

from Pat Goldstone 7th June 2014

My father joined the British Army in 1916. He was just twenty-years old. As I see it he was rather fortunate. Firstly because he enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery because he was experienced with horses as his father had three work horses which were essential to his agriculture business. - Secondly because he was spared the horrific conditions in the trenches.

He told me he did his training at Pries Heath in Shropshire. Shortly after his arrival he had thirteen teeth removed, because of a gum disease and then had his photograph taken to send home. On receiving it his mother was reported to have said "What have they done to my poor boy!"

Dad was a resilient and cheerful character and seemed to look upon life as an adventure. He was slightly wounded twice and was also gassed - his breathing suffered for some years afterwards - during his service in France. He was often in action and was known as "youngun" and was well cared for by the older men in the Battery.

He only ever told me about one specific wartime incident which took place at Boulton Wood - on the French/Belgium border. To set the scene for me - he would say - now the Germans were down in Aldington ~~and~~ with our captured guns and we were up here in Badsey. Determined to recover our guns under cover of darkness and with ~~two~~ ^{four} borrowed eight horse teams from another battery - we fitted rubber tyres to the limbers and set off on our mission. We found the Germans asleep and our guns sand-bagged and detonated for destruction. These we removed and we hooked up the guns. - we made off by now amid great confusion and firing ~~we~~ ^{and} started off back to our lines. They were very lucky not to sustain any serious casualties. Private enterprise he called it!!

In the 1970s when he was older he expressed a

wish to visit the battlefields especially Boulton
For various reasons we never took him - something
I have always regretted.

When he died in 1980 my husband and my ten year
son Tim and myself decided to visit France. We
planned to visit the cemeteries, beaches and surroundings
of the D.D. Normandy landings. When we were
to come home the French fishermen decided to block
the ports - we were told by Brittany ferries to
the port of Zeebrugge in Belgium. Passing through
France we crossed the Somme and decided (not
to try and find Boulton Wood. However on the road
between Cambrai and Douai we did find the village
of Boulton and the Wood behind. I sat in the village
square and wept with regret that we had not
my father there.

I also sent a post-card to my old friend
Oliver Harrison from the Boulton cemetery.
On returning home I was visited by his sister
She told me Oliver was terminally ill but had
me a book called "A wood called Boulton". I read
there on Page 161 is the incident my father had related
to me. Oliver had said I could keep the book and
treasure it to this day.

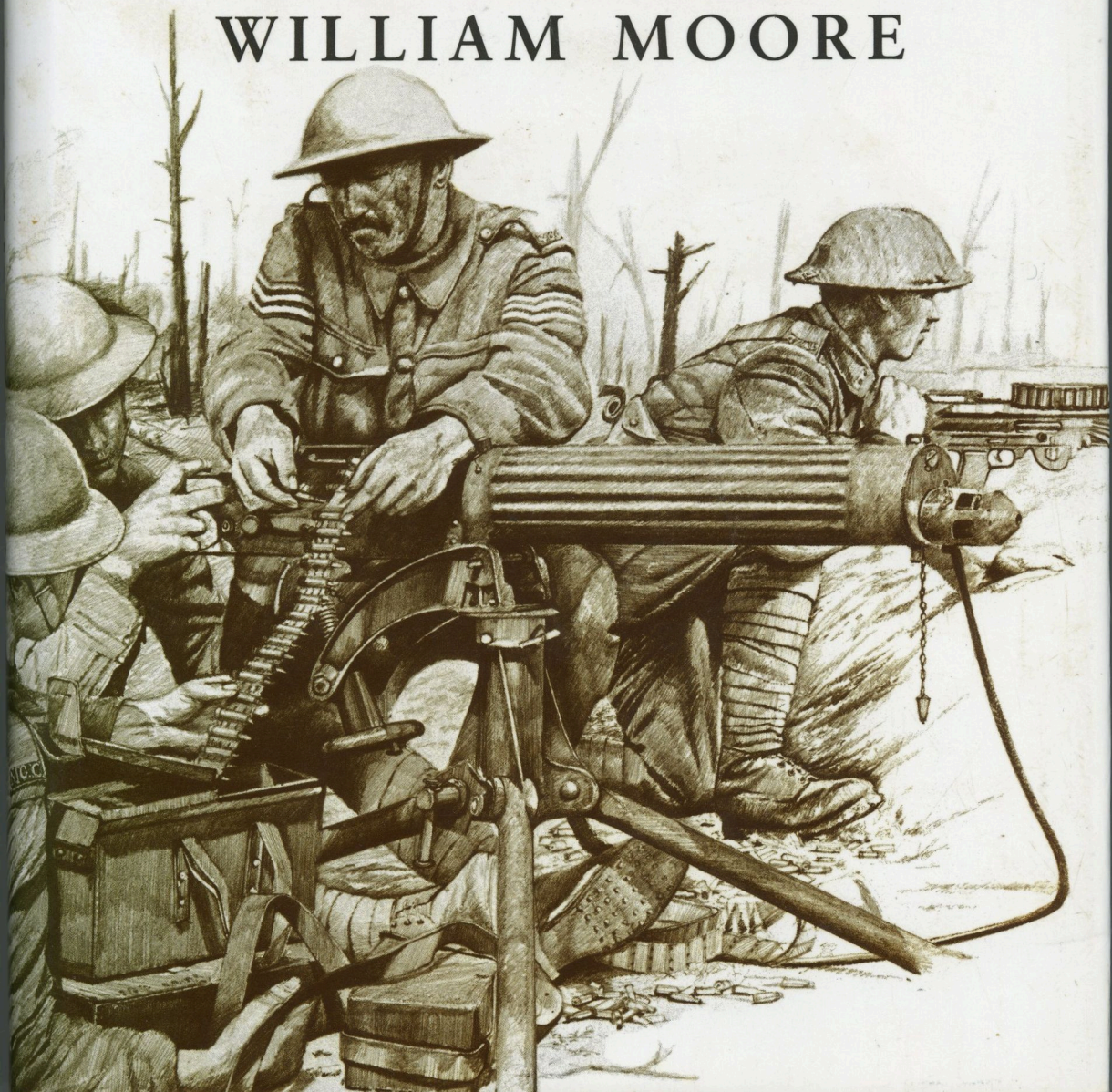
Since then my sons David and Tim have taken
back to France. We had wonderful three day tour of the
battlefields. As Tim is a history teacher with a passion
for military history he told us so many fascinating
and inspiring stories. I took a large amount of soil
with me to plant - where else but in Boulton Wood
in loving memory of my dear Dad.



