

NORMAN - HIS ARMY SERVICE IN FRANCE IN 1918



Compiled by his son Brian and Grandson Gareth



DECEMBER 2013



NORMAN'S WAR 1918



This is the story of how my Dad helped to win the first world war,
The Great War, the war to end all wars.

His name was **Norman Mate** and he was born on 21st June 1899.

He was born in Anchor Road, Longton, Stoke on Trent but his address when he joined the army was given as 197 Duke Street, Fenton, Stoke on Trent. This address did not relate to any apparent member of the family and I have only recently found out that he lodged with his sister address as his mother did not agree with his desire to join the Army before his 18th birthday.

His Army service number was **61667** and he was a Private in the **1st/6th NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE REGIMENT – COMPANY B.**

He did not talk much about his experiences except that he saw many terrible things and that it changed his view of religion for the rest of his life.

What little information I got from him was towards the end of his life during the time he was ill with Alzheimer's disease when he could clearly remember things that happened in his youth but could not recall things he had done that day.

He said that he was in the Army in France for 9 months in 1918 towards the end of the war. As the war ended in November 1918 that would suggest that he went to France in March/April 1918. If this is so, he was 18 when he joined up. I understand that soldiers were not sent to the front to fight in the trenches until they were 19 years old but there are many instances of men fighting and dying at a younger age. If this is so he would have been sent to the front sometime after his birthday on the 21st June 1918. He would have probably enlisted sometime during the winter 1917/18 although, at this stage, I do not have a date.

He said that he did his training in **NEWCASLE-ON-TYNE** and was billeted at **GRACE STREET SCHOOL, BYKER in NORTH SHIELDS (or WALLSEND)**. Grace Street is a terraced street but the Victorian school was demolished some years ago. Wallsend Garrison trained many soldiers throughout the war both at Wallsend and at the field firing and training ranges in North Yorkshire.

From the reading I have done, it is likely that he would have been there for about 3 months and at the end of his training he probably had a short leave at home before making his way by train down to Folkestone then crossing by sea to Bologne. He would then have had a further period of training in France.

He talked of being in the trenches and of going into Belgium in and around Ypres after the end of the war. He also talked of slight frost bite in one foot which suggests that he was there in very cold weather in early spring of that year.

It was not until after he died in 1993 that I started to try to discover further details of his army service and experiences.

The 46th was the first Territorial Division to be constituted as such in France in 1915. Its Regiments were Lincolns, Leicester's, North and South Staffordshire's, and Sherwood Forester's from Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire.

It was not a distinguished Division having had good and bad days but in 1918, it was commanded by Major-General W. Thwaites, an excellent Officer who turned it, in his successors words, 'into a fighting machine in which every Officer and man was imbued with a real soldier's spirit'. He was about to supervise what is described as one of the most wonderful feats of the war.

I visited the Regimental Museum at Whittington near Litchfield, got a copy of the companies war diary for 1918 and discovered that the North Stafford's most important mission of the entire war was the crossing of the St. Quinton canal in September 1918. I was told that the North Stafford's were part of the Territorial Regiment known as the 46th Division although I did not, at the time, quite understand the significance of that event.

As I do not know when he enlisted or the exact date when he reached France, I decided to pick up his story from September 1918 and so follow his journey with my son Gareth, his grandson and our friend Pat. In the early part of that month he was in Villers and on the 12th he went by train to Heilly. When I say train, I really mean cattle trucks rather than comfortable carriages. Fortunately the journey was relatively short.





The small station buildings on the photograph were almost as they were in 1918.

During the battle of the Somme in 1916 Heilly was a casualty clearance station and the railway line took the wounded to Amiens and on to the channel ports and home. There were so many wounded soldiers brought in to Heilly that the trains were unable to cope with the numbers.



Heilly Station

The fields beyond the railway station near the now sleepy village of Heilly was the site of the casualty station and beyond that another of the many cemeteries.



Site of the Heilly Casualty Station in 1916



North Staffs Regimental Badge



Heilly Cemetery

As with all the cemeteries in the battlefield areas, it is beautifully maintained by the War Graves Commission. Nearly all the men buried here died in the main battle of the Somme in 1916. Many regiments including the North Staffordshire Regiment are represented.

