

Ninetieth Anniversary

In 1914 there were two young men living close to each other; they were cousins. Joe was the elder by two years while Will had just had his twenty-first birthday. In September they, along with thousands of others, volunteered to fight for King and Country. Joe joined the Infantry - the Liverpool King's Regiment but Will joined the 275th. Brigade, West Lancashire Royal Field Artillery. Neither knew anything about soldiering though Will had a vague idea that the Field Artillery used horses to pull the guns and fancied himself in riding breeches of a driver. Joe just wanted the adventure and felt that if he didn't join quickly he'd miss the fun, as everyone said it would all be over by Christmas.

Christmas came and they had not yet left Britain but Joe had been trained to wear the King's Uniform, to march the Army way and to look after his rifle and bayonet.

Will had learned how to ride and to look after a pair of horses that were more important to the Army than *he* was. Soon, in the New Year they both found themselves in France and Belgium respectively, Joe in a holding Battalion undergoing more rifle and bayonet training while Will was sent north to the town of Ypres with his horses. He was the lead driver in a team of three, each riding a pair of horses. He had now mastered the skill of manoeuvring of the field gun into position. His job was also to keep the guns supplied with high explosive shells.

The initial German advance had been halted and Joe was now living in the trenches. He suffered bombardment by German artillery. He was involved in countless fruitless sorties into no-man's land. One night they gained a hundred yards of land only to lose it the next. Will and the gunners shelled the German troops and received the same in return with the occasional gas attack to add to the danger. On many occasions the town of Ypres seemed certain to be taken but they hung on.

So far both Joe and Will had led charmed lives, remaining more or less unscathed. Will had a lucky escape when a German bullet went between his right stirrup iron and his foot. He also sustained a scrape wound so needed to attend the field hospital for a dressing and tetanus injection. They wanted him to stay but as he knew he would lose his precious horses if he did not return, he discharged himself and after collecting a new boot went back to the line. Spring 1916 saw the two cousins moved to the same sector on the banks of the river Somme. A chance meeting one day enabled them to compare notes on the War. Joe took his cousin through the support trenches to the front line and showed Will how to look through a periscope at the German positions.

"Not much to see!" remarked Will.

"You'll get your head blown off if you look over the edge," warned Joe.

They went back through the trenches and said their 'farewells'.

Will and the Artillery then made ready to start a heavy barrage and it was obvious that this was the beginning of a major battle.

Joe and his platoon made ready to assault the enemy and waited for the command.

Will ferried shells from the storage bunker to the gun position but in a lull took his horses up onto high ground and looked across at the German trenches. To him it seemed as if the yellow soil of Flanders was boiling as shell after shell burst on the German positions. His thoughts were --*nothing can live under that barrage*-- but the guns kept firing for another twenty-four hours. Then as they fell silent there were two huge explosions just behind the enemy lines. This was the result of the detonation of two large mines laid underground by the British Engineers. Now all was silent and the first wave of troops climbed out of their trenches and with bayonets fixed walked towards the enemy positions.

To Will's horror the German positions were filled with machine guns and they wiped out most of the infantry. Men fell; dead, dying or wounded. The German artillery joined in the slaughter but still the troops came, wave after wave, after wave. Stretcher bearers tried bravely to bring some of the wounded back but a machine gun is no respecter of a Red Cross arm band or a stretcher.

Will was to learn later that Joe fell early in the battle. Alongside his Officer he had led the platoon across no-mans land.

Will also had a close encounter with death. While on duty ferrying shells from the bunker to the guns, he had stopped the ammunition limber at the entrance to the bunker. He was mounted on his ride horse called Mybs and Gypsy was the second horse of the pair. Will's job was to steer the team. There was no second driver on this occasion and the third driver, whose job it was to use his horses as a brake, had been ordered to help load the limber.

Suddenly a German Howitzer shell burst close to the team and the horses took off in fright pulling the limber after them. A second Howitzer shell made a direct hit on the limber causing a massive explosion which killed the pursuing officer and four of the horses in the team. Will was blown off Mybs but managed to hold on to him. However Gypsy, free of the harness ran off into the distance. Later Will was to be reunited with Gypsy and they formed part of a new gun team.

Joe is probably buried in the cemetery at Thiepval. His grave, like many others marked with a headstone inscribed "A Soldier of the Great War, known only to God"

Will returned to England in 1919 having taken part in the Victory Parade in Brussels. He married in 1925 and had a son and a successful career. He died in 1960 at the age of sixty-six and is buried in Liverpool not far from where he was born.

Both men were remembered on the Ninetieth Anniversary of the end of the Great War, at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month Two thousand and eight.

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1,064 words. Frank Byrne.



1817 Driver Will Byrne with his two horses Gypsy and Mybs on the Menin Road outside the Belgian Town of Ypres. May 1916.