changing the volunteer uniform from steel grey to rifle green. In Chester-Le-Street the dark green tunics blackened badges and accoutrements earned the volunteers a new nickname, "the Chester' Black Watch," a name carried on into the twentieth century by a local amateur football team.

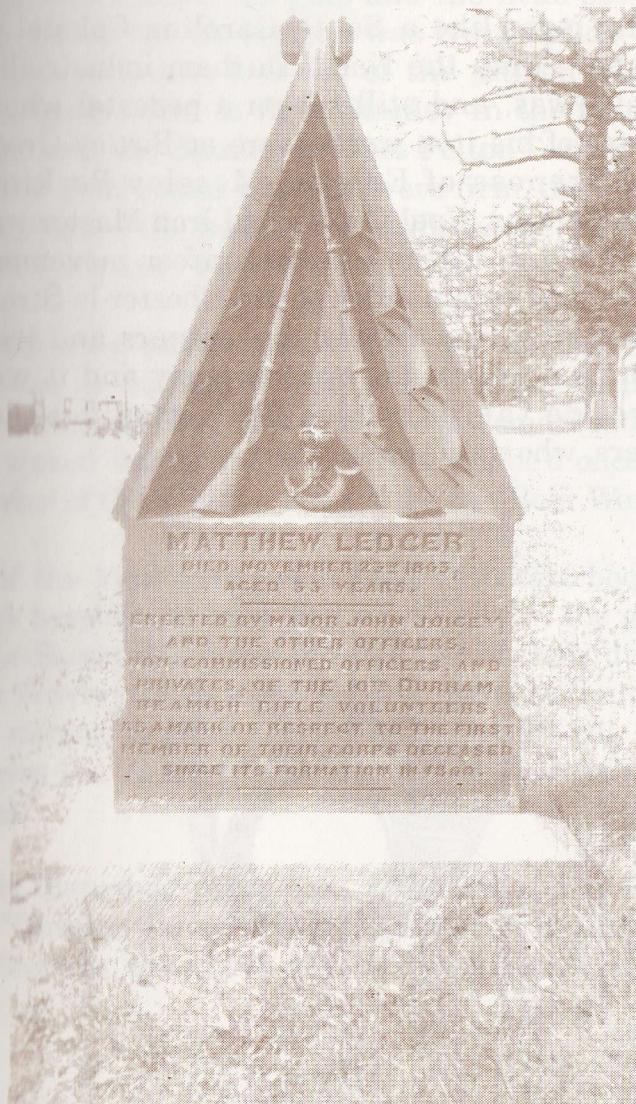
Over the years other military fashions changed too. France the enemy became France the friend. Russia the friend became Russia the enemy, then ally against the Prussians who were our friends but later sworn enemies. None of this really mattered when the only "real" enemy was a lad from the next pit village shouting "bang you're dead" through the nearby hedgerow.

Part time soldiering was by and large pure escapism. A miner's working life was hard and any respite from it welcome. Strong drink and strong religion were always popular options as was a dash of weekend soldiering, then back down the pit on a Monday morning with not very much harm done.

Even the Boer War had very little impact on the make believe. The local volunteers took to wearing the broad brimmed cowboy hats popular in South Africa but few ever saw an angry Afrikaaner.

Today there are no eyewitnesses to the antics of the Victorian volunteers. In 1974 the late Johnson Ellwood of Chester-Le-Street recalled the rough and ready manoeuvres of the pitmatic riflemen.

"Franky Fuge was sergeant at one time, and he had a little pit pony as a pet, and when this field gun had to be taken out for exercise, the' would have this little pony pullin' it. The' were gannin' up to Twizell Farm one day,



Emblazoned with their bugle horn insignia and crossed Enfield weapons the headstone of Matthew Ledger in Pelton Churchyard is one of the few formal memorials left to the passing of the local volunteer rifles.

Subscribers to the headstone included Major Joicey whose family were to be among the foremost titled coal owners in County Durham, the Barons of Chester-Le-Street and Ford.

In 1974 an elderly resident of West Pelton recalled an accidental memorial to the passing of the local volunteers. In the wooden door frame of the colliery house where his grandmother had lived on Pit Hill Front Street was a hole you could put your finger in. As a little girl she had shouted at the volunteers marching past. In fun one aimed his Enfield at her, there was a crash as the rifle went off by accident, burying a musket ball in the doorframe an inch above the child's head.





Looking more like a South Carolina Colonel at Gettysburg than the North Durham industrialist he really was, and still set on a pedestal where the gates of his iron works were at Birtley Green is the likeness of Edward Moseley Perkins. Colonel Perkins, Coal Owner and Iron Master was a major figure in the local volunteer movement and one time commander of the Chester-le-Street detachment. He saw his coal miners and iron workers as a personal private army and it was woe betide the putters, fillers, moulders, or puddlers, who didn't 'volunteer.'



when somebody clashed the gate and the little powney shot off draggin' this bloody gun behind it, and when the' caught up with it the bloody gun was lying upside doon in the dyke. Colonel Turnbull was standin' there, and he used tee tark swankee, and one of the pitmen says in a loud voice, "What the bloody hell's he tarking about?" Twizell Company used to fight Stanley in the fields around Twizell Farm. and many a time the' would hev tee shout, "Hoo are yee, Stanley or West Pelton?" afore the' fired at each other. We were only kids at the time and we would follow them roond when th' were firin' the blanks, and get the cartridges for the ragman. We used to dig the lead bullets oot of the butts on the rifle range, between Smith's Farm and Ginglin' Gate, and many a time, that's how we got the money for a loaf o' bread.

Twizell had some bloody smart men, for all they were pitmen. Me granda' was a sergeant in the militia, the barracks was in William Street, West Pelton, he used to wear these lovely blue troosers, a red coat, and like a policeman's hat. By the' was some bloody smart lads, Joe Martin, to the day he died was Sergeant Martin, he used tee hev a waxed 'tache, and Harry Sharpe, he'd once been a regular soldier, and had spent a lot o' time oot in India. Twenty three of those lads went oot tee the Boer War, and four didnt come back, the' were killed with the dysentry."

The son of the local mineowner died with text book bravery leading his men against the Boers at the Battle of Colenso. A handful pit lads died wrechedly in the grip of fever, others such as William Cuthbertson a well known Chester-Le-Street character in his day did their duty solidly and lived to tell the tale. Oddly enough the highest award for bravery to go to a local volunteer at the time went to a man who never left the county, Captain William Blackett, mining engineer and colliery agent. His decoration was won not in action against the Boers in far off South Africa but in the blackness of Sacriston colliery's Busty seam fighting the miner's real enemies flood water and foul air.

The barely disturbed peace soon returned and one pleasant Edwardian summer gave way to another. Soldiering with the "Chester Terriers" was a matter of a pleasant day or two in the sunshine and fresh air of the Cleveland Hills or Cheviots, then back to your own fireside, to clean pit clothes and well greased work boots.

Gavin John Purdon.



The Territorials of B Company (Chester-Le-Street) 8th Durham Light Infantry at Summer Camp, Rothbury, Northumberland, in August 1910. The soldier on the far left without a cap badge is Mick Maher, a coal miner at Pelton Fell Colliery. Five years later Mick Maher was fighting on the western front.

"THE FOST WARR"

The D.L.I. battle honour "Dunkirk 1940" was won half a century ago, an event fast becoming the dim and distant past. It seems no time since the 1960's and the 50th Anniversary of the Great War. In Chester-Le-Street then there was no shortage of men and women with clear memories of the "War to end all Wars." Today that is far from the case, and even Dunkirk veterans are getting thin on the ground. Back in the 1970's when memories were clearer and easier to come by Bob Barker and Lena Little, residents of Chester-Le-Street district told of the Great War as it was seen from the door of the Durham pit cottage.



ECHOES OF REMEMBRANCE

The chance to piece together a detailed local eye witness account of the Great War has long since passed.

It was different when I was a boy in Chester-Le-Street, back in the early 1960's. Stories were there for the telling. I remember talking to my Granda's friend, Jimmy Noddles. Barely five feet tall and slightly built Jimmy was a "Bantam" a volunteer well below the regulation stature for military service. As an infantryman in the trenches where the mud was up to other men's knees, it was up to Jimmy's backside! Then there was old Mr Surtees who told me of his first home leave to Chester-le-Street from the trenches of the Western Front. Having tramped over his mother's clean floors in boot's still thick with French mud old Mr Surtees or young Mr Surtees as he was then, proceeded to drink a bottle of beer straight off without pouring it into a glass first. It was all too much for his mother who gasped "They' ve turned our lad into a savage!" It was alright to kill Germans with your bare hands and smash other people's homes into rubble but back in Chester' you had to mind your manners.

I also recollect two old ladies who used to play bingo on a Saturday night with my Grannie. One recalled having to bundle up her Father's trench uniform, taken off at the door of their home in North Burns, and run round to the little tailors shop at the bottom of Cooperative Street. She never forgot the snap, crackle and pop of bursting lice, as the tailor ran his hot iron across the dirty khaki.

The other old lady who lived in the Close East told me how her family had only ever won two medals, one a mathematics price from Bede College, Durham and the other a D.L.I. V.C. Her brother Mick was a miner and during the Great War had saved a wounded soldier left to die in no mans land. "It was just like my brother Mick to do that. He was kind hearted, but he was a daredevil too. Ah remember when he was a boy if he found a wild bird or a rabbit that was hurt he'd have it in a box at home looking after it, but the' was that wild streak in him too. He jumped off the bridge at Craghead down onto the colliery wagonway for a dare and broke both of his ankles. He was just a schoolboy then. He had to be carried home."

Today, in 1990, memories like that are all but gone, only the cold stone words of memorials are left behind.

Gavin John Purdon.

"TOOT SWEET"

The' was a lot of lads went from Twizell Pit to the Fost Warr. Jack Armin was killed, "Pushy" Robison was killed, Harry Battensby was killed, Bobby Little was killed, and Joe Fuller's father, he was as good as killed. That med 5 out of a little place like Twizell. You bugger, ahl nivver forget Billy Armin comin' home from the trenches. He was lousey. He stood in the yard, We arl had poss tubs then. "Mother" he shouts, "Fill this tub wi' hot watter." Billy teks arl his bloody clothes off in the yard, every stitch. His Mother says, "Lad, thoo hes nowt on." He says, "It's the first bloody time in months." He was a pitiful sight, frost bitten, frozen feet, standin' up to knees in watter, months on end, ah divint kna how the hell he survived. He got into the poss tub, filled wee hot watter, had a bath and went into the hoose. He says, "Noo Mother put arl them bloody clays into the poss tub, and give them a good possin' "yer bugger he was lousey. Bob Wears was a sergeant in the Durhams during the Fost Warr. He won the French V.C. the Croix de Guerre. He says to me one time, "Ah once remember, we got a German prisoner, a bloody greet big Prussian, and ah got the job tee tek him back tee base. Why lad it was miles. Ah says tee mesell, "Bugger him and base." Ah just lowsed a Mills Bomb oot, pulled the pin oot, shoved it in his pocket, "Toot sweet" ah shouts in French, and the bugger starts to run, and the farther he was gannin' ah was gannin the other way. The bugger went off, and ah went back meesell." Aye Bob Wears was a queerin. He comes onto the heap one day, at Twizell, when we were ready to gan doon the pit . It was a card mornin' and Bob turns his collar up. One of the lads says, "Oh hell Bob, ther's two bloody greet blacklocks on thee showlder." "Where" showts Bob so he looks at them and says, "Get away to hell back tee Grange Villa, and mind that bloody level crossin'." Aye that was segeant Bob Wears.

Bob Barker.



BOB LITTLE ' THE SLUSH PUTTER '

"THE SLUSH PUTTER"

They used to call me Brother the slush putter, 'cause he was that good a putter. He used to be a good worker, a very good worker, he always made good money at the pit. Anyhow at the start of the First War, the' was a recruitin' party came to the pit. It was nine o' clock in the mornin' when the lads were comin' oot from the forst shift, and me brother joined up. Me Father went mad when he came in, he said, "Ah dont know what you signed on for." He was put into the 8th Durhams, and was in France with them.

Me Brother used to go with this young woman from Craghead, then she started to go with another chap and she didn't want nothing more to do with him, 'cause he was away, and she didn't want him to be away. It was enough to dishearten any young man in the fighting line. Then we got word one saturday that he'd been wounded, it was just a blighty wound. On the Monda' ah was out in the fields, singlin' turnips. Somebody shouted of us that ah had to go home. Me Mother was sittin' makin' a proggy mat, a pulley up mat, in fact she had two in the frames together, long passage ones, and she was by herself when the telegram came. Me Brother had died of his wounds. They sent for me up in the fields to come home and me mother was in a arful way. It was heart breakin' when they sent his bits of things home, and the medals he got. He was a good lad, but he came to a bad end, everybody was sad about it. They had a memorial in the church after the War and his name was put on the plaque. We had a cousin, and durin' the Forst War he was arlways desertin'. He used to come to our house and me mother took him in, but she heard that she would get wrong, and she told him that he had to go. But he came back again, dressed as a woman, this time. Me Mother nearly died when she saw him, he was arlways desertin' and the police were lookin' for him. Me Mother was dreadin' the police comin' and me Dad said, "You'll have to go Jack", but she was that sorry for him, been away that long she says, "You can just stop the night" and she packed him off the next morning. She felt that sorry for him.

Mrs. Ramshaw (Lena Little)



A wooden cross hangs on the North wall of St. Cuthberts and St. Mary's church in Chester-Le-Street brought back from the Somme in the 1920's where it was set on the crest of the Butte De Warlencourt after the battle.

That small hillock near Bapaume was the scene of horrific fighting even by Great War standards. On Guy Fawkes night 1916 Prussian Guards and Durham Territorials fought savagely for possession of the chalk mound. In torrential rain a murderous brawl took place. Bare fists, shovels and rifle butts flew. Wounded men drowned in the mud where they fell and the living gave and asked no quarter.

Chester-Le-Street's Rifle Company was there in the thick of it, although, after a year's service on the Western Front, the unit bearing the town's company letter and battalion numeral had already suffered such heavy casualties that very few of the original Chester' Terriers were still in it.

St Cuthbert's and St. Mary's church had old ties with the town's military units. With the thickest walls and stoutest doors in Chester-Le-Street it was for some time the Volunteer Armoury. Within living memory some of the muskets were still in the church. The late Mr. Jack Seedhouse recalled them being borrowed as stage props by the local Amateur Dramatic Society.



The Butte De Warlencourt today

75 years have barely healed this wounded countryside. Shrapnel balls and shell splinters lie thick in these feanfields and the bones of Durham Territorials are still being found on the Butte's weathering flanks.

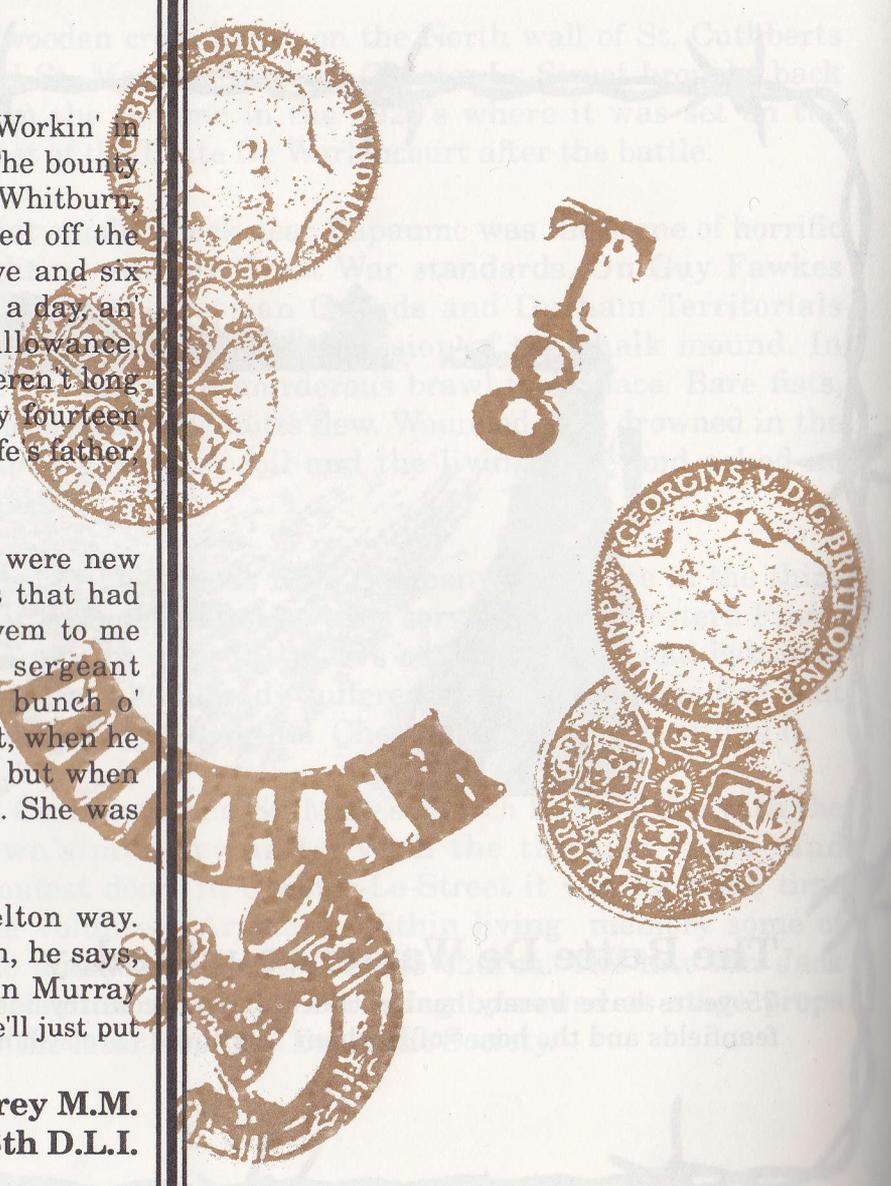
"TWO SHILLIN' A DAY"

