

Alfred Reynolds 1899-1983: My Dad

Part One My Dad versus Kaiser Bill 1914-1918

My Dad's First World War story lay hidden in my father's tin trunk which, as a boy, was in my bedroom, covered with a curtain. Somehow, I had the impression that it was never to be opened and it just became part of the room. My father was not a great talker and rarely mentioned the war directly, let alone his part in it. The tin trunk held all his worldly possessions from before he was married. He had kept several important letters and documents, one lot being in a red envelope type holder from the War Office. However, it was only after he died in 1983, that I was able to connect recalled snippets of conversation with the oddments in the trunk. The following account is what I have pieced together about my Dad's life.

(Relevant historical background and explanatory notes are in italics)

My Dad's family and childhood

My father was born in Fulham, London. He had two older brothers, Samuel George and Francis Alexander and a sister, Louise Winifred.

- Sam, born in 1895
- Frank, born 10th August 1897
- Alf, born 8th March 1899
- Win, born 1901.

My Grandfather was a taxicab proprietor (initially horse-drawn ones, then motor-cabs) and they all lived in a mews just off Sussex Square, Edgware Road, London. I had always been told that my Dad's mother had died when he was 2 ½ and his sister was only 6 months old. He and Win were then sent from London to be fostered at Horsted Keynes, a village in Sussex. The two older brothers, Sam and Frank, eventually went to Australia around 1912.

During my childhood, no one ever spoke about my Dad's parents and it never dawned on me that I grew up knowing only my maternal grandparents. So I was in my seventies when tracing my ancestors that I found that his mother had, in fact, run off with one of my Grandfather's workmen. My parents had been subsequently divorced, which was a rarity for that social class in those days.

Outbreak of war : 1914

My Dad was 15½ years old when the Great War started in August.

The initial German offensive nearly reached Paris. The story of how the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) literally bumped into the advancing Germans at Mons, the fighting retreat by both French and British Armies are stories on their own. Another story was something that a lone reconnaissance British pilot spotted by chance. A gap was opening between the two advancing German Armies as they neared Paris. The spirited action by General Gallieni in Paris, who, on hearing the report from the British pilot, organised what is now known as the "Taxis of the Marne". He commandeered the

Paris taxis and busses in order to rush French troops to exploit the gap. The Germans were forced to retreat and eventually, each side dug trenches, fortified with barbed wire and machine guns.

At the commencement of hostilities many thought that it would be over by Christmas 1914 and many men volunteered in order "not to miss the fun" and this included many boys. The Liberal MP for Mansfield, Arthur Markham raised the issue of boys being accepted, but the War Minister flatly denied that anyone under 18 had been accepted, who had not sworn that they were over 18 years old. Eventually, many boys were killed and the scandal forced the Army to discharge them in many cases. Markham said that most boys were useless as soldiers and that it would be more advantageous to let them grow into men and then join up. He favoured conscription as a means of swelling the ranks.

1915

I found out that my Dad enlisted (Appendix 1) on the 8th May 1915 at Horsham, Sussex in the 14th (R) Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment, given a regimental number 3825. Aged only 16yrs and 2 months, he must have lied that he was 18 years old, this being the minimum age for service in the UK (19 years old for service overseas). He puts his address as Mr A W Reynolds, c/o Mr Freshfields Esq. Wych Cross Place, Forest Row, Sussex. His army record records his occupation as a man servant. In the trunk were 3 postcard-sized photographs of French soldiers (Appendix 2). It was common in those days to have photographs printed as postcards. Two were portraits and one was a group-shot and had been sent through the post to a lady in a small village called Baizieux near Warloy in the Somme district. One was marked "Morlaix le 3 Septembre 1915 (? : the last digit is unclear). There were no postage stamps on them so I assume that, as for British soldiers, they were sent free. The village location evaded me for some time, but it was mentioned in a book relating to the battles on the Somme in July 1916. I noticed that my Dad had written in pencil "I am here" over the village name in very small letters. He had sent the photos in an envelope back to his sister in England, cutting them down in size slightly. Was the small writing meant to evade the army censor? The question running through my head was "did he serve in France as a boy?" i.e. in **1915?**

1916

My Dad's lie about his age was presumably discovered, and he was discharged from the Army after

272 days (nearly 10 months) on 3 January 1916 from Northampton. He left the colours on 3 Feb. 1916. It is unclear where he was for those preceding 28 days.

Another letter in the trunk was from the station master at Brighton Station on note paper headed "London, Brighton and South Coast Railway". It suggests that he was directed to work there by the Ministry of Labour when he was discharged in February 1916. (Men and women were also directed into essential war work in World War II).

