

Percy Haigh War Diaries

Volume 1

Tuesday October 24th 1916

The little YMCA hut was crowded. Outside it was soaking with rain, a black night in lonely autumn; the camp itself small, consisting of two companies only, a little cluster of dazzle painted tents pitched around an East coast farm-house, was little better than a quagmire; and the "Y.M." was the only accommodation of its sort. The Wet Canteen was a canvas affair and very draughty, possessed of no heating apparatus and an additional disadvantage tonight insomuch as the stock was sold out and fresh supplies had failed to arrive.

The mile distant town had few attractions at any time and none at all on a wet night. Had the roll been called in the Hut between seven or eight o'clock there would have been very few absentees. A few hardy spirits perhaps, rolled themselves in their blankets and sucked their pipes or attempted a fitful slumber on the muddy floorboards of their tents; one or two others "well in" with the Sergeant of the guard, crouched over the coke brazier in the old stable which did temporary duty as a guard-room and carried on wordy combats with the Camp-bugler, a celebrated promoter of futile arguments. The common desire for warmth drove the rest to seek refuge in the "Y.M." where a cheerful lady worker, aided by a bespectacled Lance-Corporal, dispensed good fare in the shape of "Camp" coffee and cakes, cigarettes and chocolate, to be consumed as near to the stove as the double cordon of "fire-spaniels" would permit. These latter devotees of physical comfort, with the wisdom born of many disappointments, had arrived as soon as the Hut had opened after tea, staked out a claim and the proverbial wild horses would not dislodge them until closing time.

On the platform which filled one end of the Hut a piano formed the nucleus of another group. A Lance-Corporal was strumming ragtime in a spasmodic fashion. Scraps of "Michigan" and "Tennessee" mingled with the ceaseless din of conversation and shuffling of feet. The trestle-tables in the body of the hut were crowded with men who clumsily worded the reluctant muse of letter writing with a minimum of elbow room, scratchy pens borrowed from the counter and periodical snatches at half-consumed buns or mugs of coffee. Tattered magazines and cake-crumbs, wet rings and splashes from the mugs fought for the remaining space. Vociferous discussions, describing vicious circles about matters of little or no importance, added to the general discomfort of the letter writers. Dominos and draughts rattled in odd corners; muddy boots and damp great-coats steamed by the stove; a blue fog of tobacco smoke ascended to the cross beams and obscured the flickering lights.

The windows behind the air-raid blinds were misted thickly with condensed vapour and dimly audible beyond the general hubbub was the steady patter of the rain drops on the roof. In a small space against the wall near the door we had piled our equipment, a jumble of strap-ends, bulging packs and protruding entrenching tool handles, thus saving ourselves another dark and muddy journey to the tent-lines before the "Fall-in" went. It still wanted twenty minutes to be eight o'clock, but it was time to be saying goodbye. We were due to move off at light and they were sure to keep us hanging about in the rain for at least ten minutes.

In no particularly happy frame of mind yet glad to get it over, I went the round of the Hut shaking hands with such of my friends as remained. There were not very many of these. I had but recently returned to the Camp after passing out of the Brigade Signal School to find that most of my

contemporaries had preceded me to the Front where they had been just in time for the earlier battles of the Somme. Some were already killed, others home again in English hospitals and one or two even had already veterans to civilian existence. With the exception of my friend B and one Lance-Corporal, even the members of the draft were strangers.

By way of farewell we exchanged flippant remarks and did our best to show that we did not mind going to the front. The more recent recruits-mostly older men than ourselves-watched us curiously and silently. The lady who presided over the Hut gave us a parting gift of chocolate and cigarettes. Farewells over, there was an awkward pause, a sort of anti-climax. We ought to have gone out of the Hut immediately. The general noise of conversation had ceased. The pianist, the letter writers the domino players all had suspended operations in order to see the last of us. In the general hush the rattle of the rain against the windows became sharply apparent.