Norman was here from 12th until the 19th September when the regiment was moved forward by bus from Heilly through Albert to Estrees En Chausse. Many buses were sent from London to the battle areas to transport soldiers

to and from the front and it is likely that Norman would have been on one of those buses.



Albert was the nearest town to the Somme battlefields and suffered considerable damage. The journey took Norman through the devastation of Albert and the Somme battlefield to the small village of Estrees.



The road from Heilly to Albert



Albert

Estrees had suffered a lot of damage and while Norman was there the Regiment was subjected to much enemy artillery fire and bombing from the air at night. Being so close to the front he would have been stressed and deprived of sleep.



On the 27th September with the enemy artillery even more pronounced, B company were moved to a field near Vraignes and then on the 28th to the front line. Vraignes was a small town and as the Germans had a scorched earth policy and as they retreated, the town was razed to the ground. At the

front line they relieved the 4th Leicester Regt. and, under the command of Captain F J Newton, they were attacked by the enemy and forced to withdraw. All communications were destroyed and there was a shortage of ammunition and shells. Although practically surrounded B Company fought with great gallantry and determination and after an attack lasting 6 hours the enemy were beaten off with heavy casualties.

The next day was the 29th September 1918 and was said by many to be the most important day of the whole war. The 137th Infantry Brigade led by Brigadier J. V. Campbell VC., the 1/5th and 1/6th South Staffordshires and 1/6ths North Staffordshire's from the 46th Division launched its attack across the St. Quinton Canal at 5.50am.



St Quinton Canal

It was a foggy morning which was a great aid to them. In the initial assault the North Midlanders quickly overran the German forward positions. The divisional history describes their practiced techniques: 'In small parties and protected by the fog, they then, rising with a shout, worked their way up to within a short distance of the enemy trenches, dashed in with bayonet, the enemy giving way in all directions and many of them making good their escape through the fog to be bombarded by the artillery as they retreated'.

As the canal had high steep sides almost 80 feet high with no tree cover, the time came to put to the test of battle all the devices prepared by the engineers. Norman and the men had been preparing for the assault across the canal, which was seen as a major obstacle, with special mud-mats, collapsible boats, rafts and life belts from the Boulogne cross channel steamers. These were supplied to the troops and rehearsals in their use took place at Brie Chateau near to Estees. On the night of the 28th/29th September

all of these materials were moved as close as possible to the canal. This was the moment of truth, as delay which might be critical.

Soon the Staffordshire men reached the canal and the Riqueval Bridge. The bridge had been used a main supply route by the Germans and on the 28th was still intact. It was therefore decided that a small group of Norman's company under Captain A. H. Charlton should attempt to seize the bridge. The visibility proved so bad that they had to guide their way using a compass. The German soldiers attempted to reach the bridge to detonate their explosives but were killed by Captain Charlton's small group and their bodies thrown off the bridge into the canal.

The fog proved invaluable. Although the Germans had strongly defended the far bank of the canal from concrete emplacements as it was possible to see only a few yards, the Germans could not tell with any certainty where the North and South Stafford's were coming from until they were right on them. The Staffords quickly silenced the enemy machine guns by the destruction of the gun crews. So quickly was progress made, that comparatively few casualties were suffered in this very difficult operation. Any hesitation at this point would have been fatal and might have resulted in the total failure of the attack.

By 8.30am exactly on time, the Staffords had succeeded in clearing the way to the canal, crossing it, and storming their way through the fortified Hindenburg line which the Germans had done everything in their power to make impregnable.