The Diary

Then came the finding of a very small diary (Appendix 3) that I had previously missed, which was tucked in the back of the red War Office envelope. It measured 80 x 140 mm. The first entry being that the small booklet was a gift "from Win on my 16th birthday".

(Fortune then favoured me, when it became apparent that a bowling friend was very interested in WWI loaned me several books to supplement those I had from the library).

Up to that time, I had no idea that a great German offensive starting on 21st March

1918 very nearly separated the French and British armies in the Somme region plus subsequent offensives elsewhere very nearly ended the war with a German victory.

The German army advanced nearly 80 km, capturing the town of Albert on the old Roman road some 30km from Amiens. This latter town was the hub of the British arm in the Somme region and had to be defended at all cost. The battles of previous years had been ones of attrition, which left the British army weakened, especially in this region and reserves were desperately needed.

At a meeting of the war cabinet to discuss the dire situation that had developed, it was stated that about 50,000 boys between the ages of 18 and 19 years old were in the UK and that, if the rule restricting their deployment to the UK could be over-ridden, then they could be used as reserves.

This was agreed, hence my Dad entered onto the scene with Kaiser Bill.

1917

His very small diary says that he enlisted in the Royal Sussex Regiment for the second time on Monday 2 April 1917 with a Regimental Number 10990. Research suggests that there are some digits or letters missing. An additional entry says that he went from Brighton Town Hall to Chichester, where he stayed until Thursday 5th April, when they went to St Albans.

The diary follows no chronological pattern, probably being written in any quiet moment. Most of the diary entries are in pencil, but still in his best copperplate writing. In ink he listed the duties of

the Orderly Lance Corporal and Orderly Corporal, plus a few other items. Another observation is that whilst he was in France, he spells all the place names correctly, apart from one entry. He was a lad who had left school at 12 ½ yrs old with no knowledge of the French language. I can only assume that he was in the regimental office, which might have given him access to pen, ink and the spelling of French towns.

Having previously gone through a basic training, he would have a large advantage over the recent conscripts and possibly been upgraded to corporal. In one section of the diary, he is keeping the rifle shooting scores of other soldiers. Perhaps this means that he is in charge of the squad?

However, the next entry relates to being given 14 days confined to barracks with 7 days loss of pay from 24th July - 7th August. The following entry may explain this:

1st -11th August 1917: his brother Frank was home on leave from Ypres. Sam may also have had leave at the same time as I seem to remember my sister saying that the brothers all met up at the father's house in Fulham at one time. There was a photo of the three soldier brothers in the trunk. They were perhaps in contact via the army postal system, as Dad notes in the diary their Army numbers and whereabouts: 140,618 Sapper Samuel .G. Reynolds with 146th A.T.Coy Section (1) R.E. (does he mean B.E.F?) and in pencil small letters "Ypres". He then notes 'F' (Frank) in the 167th A.T.Coy R.E.

Both Samuel and Francis were in the Royal Engineers of the British army, having returned from Australia to enlist (see other notes for more details). On his "Certificate of Employment During the War" given to Francis Alexander Reynolds on his demobilisation on 9th March 1919 he is listed as being in the 167th A.T.Coy R.E.

On September 8th 1917, my Dad left St.Albans for Colchester.

The Russian revolution of 1917 and the subsequent cessation of hostilities between the Russian Reds and the Germans enabled the Germans to move vast numbers of soldiers and material from Russia to the Western Front for another offensive. This offensive was on a vast scale and it was planned to be the deciding factor, which would bring them victory.

1918

February

On 18th Feb 1918 he left Colchester and went to Norwich.

The German offensive, having started on 21st March 1918, was threatening Amiens by the end of March. The situation for the British was dire and it was even thought that we could lose the war.

The War Cabinet was being pressed by General Haig for more men to help stem the German advance and, at this point, the 18 year old "boys" were sent to

France, the most experienced first, which would have, of course, included my Dad.

I have rewritten his notes in some sort of time order as follows:

March

G.D.(what does this mean?) left Norwich 31 March 1918 at 9pm (21h00) Easter Sunday arriving at Folkestone 3-30am (03h30).

April

1st April on board and then came off again as boats full (or was it submarine activity in the Channel?)

Left 6pm (18h00) arrived Boulogne 8-10pm (21h10) on the W(?) ship Victoria. From station to Coppins rest billets.

Left C.R billets (Coppins rest billets??) 11—15pm (23h15), entrained 1-30am (01h30) arrived?? (blank space, so not known)

I am unable at present to unravel his next movements as the diary does not proceed in chronological order. One note says 'left ETAPLES 7-30' (07h30) followed by an 11 hour journey arrived rail head MALLY Greives (?). The town is Mailly Maillet (?) on present-day maps.