If some shivered and congratulated themselves that they were not starting overseas on such a night, who could blame them? We glanced uneasily at the clock in order to relieve the tension, began to struggle into our equipment hunching our shoulders to the packs with a grunt and deflating our stomachs in the struggle to make belt buckles meet over greatcoats. Ten minutes to eight. Outside there was a stir, voices calling, footsteps crunching in the muddy gravel of the lane which ran between the Y.M.C.A. and the farmhouse. Then a stentorian shout "Fall in the Draft!" Someone pummelled the side of the Hut.

The door opened and the burly form of the Orderly Sergeant pushed aside the green baize curtain. "Fall in the Draft!" Then in quieter tones and with a salute to the Hut mistress, "Time to fall in boys. Get a move on." We groped our way down the steep little steps from the Hut with feeling of relief. The definite action after the tension of the last few minutes made us feel almost light hearted. The sudden passage into darkness temporarily deprived us of vision but habit guided our footsteps to the gap in the hedgerow and over the planks, slippery with mud, which bridged the ditch. We fell in on the road just in front of the farmhouse railings where two dim figures waited by a lantern. The house and its ring of elm trees formed a vague background relived only by a single chink of light from the corner of a carelessly shrouded window of the Orderly Room, once the farmhouse parlour.

The Orderly Sergeant, who held office permanently in virtue of his luck, being far too fat for ordinary parade work, called the roll, the Company Sergeant-Major holding his blurred storm-lantern close to the others face and the pair of them peering hard at the list of names and fumbling with the pronunciation of each as if they had never heard any of them before. Their ponderousness filled one with impatience. It seemed as if they had a blanket wrapped about their joint intelligence. Or as if they were spinning out the business maliciously, which was, of course, absurd. Doubtless the C.S.M. was only too anxious to get the business finished; there was probably a 'bunk' waiting for him over at the Sergeant's Mess while the Orderly Sergeant would be cursing the weather and thinking of his warm bunk at the back of the farmhouse.

Nevertheless I thought "Why don't they get it over and let us go?" It was ridiculous to feel so irritable, especially as another side of me was all the while regretting keenly each of these last flying moments, but I suppose we were all a little on edge, conscious rather of the significance of the occasion. I fell to wondering what it would be like over the other side. Going into action, over the top, slowly and steadily, rifles at the trail, not in silence as we had practiced it on the ploughed land round the farm, but with a barrage screaming overhead and a crackle of machine-guns breaking out in front. We had only the vaguest ideas about it really; distorted conceptions gleamed from newspapers or the scrappy information of returned Expeditionary Force men.

“Here Sergeant!” The last man answered his name. The C.S.M. and his assistant held a muffled consultation, their faces lit up sharply in a sudden gleam, the Sergeant Major lean and burnt by many years of Indian sun, the Orderly Sergeant while and heavy, with protruding eyes a walrus moustache sticking out of the V of his upturned collar.

“Number!”

“Two!” yelled the second man absent-mindedly having previously ascertained his number in a desire to be alert.

“One!” bawled his right-hand neighbour, aggrievedly, half a second too late. There was general laughter and relief. The second man, being myself muttered unprintable things to the night.

“Nah then. Wot he ‘ell,” remonstrated the Orderly Sergeant in pathetic, wounded tones, like a clown feigning surprise and reproach at the mirth of his audience.

The proceeding became normal again. The C.S.M. disappeared into the darkness of the farmhouse to report. The men of the draft stood at ease, shifted their equipment, shook the water from their greatcoats and made sure that their cigarettes and matches were easily attainable. It was uncomfortably hot. There was no wind and the whole earth seemed to be steaming. The slow drip, drip from the trees made a distinct note from the unceasing patter of the rain. A few figures came to the door of the “Y.M.” and called farewells, mostly of a facetious order, across the hedgerow.

“Good luck boys!”, “Keep your ‘ead down, Nobby!” “If you see the Kyzer,” and so on.

“SHUT..THAT..DOOR!” roared an impatient voice. One of the ‘fire-spaniels’ probably. One could imagine its owner shivering. With a thud somebody complied, suddenly cutting us off from all light and companionship. In a few moments there drifted out * faint voices and the muffled notes of the piano breaking into ‘Tennessee’. Inside the Hut life had already adjusted itself and gone ahead; already we belonged to its past.

