

In August 1915 I went to France as a Private with the 9th Battalion York & Lancaster Regiment. I was posted to the Battalion Headquarters as a Clerk. My early experience in the Trenches was in the Battalion Headquarters in a small farm 800 yards west of our Front Line.

One of my first mornings having washed and shaved, still all wet I moved 10 yards from the pump and started to towel myself when two German shells fell close to the pump and undoubtedly would have killed me if I hadn't moved. That was just the start of 4 years of dodging death. In October 1915 a War Office Order came that a number of men had to be sent home for Commissions. My Colonel sent me at the end of October. For seven and a half months I was safe in England.

On my 22nd birthday I was ordered back to France and sent to the 13th Battalion York & Lancaster. On the 30 June 1915 I was in command of two platoons (80) men marching to take part in the 1 July opening day of the Battle of the Somme. I was in the last of eight waves of attack our forward move was to start at 7.30 am. By 3 pm our six first waves were shattered and the Company I was in had advanced 500 yards. The Company Commander was killed we had eight wounded men and one missing. The two Battalions in front of us, each had 350 men wounded. I had to organise the collection of the dead in our area. The blood and death was everywhere, it was hard at times to keep your feet for it and all the while the Germans shelled and machine-gunned us.

By the 19 July we had taken over the trenches at Neuve-Chapelle. Our Company took over from a Battalion that had started to build a new Company HQ in the Front Line. All four Platoons were holding the Front Trench, my number 13 Platoon was holding south. I walked to the new headquarters I hadn't been there long when the biggest shell a German gun can fire, five feet long, came over and dropped with a terrific crash in Neuve-Chapelle about 100 yards away. After five minutes another dropped about the same place and five minutes after another dropped 50 yards from where the six of us were sitting, we simply ran in fear!

Within seconds another huge shell smashed the HQ we were just at. For nearly three hours those shells came at five minute intervals blowing a 20 yards gap in our Front Line. The shell holes were big enough to bury a three ton Wagon. Fortunately we had only one man killed. We asked for retaliation from our guns, but we were told that they were rationed for shells which were needed in the Somme area.

Twice I took patrols out into No Man's Land. It was so dark out there we nearly walked right into the German trench. Every time the Germans fired a flare you simply froze, heart in your mouth, expecting to get shot and then as soon as the light faded, you moved on! Early in September I was to go on a bombing course. These courses served a double purpose besides being Specialist Training, also they were 'holiday breaks', I left a new officer called Wise in charge. When I got back to the Battalion a few weeks later they were in the Front Line and Wise in command of my platoon had already been killed.



On 1 July, we were to hold a Strong Point called Fort Marie Luise. One trench was over 12 ft deep. In the morning on getting up we caught our breath, just three yards from our door a German 5.9" shell was wedged in the mud, still smoking. Petrified, I drummed up my courage and gently picked it up, climbed the bank until I found a suitable shell hole and deposited it gently, terrified it would go off! On 13 November 1916 we repeated the attack that we had made on Serre on 1 July with tragic similar results. Shells plus rain had made our Front Line such a quagmire that we couldn't use it.

The Battalion on the 3 of May 1917 moved into the Vimy Ridge area. We followed the Naval Division that Cliff Pickett was in taking over the trenches that the Naval Division had captured from the Germans. The trench was about eight feet deep but having been dug by the enemy they knew all about them sending occasional shells to cheer us. Our Adjutant hadn't much time for me, I have a hunch that he knew I had a brother who was a Conscientious Objector. One such shell killed him on 11 May 1917.

One summer's day in 1917 I had got the Company Charger (horse) and went shopping to a French village about five miles away. It was a lovely day and I was enjoying myself, the items I had bought were in a sandbag flung over my left shoulder. You could almost forget that five miles away was a hell on earth with two lines of men trying to kill each other. Twice in 1917 I was half buried by shell fire. There were two incidents which remain vivid memories. Number 14 Platoon had to do a Trench attack. A young and very scared Lance Corporal came to me and asked if he had to go on the trench attack, he didn't want to go. I shouldn't have (and would have been in serious trouble if caught) but, told him he could go to the reserve trench away from his unit. The attack was a failure with a few minor casualties but the Lance Corporal was killed by a German shell falling on his dugout anyway.

After upsetting my commander, again, he said: 'Brocklesby you always do things bloody well wrong, get off to the Front Line there's no more reserve trenches for you'. This meant going 800 yards in the open in daylight above ground. The Priest was there and he followed me out saying he would like to come with me so off we went. I reported to the commander and he told me to find somewhere to settle down but after about an hour the Germans began shelling. The barrage was so heavy that the continued explosions actually sent me to sleep, then a shell hit the ground about five yards behind my head pushing about a ton of earth on to me burying me up to my throat. The earth was loose but I was surrounded, entombed, and I have never felt so scared! I scabbled and scratched at it until I hit clear air.

By that time I was one of the most senior Lieutenants in the 94th Infantry Brigade and was sent to fill emergency office posts, such as Intelligence Officer at the 94th Infantry Brigade. At Christmas 1917 a War Office Order called for a number of senior officers to be sent home for six months and on 15 February 1918 I came to England. In March with 29 other officers I reported at Whitby to take the place of 30 officers who had not been out in France. We had a month to settle down when to my dismay I was sent to Strensall for a Musketry Instructors' Course. For the course I was graded Distinguished and got a special paragraph in Battalion Orders of Congratulation, it got me a pleasant post of Battalion Musketry Officer for the rest of the War and saved me from going back to France again.

Account adapted from:

From the words of Phillip Brocklesby in 1972

<http://www.conisbroughheritage.co.uk/WW1%20Memories.html>