There is one scribbled entry of VELUY. This obviously refers to the village of AVELUY on the River Ancre. A vital railway ran along the valley and a fighting stand was made using the railway embankment. It seems as if my Dad was here, as he writes in pencil inside the cover of the diary

"Chemin-de Fer 20 kill" which presumably refers to 20 of his mates killed. They retreated up the hill to the Bouzincourt Ridge where the Germans were eventually halted at the top. He did say that from their positions, on the top of the ridge that they could see the statue on the church in ALBERT.

There is a photograph in a book "The Somme Battlefields" found in the Imperial War Museum library of the tired infantry retreating through AVELUY many of whom are "the boy recruits". Is he in the photo?

Then he is in a support line near ALBERT Ap (April?) 8th.

Came out 9 (th?) This leaves a few days unaccounted for and my guess is that the list of place names below, starting with DOULLENS is the route taken from ETAPLES to the railhead, from where they were pushed right into the front line.

Various books say that by Wed 27th March the British line from ALBERT to BRAY was giving way. The Australian 3rd Div to the north of Albert were informed that the Germans could gain the heights overlooking AMIENS. To prevent this, they were to use the old trenches at SAILLY-le-SEC

Sat 30th March saw a charge by Canadian and British Cavalry at MOREUIL WOODS supported by infantry and the ridge was re-taken, saving Amiens for the present.

Amiens was the most important town for the British, being near the join with the French Army and a rail, road and communication centre. At this time it was under military control by the British Provost Marshal. The loss of this strategic centre could have caused the British to retreat to the Channel ports and become separated from the French Army.

Sun 31st March was Easter Sunday and the front was relatively quiet.

My Dad probably reached the front line on 2nd April and on 4th April, the Germans renewed the attack. Their technique was to smother the rear and support lines (reserve troops and larger artillery guns) with gas and high explosive shells, which ties in with the diary entry of "gas shells on old billets".

The barrage would then be switched to the front line defences, which were then charged by storm troopers.

Another attack developed on 5th April towards Amiens, but this also was repulsed much to the dismay of Ludendorff, who was overall commander of the German armies with the Kaiser as its titular head.

The Australians played a pivotal role at Villers-Bretonneux and their achievements are commemorated to this day each year.

The diary entries then continue:

Heavy shelling. Gas shells on old billets SENLIS Sent to HEADONVILLE. Left HEADONVILLE (blank)

Another entry is a list of place names starting with the large town of DOULLENS and then: Valey (AVELUY?), Forcival (FORCEVILLE?), Beauval, Franqueville, Coulonvillers, Lanches, Saint-Riquier

Billeted LA MOTTE for 17 days then

FRANVILLE, CAUCHY ?? WORLEY, BOUCINCOURT in R, BAIZIEUX, CONTAY, FERRIERES billeted.

Then ALLY-Sur-SOMME, RAINNERVILLE, MOLLENS-EN-BOIS, PERNOIS Hospital), VIGNACOURT.

30th April from LA MOTTE to WARLOY by bus

May

1st May relieve 22nd Batt. Australians in trenches (in) front ALBERT Darling (?) S.Hill-row (meaning?)

4th May support bom (bombardment?) of Fritzes

5 May Bom. F.lines (bombardment of German front lines?)

9th May heavy shelling. Fritzes aeroplane shot down in flames after bringing down ours (?)

O.B Warl. (does this mean observer outpost near Warloy?)

15th May relieved 15th London in reserve (in?) BAIZIEUX wood

25th May Brigade reserve between BAIZIEUX and FRANVILLE and CONTAY

29th May up through BRESLE to LAVIEVILLE in reserve

30th May laying cable behind LAVIEVILLE

June

1st June sent on W.F. (working party?) at BAIZIEUX next bit says "journeys commelators 140.AI(?) W.S.
9th June German A. (artillery?) over low coming down (on?) BAIZIEUX
9th/10th June Heavy bombardment on R.(RIGHT?) of ALBERT A.O. (?) went to WARLOY W for (?)
12th June Com. (commenced?) journey back to Batt. Start 1.0pm (13h00) Batt.in support Dingo Lane (this name seems to indicate Australians around)
13th June St. Gielman K.2.Plt
19th June to BEHENCOURT near MONTIGNY shelled during day. Moved into wood near BEAUCOURT 20th June still in wood inspection
21st June MOULINS-AU-BOIS in wood (he probably did not know that "bois" means "wood")
Start away in buses 12-30 (12h30) pass through FLAXICOURT, COURLLON, BREILLY, PICQUICHY, AMIENS, DISSY arrived at FERRIERES 9 kil (km?) from AMIENS at 4-30 (16h30?). put in billets
29 th June Relieved by 58.Div. moved off 11-30 (11h30)
NB. In another book on the fighting here, the 7th Royal Sussex and the 8th Royal Fusiliers Regiments bivouacked here on 1st July