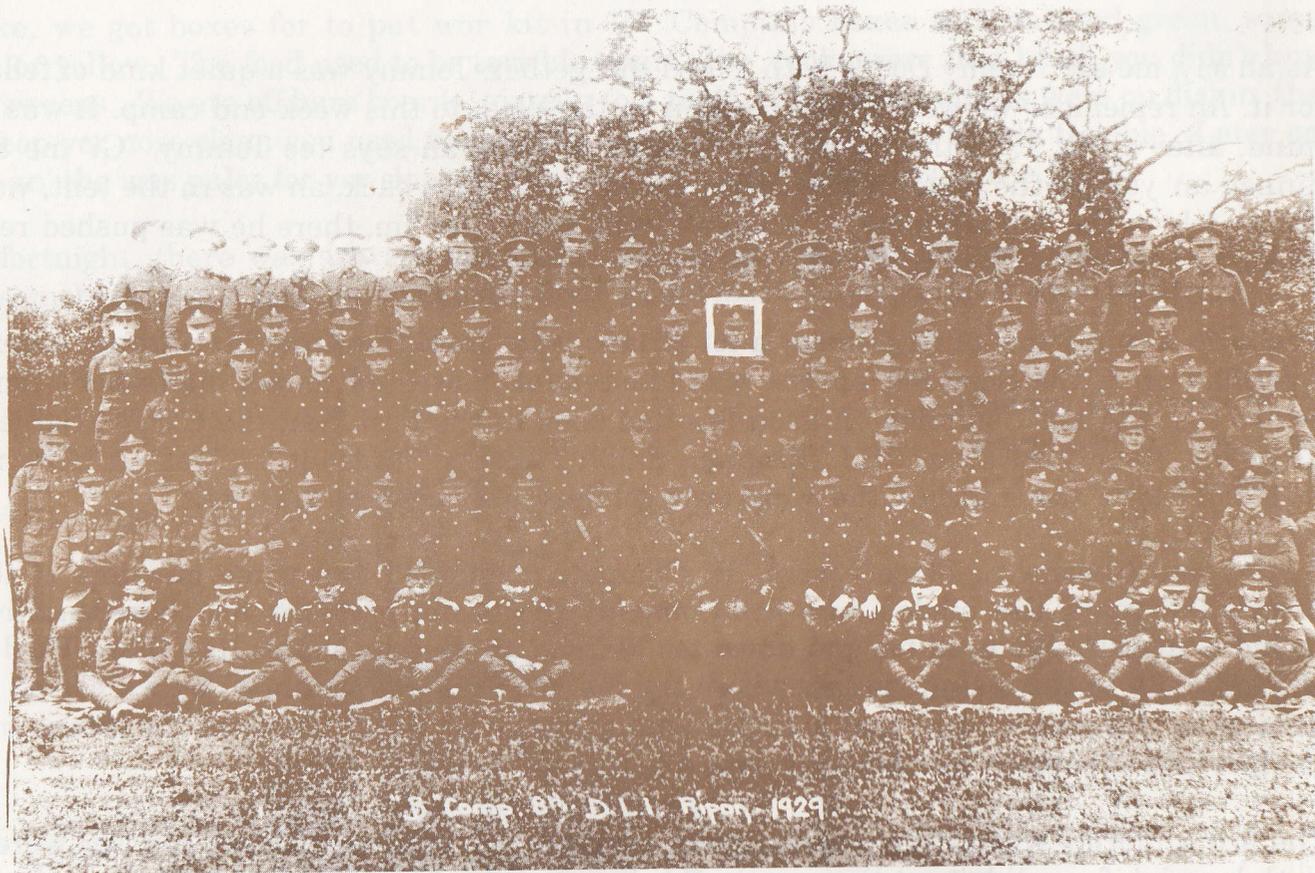
Ah joined the Territorials when ah was 18, in 1929. Workin' in the pits it was the only way you could get a holiday. The bounty was thirty shillin' then, you had to fire your course at Whitburn, and if you didn't qualify the' was ten shillin' knocked off the bounty. Out o' the thirty shillin' bounty, the' was five and six kept off for your army boots. The pay was two shillin' a day, an you had to be twenty six afore you got marriage allowance. 'Course we weren't married when we joined, but we weren't long in bein' married. When you went to camp it was only fourteen shillin' for the fortnight. We were living' in with the wife's father, so we didn't tek it see bad, but it was hard on some.

You got two uniforms, the dress one was decent, the' were new anyhow, but the work one, the' were bloody old ones that had been in the trenches. When ah fust joined ah come yem to me mother and says, "a'v getting a champion fit", but sergeant Simpkin had pulled the old gag on us, grabbin' a bunch o' material at the back so it looked a smart fit at the front, when he pulled the tunic tight, an' says, "yes it's an exact fit", but when ah tried the bugger on at yem it was like a top coat. She was pretty rough then, nee tailors

Tommy Dodds joined wi' me. He belonged West Pelton way. When we went to sign on, Simpkin was the P.S.I. Then, he says, "what's your name?" and Tommy says, "Thomas Lynn Murray Dodds" and the P.S.I. says, "forget the Sarah Ellen bit we'll just put Thomas Dodds down.

**Jimmy McGarey M.M.
Sergeant B Company 8th D.L.I.**





11 years before Dunkirk. B Company 8th D.L.I. at annual camp, Ripon, Yorkshire, 1929. Picked out on the photo is 18 year old Jimmy McGarey, newly joined and thoroughly enjoying a pitman's holiday.

'WHEN WE FIRST JOINED'

As ah say, me an' Tommy Dodds both joined the' gether. Tommy was a quiet kind of fellah, he wasn't really cut out for it. Ah remember we went to the Heddon on the Wall, to this week-end camp. It was rough when we first joined mind, after about 1932 things got a bit better, anyhow ah says tee Tommy, "Gi' me the tin plates, ah'll get the dinner, an' yee get the teas." Whey ah' got the dinners, come back, ah was in the tent, waitin', an' waitin'. Ah says, "Whey where the hell's Tommy?" When ah went lookin' for 'im, there he was pushed reet to the back 'o the queue. Tommy would nivver 'ave survived i' the army.

The' was a canny few of us pitmen, a lot of lads were from the Anne Pit, Jimmy Alderson was Sergeant, he was Overman up at the Shop Pit, an' the was Lieutenant Nelson, of course his father's family was Coal Owners, the' owned Pelaw Main Collieries. A good few had been in the Fost War, the C.S.M., Sergeant Major Nell, the Colour Sergeant, Tommy Jackson, P.S.I. Simpkin, Ralph Timothy, Sergeant, he was an M.M. i' the Fost War, a lot o' the men had been i' the trenches, the' were owld soldiers, an' knew arl the tricks.

Birtley and Chester-Le-Street were "B" Company combined, but three quarters of the men were from Birtley. After a few years, the' made a new full Company at Chester-le-Street, an' those that lived nearer had to go there, includin' myself. We used tee gan down tee Marske an' Redcar, places like that. We'd gan for marches, three or four mile, up to the trainin' areas, where the manoeuvres was held. Whey we nivver looked very smart, an' the' used to be this joke we had that a midden man wouldn't kna till he heard the moans off the back of his cart, that the last load of rubbish he'd hoyed on was a territorial soldier.

The ard uniforms was sandy jackets, green troosers, an' puttees, oh dear me, yer were left wi' bloody git loops o' cloth hangin' if yer didn't get them reet. You had tee whitewash yer belts anarl, an that had yer up to the eyes till yer got used wi' it.

We were sleepin' twelve to a tent, an' if you got by the doorway ivverybody was standin' on yer when the' come in, an' if it was clarty, orr dear me how. The' were big bell tents we were livin' in, whey it was supposed to be one man to one panel when we were under canvas, but it was arlways mare. Your kit had to be put outside, an' the' was a certain way to fold yer blankets an' that. If you were away on manoeuvres the' was a line orderly left, an' if it had come on to rain, when you went back, all yer kit was just hoyed into the tent, it was arl owwer.

Things got a bit better like, we got boxes for to put wor kit in "B" Company boxes was painted green, some companies were red, green, or yellow. The food used to be terrible anarl, the' cooks were that black you didn't kna whether the' were cooks or sweeps. We ate off bare boards, sixteen to a table. The owld soldiers were on dishin' the stuff out, an' if yer didn't keep yer nose clean you used tee get the fat an' arl sorts, it was bloody terrible. Later on it was only eight to a table, an' the was pales for yer slops an that, we even got tablecloths at the finish.

When you were away the fortnight, there was arlways one night manoevre, complete silence mind, ye'd be deen away from the lines, when somebody would fart, an' then everybody would start laughin', lad it was comical.

**Jimmy McGarey M.M.
Sergeant B Company
8th D.L.I.**





B Company, (Chester-le-Street) 8th D.L.I., marches to a peace time summer camp in the 1930's. In the front centre is Jimmy McGarey, on the right Tommy Taylor and just visible over his shoulder is Tommy Coulson.

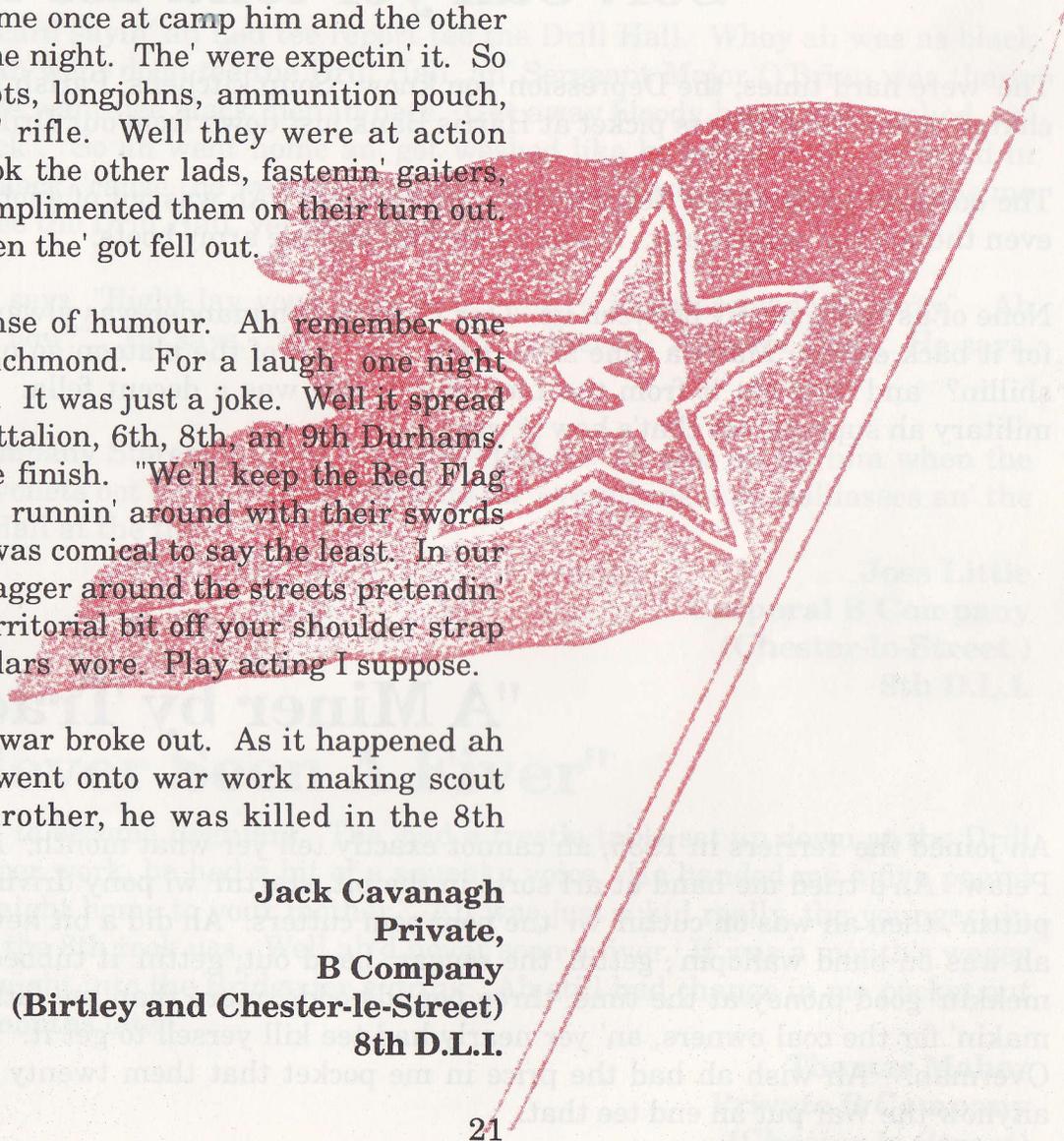
The Red Flag

Ah was in the Terriers before the War. Me father had been in the old Volunteers. Ah remember him telling me once at camp him and the other lads in his tent were stood to during the night. The' were expectin' it. So thee arranged to turn out in just boots, longjohns, ammunition pouch, belt and bayonet, spiked helmet an' rifle. Well they were at action stations in half quarter the time it took the other lads, fastenin' gaiters, buttoning tunics an' that. The C.O. complimented them on their turn out. Nobody could stand up for laughin' when the' got fell out.

Not that the Army has much of a sense of humour. Ah remember one summer we were under canvas at Richmond. For a laugh one night somebody started to sing the Red Flag. It was just a joke. Well it spread from tent to tent from Battalion to Battalion, 6th, 8th, an' 9th Durhams. All 151 Brigade were singing it at the finish. "We'll keep the Red Flag Flyin' Here." Whey man officers were runnin' around with their swords out. The' thought it was a mutiny. It was comical to say the least. In our time off we'd go into Richmond and swagger around the streets pretendin' to be Regulars. We would take the Territorial bit off your shoulder strap an' leave the Durham bit like the Regulars wore. Play acting I suppose.

I'd packed in the Terriers by the time war broke out. As it happened ah didn't see any service with them, ah went onto war work making scout cars. Our Willy went though, me brother, he was killed in the 8th Durhams.

Jack Cavanagh
Private,
B Company
(Birtley and Chester-le-Street)
8th D.L.I.



"Sor! Can yer lend uss a Shillin'?"

The' were hard times, the Depression you know. Soup kitchens, Parish Relief an' all that. The' was a police baton charge against the miners picket at Harris Bank just down from our Drill Hall. Hard times to say the least.

The boots ah got from the Territorials were like gold. Ah was out of a job an' you had to walk miles lookin' for work even though the' wasn't any. It was as well ah had me army boots.

None of us had a penny between us. Our Platoon Commander was always good for a few bob. He never ever asked for it back either. Many a time ah've seen lads out of the platoon go up to him an' say "Sor! can yer lend uss a shillin'?" and they got it from the Lieutenant. He was a decent fella. That was from his own pocket. Not very military ah suppose but that's how it was.

Jack Cavanagh
Private
B Company 8th D.L.I.
(Birtley and Chester-le-Street)

"A Miner by Trade"

Ah joined the Terriers in 1935, ah cannot exactly tell yer what month. Ah was a miner by trade, workin' at South Pelaw. Ah'd tried me hand at arl sorts in the pit, startin' wi pony drivin', then ah come off that an' went on stone puttin', then ah was on cuttin' wi' the pom pom cutters. Ah did a bit hewin' and fillin' but when the War broke out ah was on band wallopin', gettin' the seggar band out, gettin' it tubbed an' sent out for mekkin' bricks. Ah was mekkin' good money at the time, three pounds odds, mare than me father was makin'! but nowt' to what ah was makin' for the coal owners, an' yer nearly had tee kill yersell to get it. Ah remember sayin' tee Mr Errington, the Overman. "Ah wish ah had the price in me pocket that them twenty tubs ahve' just filled 'ill fetch Jack." But anyhow the War put an end tee that.

Me Brother came up to the pit, he had this card sayin' ah had tee report tee the Drill Hall. Whey ah was as black as that fireback, strite oot the pit yer kna Ah went doon tee the Drill Hall, an' Sergeant Major O'Brian was there. He says "What the hell are ye doin' here? We want nee black men in here. Get away bloody home, get weshed, an' get yer bloody khaki on afore yer come back". So ah went home an' got weshed like he telt uss tee, we lived in Third Avenue then, pitmen had to go home black, 'cause the was nee pit head baths in those days. Ah sayed tee me Mother an' Father, "Ahve' got tee gan back tee the Drill Hall, yer kna what for.

Ho when ah went back the Sergeant Major says, "Right lay your gear here, you're in the Advanced Party". Ah says, "Bloody Hell, how am ah gonna be on now?". He says, "You work at the colliery?" Ah says, "Yis". He says, "leave that to us, we'll see yer arlreet".

Ho anyway George Willy Legget was the Company Storeman doon the Drill Hall, an' ah was on wi' him when the Main Party come in, dishin' the rifles an bayonets oot tee each one, blankets an' everything else, palliasses an' the like, 'cause we were arl sleepin' in the Drill Hall at the time.

Joss Little
Corporal B Company
(Chester-le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

'Ah'd Never Seen A Fiver'

We all took the King's shilling, an' signed on to become Regulars. The' had a trestle table set up down at the Drill Hall. Lieutenant Waggett was doing the paper work, he had a bit of a squeaky voice. He handed me a five pound note when ah signed an' said "Take that straight home to your mother." Ah was just a kid really, the youngest in the Battalion. It was touch and go whether the 8th took uss. Well ah'd never seen a fiver. It was a month's wages for a pit lad. Needless to say we were all straight into the Bridge for a drink. Ah still had change in me pocket out o' that fiver when we were in Oxfordshire 3 months later.

Thomas Maher
Private B Company
(Chester-le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

"THE BEST BLOODY WAR THAT'S IVVER BEEN ON".