The C.S.M. reappeared from the farmhouse accompanied by the tall mackintosh-clad figure of the Sergeant whose turn it was for draft-conducting duty, a pleasant-voiced Irishman who had already put in two spells at the front. I had been told that he would take us as far as the Base but I do not remember seeing him after we left Boulogne. The Sergeant called us to attention and gave the command to move off in fours to the left. It always seemed to me a clumsy formation for twelve men, but the relief of movement dispelled criticism. From the door of the farmhouse the voice of the Company Commander shouted: “Goodbye and good luck!” Usually he came out, shook hands and had a word with every member of a draft. There was a thin response from this one, somebody growled “Blast your good luck!” but the majority were silent. In another minute we had passed the sentry at the wire protected farm-gate and were tramping along the narrow elm lined lane.

The ‘March easy’ was given, a cigarette or two appeared and continued to glow despite the rain, the Camp fell further and further behind until the two ghostly blurs of light showing through wet tents by which alone it was visible were lost behind a tall hedgerow. Nobody spoke. The crunch of our feet on the stony lane mingled with the sound of the dripping trees. Across the salt-marshes to the right of us came the long, sighing roll of the tide. Ahead lay darkness and the unknown. We would have given much at that moment for the prospect of one more night in the damp, warm tents amid the chaff and chatter, rolling snugly in one’s blankets close to Mother Earth as ‘Light’s Out’ went, squeezing out

the last cigarette-end against the muddy floor-boards and joining in the gust of laughter as the bugler outraged the night air with a false note.

At the end of half a mile the road, like many other marsh-roads made a right angle bend and ran up to the village which was perched on a high ridge inland. At the corner was a gate leading to another farmhouse about which B Company was un-camped. The Sergeant called a halt and two figures emerged from the darkness, calling out to know if we were the draft.

“We are. Is Private Brown there?”

“Here Sergeant,” piped a shrill voice in a comic crescendo which inspired several prompt and grossly exaggerated imitations. While the B Company Sergeant handed over his papers, the new comer was exhorted not to get the wind up.

“They can only kill you once,” somebody pointed out. Private Brown, slight, youthful and girlish, commonly known off parade as Alice or Ethel or the first feminine name that came into the speakers mind, attached himself to the rear file moving one man forward to make a blank. The B Company Sergeant went splashing back to his own quarters, whilst we continued our journey up the road to the village, halting finally under the shelter in the playground of the school which stood close to Battalion Headquarters. Very soon several figures appeared, recognisable presently in the lantern light as the Colonel and the Orderly Officer with the R.S.M. hovering bulkily in the background. We stood to attention whilst the Colonel wished us good luck and made some conventional remarks about the necessity of maintaining a high standard of duty and discipline.

Packages containing biscuits and cigarettes were distributed. We were ready to go, but at the last moment the Battalion Signal Officer arrived with the unceremonious haste which characterised most of his appearances on parade. Boyish, popular, ‘one of the lads,’ he struck a more human note at once by shaking hands with everybody, bestowing a special benediction on such of his former signallers as were present and raising a general laugh by bidding us keep up the time honoured traditions of the ‘Old Wind Bashers’. (A reputation for dodging everything in the shape of work clung to every exponent of Morse, fostered and fancy by disgusted Company Sergeant Majors and their mygdominions, signallers being for the most part outside their jurisdiction and unavailable for guard and other company duties.)

A few minutes later we were on our way to the station, storm-lanterns bobbing at front and rear in accordance with the military regulations applying to troops on the march at night. I think that most, if not all of us were glad that all the formalities of our departure were over. Two of us at least were pleased to think that we were leaving quietly in the darkness like this. We had always hated the idea of going away in a large draft like some of those which had left a few months back just before the opening battles of the Somme, when they went yelling and singing down to the Town station, everybody hot, perspiring and excited, not a few slightly drunk, the band in front pounding out ‘The Long, Long Trail’ and ‘Keep the Home Fires Burning,’ with half the garrison and the girls from the town mixed up with the draft or trailing behind amid bursts of rag-time, cat-calls and cheers.