July

12 th July from FERRIERS to ALLY-sur-SOMME in RCC+ (?) Div leaves for WARLOY area
14 th July To Div.Wing in RCC at MOLLIENS-au-BOIS
16 th July In hospital AGAIN ! at MOLLIENS-au-BOIS Cannot find when he was previously hospitalised as yet
21 st July Removed to C.C.S (hospitalised) at 4CCS PERNOIS owing to temp varying. P.U.O (PVO ?) or trench fever. Later marked influenza
30 th July From PERNOIS to MOULLINS-au BOIS Div Wing

August

1 st Aug 4 of our O.B. (I think that this means observer post) brought in D (dead?)
2nd Aug on parade,wet day. ord (orderly corporal?)
3 rd Aug from MOLLIENS to WARLOY 10 K.L.(km?) M.T. (motor transport?) 5-00pm (17h30) up to Res.Line (reserve line)
4 th Aug Orderly, fine day
5 th Aug Dom. Fine day (is it Bom for bombardment?)
8 th Aug Dom (BOM?) ALBERT gas H.Ex (gas and high explosive shells)
11 th Aug J (Jerry?) reply on F.L. (front line?) 5.0am (05h00) heavy
Same date?? From In. (infantry?) Support Pioneer Trench—relieved by 10th Essex 18th Div To BAIGIENY Mon Tues Night (?) at BAIGIENY night move up on right of ALBERT Health Trench
12th Aug Bombs dropped 70-100 yards
13th Aug Working party
15th Aug Working P.H.C. (meaning?) gas 2.0 Coy killed Burial Party Kings St.
16th Aug heavy shelling 8 inch A (meaning?)
18th Aug heavy shelling Sunday (?) Aiming (?)
22nd Aug Over Top
28th Aug Over top near MOULENCOURT
Best battery in Corp done well
24th Aug to 28th Aug King St. Moulencourt 29th Aug from M (Moulencourt?) to MAMETZ W (wood?)
30th Aug from MAMETZ W to between COMBLES MAUREPASS
31st Aug Under orders ½ hrs notice

September

1st Sept (?) 5-30am (05h30) over the top (his writing script changes now and is very shaky)
2nd Sept 6-0 AM (06h00) over
6-45 (06h45) D.Stn. (dressing station?)

3rd Sept C.C.S (casualty clearing station?) to ROUEN

4th Sept ROUEN to LE HAVRE overland SOUTHAMPTON arrive STOKE 8-0 pm (20h00) (in hospital?)

He ended his Army life in a hospital in Stoke and was eventually demobilized. The injury sustained was gunshot wound to middle finger of the left hand. The finger was stitched back on, but it never worked very well, so was amputated some years later.

After the war

He returned to Brighton Railway station as a porter (Appendix 4), worked in other local stations and became a passenger train guard, retiring in 1964.

He married my mother in 1924, had my sister Jean in 1925 and me in 1931. Jean immigrated to Australia with her husband in 1947 and they lived near Frank.

My parents spent a year in Australia with his brothers and their families in the 1960s, where it was noted how many mannerisms they still shared, after all those years.

Part Two My Dad's Two Brothers

Notes on how the stories were discovered

It was during one of my visits to Australia that Uncle Frank, as he was generally known to all, told me what happened to him and Sam whilst in France. He had a remarkable memory for place names and

I wrote them down as best I could phonetically.

I only discovered their correct spellings when I connected the tiny writing in Dad's diary of Sam's address as 'Ypres' with a comment that Uncle Frank had made. Uncle had mentioned "Dicky Bush Lake", and this had such an Australian ring to it, I wasn't sure that it was a real place. To my amazement, on looking at the area around Ypres on the map, there was a village called Dikkybus with a lake nearby! The lake seems to have been the main water supply point. Then all the rest of the names fell into place. How amazing, that one small pencil note should be the clue to all the rest!

He also spoke to my daughter Sarah and being a history teacher, she also took notes, so somewhere in her archives lie more tales. She remembers that he mentioned Ploegsteert.

Outbreak of War

Sam and Frank had left England in 1913, aged just 18 and 16 years old respectively, and gone by ship to Victoria, Australia.