Ah remember it was Frida' the fust of September, 1939. Ah'd been at the Shop Pit, Allerdene Colliery, Low Fell, for about four year. Ah was on fillin', hoyin' coals about, an' gettin' close on two p'und a week for it, a lot o' money then, like, two p'und.

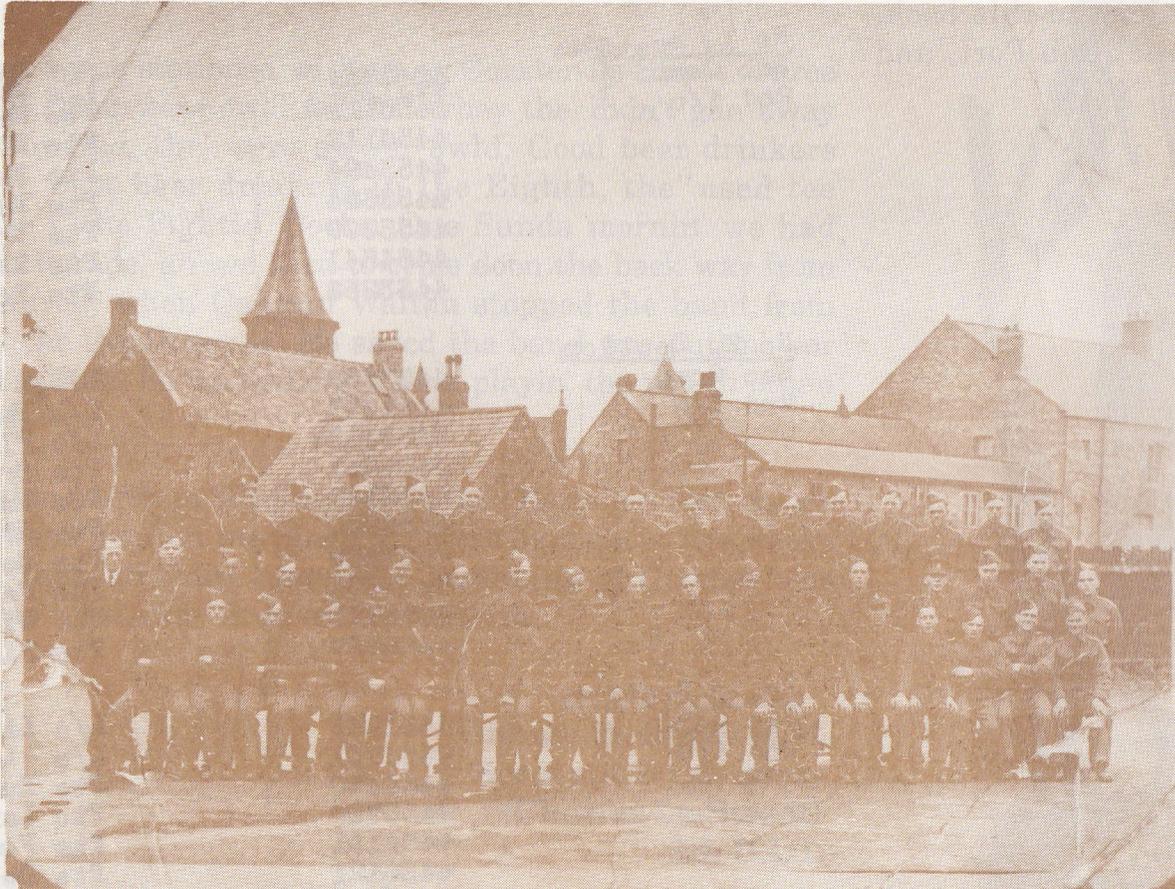
Anyhow, ah was in the backshift, an' ah come back tee bank at quarter past five, put me lamp intee the lamp cabin, an' the attendant says, "You' ve got to report to the Drill Hall as soon as possible". So ah come hyem, then lashed down there, thinkin' ah was gonna be late for the war. It lasted owver six year for me.

You went down, an' got five p'und straight away, what was called Embodiment Money. We'd finished work on the Frida', gettin' wor pit pay, then at the end of next week we had another pay lyin' at the Colliery, then the' was a week's pay doon at the Drill Hall an' the five p'und Embodiment Money on top o' that. Ah says, "It's the best bloody war that's ivver been on, this, lad".

We were sleepin' on the Drill Hall floor. Me an' Ikey's lyin' the gither on the Frida' night, an' Big Jossie comes up an' says, "How sergeant'. Ikey says, "What's the want?" Jossie says, "Greenwell, he's pissed on uss". Ikey says, "Whey gan an' piss on him back". Anyhow, the' was a complaint put in, an' Greenwell got three days Confined to Barracks off Captain Walton, who was the Company Commander. Anyway everybody was goin' home for the week-end except Greenwell.

Captain Walton set away in his car, he lived over Durham way, an' he got see far an' come back to the Drill Hall, an' told Greenwell to bugger off home, 'cause he was stuck there by himself.

B. Company (Chester-Le-Street) 8th D.L.I. outside their Drill Hall in the town during September 1939. Unlike the 11th, their sister Battalion, the 8th D.L.I went to war with a fighting chance trained and equipped as modern motorised infantrymen. To begin with heavy weapons were in short supply, real ones arrived before the Company went overseas. Until then, men carrying coloured flags were the "Bren Guns" and "Mortars."



Distribution and Organisation of 'B' Coy 8th Bn DLI (TA).

A creased fragile memento of September 1939. The roll call of 10 Platoon, one of the three Platoons that made up "B" Company of the 8th D.L.I., placed on standby at Chester-Le-Street Drill Hall, the week-end war was declared.

Among the 35 names listed are 4 men who contributed their recollections to this book, Jimmy McGarey, Joss Little, Bob Fort, and Thomas Maher.



No 10 Pl

Pl Comd
Pl Sgt 4447574
Bagman 4456104
Pl Orderly 4456110
Mor Duty 4456109
- do - 4451729

No 1 Section

Sec Comd 4451703
2nd i/c 4451371
4456119
4456118
4453684
4453684
4455809
4464541
4433258

No 2 Section

Sec Comd 4451703
2nd i/c 4451371
44561132
4455051
4456143
4456080
4451849
4455691
4456171
4456227

No. 3 Section

Sec Comd 4451845
2nd i/c 4455701
4454490
4455700
4456131
4456121
4449568
4452899
4609797

2/Lt L.R. English
Sgt McGarey JA.
Pte Ledger E.
Pte Benny D.
Pte Brown L.
Pte Dixon F.

Col Gray R.
L/c Harrison R.
Pte Dawson G.
Pte Elliott GW.
Pte Marshall R.
Pte Maddison C.
Pte Chester G.
Pte Estell RR.
Pte Booth J.

L/Sgt Wardle S.
L/c Harvey T.
L/c Flower F.
Pte Smithson C.
Pte Huscroft N.
Pte Stainbank R.
Pte Bowman J.
Pte Fellowes C.
Pte Gibson A.
Pte Fishburn J.

L/c Little J.
L/c Lambton JR.
Pte Hanwick CH.
Pte Lambton W.
Pte Fort R.
Pte Bellow L.
Pte Gill NT.
Pte Hickman J.
Pte Smithson GA.
Pte Maher T.

For the fust week or the fust fortnight we'd just march up to Waldridge Fell, and do Section Formations. We still had the old Fost War gear, the big wide webb belts an' pouches, five pouches on each side, small ones yer kna, for rifle bullets. When we got the new battledress an' that, down in Oxfordshire, the' were much easier, gaiters instead of puttees, an' nee buttons tee clean, the webbing was better too, one big pouch on each side.

The band was stationed with us at Chester-Le-Street. Three parts of them were owld fellahs. Whey the' didn't gan away with wor like; the' were owwer owld. Good beer drinkers though, best beer drinkers in the Eighth, the' used tee practise i' the Fightin' Cocks. One Sunda mornin' we had Church Parade, an' we used to come doon the back way from the Church, when Captain Walton stopped the band from playin' the mooth organ. He sayed the band was puttin' wor arl oot o' step. So we had Big Jossie playin' the mooth organ instead.

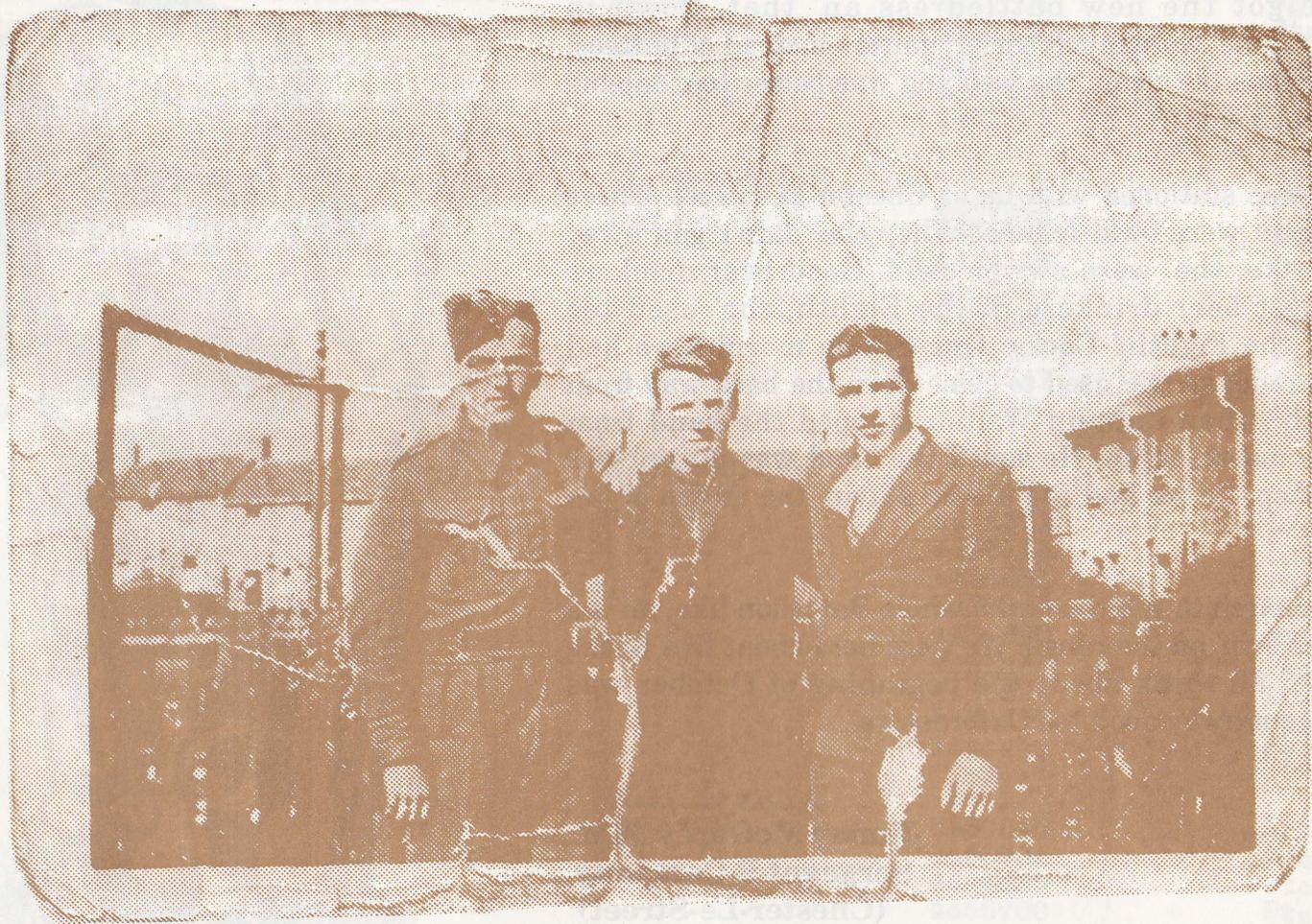
We had to march to Whitburn, the whole Battalion like, an' we had a week firin' on the range. We were here about five weeks in all, then ah think about the beginning of October was when we went away doon tee Oxfordshire.

**Jimmy McGarey M.M.
Sergeant B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.**



by G. L. Whitford

Brothers in arms. The Coulsons in Chester-le-Street, Autumn 1939. Joe on the left was in the Chester-le-Street Company of the 11th D.L.I., his brother Tommy was in the Chester-le-Street Company of the 8th D.L.I.



"LETS JOIN THE ARMY".

The' was a recruitin' campaign in Chester-Le-Street at the time, an' the' was Jimmy Hubbick, Billy Cook, meself, George Stevenson, an' another lad, we all worked at the store, an' we were out drinkin' that night, in the Bridge End Pub, a bloke called Grundy had it then, an' we came out full of beer course. Somebody says, "let's join the army". So we all trooped into the Drill Hall, once you got in, the' closed the doors, an' you were there, you couldn't change your mind. Queerest thing about it was the medical, you got it there and then, signed on, an' got your king's shillin'. The' sayed, "are you fit?" when ah sayed ah was, the' sayed, "O.K., sign here". As it happened ah'd bad eyesight arl me life, but there ah was in the Durham Light Infantry.

So that was how we got into it, an' all of us managed to come through the War safe, we all got back. Of course everybody knew the' was a war coming and eventually we would have had to go into the army anyhow. Well they tried to knock us to shape as soldiers. We were just playin' at soldiers, really nobody knew what it was all about, or what we were in for.

We were assembled on Sunday the Third of September, an' everybody knew the broadcast was coming over the radio. As soon as War was declared the air raid siren went an' we all rushed into the trenches behind the Drill Hall. We were in there about an hour an' a half, then we were eager to get across to the pub, 'cause it was getting on for twelve.

We were all sleepin' on the Drill Hall floor, with just one blanket each, the whole of us, Jimmy McGarey, Ikey McDermott, Big Jossie, a lot of men that are still knockin' about the town now. We were sorted out into platoons an' that, but ah don't think that we did very much. The' just used to buy the rations in the town, Jack Crowe was the Messing Sergeant, an' he would just gan with a shopping bag. We'd go for route marches up to Waldridge Fell and back, an' of course we were arl friends the was no such thing as "Sergeant" or "Corporal". The whole time ah never called Jack Crowe anything but "Jack" unless we were on parade, or the' was an officer about.

Bob Fort
Private,
8th & 11th D.L.I.

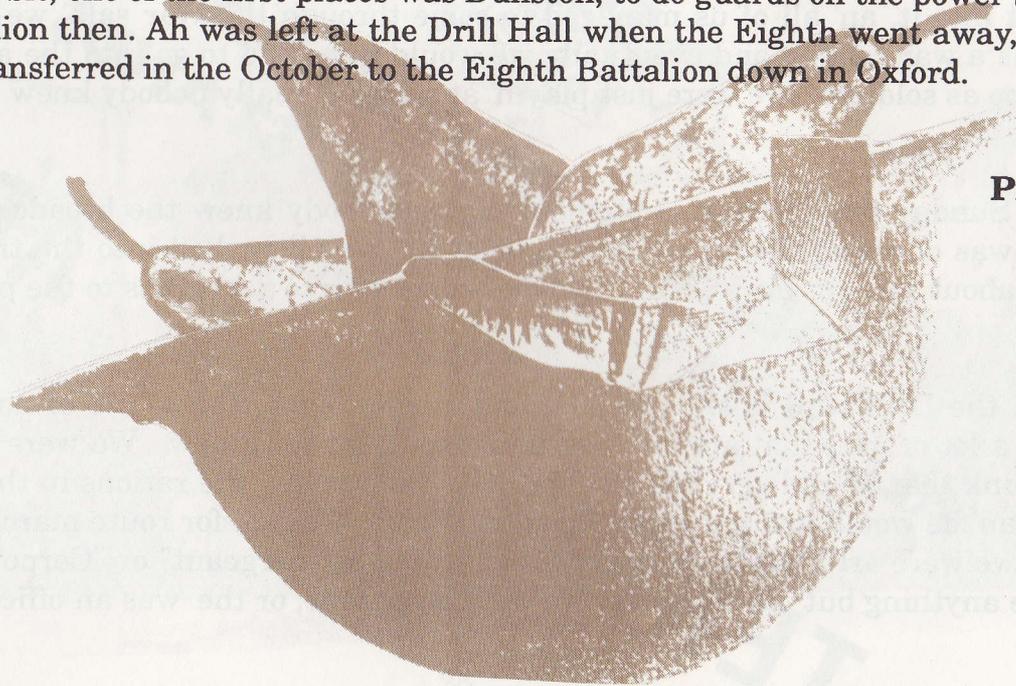
"NICKING PEARS WHILE WAR BROKE OUT"

Ah joined the beginning of 1939, ah think the February. All me mates were joinin' you know, an' ah suppose that's what give uss the idea. As was just jobbin' around, Pelton Fell, Waldridge, 'Cotia, all them pits. 'Course that was the thing, to be in the Territorials, so me, Joe Dodds, an' Bobby Gordon joined. Jossie an' them had been in a good while, but we all joined together. The idea was to get your bounty money, an' go to camp, things like that, see.

Before war broke out we were all mobilized an' sleepin' at the Drill Hall. War was expected. Ah can remember the Sunda' mornin' it broke out, ah was up a tree in Chalmer's Orchard, nicking pears while war broke out.

Then we got moved about a bit, one of the first places was Dunston, to do guards on the power station. The' were on formin' the Eleventh Battalion then. Ah was left at the Drill Hall when the Eighth went away, ah was too young to go with them, but ah got transferred in the October to the Eighth Battalion down in Oxford.

Thomas Maher.
Private 8th and 11th
D.L.I.