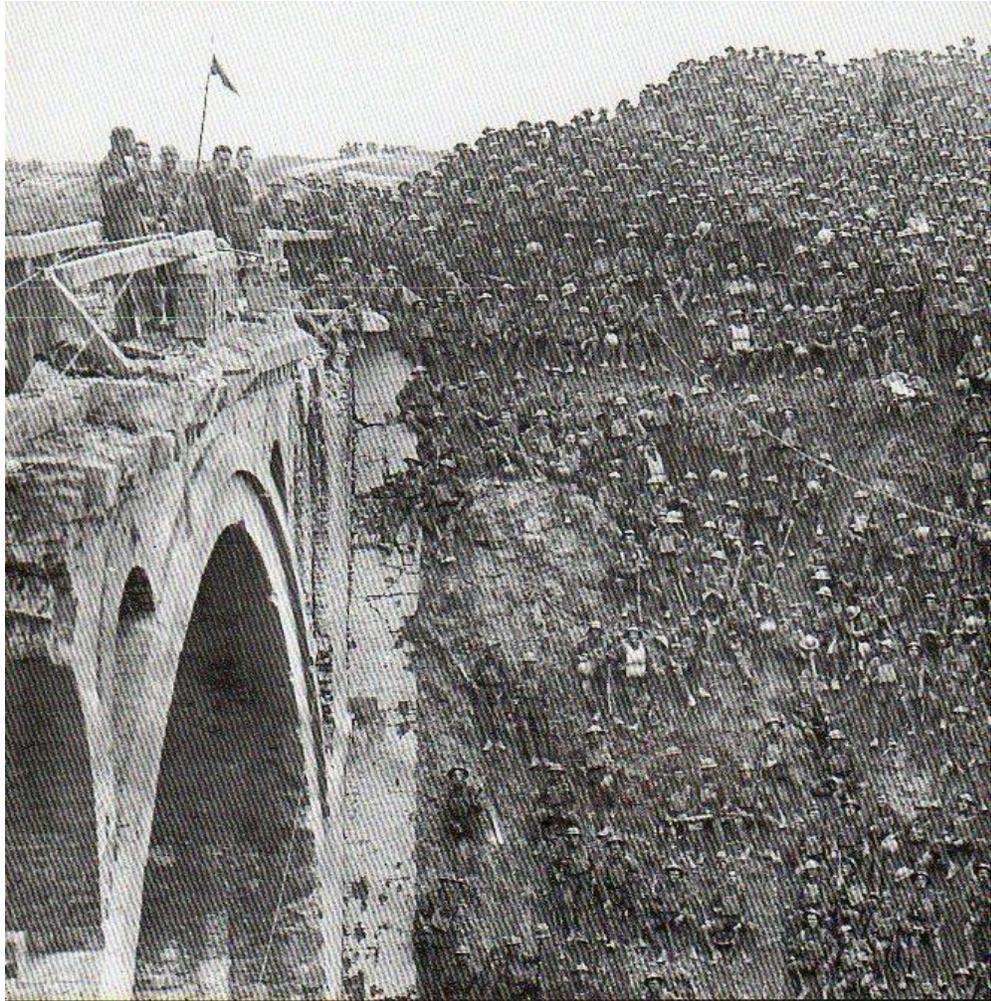


Brian and Gareth at Riqueval Bridge October 2013

The Staffords pushed on to Magna La Fosse, a small village about 1 mile beyond the canal before assembling on 2nd October at the bridge where one of the most famous photographs of the war was taken of Brigadier Campbell standing on the bridge addressing his men.



Magna La Fosse



2nd October 1918

Norman is somewhere on that photograph – a very proud moment for him and all the Staffordshire soldiers.





Riqueval Bridge in 1918 and in 2013

At the end on the day the Fourth Army had penetrated the strongest part of the Hindenburg Line to a depth of 6000 yards and on a frontage of 10,000 yards. It was the beginning of the end for the Hindenburg Line and for Germany. The Armistice was 42 days away.