As good a way of leaving for the front, of course, as any other, but from what other men have told me, I think we were not alone in preferring to slip away quietly. It was partly a dislike of any publicity attending what was possibly one’s last few hours in the Country, partly perhaps a sense of the disparity between the heroic military conception of the people cheering on the pavement and the private soldiers private knowledge of the un-heroic truth. However, the wet weather had rendered the presence of the regimented band out of the question and the smallness of the draft would have made it

look rather ridiculous, a head with a very small tail but no body. The road which skirted the town on its way to the station was a lonely one at the best of times and on such a night was completely deserted. Nobody felt moved to speech, much less to song. The station when we reached it was almost in darkness and very forlorn until a local train unloaded a crowd of girls from an outlying munition factory who, as they swarmed towards the barrier, grasped our hands and wished us, "Good luck Tommy," so we had something of a send off after all.

Our own train came in before the platform was cleared of the Munitions workers. Two or three compartments had been reserved for us and shedding our equipment and sodden overcoats we settled down to smoke and doze in comfort for an hour or so while opportunity permitted.

Later.

Liverpool Street Station with its dim shrouded lights looked like a vast underground cavern. It was late and the usual station crowd had thinned out considerably. A few city people hurried past with mud splashed clothes and dripping umbrellas. How we coveted their damp but civilian journey to their East London homes as we clattered with a hollow ring of nailed boots down into the underground. Rattling westward in an inner Circle train the full significance of our journey struck home for the first time. Our departure from the Camp and its temporary associations, apart from regret at the rupture of a few friendships and the loss of a year of physical comforts, however primitive, had aroused irritation and embarrassment rather than sentiment, but to B and myself, London-bred, these Eastbound-flying city stations were fraught with a thousand vivid memories of pre-war strap hanging and hustling and when, with a jolt we pulled up at the Temple, I thought of the many rapid exits which less than a year ago I had made from that station and could not keep wondering when, if ever, I should repeat the performance.

It seemed impossible that so short a time had elapsed since I used to scuttle up through the hushed * of the Temple, hoping against hope that the Ten O'clock would not boom out solemnly and remorselessly from the Law Courts clock before I could reach Fleet Street and the thudding traffic. Charring Cross, where the compartment was immediately invaded by a gay and garrulous crowd from the theatres made us even more aware of our months of east-Coast exile. With a little shock one realised that whatever else happened the nightly routine of London went on just the same and that even after two years of warfare the supply of youthful male civilians seemed undiminished. A few, swaying from their straps, bestowed a moment's rather resentful curiosity on our blackened badges and wet packs, before resuming an animated discussion of the night's entertainment and doubtless were relieved when Victoria rendered vacant fourteen seats.

We waited a few minutes for the civilian crowd to clear. As we crossed to the main station we encountered the first of several surprises that awaited us. As if by a pre-arranged signal, parties of men were filing into the station by each entrance and inside we found others already assembled. We had seen no other drafts on the Underground and now it was as if a great stage were filling up for the final tableaux. Shattered immediately was the innocent conceit that the army machine functioned for us alone that night. The R.T.O. who pounced on us almost before we had time to halt dealt a second blow to our preconceived notions. So far from entraining after a few formalities for Folkestone, as we had imagined was the case, we were ordered to dump our equipment and were shown the whereabouts of food and sleeping accommodation. The latter proved the most welcome surprise of all. As soon as we heard that our journey was to be broken for the night we assumed that the stony floor of the station would be our lodging, instead we were piloted up a steep staircase into a large room of which I retain

a rather hazy impression that it was somewhere near the roof of the station and partly overhung the platform.

Whoever was responsible for this place (I believe it was the Y.M.C.A.) must have earned many a private soldier's gratitude, for no greater contrast to the bustle, draughts and discomfort below could have been provided than its warmth, quietness and soft lighting. Blankets were neatly piled in rows down the middle of the room ready for use; at the sides were comfortable looking lounge chairs in which sundry men, chiefly it seemed those of the Dominion forces, were dozing or reading magazines. Presumably they were all returning from leave and were making the most of a few hours final comfort before proceeding on their way to certain discomfort and an uncertain future but they had rather the bored air of habitués in a hotel lounge. One could not help being impressed if not a little envious of the indifference with which they appeared to regard this business of going to the Front.