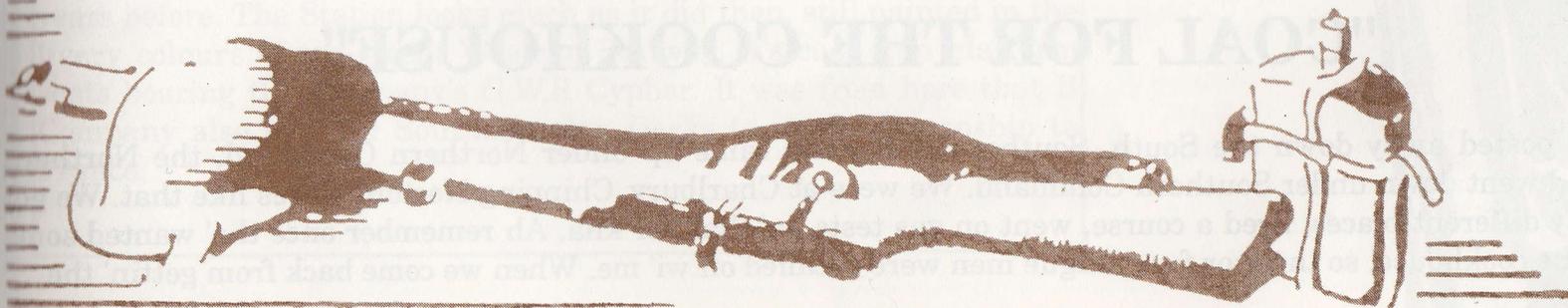
"CHRISTMAS DINNER"

The' was Sixth Eighth, an' Ninth D.L.I. in One Five One Brigade. When the war started the' made a reserve line to us, the Tenth, Eleventh, an' Twelfth D.L.I. So when the Eighth moved out of Chester' Drill Hall to go tee Oxfordshire, the Eleventh moved in an' took owwer. We went to Chadlington, H.Q. was Charlbury. It was arlreet, just a little village, they'd never been invaded afore, till we got there.

We used tee gan to different people's houses to get baths yer kna. We were livin' in a barn, an' the officers was in the farmhouse. We started Company training, then we got Battalion training, manoeuvres an' that, out in the fields. We got issued wi' the new style battle dress when we were there.

The was a pub there, the Sandwich Arms, the landlord had a garage, an' we use to billet there, when we came oot the barn. The landlord an' landlady made us arl Christmas Dinner. We had a smashin' do. Ah remember Tommy Coulson, belanged Pelaw, he was a Corporal then, complainin' about the beer been flat, an' we were gettin' it arl for nowt, the tables were laid after closin' time, soup, roast potatoes, brussels, turkey, an' a sweet, but the' still had to complain about the beer.

Jimmy McGarey M.M.
Sergeant, B Company,
Chester-Le-Street,
8th D.L.I.



"A LITTLE VILLAGE IN OXFORD"

We were sent to a little village in Oxford, after been at Chester' maybe two months. We went to Chadlington, that was the actual village "B" Company was in. Down there, the only thing that comes to memory ah did a Divisional Guard, 'course we were gettin' real soldiers then, very little good wi' weapons' but regards drinkin' an' lookin' the part.

Ah don't remember a lot about that period, except gettin' drunk in the pub, an' playin' football two or three times a week, ah suppose we were gettin' fit.

Ah was home for the New year's Eve, an' it was about that time the' decided ah was too young to be there. As it turned out ah was twelve days too young to go to France wi' with Eighth Durhams, so ah was sent back to join the Eleventh Battalion then. Eventually ah' ended up at Sunderland, Chester Road Schools, wi' "C" Company from Stanley Drill Hall. We moved to Hall Lane Schools at Houghton, an' we went tee France from there.

Bob Fort
Private 8th
and
11th D.L.I.

"COAL FOR THE COOKHOUSE"

We were posted away down the South, Southern Command came up under Northern Command, the Northern Command went down under Southern Command. We were at Charlbury, Chipping Norton, places like that. We got sent away different places, fired a course, went on gas tests an' that yer kna. Ah remember once the' wanted some coal for the cookhouse, so three or four fatigue men were detailed off wi' me. When we come back from gettin' the



1990. Charlbury Railway Station on the Cotswold Malvern Branch Line where the 8th Battalion arrived in Oxfordshire from Durham 50 years before. The Station looks much as it did then, still painted in the livery colours of the Great Western Railway, it's cast iron platform seats bearing the Company's G.W.R Cypher. It was from here that B Company also left for Southhampton Docks to catch a troopship to France.



coal, here's arl the lads lookin' spick an' span. Ah says, "what the hell's been on?" the' says, "whey you' ve missed it" Ah says, "Missed What?". He says, "Whey the King's been inspectin' wor, he says we've got a good regiment". Ah says, "Got a good regiment? it's as weel he didn't see us scruffs then," we were as black as the roads wi' gettin' coal.

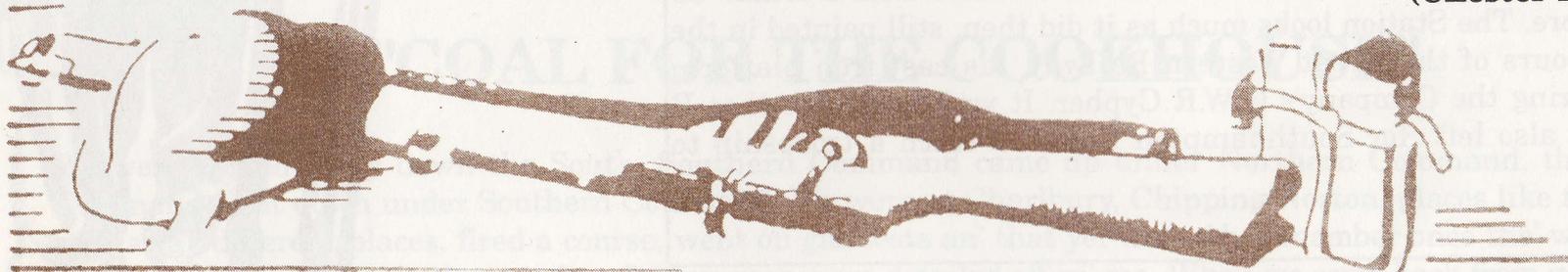
Joss Little'
Lance Corporal B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

"OFF TO FRANCE"

The' formed another Battalion, the Eleventh, an' ah was left at Chester' Drill Hall when the Eighth Battalion went away, actually ah was too young. But eventually when the' started sortin' people out for this Battalion an' for that Battalion, some stayed wi' the Eleventh, but ah was one of a group that got transferred down to the Eighth in Oxford, at Chadlington.

We were doin, manoeuvres, you know, endurance, route marches, an' arl that, an' we actually went off to France from there. We got the train from Charlbury, went to Southampton, ont' the boat, an' from there to Cherbourg".

Thomas Maher.
Private, B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I





1990. Chadlington, the tiny Cotswold Village where Chester-Le-Street men of B. Company, 8th D.L.I. were billeted for three months before going to France. The Chester' lads remember the kindness of the Oxfordshire Country folk. A hot bath in someone's house, then tea and home made scones at a friendly fireside were a welcome antidote to nights spent sleeping on straw in barns cold December days out on manoeuvres.

"A ROUGH DO"

We did away from Chadlington, marched to the station, the transport had already been shipped away, so we had tee manhandle arl the stuff, the Brens an' the boxes. Whey it was arl snaw an' ice, it was a rough do just to get to the station.

We were strite off the train at Southampton an' onto the boat. It went an' lay outside o' Portsmouth till it was neetime, an' the convoy could set sail for Cherbourg. We got there about seven i' the mornin'. Whey Cherbourg's a git lang station an' the cooks had a meal on. we weren't movin' out till about midnight, so we were allowed to go into Cherbourg. We had to be back for about ten. So that was the first taste the lads had of the brothels. When the train left Cherbourg that night, just joggin' alang, it was an owld one out of the Fost War, wooden seats an' that, ah went alang the corridor, here's two o' the lads lyin' full length on the seats. One says, "By, that was lovely lad. you've seen nowt like it, ah wish we're at the next place".

When we got to St. Remy du Plain it was only a small village, whey the' was nee brothels there, the nearest one was Mameuse. Whey if you'd seen the snaw, it was a hard winter, but the' still managed to get there. You talk about dogs servin' bitches in arl weathers, an' the' had tee walk yemm after anarl.

A tSt. Remy du Plain we got the lice strite away. We ever had been in our billets afore us must have left it, 'cause the place was thick wi' dorty straw. The' were owld buildin's, owld places, the lads was full o' lice. The Sergeant Major had two pairs o' shears, one was to shave the' heeds, an' the other was tee shave the' balls. Ah mind one lad sayin', "ah hope yer not gettin them shears mixed up Geordie". Life was pretty grim there, a hard winter, snaw, cold, still it was a change an' ah suppose we enjoyed it in a way, gannin' intee the cafes an' that, not that we had much money like. It was a coal minin' area we were in, not far from Lens, an' the was plenty of pits 'round there. From Vimy Ridge you could see any amount of pit heaps.

Sergeants was allowed to billet out, it cost you a few francs. Me an' Ikey Mcdermott bunked in wi' this little owld Frenchman called Maurice, he was a glazier. He had a limp from been wounded i' the Fost War. He used to give the lads rum for nowt, so the' would smash windows in the village on a pay Frida' neet, an he'd gan limpin' along on the saturday mornin', an' put them back in. By he hated the Germans, an' we were tellin' him how we were ganna wipe the floor wi' them this time, the' wouldn't get the chance to set foot in France, an' yer bugger we were back yemm within a month.

Jimmy McGarey M.M.
Sergeant, B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.





The London Midland and Southern Railway steam packet "Duke of Argyll" took Chester-Le-Street's 8th D.L.I. Company to France in 1940.

It was a stormy winter crossing from Southampton to Cherbourg, but nothing compared to the storm that would break over the 8th Battalion men who crammed her decks.

In modernised battledress, with their brand new Bedford trucks and Bren Gun Carriers, none would have believed that within a few short months the battered remnants of their Battalion would be limping back to England, most of its equipment destroyed or left behind.

Photo of the "Duke" by permission of National Maritime Museum.

"YOU WOULDN'T THINK THE' WAS A WAR ON"

When we got to Cherbourg, we had a bit of a look 'round, then we were piled onto these bloomin' old cattle trucks, typical French, an' away we went. First place we got to was st. Remy du Plain. We were based there a week or so, an' used to get trips out to places like Alencon an' Mameuse, these kind o' places. It was more or less just doin' guards, occupyin' these villages.

Then we were moved away to a place called Logny, a town like Chester-Le-Street. You wouldn't think there was a war on. Kid's comin' 'round on a night sellin' the "Paris Soir" an' that. We used to be sent on different guards from there. One of the first ah went on was a platform patrol on this station, where the main line trains from Paris to Bolougne went through.

Ah remember this train stoppin' an' it was full of American civilians, the' would be gettin' out o' Europe while the' could, an' one lady said ah looked rather young to be a soldier. So that was platform security with the French. We wer doin' route marches anarl, ah remember these boots ah had on were newish. On the way back we stopped, we'd done a bit mock action in the woods, cowboys an' indians. Ah took me boots off, an' me sock was stickin'. Lieutenant Regnart says, "lets have a look at yer heel". It was just like a tomato. Ah put this powder on, but when ah got me boot back on it was agony. When you walk it goes away a bit, but it's still sore. We were walkin' behind the fifteen hundredweight truck, ah was carryin' the Bren, an' limpin' a bit. Big Jossie says, "Giz the bloody Bren, an' get a bike off the back o' the truck". The Sergeant was ganna put us on a charge, he says "You're supposed to be carryin' the Bren, not ridin' a bloody bike".

Thomas Maher.
Private, B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

"DIGGIN' ANTI TANK TRAPS"

When we went owwer tee France, we landed, got onto the train, the' took wor up, way up tee round about Gondecourt. What we were doin' was these trucks was takin' us out tee a place called Seclin, where we were on diggin' anti tank traps. We were expectin' the Jerries, an' the did come eventually, from the North part o' France, down to where we were, where we'd made these trenches. But what Jerry did he'd run a tank strite into the ditch, blew the turret off it, an' drove the next tank strite owwer the top ont. One or two didn't make it like, the' got stuck, an' picked off by our lads what was fightin' the rear guard action. But the' couldn't howld the Jerries back as it turned out. So that's what we were doin' afore we went into action, diggin' tank traps, doin' a few route marches, things like that.

Joss Little.
Lance Corporal
B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.



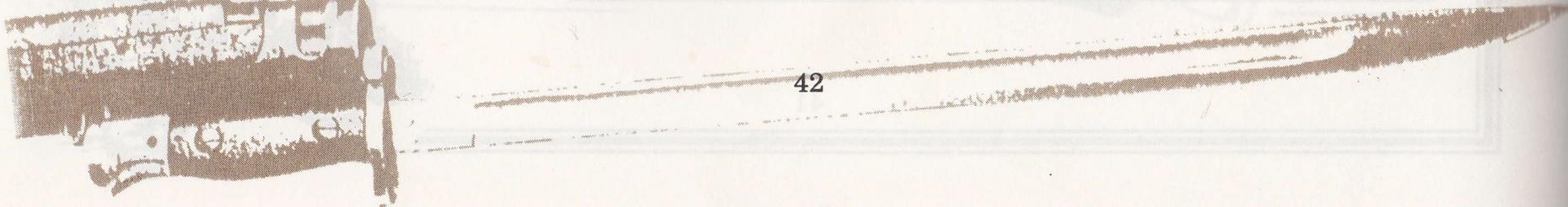


All quiet on the Western Front. Just weeks before the German attack a platoon of B Company men outside their billet in Gondcourt School House. Still smiling but soon left with their backs to the sea and struggling to survive the onslaught of the German Blitzkrieg.





Just joined up. 2 pals from Chester-Le-Street's 11th D.L.I. Contingent. The ill fated 11th were not only short of cap badges they never had enough of anything to go around. Half trained and ill equipped for war they went to France as ditch diggers and cement mixers not infantrymen. Sent into the front line as a last resort they only lasted a few hours against the Germans. Very few made it back to Dunkirk. Amazingly some isolated groups fought on to the last cartridge, pitting single shot rifles and First World War sword bayonets against tanks and dive bombers.



"THE BUZZ ON THE GRAPEVINE"

My Company was in Houghton when we got the buzz on the grapevine we were gantee France. As usual 'i the army, 'stead o' sendin' trucks to take us to Durham, we had to march. We set off, it was a Thursda' night, back end o' February, an' we marched from Houghton tee Durham i' the pourin' rain, full pack.

Got on the train, neebody had telt us where we were goin', but we had an idea it would be France. Anyhow, away we went, travelled all night, you couldn't see where you were at, station signs were down, you just had tee try an' work it out, "Whey this is York, ah've been here before", that kind o' thing. Eventually we pulled into the Docks at Southampton.

We sailed from there, an' landed at Cherbourg. Usual French railways, we were put in cattletrucks that had ten hosses or forty men written on the side. We aways into the country, somewheres in Northern France, so we wer put into barns wi' these git big rats runnin' around.

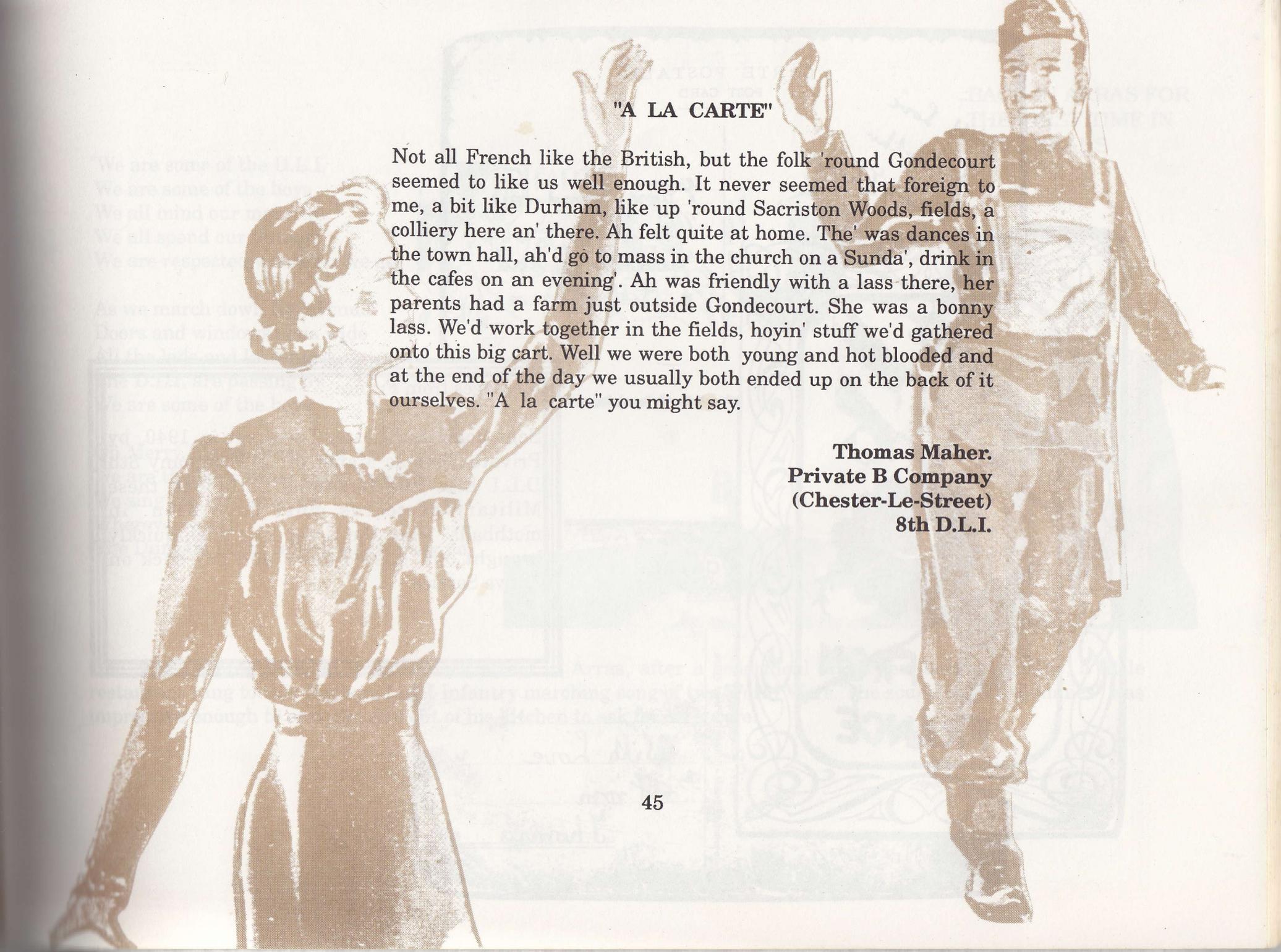
As regards army trainin' an' can't remember doin' that much. You only got the usual parades, church parades, things like that. Ah only ever fired me rifle about twice, so regards army trainin' ah suppose we were a disciplined mob, you could put it that way. Ah remember the Provost Sergeant of the Battalion, he was a policeman in civvy life, he liked his discipline, a real army type. He was a fellow called Tiplady, belanged Portobello. Ah'll not tell yer what ah thought of him. He had my mate Danny on fourteen days detention for nowt, field punishment yer kna, which wasn't very pleasant to say the least. But Tiplady was that kind of fella. When he came back he must have arrested nearly everybody in Chester-Le-Street. Ah forgot to tell yer about the Durham Shakespeare band, they volunteered on block as stretcher bearers, in fact the band leader ended up as Company Quarter Master Sergeant, an' when the' were arl needed, they joined the' gether at the Battalion band. They went across tee France with us. The' used tee play in the square of this town tee the French residents.