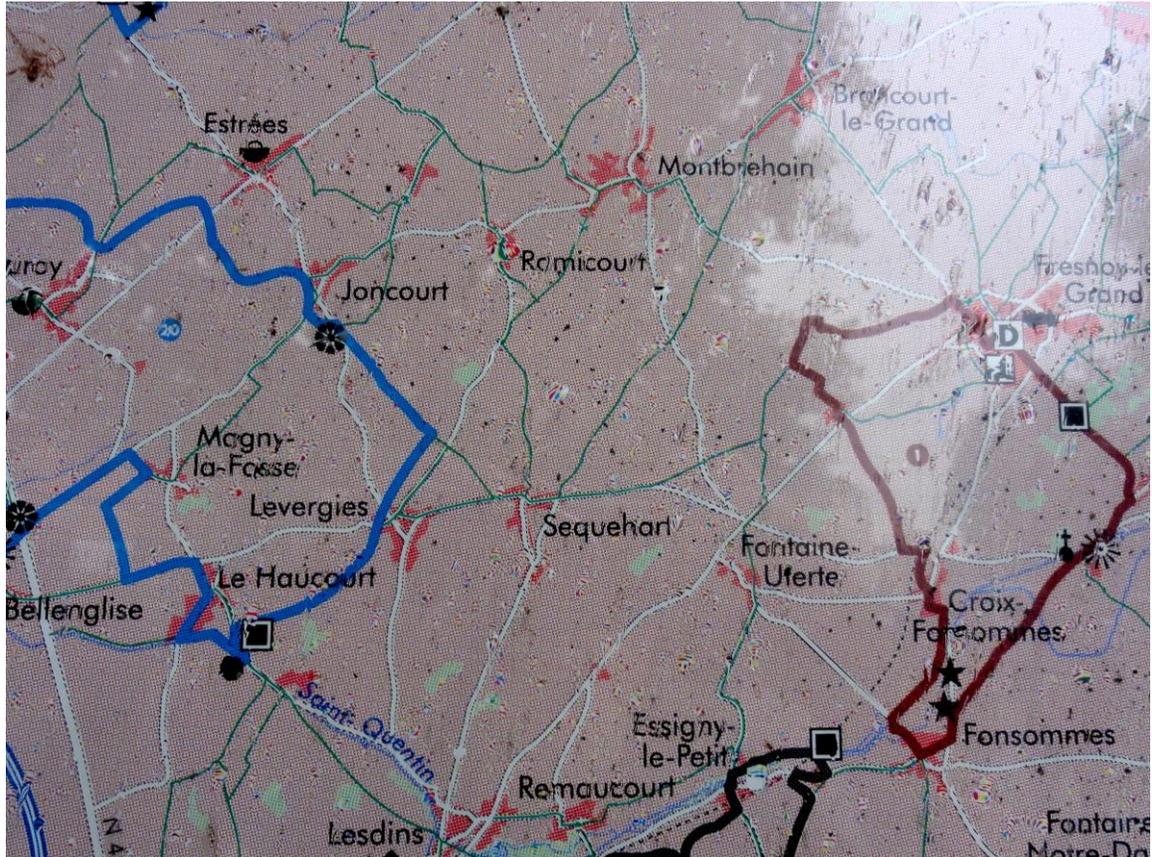
With the help of the following brigades they had broken through the Hindenburg line. Historians say that there were really no words to describe what the Staffords had achieved that day. Modestly the Divisional history says : ‘ The breaking of the Hindenburg Line marked a definitive stage in the history of the war, for it opened the way to a war of movement which could only end in one way. The 46th Regiment had done its share’.

It had done much more, out of 5300 prisoners taken on that day, a total of 4200 were taken by the Staffords ; they also captured 70 guns, and made possible the deepest penetration on the whole army front – some 6000 yards. Their casualties, including those suffered two nights earlier in repelling a German counter-attack, amounted to less than 600 officers and men. Only 600 !!!!!.

The job however was not yet done and, after a brief respite, on the 3rd October the Regiment was, in conjunction with other units of the Division, back on the front line. With artillery and tank support they passed through

the Germans last trench system. 2000 enemy soldiers and many machine guns were captured.

On the 4th October the Stafford's were still on the front line in positions gained the previous day near to Sequehart.



On a recent visit to the National Arboretum I noticed a commemorative stone to a soldier Lance Corporal William Harold Coltman VC. I wondered whether Norman knew William Coltman and I was aware that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross, Britains highest bravery award in war. He was 26 at the time and a Lance Corporal in Norman's Regiment when the following deed took place for which he was awarded the VC.