We supped on coffee and sandwiches at a canteen in the station below and then beat a hasty retreat to our unexpected quarters in the hostel, almost reluctant to sleep for fear of missing some aspect of their cosiness.

Wednesday October 25th

We were very early afoot and breakfasted somewhat sketchily in the canteen downstairs. The station presented a scene of even greater activity than on the previous night; officers and men of every rank returning from leave, bustling R.T.O.'s, unwieldy drafts, worried looking Sergeants, kit laden porters and a veritable babble of shouts, orders, ringing heels, shrill train whistlers, clanging bells, hissing steam, dreary greetings and tearful farewells, argument and error, laughter, curses and conversation. It seemed impossible that such chaos could be dealt with efficiently by any human agency and one began to feel an increasing respect for Army organisation as the station gradually cleared.

Our next stage was Folkestone and it transpired we were booked on a train which started about seven o'clock. I was lucky enough to secure a corner seat in a compartment not unduly crowded. It was a soaking, wet morning and the river as we crossed the Grosvenor Bridge was shrouded in grey mist. The familiar London landmarks slipped by, it seemed all too quickly and soon we were in the south-eastern suburbs with the slate roofs of the villas gleaming faintly in the drizzle and people beginning to hurry out of the houses on their way to the trams and buses for the City. The sight was not good for one's patriotism: it recalled too vividly a happier, care free existence from which one now seemed irrevocably to be cut off and it was perhaps as well that the train gathered speed.

Streets and houses gave place to fields and country roads; in a short time we were thundering through the tunnels deep under the Kentish chalk; then, with a sigh of relief and a lowering of the windows, flying out into the open again to Tonbridge and the long straight run through the Weald, where Oast-house cowls peeped up like wizards caps above the bare poles of hop fields and the lichenous tiles on farmhouse roofs flashed fresh, wet colours through the tangled boughs of orchards already threadbare from the October gales. The landscape, flickering by like an ever wonderful film, kept one's mind focussed, perhaps fortunately on externals. Little was said. Half the men in the compartment dozed for it appeared in comparing experiences that not all had been so snugly housed at Victoria as the rest of us. The biscuits presented to us overnight and hitherto somewhat disregarded, now achieved their due need of appreciation as we supplemented our hurried breakfasts. And we smoked more cigarettes than were good for us.

At Ashford, dismal in the rain, we stopped a little while. There was a general stir; windows were lowered and the fog of tobacco smoke dispersed by a draught of raw air. A strained voice from an adjoining compartment caterwauled in high pitched derision:

“Take me right over the sea,

where the Alleymans cant get at me.

Oh, my! I don't wanna die,

I wante go 'ome.”

The voice of an unseen critic bawled “Shut r-r-up!” There was a babble of argument and the clink of coins, cut short by the sound of a window being raised violently.

The train moved on again. We began to fasten buttons and collect our belongings, deeming the journey now all but over, yet we still had a considerable distance to go (Or perhaps the number of halts made it seem a long way) before we finally came to a standstill on a steep embankment just short of Folkestone. Across the fields we could see the huddled roofs of the town and beyond a high sea, slate coloured and white capped, raging in squalls of rain and wind. The sight did not allay the misgivings we had felt since first sizing up the morning's weather and thinking rather wistfully of the abandoned Channel Tunnel, we sought distraction on the landward side of the train, where the country rolled up in an awe-inspiring sweep to a high ridge of the downs. Along the skyline could be seen a line of telegraph poles no bigger than match sticks, while the lower slopes were dotted with Lilliputian tents.

The halted train brought some children scrambling up the embankment from a few scattered bungalows in a quest of buttons and other souvenirs. It was evident from their indifference to any possible danger as they ran along the metals and their aptness of retort to the clumsy witticisms of the soldiers lolling out of the carriage windows that ours was not the first troop train they had visited on that embankment. Disappointed as to souvenirs, they reaped a more profitable harvest by offering to post letters or postcards. The opportunity seemed too good to be wasted.