Bob Fort.
Private, 11th D.L.I.



Number 11 Platoon from Chester-Le-Street's, B Company.

Gondécourt, Northern France. Confidently posing for the camera, the ill fated class of 1940, smashed in the retreat to Dunkirk. the 8th Durhams spent months ditch diggings in Flanders fields but also practicing motorised infantry tactics. They were as good as anything the British Army had at the time. Tank for tank, gun for gun, aircraft for aircraft, the allies were stronger than the German forces opposing them. But the sophisticated German grasp of combined air armoured, and infantry assault, close artillery support, communications and battlefield engineering left the allies standing.



"A LA CARTE"

Not all French like the British, but the folk 'round Gondcourt seemed to like us well enough. It never seemed that foreign to me, a bit like Durham, like up 'round Sacriston Woods, fields, a colliery here an' there. Ah felt quite at home. The' was dances in the town hall, ah'd go to mass in the church on a Sunda', drink in the cafes on an evening'. Ah was friendly with a lass there, her parents had a farm just outside Gondcourt. She was a bonny lass. We'd work together in the fields, hoyin' stuff we'd gathered onto this big cart. Well we were both young and hot blooded and at the end of the day we usually both ended up on the back of it ourselves. "A la carte" you might say.

**Thomas Maher.
Private B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.**

CARTE POSTALE
POST CARD

With Love
To Mother
From Thomas

Please send me
Mrs Dodds
address, I had
a letter for me
Joe

Made in France



Messages from France.

Sent home to Chester-Le-Street in 1940, by Private Thomas Maher of 'B' Company 8th D.L.I. Like the Territorial Battalions, these Military postcards must have been "in mothballs" since the Great War, then quickly brought out, dusted down and put back on Active Service.

POSTALE
FRANCAISE

Paris
France

With Love
From
Thomas

BACK IN ARRAS FOR
THE FIRST TIME IN
FIFTY YEARS

"We are some of the D.L.I.
We are some of the boys
We all mind our manners
We all spend our tanners
We are respected wherever we go.

As we march down the avenue
Doors and windows open wide
All the lads and lasses cry
The D.L.I. are passing by.
We are some of the boys.

Oh Merry, Merry, Merry are we
We are the boys of the Light Infantry
We sing high we sing low
Wherever we go
The Durham Light Infantry never say no."



One May evening in 1990, down a back street in Arras, after a good meal and a few bottles of wine, a little restaurant rang to this Durham Light Infantry marching song of two World Wars. The sound of "Les Tommies" was impressive enough to coax the chef out of his kitchen to ask for an encore.

' ON THE MARCH '

We were on the march a couple o' days, an' the way we were gannin', Jerry was comin'. We were marchin', till we come tee Vimy Ridge, an' we were fell oot. This officer comes roond an' says, "yer kna what tee dee lads?". Ah says, "Aye sorr." He says, 'What corporal?.' Ah says, "Shoot fofst an' ask questions later". He laughed an' sayed "That's reet".

Anyhow we moved up, gannin' along this road, one section up, one section doon, on both sides of the road. We'd just gone by the big monument ' it'll still be there yit. The place was arl boarded up, ' cause of the war, but the' was still this souvenir shop open, wi' postcards an' pens an' that.

the canadians had lost a hell of a lot of lads around there in the fofst war, an' arl the' names is roond that monument. we were just past it when this aircraft come fleein' over. one o' the lads says, " It's arlreet she' s british." That was when it opened up on us, "brrrrrrrhhhhhhh" Ah says, "Aye? she's a jerry".

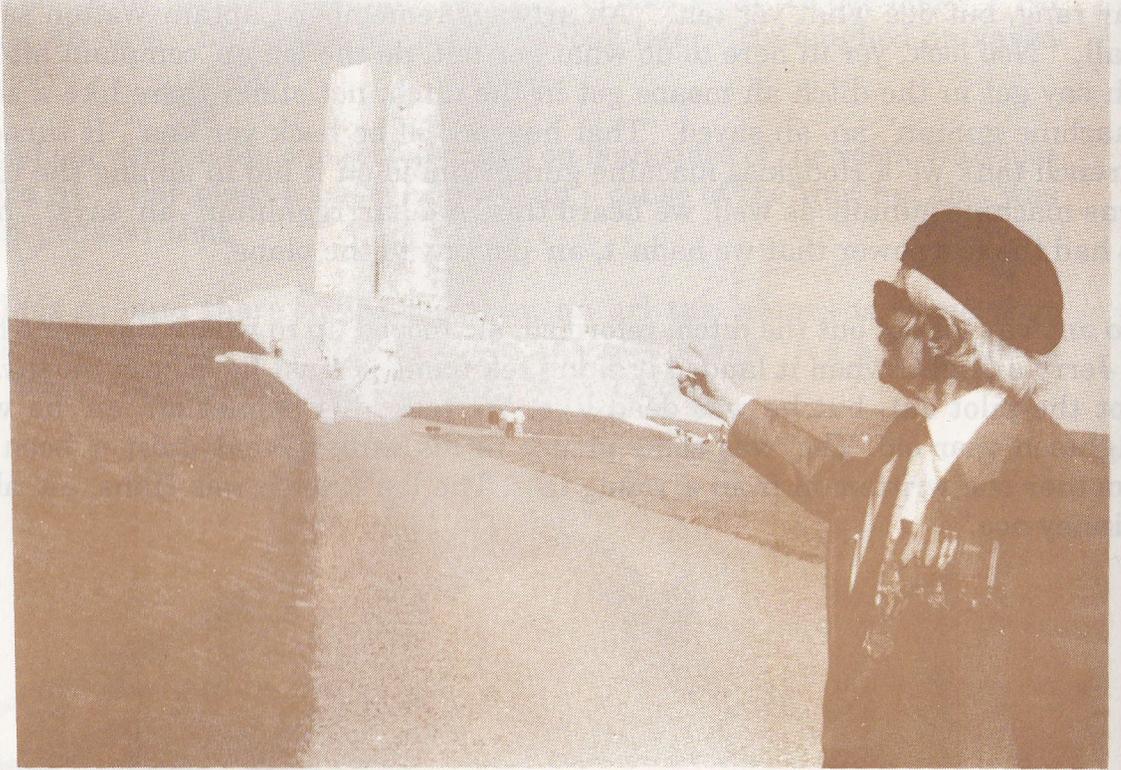
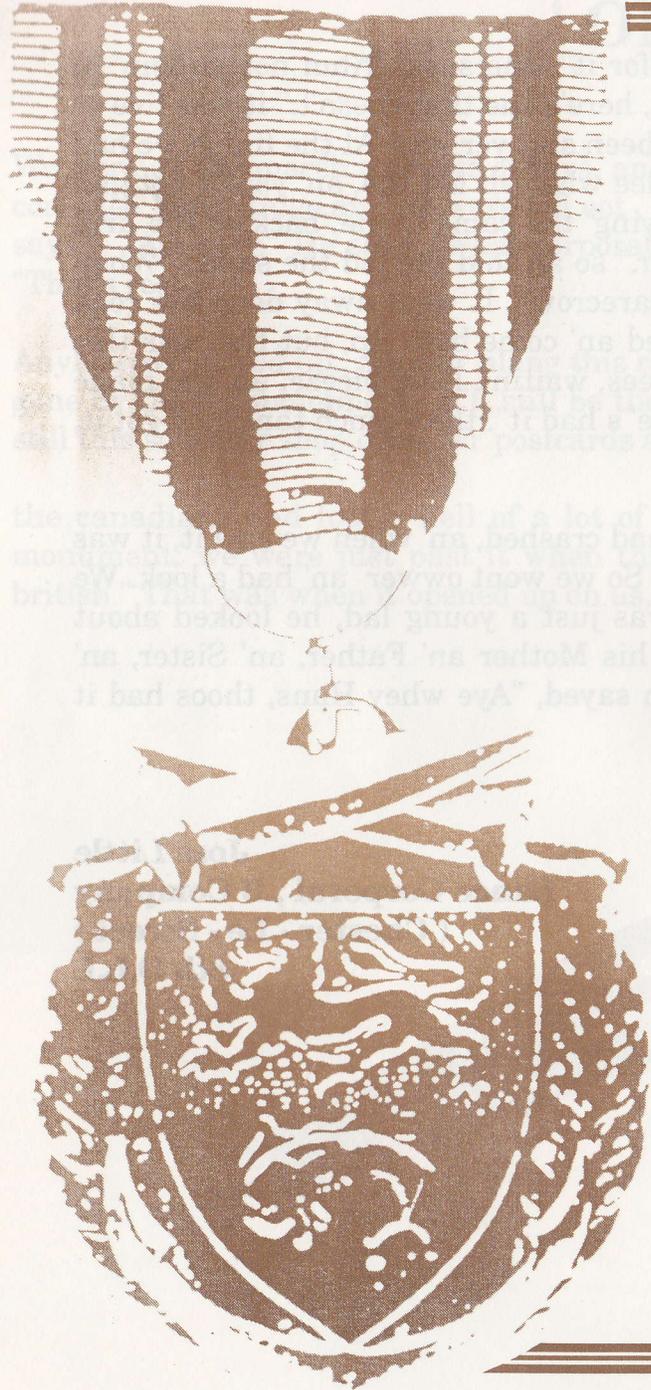
The' was a ditch on both sides of the road, an' ah says, " Right lads jump for it". one says, "Ahm not jumpin' in there". so ah says, " please thee bloody sell, if thoo wants tee get mown down, here's one that doesn't." it was five or six feet deep , full o' clarts an' it stunk, but ah couldn' t o' cared less if it had been shit yer kna. At the finish we had tee drag this lad into the ditch an' hold him doon. Ah says, " Listen lad, ye dee what ah tell the, an' you' ll not gan far rang, but dee what yer telt. " Ah arlways remember Captain Walton saying' the same to me, back at the drill hall, " Noo look, yer in here to do what yer telt, do the job an' complain after." so ah told the lad the same, "When ah say get in the ditch ah means get in the ditch, not stand there like a scarecrow". It went away doon the road machine gunnin', an' ah sayed, "That bugger ' ill be back yer kna". It turned an' come back up, but the' was this French tank wi' a Hodgkiss machine gun mounted on it hid in amang the trees, waitin'. It let bleeze, an' the plane was machine gunnin' as well. we heard this,"Aaaaarrgghhnn" ah' says, " he' s had it". the French tank had got it, it had the fire power that we hadn' t, an' put pay to the plane.

So anyway we got out the ditch, reformed, an' moved up to where the plane had crashed, an' when we saw it, it was a Jerry arlright. when it landed it didn't tek flame,it must have been mushy. So we went owwer an' had a look. We got the pilot out, but he was dead like. We took his helmet off, an' he was just a young lad, he looked about eighteen year old. The' was some photos in his wallet, what must o' been his Mother an' Father, an' Sister, an' another one written on from a young lass. The lad's name was Hans, an' ah sayed, "Aye whey Hans, thoos had it hinney noo"

Joss Little
Lance Corporal , B Company
(Chester - Le - Street)
8th D.L.I.

May 1990. Beneath the Great War memorial on Vimy Ridge.

Thomas Maher recalls how as a 19 year old Light Infantryman he braved there with boiled eggs and bully beef sandwiches on the morning of the counter attack.



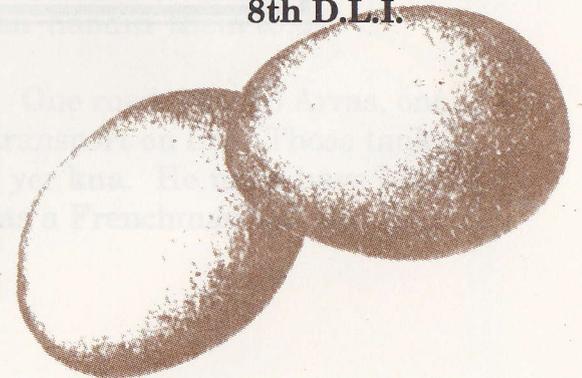
"We'll Meet With The Enemy in an Hour."

Lieutenant Regnart come round the platoon an' said "We'll meet with the enemy in an hour." So that was really the first time we were goin' into action. We'd had boiled eggs an' bully sandwiches for breakfast an' one of the lads said, "Well the's nee fear of us shitin' oursells!" which got a bit of a laugh. Ah suppose morale was high enough, although I would say we were in a bad way with all the foot slogging. The weather was red hot, we were tired, we hadn't had much sleep. The' was blood comin' through the lace holes of my boots, an' ah wasn't the only one. But a had me Bren Gun. Ah was a good shot with it an' me mate Bobby Gordon was with us carryin' me ammunition. Ah suppose the'; was that bit worry in the back of yer mind. What we didn't know was that there where we were goin' 70th Brigade, the 11th Durhams an' them had been overrun the day before.

**Thomas Maher
Private B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.**

May 1990. Beneath the Great War memorial on Vimy Ridge.

Thomas Maher recalls how as a 19 year old Light Infantryman he breakfasted there with boiled eggs and bully beef sandwiches on the morning of the Arras counter attack.





Peaceful today, the skies and fields of Northern France. 50 years ago they were a bloody killing ground. Behind this hedgerow the men of the 8th D.L.I., advancing into battle for the first time found a "butchers shop," the bodies of nearly a hundred German soldiers slaughtered by French heavy machine gun fire. There was little time for pity, by the Chester-Le -Street Company had crossed the field to Duisans Wood on the left of the photo, they were already counting their own dead and wounded.



" IN THE FIGHTIN' "

Everybody knew that eventually we'd be in the fightin', but we didn't think it would be as quick or as sudden as it was. Actually what we had in mind was a visit to the Maginot Line, an' doin' our stint there, but we never got near it.

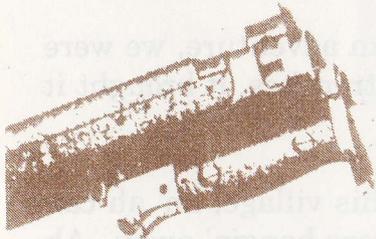
The first time we saw action would be when we went to Vimy Ridge, before that it was just an adventure, we were arl young. When ah got up onto Vimy Ridge, an' saw the memorial, an' all the old Fost War trenches, it brought it back to you the seriousness of it.

Actually we weren't far from the Germans then. We marched down the Givenchy Road to this village, an' ah can remember this Jerry spotter plane, it was a Storche, flyin' round. A couple of Frenchmen were bangin' away. Ah wouldn't care, the bloomin' thing was no hight, an' it never got hit. Ah was always suspicious that those Frenchmen were plants, the' was a lot of Fifth Columnists. Lieutenant Regnart had told us to trust nobody.

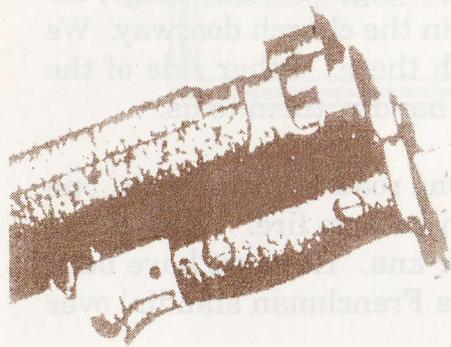
Anyway we marched on, an' this Storche was still flyin' around. You got the feelin' that when you were marchin' with your own platoon, you were the only ones fightin' the war. You felt you were on your own, but ah suppost that Storche could see the whole Brigade, the whole Division even, stretchin' for miles.

These tanks went flyin' past us. Ah believe the' were Matildas, the' flew past us anyway. We got to this village, an' it was deadly quiet, yer know, an' the first thing ah saw was this dead Frenchman, lyin' in the church doorway. We marched on through the village, it was like a ghost town, the Jerries had been through there. Other side of the village was a rise, an' the' was another two Frenchmen there, drinkin' out of bottles, an' handin' them to us.

Lieutenant Regnart said not to take any. Top of this rise an' down was a cross roads. One road went to Arras, one this way, an' one straight on. That was the first real sign of it we all saw, a German transport on fire. Those tanks had caught it, a Jerry was lyin' in the middle of the crossroads, all his guts were out yer kna. He must have been S.S. 'cause he had their two lightin' flashes on his helmet. Further along the road was a Frenchman standin' over two dead Jerries. Ah thowt he might of been a Jerry too.