'For most conspicuous bravery, initiative and devotion to duty. During operations at Mannequin Hill, north-east of Sequehart, on the 3rd and 4th of October 1918, Lance Corporal Coltman, a stretcher bearer, hearing that wounded had been left behind during a retirement, went forward alone in the face of fierce enfilade fire, found the casualties, dressed their injuries and on three separate occasions, carried comrades on his back to safety, thus saving

their lives. This very gallant NCO tended the wounded unceasingly for 48 hours’.

In addition to his VC he already had the DCM & Bar, the MM & Bar, Mentioned in Despatches, the Croix de Guerre (France) and was the most decorated soldier of the First World War.

Remarkably, as a stretcher bearer he won all his medals and survived the war without firing a shot.

Further reference to the Regimental War Diary showed that L/C Coltman was presented with his VC at a ceremony before the end of the war so Norman would have been present.



After the end of the war William Coltman returned home to Burton on Trent where he was employed as a Parks gardener for many years. He died in 1974 aged 82.

From there the Regiment had a fairly quiet period moving forward first to Fresnoy Le Grande



Fresnoy le Grande

and then on to Bohain.



Bohain

On the 13th October the Regiment was back on the front line east of Bohain with enemy artillery still active, before again being relieved by the South Staffords. The Battalion then moved gradually forward as they pushed back the enemy and on 9th November they were back on the front line when they blew up a huge German ammunition dump.

On 11th November they were at Zorees when the news they had waited for came through ' Hostilities temporarily cease at 11o'clock today when all offensive action will cease and present outpost line to be maintained and no troupes of the 46th Division to pass east of it other than road reconnaissance and working parties. No conversation with the enemy will be allowed'. The message was read out at to a battalion muster parade amid great cheering.



Zorees

On the 14th November the Battalion moved to Preux-au-Bois North West of Landrecies where they spent time salvaging and cleaning equipment.

Norman said that he had paraded through the streets of Landrecies past King George, The Prince of Wales and Prince Albert. The Battalion diary shows that this happened on the 1st of December 1918.



Landrecies

On the 11th December the Battalion moved to billets in Busigny and then the following day moved back to Fresnoy.

On the 14th December the first of the men started their journey back to England. The first men to leave were men with important or needed skills back in England. Norman, prior to his army service, was employed in the accounts office at Sampson and Bridgwood Pottery in Longton so it is very likely that he would not have been included in that first demobilization.

At this point I think that every soldier would want to leave France and return home as quickly as possible, but the reality was that many of them, including probably Norman, would be there for many more weeks. The Battalion diary shows that in the first months of 1919 the men carried out clearance work and played football and in early summer, cricket. Obviously sport helped to beat the inevitable frustration of still being in France and there were reports in other regiments of unrest. In June they finally moved up to Troisvilles and from there they were even taken on days trips to Lille.

At last at the end of June 1919 they moved up to the coast for their journey home.

As I said earlier Norman said, like many others, little or nothing about his experiences in France. He did say that he had an older and more experienced soldier who looked after him. He said that this man saved his life twice. On both occasions the man moved him from their position in the trenches and on both occasions a German shell landed in the position they had recently left.

Without doubt, like many others, the experiences he endured coloured the rest of his life. From an office job in Longton to the horrors of war in France must have been a life changing experience.

Norman – my dad- played his part in hastening the end of this terrible war and, of course, he survived.

During the events of the Regiment in September and October the Battalion received a number of letters acknowledging their heroic efforts :-

War Diary
6th NORTH
STAFFS REG

46th

NORTH MIDLAND DIVISION.

BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

The Divisional Commander has received the following letter, dated 23rd November 1918, from General Sir. H. S. RAWLINSON, Bart., G.C.V.O., K.C.B., K.C.M.G., Commanding the Fourth Army, which he publishes with pride to all ranks of the Division :

“ It is a matter of very deep regret to me that the 46th Division is not accompanying the Fourth Army to the Frontier. I desire, however, to place on record my appreciation of the splendid performances of the Division during the recent operations, and to congratulate all ranks on the conspicuous part they have played in the battles of the 100 days.