A WOOD CALLED BOURLON

The Cover-up after Cambrai, 1917

WILLIAM MOORE



It had been a trying day for Sir Julian. He told the Commander-in-Chief that he was not particularly worried about holding La Vacquerie, the fortified hamlet a mile north of Gonnellieu on 'Welsh Ridge' but a brigade of the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division was driven out that morning. The 61st had relieved the 20th and 12th Divisions under difficult conditions, no one being sure where the front lay. The 2nd/4th and 2nd/6th Gloucestershires clung to a strongpoint called the Corner Work and prevented a further enemy advance. Hundreds of grenades flew as the 2nd/7th Warwickshires disputed Ostrich Avenue, part of the old Hindenburg System.

After their morning conversation Haig's instructions to Byng were explicit: 'The Third Army front will be withdrawn with the least possible delay from the Bourlon Hill-Marcoing salient to a more retired and shorter line of defence to be selected by you.'

The second paragraph of the three-paragraph GHQ Order issued on 3 December and signed by Kiggell hints at some reluctance by the Army Commander to comply:

'The line chosen should be the best available with a view to obtaining security of ground combined with economy of troops. The abandonment of ground recently won is quite secondary to these considerations.'¹⁵

The final paragraph drew 'particular attention' to the importance of Byng's right flank 'about la Vacquerie, Welsh Spur [Ridge] and to the south of those places'.

The evacuation of Bourlon Wood and the Marcoing position took place on the night of 4 December under appreciable moonlight. As at Suvla, which Byng had left with more enthusiasm in December, 1915, the British kept up the pretence of normal conditions. The 23rd London Regiment, in trenches on the immediate left of the wood, heard of the retirement 'accidentally', no message having reached it, but in general all went according to plan. Burdened with surplus ammunition and bombs, the infantry of the 47th Division withdrew through the gas-drenched undergrowth and slithered down the slopes stormed eleven days earlier by the 40th. Sections stumbled down the sunken road which marked the limit of the first attack of the 62nd. 'In it there sprawled large numbers of German dead. No one knew the occasion of their death but it was probably the attack of 30 November.' The previous night officers who had been occupying

this open grave for two days were startled to hear a low groan. A badly wounded German had regained consciousness.¹⁶

German shelling of the rear areas during darkness helped to blanket noise of movement, and the gunners of the 270th Siege Battery chose this, of all nights, to indulge in a piece of private enterprise. Borrowing four eight-horse teams from another unit and fitting rubber tyres to their limbers, they prepared to recover their abandoned 6-inch howitzers from the edge of the German positions. Enemy troops were using the pits as outposts. Helped by a small detachment of the 10th KOYLI, the raiders carried out a pincer movement to persuade the opposition to withdraw. They discovered preparations had already been made to destroy the guns. Sandbags, charges and detonators were removed from the barrels, the howitzers pulled from their emplacements, signals made to the rear. Two teams galloped up and made off with their rightful possessions. The enemy began raking the area with heavy shells and machine guns and, as the next teams arrived, a driver was hit and the plunging horses became unmanageable. Once they were quietened the guns were hooked on and were careering over the ground when the lead detachment came to grief in a shell crater. Four horses of the second team were hitched to the first. All twelve took fright, but bolted in the right direction. The last gun, with only four horses attached, was recovered with the aid of every man of the infantry covering party heaving on drag ropes.¹⁷

As the moon rose, about 11 o'clock, all appeared as usual on the Cambrai front. By 4.30 am only skeleton forces remained at Bournon 'moving from point to point, to fire rifles and Verey lights, just as if the normal garrison had been there'.¹⁸ Wreckers moved into the dug-outs under Graincourt church to ensure that the Germans could not quickly make use of them again.

The following day troops watched the enemy bombard and attack deserted positions. They 'came over in waves and, on finding the trenches empty, halted irresolutely. After a little while they settled down.'¹⁹ Two miles away the British remained hidden and silent. For once the PBI on both sides were happy.

Near La Vacquerie bombers again clashed in Ostrich Avenue and the 9th Inniskillings went to the aid of the 2nd/7th Warwickshires. They reported the old Hindenburg Support Line 'a filthy place. Corpses were touching, laid along the fire step, all men of the 61st Division'.

The next day a young lieutenant of the Inniskillings inspired the

THE
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A
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