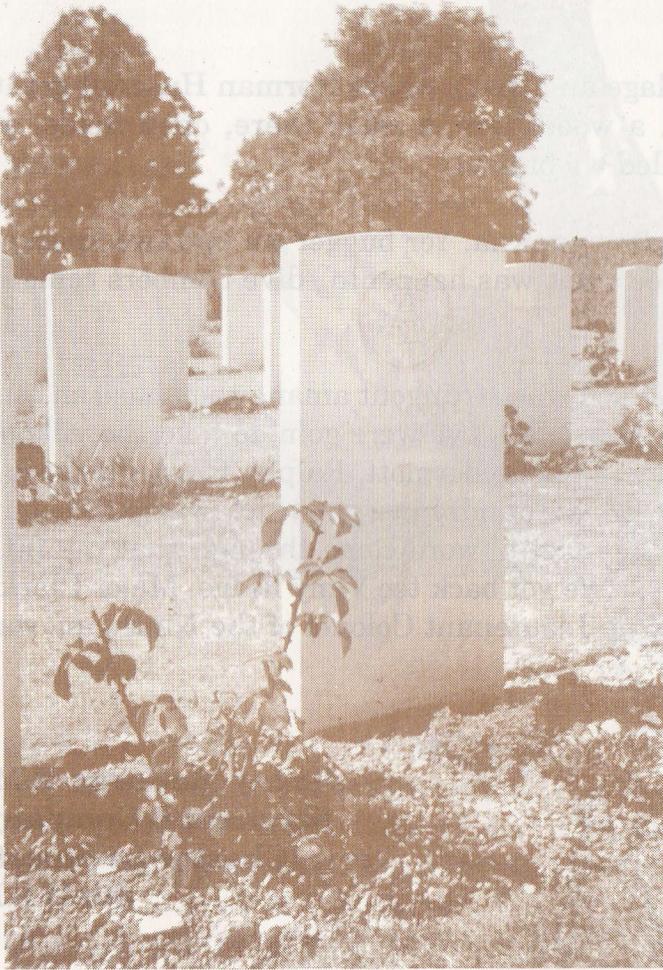


Over the cross roads the order was given to fix bayonets, as we were comin' up to this wood. 'Cause ah was on the Bren, an' carryin' that. The road went through the wood, an' as we got to the other side Corporal Hall comes up to me an' says, "Up here with yer Bren Tom". We'd heard machine gun fire first just before that, an' he said, "Norman Huscroft's copped it". Ah sayed, "What! Just wounded?" he says, "Nor, killed". The Jerry couldn't of been more than fifty yards away when he opened up, but he got clean away



Anyway, we goes up the top of this road, Bobby Gordon was Number Two with me on the Bren. we were back of this hedge, an' just lay there waitin' for events. For about half an hour we could here the skirmishing gannin' on around us, when the sergeant came runnin' an' said, " Right, get out".

Thomas Maher
Private, B Company
(Chester-le-Street)
8th D.L.I.



The grave of Private Norman Huscroft, the first Chester-le-Street soldier in the 8th D.L.I. to be killed in action on the road to Dunkirk. Private Huscroft's death was a shock to the company for all they were a front line fighting unit on active service. The death of someone you had grown up with and worked alongside in the coalmines was hard to believe at first, soon it was an everyday event to through the packs and pouches for rations and ammunition they no longer needed.

Often it was left to the local French people to give the British dead a decent burial. The Germans were more concerned with pursuit of the survivors then rounding up the casualties.

Private Huscroft is buried in the village cemetery at Habarcq on the Arras - St Pol road not very far from where he was killed. During the phoney war Habarcq was the temporary home of Lord Gort and Headquarters of the British Expeditionary Force. Mobile warfare turned Habarcq into the front line and permanent resting place for dozens of British soldiers killed in the very real war that briefly raged through the surrounding fields.

" COUNTER ATTACK "

The plan was to close the gap Jerry had made in the lines with his push. The tanks went in front of us. The first village we went into the' was one or two lyin' dead, they'd been taken by surprise. They'd never had a rebuff for lang enough, an' to tell you the truth, ah think they'd arl been pissed. You bugger the' looked twelve foot lang stretched out in the road.

"A" Company was advancin' on our left, we'd just got through this village and that's where Norman Huscroft got it, the first one to be killed in "B" Company. It was bad countryside, a wood here, a wood there, open fields, ah remember this old woman with a pram, she was lyin' arl twisted, riddled wi' bullets.

It was down on the Mons Road we saw these tanks, we had two pounders yer kna. Yer bugger we had two knocked out afore we found out the' were French. When the Jerries got wise tee what was happenin', dive bombers come in on the two forward companies, an' our attack was halted then.

We fell back on this village called Warlus, an' we had to hold it, arl the lads was strungout among the house an' that Word come for platoon Sergeants to meet at the edge of the village for a briefing, we were goin' to hold the village, an' the fifth division was supposed to advance through us. The' was me, Ikey Mcdermott, Ralphy Crowe, an' a few others at the meeting', here when we got back to the square, the last fifteen hundredweight truck was pullin' out, an' we just managed tee jump on the back of it. When we were at the meetin' word come through that the fifth Division's advance was off, an' that we had tee fall back to Vimy Ridge. We got back tee Vimy Ridge, Major Clarke was there, he said we'd done well under the circumstances. He ended up Lieutenant Colonel of the Ninth, an' was killed in Sicily.

Jimmy McGarey M.M.
Sergeant B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.



Whilst Chester-le-Street and Stanley Companies held the flank, Houghton-le-Spring and Birtley Companies of the 8th D.L.I. advanced across these open fields on the ridge above Warlus Village. Within sight of their objective, the Arras Doullens Highway, Houghton and Birtley men came under accurate mortar and machine fire. Twelve Junkers 87 dive bombers, the infamous "Stukas" swept down on them from above the woods on the left. Advance turned into a stubborn and costly house to house defence of Warlus village, then to retreat. A small plaque, in French, on the village water tower recalls that many soldiers died in the surrounding fields during the combat of May 1940. These concrete water towers are common in the area and actually played a major roll in the battle. Bearing the village name in large letters German tank commanders with the aid of powerful binoculars used then to navigate by.



Thomas Maher
Private, B. Company
(Chester-le-Street) 8th D.L.I.

"THE' WOULD MACHINE GUN OWT THAT MOVED"

Of course the' weren't long on hittin' back at us, bombers, the lot. We were just beside this wood an' the Jerries were flyin' in high. The Officer took a few pot shots but the' took no notice of us. The' were after bigger fish. Mind the Jerry bombers that had dropped the' loads were another matter, they came back low as Hell an' the' would machine gun owt that moved. Whey the bullets were fleein' an' we had to take cover ahind this wall, then make a dash for the wood an' better cover when we got the chance.

Thomas Maher.
Private B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

"AH DON'T KNOW WHO WAS THE MOST FRIGHTENED"

"Anyway we got on with the advance, and started into these woods. Mind we took hundreds of prisoners to start with. Ah remember the first German we came face to face with. He was crouchin' down among the bushes with his rifle at the ready an' we just walked into him. He could have shot us if he'd had a mind to, but he just threw down his rifle and up wi' his hands. Ah don't know who was the most frightened, him or us. The officer waived his pistol at him an' the lad just gave himself up."

Thomas Maher
Private. B. Company
(Chester-le-Street) 8th D.L.I.

" Took Prisoner"

I got took prisoner at Wancourt. We didn't know what hit us. There were German tanks all over the place. We got some rough treatment as well I can tell you. It was a forced march off the battlefield. Some off the lads were wounded and they were falling back, but the guards pushed them on with rifle butts, shouting "Raus! Raus!"

I think we nearly marched to the German Border on foot, Luxembourg, somewhere like that, before we ever saw transport and that was a disgrace, crammed into cattle trucks and taken by rail right into Poland. We were jammed in like sardines. You just had to do your business where you stood, you couldn't help it.

We went to Thorn, I ended up working on a farm, gathering sugar beet. My D.L.I. uniform fell to pieces and you just wore what you could get hold of, French uniforms, Polish, anything.

**Steve Barker,
Sergeant. 11th
D.L.I.**



Steve Barter photographed
in May 1990 not very far
from where he was captured
50 years before

'MAKIN' BACK'

Anyhow, the Company had gettin' smashed up and some of us was makin' back. It was neet time, pitch black, and Sergeant says, "Right, ah want ye to gan up there an' fetch that gun doon; wi' these two lads". Ah says, "What bloody gun?" It was a two pounder. He says, "We've got one up there, one up there, and one up there." So we gans up an' gets gets one doon, came back to the truck an' ah says, "Hey, what bloody mob's this like?" He says, "Anti tank gunners." Ah says, "Whey yer bugger we're in the wrong bloody place here."

Anyhow we gans up for this other gun an' gets it doon. We'd just got it doon when ah says, " Listen". Ah heard this rattlin' yer kna. Ah says, " the's somebody up there that shouldn'd be". Ah sayed, "We'll get the other gun doon sharp as we can, yukked on, an' we'll get out of it". When we got back it was arl quiet yer kna, ah says, " Sergeant, it's time we weren't here". he says, "Right, move out".

Us were on the fost truck, the' was two or three Scotch lads anarl from the K.O.S.B.'s One of them says to me, "Hey Corporal, where the hell are we going?" Ah says, "Your guess is as good as mine, as long as this truck taks me away tee hell out ont, where Jerry is there, ah'l be happy". Ah says, "Ah'l meet Jerry face tee face when it's light, but not in the bloody dark, coz he could come from any direction he has a mind, an' yer wouldn't kna where he was.

Anyhow we managed tee get away, an' we come tee this village, ah just forget the name of it, it was just outside Bethune anyhow. "Moppy" Armstrong gans intee this hoose, tecks his gears off, tecks his jacket off an' gets intee this bed.

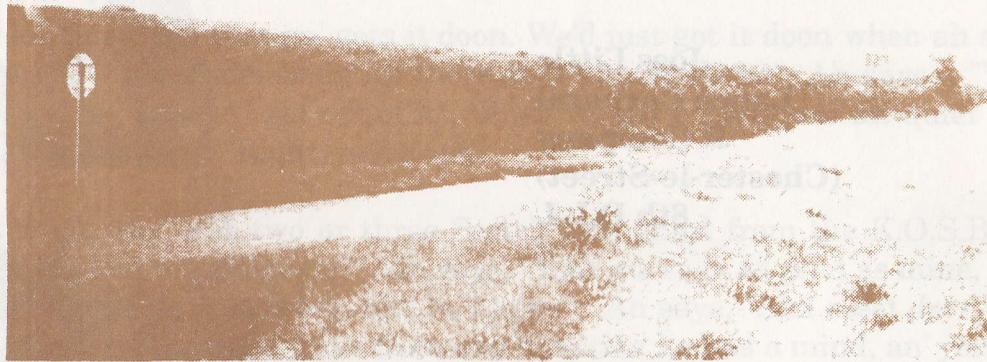
Ah sayed, "Moppy if we've got tee get oot of here in a hurry yea'll be catched wi' yer pants doon". Ah says, "Yer lyin' in there an orders is you've just tee loosen the belt of yer gears when yer restin'. If yer get nicked you've only yersell tee blame for it".

We'd been there nearly two hours when the Jerries landed. Ah says, "Gerrout! Howay! Move! Jerry's comin!" Moppy says "Eh? What?" Ah says, "Moppy lad howay!" He says, "Or' lad, the's nee rest here". Ah says, "Howa lad, Jerry'll find the' if the' disn't move". "Jerry's comin' in the top end o' the village an' we're gannin oot the borrom". Moppy got his claes on. Ah've nevver seen anybody put them on as sharp in arl me days. He was lacin' his boots up in the back of the truck.

Joss Little
Lance Corporal
B Company
(Chester-le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

Right. Back on the battlefield 50 years later old Durham Light Infantrymen remember what it was like in the May of 1940.





The Sunken Road at Duisans. Stanley and Chester-le-Street units of the 8th D.L.I. were holding this flank position with their battalion's anti tank gunners during the Battle of Arras when a column of tanks crossed the horizon at speed. A savage skirmish flared up. Tanks were destroyed before the fog of war lifted and they were recognised as French army models, not German Panzers.

A few hours later, it was another roving column of French armour passing back this way that safely escorted the battered 8th D.L.I. survivors of Houghton and Birtley Companies out of Warlus, and rescued a party of badly wounded Durhams left behind in the retreat, loading them into the tank decks and carrying them to the new British line at Vimy. This minor miracle of survival was greeted there not with cheers but by an irritable "Where the hell have you lot been?"

RIGHT

The battle will of Private Joe Coulson 'B' Company (Chester-Le-Street) 11th D.L.I.

Joe Coulson survived the retreat to Dunkirk and evacuation to England but was killed in action 4 years later during the Italian Campaign.

CHERRY BRANDY

Ah remember in the retreat Joss Little found a great barrel o' cherry brandy. Well Joss was strong as a bull an' lifted it owwer his heed tee get a drink oot on't. We had a few free "Vin Blancs" on the road back! Well Captain Leybourne went mad about it. He told Jossy to put it down, then he emptied his whole revolver into the barrel, shot it tee bits. Poor Joss didn't kna what tee say.

Thomas Maher
Private B Company
(Chester-le-Street)
8th DLI

15

Army Form B. 2089.

ON COMPLETION TO BE DESPATCHED TO OFFICER IN CHARGE RECORDS BY O.C. UNIT.

FORM OF WILL to be used by a soldier desirous of leaving the whole of his Property and Effects to one person. (See page 17 for FORM OF WILL leaving legacies to more than one person.)

(a) Signature of soldier in full

I, (a) *Joseph Coulson*

(b) Rank and army number.

(b) *PTI 4455681*

(c) Regiment.

(c) *11TH BN. D.L.I.*

hereby revoke all Wills heretofore made by me at any time, and declare this to be my last Will and Testament.

(d) Name and address of Executor.

I appoint (d) *MARY ELIZABETH COULSON, 44, PELAW SQ., CHESTER 12 ST. CO. DURHAM.*

to be the Executor of this my Will

After payment of my just Debts and Funeral Expenses, I give all my Estate and Effects, and everything that I can give or dispose of to my (e) *other*

(e) Insert "friend," or, if a relative, in what degree.

Mary Elizabeth Coulson

(f) Full name and address of person.

(f) *44 Pelaw Square
Chester-le-Street
Co. Durham*

"SAFE IN FRANCE"

The Germans had pushed through, an' we were banged into trucks in real British Army style an' rushed off to where nowt was happening. We were all left sittin' on this hillside just outside Arras. We just lay there an' we could see the refugees streamin' down the roads, some one way, some the other, ivverything in a mess. Some dive bombers flew right over us. The' dropped the' bombs, "Bang, Bang", but not on us, we were just lyin' there smokin' an' gettin' our grub while we could. We were playin' hell about havin' to eat cold rations. Nobody seemed to have any idea how bad it was. Then we got bundled into the trucks an' you were off. Tell the truth ah nivver saw an angry German, an' ah wandered round France from the day of their push till ah came off the day before the' ceased evacuatin' from Dunkirk.

We got to Gondécourt, an' that's the first time ah met somebody else ah knew, from the day complete chaos happened. We went into this big Post Office buildin' an' the' was hundreds of troops there. This officer was handin' out field cards to send home. We filled them in, the' had "Safe in france", an' "I am in Hospital", on the back, things like that. Little brown cards, an' you put your parents name and address on the front.

Ah met Tommy Nightingale there, an' a lad called Trotter, belanged Pelton Fell. Tommy was a cook in the Eighth Batallion, an' Company Quarter Master Sergeant Moore, who was Mentioned in Dispatches. He was killed in Sicily, gettin' grub up to the lads in the fightin'. They'd just killed a pig, am' it seemed as though we hadn't eatin for months, an' we had pork chops and chips. We never saw them again after that.

That night we were all bundled into trucks, an' we rode arl night, for about twelve hours, an' when the sun broke through the next mornin', we were back in the same place, an' debussed. We couldn't get out, we were surrounded. One of us says, "Whey am not stoppin' here, lets away", so we just walked, me an' this lad from Craghead, called Sid Smith, he'll be a chap in his seventies now. How we got back ah'll never know, ah mean we were in Gondécourt, an' that's a lang way from the French Coast.

We didn't know where we were going it just seemed like instinct to head for the coast. What we were gonna do when we got there ah don't know, but that was where we were making for. Nobody told us we just went. We followed the roads but kept off them, they were packed and getting; dive bombed the whole time. We kept going over the fields and heading the same way as the traffic.

Sid and me were scrounging for food where we could get it. These towns and villages were evacuated and we helped ourselves. We got blind drunk in this cellar, and when ah come round the whole place was blazing over our heads, ah had to drag Sid out, he was as drunk as a newt. There were fields and fields of army wagons, just dumped, we looked for the ones with rations on, and stuffed our tunics. How the hell we got back ah just don't know.

Bob Fort
Private
11th D.L.I.



A glimpse of the enemy. An S.S. Trooper of the Death's Head Division near Dunkirk. Like the 8th D.L.I. they fought against in the retreat, the Death's Head Division were motorised infantrymen short of battle experience before the bloody May of 1940. Unlike the 8th D.L.I. who were mostly coal miners the Death Head Division were recruited mainly from concentration camp guards and their commandants.

"TANKS"

These Dornier bombers come owwer. We were firin' at them wi' rifles, but it was a waste o' time. Somewhere at the other side of the wood Brigade must have been gettin' it. As one lot were droppin' the' bombs, another lot were followin' on, an' comin' owwer. Anyway it arl went quiet for a time, then the shout went up, "tanks", but the fost thing to come 'round the corner was the Church of England Padre.