When war broke out, Frank tried to enlist into the Army in Melbourne, but was refused because he was under age. So, they returned to England in 1915 and enlisted in the British Army in London instead. They were:

- 140618 Sapper S.G. Reynolds 167th A.T.C. Section (2), R.E. (Royal Engineers). B.E.F. France (Appendix 5) and
- 140617 Sapper FA Reynolds 167th A.T. Coy R.E.

Frank was a plumber by trade and wanted his brother to be in the same unit. By secretly handing Sam a threaded pipe that he, Frank, had prepared earlier, they managed to convince the Sergeant that his brother was a plumber too. This way, they managed to stay together for the 3 years that they were in the war.

As Sappers in the Royal Engineers, their job was to connect and maintain supplies of water as near to the front line as possible.

Background to WWI 1918 in Northern France and Belgium

20th March German offensive started and was directed towards Amiens and the Somme area.

5th April After an advance of some 50 miles, capturing Albert and threatening Amiens, the advance was repulsed.

9th April Quartermaster General Ludendorff of the German Army switched the attack to the north. It was directed at Armentieres (on French-Belgian border), some 2 miles behind the British line at

that time. The attack started with a barrage at 04h15 of high explosive and gas shells on the rear and support lines of the British 1st Army in order to prevent reserves moving forward. The barrage then shifted to the front line trenches, towards which the German storm troopers advanced. This was a standard German tactic. 10th April another attack developed further north, in which the Germans took the Messines Ridge, which had been held by the 51st and 61st Divisions of the British Second Army.

12th April Bailleul was threatened, but train loads of Australian troops arrived at Hazebrouck and still held Neuve Englise (Nieuwkerke).

13th April Neuve Englise was attacked

16th April Bailleul and Wytschaete, near Mt. Kemmel, fell to the German Army.

All these attacks by Ludendorff were designed to both separate the British and French armies and to force the British to retire to the Channel ports. However, the attacks failed and eventually, the Germans were forced to retreat.

11th November 1918: Armistice was declared.

Frank and Sam's War-time experiences

Dad's diary notes that Frank was on leave from 1st to 11th August 1917 and at that time was stationed near Ypres, Belgium. Samuel's address was the same as Frank's. I understand that the three brothers managed to meet up in London during that leave and there is a photo of the brothers in army uniform.

Frank told me that they had billets at Dranouter, and that they were shelled there. They biked to Mt. Kemmel, going through Loker. They literally cycled into a group of Germans at Bailleul, where one of the water supply pumps was located and beat a hasty retreat.

He mentioned an abandoned British Army H.Q. near an asylum. They raided the stores that had been left and picked up food, chocolate and also some aerial photographs of the area, one of which he gave to me. They ended this sortie at Boeschepe.

He also mentioned that they had both been near Passendale at one time and in a retreat to Messines, which was probably in 1918.

After the War

They both returned to Australia in 1919 and I have the post card that they sent to my father from La

Palma, Spain, dated 1919, as they made their way home by sea.

Part Three Postcards of the French Soldiers: Sequel 2013

How my father came to be in possession of the postcard-photographs is still a mystery. He would never have stolen them; it would have been against his principles.

The only explanation that I can give is that someone at the farm gave them to him. Perhaps a young lady with whom he had met at the farm? He would then have known how to contact her when the War was over!!

To try to solve the mystery, in 2006, I wrote to the Mayor of Baizieux. In due course, I received a reply from a lady living in Amiens, who sent me a photograph of the mother to whom the postcards had been sent and a contemporary photograph of the farm (Appendix 6). The lady is related to the mother in the postcard.

Correspondence passed between us and in November 2012, three of my daughters took me to meet the lady and her relatives. It proved to be a wonderful experience. The family described how soldiers in 1914-1918 camped on the other side of the orchard and parked their vehicles there too, during their rest periods from being at the Frontline. During the war, the lady at the farm provided my father and fellow soldiers with meals, and we were able to see the very kitchen where this took place, with even the same furniture, the chair he would have sat in, the outside water pump that would have been used. It proved to be a wonderful experience.

We also visited the War Graves at Bouzincourt Ridge and Aveluy where his pals of the Royal Sussex rest.

We will probably never find out why my father had the postcards in his possession. But without them, we would not have been able to make such a valued connection with the descendants of the French family who gave my father some respite from the horrors of the war, and be able to express our gratitude to them.

John Reynolds (son of Alf Reynolds), Nov 2013.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Alf in uniform

Appendix 2: 3 photograph-postcards, Baizieux

Appendix 3: the Diary

Appendix 4: Alf in 1923

Appendix 5: Sam Reynolds in uniform

Appendix 6: Family at Baizieux, farmhouse, Albert in Great War

April 2014