The forcing of the main Hindenburg line on the Canal, and the capture of *Bellenglise* ranks as one of the finest, and most dashing exploits of the war. The attacks of October 3rd, and the subsequent operations about *Bohain*, together with the later advance beyond the *Sambre* Canal, constitute a record of which all ranks of the Division may justly feel proud.

I offer to all ranks my warmest thanks for their great gallantry, and to the leaders and staffs my admiration of their skilful direction, and staff work throughout these battles.

To every Officer, N.C.O., and man of the Division I offer my warm thanks, and hearty congratulations, and trust that at some future time they may again form part of the Fourth Army.”

Special Order of the Day
by
Major General G.F. BOYD, C.M.G., D.S.O., D.C.M.,
Commanding 46th Division.

The following letters are published for the information of all ranks :-

From General MATHIEU 123th French Division to General BOYD.

The operations undertaken by my Division on October 17th and 18th met with most successful results, which I am informed have given satisfaction to the Higher Command.

In considering these operations - which resulted in an advance of 9 kilometres, and the capture of 39 Officers and 1200 Other Ranks - I cannot but realize that they are largely due to the close co-operation of the 46th British Division on my left.

This co-operation, offered as it was in a truly wholehearted manner, afforded us the most valuable assistance. May I be allowed to tend you my warmest thanks for the assistance thus rendered, whereby another proof - though none were needed - was once again given us of the very real spirit of comradeship which animates you all towards your brothers-in-arms. From the day on which I first had the pleasure of making your acquaintance I felt assured that I could rely upon you for true friendship and loyal assistance.

In thanking you once again Dear General, I would ask you to believe that it is my earnest wish, to be some day in a position to offer you the same friendly and loyal co-operation which you have just shown towards me.

I beg you to accept my most cordial good wishes.

CONTINUED :-

From General BOYD to General MATHIEU.

Thank you most heartily for your letter in the name of my whole Division.

The letter will be published as a "Special Order" to the Troops.

In congratulating you, and your splendid Division on its determined fighting, and most successful operations, I add the great hope that it may be the good fortune of the 46th North Midland Division to serve again alongside your 126th, with whom our co-operation has been so close, and cordial.

May good luck be with you all.

R. Du Roi

Lieut-Colonel.

A.A.&Q.M.G., 46th (N.M) Division.....

20th October, 1918.



Soldiers in WW1 were known as Tommies. They were called Tommies as the name 'Tommy' is derived from the name Tommy Atkins which was a generic name for a soldier for many years. It was used to refer to any soldier in the British Army.



A Tommy in uniform.

The war which lasts for over 4 years claimed an average of 1500 dead or injured soldiers each day, a staggering statistic.

The misery of long marches along the uneven roads of France was a constant theme of letters and diaries of the British soldier. As one soldier wrote 'It was the most depressing plod, plod, legs and boots going on and on and when a halt came we would just fall down. We had 120 rounds of ammunition, iron rations, a full pack and rifle'.

As they approached the front there was the constant sound of the guns both day and night. 'The Trenches' : there can be little doubt that this phase was the most emotive to emerge from the vocabulary of the First World War.

A soldier would normally take into the trenches 150 rounds of ammunition. They wore greatcoats, with full equipment on top of this. A mac would be worn over the top. They were allowed one blanket which was rolled in a ground sheet and slung around the neck. In addition they had a pocket primus, a tin of paraffin, 2 small tins of beans, Vaseline, a Tommy's cooker, a pair of gloves and of course a rifle.

In the trenches were a soldier's constant companions – the lice and the rats. Lice were counted in their millions and were almost impossible to eliminate and the rats described as 'being as big as cats' were a constant menace.

As one soldier reported 'Whilst asleep during the night we were frequently awakened by rats running over us'. Add to all that the rain, the mud and, of course, enemy action made life for the Tommy a miserable existence.

A normal trench duty would be 4 days on and 4 days off. In addition to enemy shelling and ground attacks there was the horror of gas attacks. On one very bad day the British they sustained 3000 gas cases alone not to mention the wounded and the dead due to shell fire and rifle and machine gun bullets.

The inevitable result of all this was that once gas was used by the Germans its use was seen as legitimate by the British and the French; it was another down spiral in an already seriously unlovely war.