Anyway the order was to "Fall Back". Me an' a lad called Franky Flowers from Pelton, an' another lad, ah' just forget his name, we got on the M.O.'s truck. Everybody was tryin' to get away, you'd wonder where the' arl come from. We got back to this village near Lens, the' was a school room, an' we had to wait till dark. It was gettin' on late afternoon like. We got some cocoa, an' some bully, an' that, then me an' Franky had a look 'round the village. The' was a hall opposite, an' it had been bombed, the' was bodies lyin' about, but it didn't seem to bother you, 'cause you didn't have to be in action long before you were in a wild sort of state.

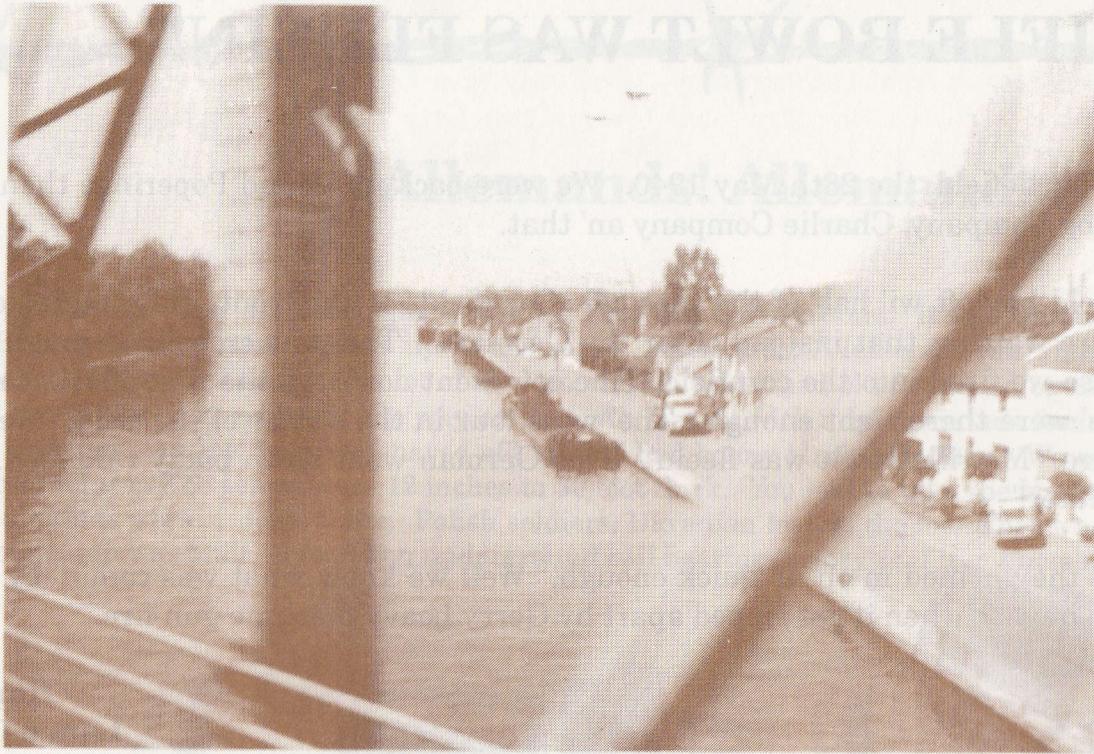
The' was arl these ambulances, an' a Sergeant shoutin', "Is the' any drivers here?" Ah says, "Aye, ah can drive." He says "Whey you got wi' one of these", so ah' got in one of these ambulances as the spare driver, an' we set away.

We were gettin' towards Armentiers, an' the roads was crammed. The' was these French horse drawn wagons, an' the' were holdin' everybody up, it was chaotic. We were there hours. The' was a Frenchman with his pistol out an' he was shoutin' at these others. Traffic was comin' this way, an' traffic was comin' that way, so we just pulled into the roadside. The' was rifle fire in the distance, then machine guns, these Frenchmen pulled their horses into this field at the finish. Somebody shouted, "Motorbikes". so we got away quick. The' was two roads to take, we bore left, the tracer bullets were flyin' overhead an' a hell of a lot of firin' was goin' on, 'cause where the' was motorbikes, tanks, weren't far behind. Anyhow those Frenchmen copt it. We got through Armentiers, it was gettin' Stukad to hell, an' we were back to more or less where we'd started from, somewhere 'round Seclin.

We pulled the ambulances in by these farm houses. The' was a driveway like that leadin' up to Lambton Castle, trees on either side, an' the wagons pulled in among the trees off the driveway. We'd been there a couple of hours, had somethin' to eat, an' were just sittin' dozin', it was a lovely afternoon. Ah was sittin' wi' Franky Flowers an' this other lad. Now you cannot hear a Jerry plane when th' come in low like that one did, 'till the' on top 'o yer.

This lad says, "Get down". Whey ah went straight down on me face. Ah' didn't hear anything, just felt me lugs, then this heat, an' it was owwer. The' was a whump as the truck went up. Then he started the machine gunnin', my mouth was hangin' open, it shook you that much. This Corporal wi' glasses says, "Come on lads, give us a hand". On the other side of the wagon these lads were lyin' among the trees, the' wasn't a mark on them, they'd been caught by the bomb blast an' the' were stone dead.

Thomas Maher
Private, B Company
(Chester-le-Street)
8th D.L.I



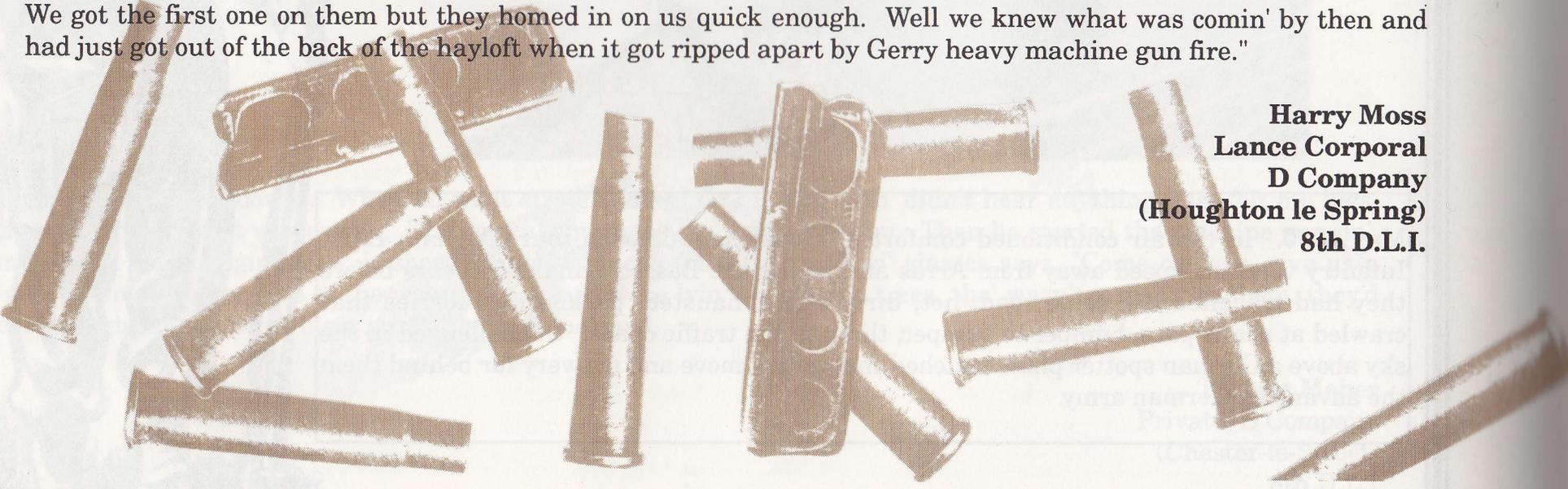
May 1990. In the air conditioned comfort of a continental coach tour, Durham Light Infantry veterans speed away from Arras and across the Bassee Canal. 50 years before they had travelled the same road, hot, dirty and exhausted, packed into lorries that crawled at snails pace, bumper to bumper, through the traffic chaos. Unchallenged in the sky above a German spotter plane watched their every move and not very far behind them the advancing German army.

"ME RIFLE BOWLT WAS FLEEIN!"

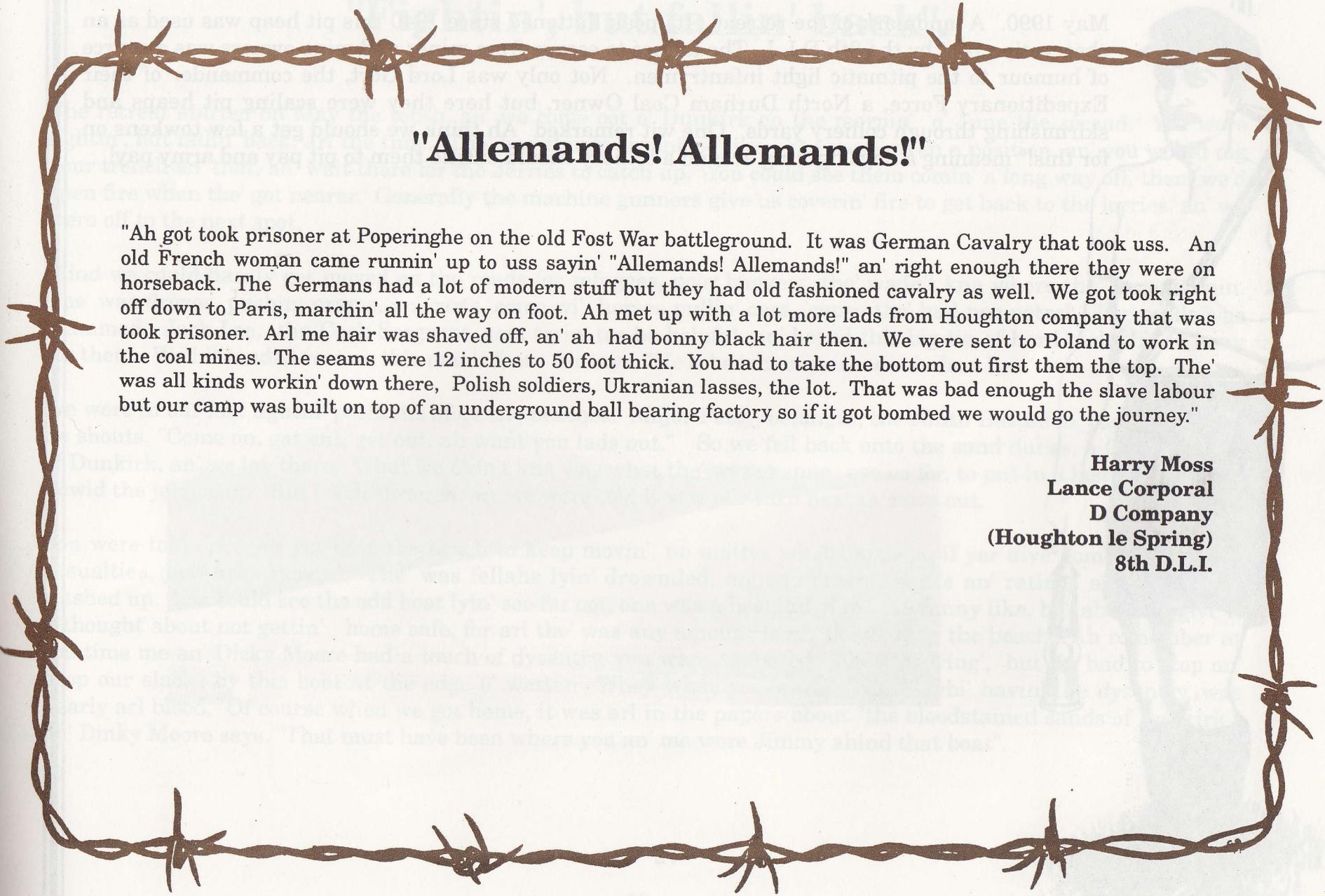
Ah had me 20th birthday on the battlefield, the 28th May 1940. We were back up 'round Poperinge then. A lot of the Companies were mixed up, Dog Company, Charlie Company an' that.

We were holed up in a barn, an old hayloft wi' half of the tiles off. Cornfields to the front, quite high corn. The' was a cow in the field an' we were watchin that instead of for the Germans. The' was creepin' through the corn. We thought it was owwer quiet so we fired into the cornfield. The cow went down wi' the first shot. Anyway the firing flushed the Germans. The' were there right enough. The' were four in the corner of the field. Well ah just give them full 10 rounds rapid fire. Me rifle bowlt was fleein', This German went down badly wounded. He was crying for his mother - "Muter! Muter!".

We got the first one on them but they homed in on us quick enough. Well we knew what was comin' by then and had just got out of the back of the hayloft when it got ripped apart by Gerry heavy machine gun fire."



**Harry Moss
Lance Corporal
D Company
(Houghton le Spring)
8th D.L.I.**



"Allemands! Allemands!"

"Ah got took prisoner at Poperinghe on the old Fost War battleground. It was German Cavalry that took uss. An old French woman came runnin' up to uss sayin' "Allemands! Allemands!" an' right enough there they were on horseback. The Germans had a lot of modern stuff but they had old fashioned cavalry as well. We got took right off down to Paris, marchin' all the way on foot. Ah met up with a lot more lads from Houghton company that was took prisoner. Arl me hair was shaved off, an' ah had bonny black hair then. We were sent to Poland to work in the coal mines. The seams were 12 inches to 50 foot thick. You had to take the bottom out first them the top. The' was all kinds workin' down there, Polish soldiers, Ukranian lasses, the lot. That was bad enough the slave labour but our camp was built on top of an underground ball bearing factory so if it got bombed we would go the journey."

Harry Moss
Lance Corporal
D Company
(Houghton le Spring)
8th D.L.I.



May 1990. A landmark of the retreat. Its peak flattened since 1940 this pit heap was used as an observation post by the 8th D.L.I. The failure to escape from mines and mine owners was a source of humour to the pitmatic light infantrymen. Not only was Lord Gort, the commander of their Expeditionary Force, a North Durham Coal Owner, but here they were scaling pit heaps and skirmishing through colliery yards. One wit remarked "Ah think we should get a few towkens on for this!" meaning a days fighting around a colliery should entitle them to pit pay and army pay!



"Fightin', but fallin' back".

The retreat started on May the tenth, an' we come oot o' Dunkirk on the mornin' o' June the second. You were fightin', but fallin' back, arl the time. The' had things organized like. You were given a position, an' you would dig your trench an' that, an' wait there for the Jerries to catch up. You could see them comin' a long way off, then, we'd open fire when the' got nearer. Generally the machine gunners give us coverin' fire to get back to the lorries, an' we were off to the next spot.

Mind we could hardly get moved on the roads for refugees, poor buggers, the' wadn't kna where the' were gannin. The' was droves, pushin; prams, an' carts, some wi' horses pullin' cars, 'cause the' had nee petrol. The roads was crammed. Jack Lee, the Cook Sergeant, was tryin' tee be helpful, an' hoyed this big tin of hard tack off the lorry for them. Well it landed reet on this man's foot. Ah says, "He'll be teekin prisoner ah dare bet."

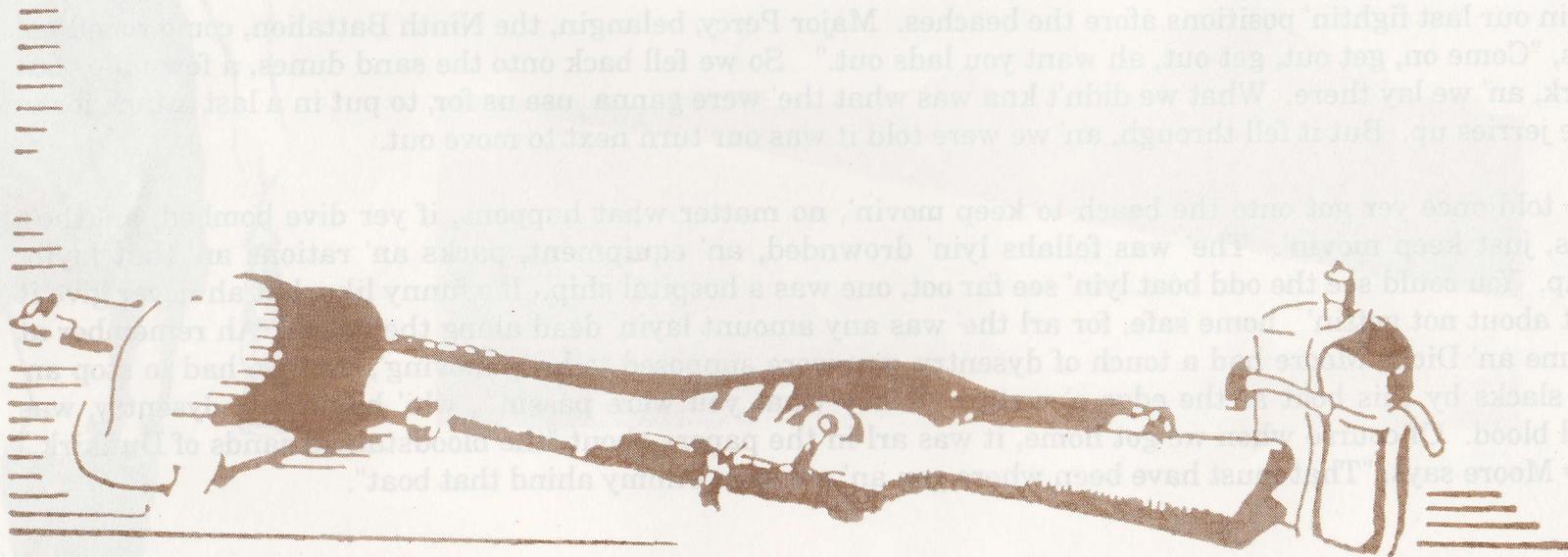
We were in our last fightin' positions afore the beaches. Major Percy, belangin, the Ninth Battalion, come roond an' he shouts, "Come on, get out, get out, ah want you lads out." So we fell back onto the sand dunes, a few miles out of Dunkirk, an' we lay there. What we didn't kna was what the' were ganna use us for, to put in a last attack for to howld the jerries up. But it fell through, an' we were told it was our turn next to move out.

You were told once yer got onto the beach to keep movin', no matter what happens, if yer dive bombed, an' the's casualties, just keep movin'. The' was fellahs lyin' drowned, an' equipment, packs an' rations an' that layin' washed up. You could see the odd boat lyin' see far oot, one was a hospital ship. It's funny like, but ah never give it a thought about not gettin' home safe, for arl the' was any amount layin' dead along the beach. Ah remember at the time me an' Dicky Moore had a touch of dysentery, you were supposed to keep moving', but we had to stop an' drop our slacks by this boat at the edge o' watter. Whey what you were passin' . whi' havin' the dysentery, was nearly arl blood. Of course when we got home, it was arl in the papers about "the bloodstained sands of Dunkirk," an' Dinky Moore says, "That must have been where you an' me were Jimmy ahind that boat".

So anyway, we come back up off the sands, an' through these fields, a remember the' was a dead horse lyin', it's ribs were stickin' up, an' arl the meat had been took off it for to eat. We went into Dunkirk itself an' it was blazin'. The' was gear arl owwer, lorries an' that. For days they'd been burnin' tyres, smashin' things, an' blawin' them up, stacks of brand new stuff. Then we were back on the beach. The' was a lot of officers, an' things was well organized around the pier, the' was nee panic that ah saw, neebody tryin' tee rush their turn.

We come off on H..M.S. Windsor. When we got on it was crammed. The sailors was givin' us bread and tea. It was lovely, ah went to sleep, an' the could have sunk that boat and ah wouldn't have known. We'd had nee fairly sleep for three weeks. Jimmy McGarey M.M.

**Sergeant, B Company
(Chester le Street)
8th D.L.I.**



"We are some of the D.L.I. We are some of the Boys." May 1990. D.L.I. Dunkirk Veterans enjoy a civic reception in Gondcourt Town Hall, Northern France. In the dark days of May 1940 the Mayor of Gondcourt hid the silver bugles left behind by the 8th D.L.I. in his cellar. He said he always knew the 8th D.L.I. would come back because he had their bugles. Come back they did, in 1944, down the long hard road from North Africa, through Sicily, Italy and Normandy to the Belgian border.



" THE BEACH" .

We got through Bethune, down intee Dunkirk. Jerry hadn't closed in by then. Ah says, " Reet lads, we have to move on, down onto the beach". we'd just gettin' onto it when the Stukas came doon "Aaaaaaaaarrrrrrrr", then, "Drrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr". Machine gunnin' along the beach. whey none o' the lads was hit, mare through good look than good management.

Anyway ah got the lads into the water, an' we' d been in there a couple of hours when this military policeman comes along an' shouts, " "Howay lads, get o' there, Howay, back on the beach". Ah says, " What wi' them up there machine gunnin' the beach?" He says, "'The' cannot hit yer man, the' just scatter roond yer". Ah says, " Aye whey, they've just got to hit yer the once".

Joss Little
Lance corporal, B company
(Chester- Le - Street)
8th D.L.I.

"THE SKY WAS BLOODY RED".

The sergeant said, "it'll be the same thing again tonight, we're gonna get as many wounded out as we can, soon as it's dark". This wasn't far from Dunkirk, you could see the sky was bloody red. The' wasn't just a few ambulances this time, the' was hundreds. We drove on into Dunkirk itself, a few of us got hit, an' the trucks were burnin' in the road. The' was lines an' lines of infantry, the R.P's were directin' them left onto the beaches, an' the ambulances down to the dock. Well the' was men as far as the eye could see.

The' was a hospital ship there, called the St. David, we were gettin' all the stretchers out an' lined up the dock, an' the boat crew were takin' them on. The' was two nurses there, ah'll never forget them. Because by then, the' were shellin' us all the time. The other side of the docks were bein' bombed, an' the beaches were gettin' it. Well these lads were wounded, an' the' were screamin' like hell. The would be nothin' worse, like, bein' wounded, an' lyin' out in the open, an these two nurses, one was an oldish woman, an' the other was a young lass, an' the' were just walkin' among the stretchers sayin', "all right lads, we'll get you out".

Eventually we all got onto the boat. Ah was in the saloon, an' the' give us some hot cocoa, an' that was it, ah could hardly remember another thing. We'd had no sleep for days. This lad says, "Don't take your boots off". When you've had them on for days, an' you've been on the march, an' tek them off, you feet's that swollen the' wont go back on.

Thomas Maher
Private, B Company
(Chester-Le-Street)
8th D.L.I.

"Ivverybody med yer welcome"

Anyhow, we got to Dover, an' arl ah had was what ah stood up in, shirt, slacks, an' boots. Sid Smith an' I had been the' gether the whole time, we got into the station, an' that's where we split up ah don't know how it happened, he must have wandered one way and me the other.

Ah got onto the first train, an' landed up at Lichfield in Staffordshire. On the way, the train must have stopped at nearly ivvery station, an' the' were givin' us cigarettes, sandwiches, cups o' tea, coffee, ivverybody med yer welcome.

Ah reported in to Lichfield, give me name, rank, an' regiment, an' the' showed you a bed. Ah slept for about thirty six hours, got up one mornin', had me breakfast, come back, neebody bothered you. Ah drew some money off me pay, 'cause we hadn't been paid for quite a while, an' went down into Lichfield, got into a pub an' phoned me father to tell him ah was O.K.

While ah was in this pub, the' was a long distance lorry driver from Wallsend said he was goin' back up North, so ah said, "Ah whey, a'hm comin' with yer."

Ah stopped at Fatfield seven days, then ah went back to Litchfield, an' ah'd nivver been missed. We were there another week, an' orders came for Fifty Division men, Eleventh were Forty Nine Division, and Eighth were Fiftieth Division, to report to Launceston on the b orders of Devon and Cornwall. Out of the thousand men that went to France wi' the Eleventh Battalion eighty had got back.

We got about thirty or forty new lads from Chester-le-Street, then a big influx of four or five hundred Royal Scots Fusiliers, straight from training. Eventually everything got sorted out, new officers, new N.C.O.'s, the' got a Battalion together an' that's when the work started.

Bob Fort
Private
11th D.L.I.

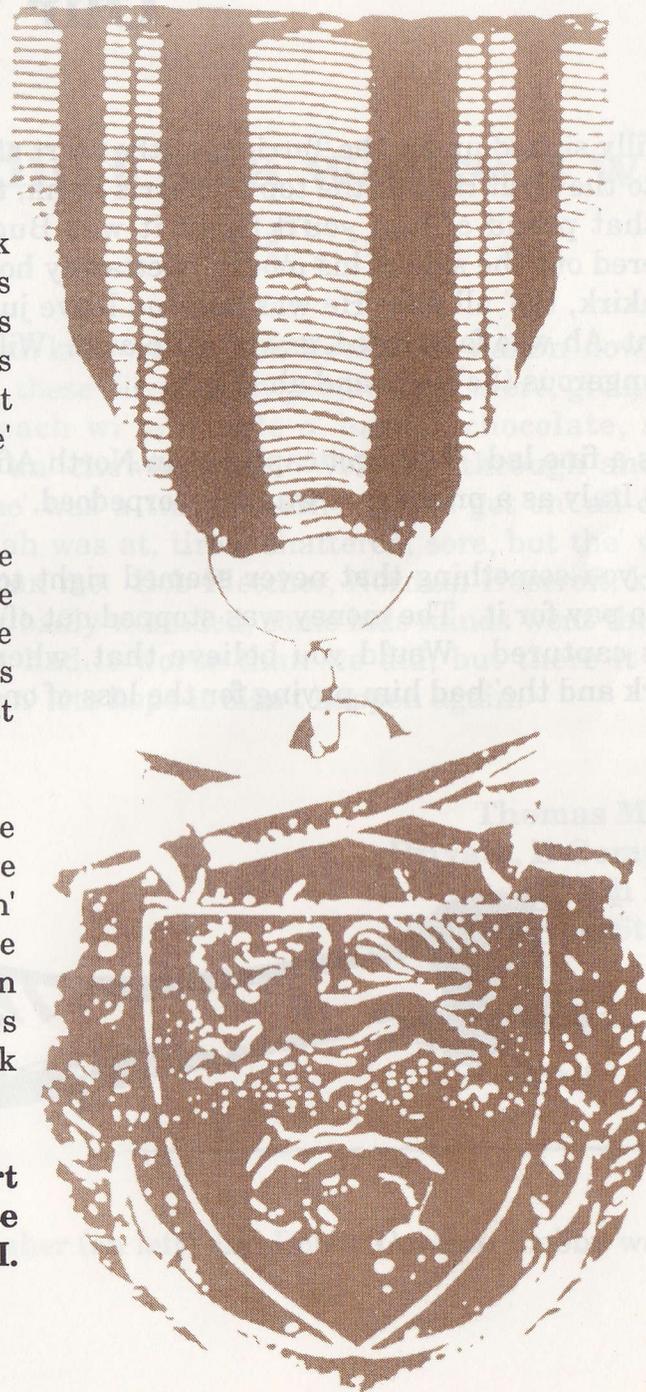
'THE SEA WAS JUST LIKE A LAKE'

Eventually we hit the beach at Le Panne. Ah've been back there a few times since. We got onto the beach, an' the' was thousands an' thousands there. Neebody knew what was happenin', you could see the boats comin' in, the' was bodies lyin' on the sand. Anyhow we joined this queue an' just kept walkin' along, till eventually we come to this small pier. The' was a destroyer on it, an' me an' Sid managed to get on.

Whey we seemed to be waitin' an' waitin', an' on the open side of the destroyer was a little fishin' vessel. He happened to be castin' off, an' ah shouted down, "ah yer gannin'?", an' the shouted, "aye, we're away now, so Sid and I jumped onto this fishin' vessel. We pulled out of Le Panne harbour, an' we'd just got clear when this destroyer shot past us, an' away.

It took a destroyer an' hour an' a half to get across the Channel, but we were on the sea for twelve hours. Of course the sea was just like a lake, smooth, an' the Sun was blazin' down, an' ah sat on top of a case containin' Libby's Milk. Ah've loved it from that day to this. Whey ah was just drinkin' can after can. The' come 'round wi'coffee, the sailors on this trawler, an' give wor arl coffee an' hard biscuits, but the milk was lovely.

Bob Fort
Private
11th D.L.I.



Our Willy's Rifle

Our Willy signed up for the Terriers at the start of the War. The 8th Durhams. Of course the whole family trooped down to the Drill Hall at the top of Harris Bank, to see him on guard duty marching backwards and forwards. We were that proud of him you'd think it was Buckingham Palace he was guardin' not Birtley Drill Hall. He whispered out the side of his mouth "Gettaway home the lot of you. You'll get me shot!" He went through the mill at Dunkirk, the' all did. He was back on leave just after Dunkirk. A German plane flew over our house in broad daylight. Ah was fascinated, gawping up at it. Willy grabbed me an says "Get down yer daft bugger!" He knew just how dangerous the' were and ah didn't.

He was a fine lad. Willy got captured in North Africa an' was drowned in the Mediterranean when the ship takin' him to Italy as a prisoner of war was torpedoed.

I'll tell you something that never seemed right to me. Willy lost his rifle in the Retreat to Dunkirk and he was made to pay for it. The money was stopped out of his army pay an' he was still payin' for it out in the Desert when he was captured. Would you believe that, when you think of all that was lost and deliberately destroyed at Dunkirk and the' had him paying for the loss of one bloody rifle.

Jack Cavanagh





"Ah' did't kna where a was at".

Next thing ah kna, we were at Newhaven walkin' down the gang plank, these Silver Lady people were there, givin' us a little bag each wi' a couple o' bars o' chocolate, some cigarettes, an' chewin' gum. We went through another gate, an' the' was a train waitin', an' we got on' ah didn't kna where ah was at, tired, shattered, sore, but the' was a lot worse than me. Bob Fletcher, Norman Huscroft, killed, any amount badly wounded, some lads minds went through that. A lot had it worse than we did, but there it is, it happened, an' lets hope it didn't happen again.

Thomas Maher
Private, B Company
8th D.L.I
(Chester-Le-Street)

Safe back from Dunkirk, Chester-Le-Street "Terriers" Thomas Maher (on left) and Bobby Gordon. Bobby was later killed in the Western Desert.

"Fourteen Days Leave"

We got onto the train, an' the' was people givin' wor chocolate. an' tea, cards to send home to say we were arlreet, an' that. We went from Dover to Aldershot, but it was lovely weather, we were under canvas. The' was arl sorts there, nearly arl what was left of the British Expeditionary Force, the Guards, Scotchmen, you could change your money from francs into British money.

We went from there, after a couple o' days to Knutsford, in Cheshire. We were gannin' on leave, we were gettin' fourteen days leave, an' we were arl on the train when the officers come round, Major James an' them, to tell us it was altered to forty eight hours. The' were frightened the' would be an invasion.

Jimmy McGarry M.M.
Sergeant B Company
(Chester-le-Street) 8th D.L.I.

"A COOK'S TOUR"

We landed at Dover , this ambulance train pulled in , the' took the stretchers off the boat an' onto the train ,it was arl fitted out so they didn't sway when the train moved. The rest of us formed up, we were from different regiments, King's Royal Rifles, some o' the K.O.S.B 's, the' was Yorkshire Light Infantry, an' a few of us from the Durhams. We were arl mixed up.

The' took us up to Brecon in a truck, it was the first South Wales Borderers there. This Sergeant Major says, " Right lads, we'll get your particulars, then we can contact your regiment, they'll be somewhere in England now, we don't know where, so you might be here a month". we were there about three weeks as it turned out.

We got money, an' grub, an' this Major from the south Wales Borderers come an' asked us to say nowt about what we'd seen, or what we'd been through, ' cause he sayed the morael of his troops was very high, an' he wouldn't like it to get lowered. He says, "If any o' the lads come an' ask you where you' ve been, say you' ve been on a cook's Tour".

Joss Little
Lance Corporal B Company
(Chester-Le-Street) 8th D.L.I.

LA VILLE DE DUNKERQUE

à

J. Maher

Durham Light Infantry

En mémoire des Combats de Mai et Juin 1940

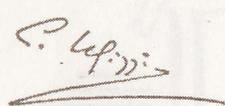
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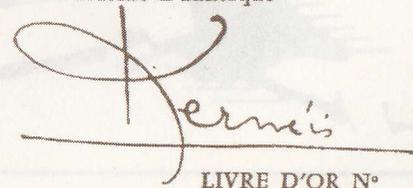
CLAUDE PROUVOEUR

1940
Dunkirk Veterans
Association

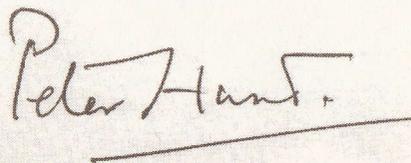
Association Nationale des A. C.
de Flandres-Dunkerque 40



Amicale des Anciens de
Marine Dunkerque



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MAY 1990. THE ROAD TO DUNKIRK REVISITED

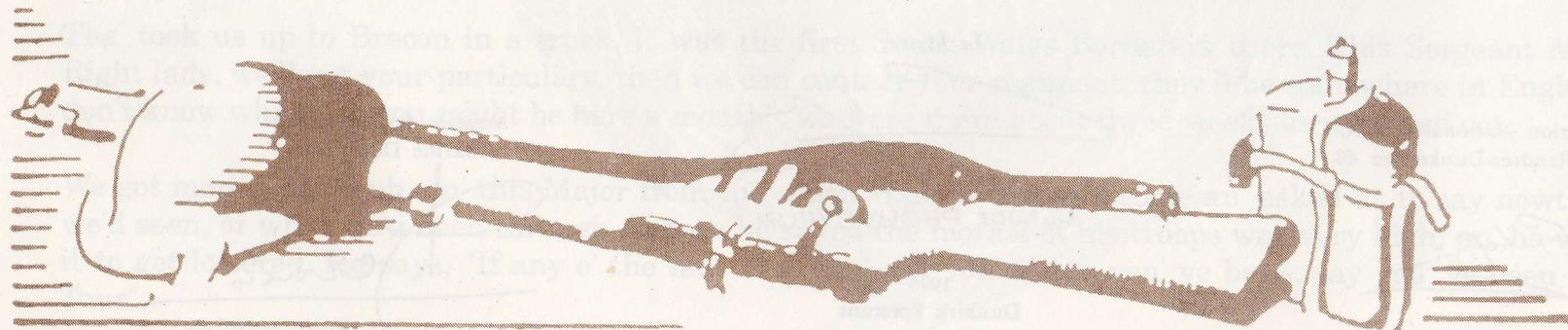
For all the bugle calls medals and memorials of the visit, and for all I was standing shoulder with the very men who soldiered there 50 years before, I could not really picture that desperate and bloody struggle of so long ago.

The weather was uncomfortably hot, much the same as May 1940, lilac was in bloom and meadow larks sung high above us. The distant woods and villages were a little out of focus in the haze, but noisy juggernauts on the nearby Common Market motorway broke any spell that might have been cast.

Then, Harry, a 70 year old retired miner recognised the lay of the land. From over there under cover of the green May corn German assault troops had crept towards him. Without any word of explanation Harry raised an imagined rifle. His right hand with a terrible and deadly skill of old flew in a controlled blurr from trigger to rifle bolt and back again, sending " ten rounds rapid" into the edge of the cornfield where the storm troopers had lain. Fire - Eject-Load -Fire - Eject - Load - Fire - Eject - Load.

It was a powerful conjouring trick. A few swift movements in thin air of an old man's hand and the life and death struggle of 50 years before fel tvery close by.

Gavin John Purdon



02120

John A. Purdon

Lance Corporal B Company
(Ghater/La Street) 8th D.L.I.