

## Diary of a "Ragtime" Soldier

### April 1914

Met Cathie at Joppa when I was introduced to her about the foregoing date. My first really vivid impression of her was standing talking to me near Mr Oswald's shop at the foot of Morton Street near Smith & Syme's. She was wearing a straw hat with a gay coloured striped band, the stripes running vertically down the band instead of horizontally. A Sax Blue costume, short skirt & brogues with outside tongues. From then I was a constant visitor either to the lamppost outside Number 15 Joppa Road where she lived or on a garden seat inside her garden.

In 1914 there was a great tension between Ulster and the rest of Ireland in the spring of 1914. In both sides were drilling and arming over Home Rule for a united Ireland. There was practically a revolt by British Army officers who said if they were asked to fight against Ulster they would rebel and refuse to serve. It was boiling up into a great political row between the Tories and the Liberals under their leader Prime Minister Asquith. Just as things were getting out of hand war was declared on the 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914 between Britain and Ireland, France, Italy and Russia against Germany, Austria. There was a great rush to the Colours, recruiting meetings all over the country. I was taken with the idea of joining up but difficulties at home kept me working with the Distillers Company Limited and from joining until October 9<sup>th</sup> 1915 when I was 20 years and three months. I enlisted at Cockburn Street Recruiting Office and was sworn in by Captain Robertson VC and examined by a doctor who passed me A1. A week later I set off for Witley camp in Surrey in the Godalming and Aldershot district in Surrey. I travelled down with another recruit, Davie Lees, a shop assistant in St Cuthbert's Co-op Society. Quite a nice lad with a sense of humour no one else appreciated. I had joined the 14<sup>th</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (a Sportsman's Battalion). I was very uneasy about how I would perform because of slight physique but I need not worried as while I earned no medals I managed to do all that was needed. My fellow recruits were cheery and of lads and in my Company were quite a lot of Joppa boys:

Henry Alexander from Joppa. His father was a tailor at the top of Regent Street. Portobello.

"Tattie" Shaw. His father was a director with Wilson & Sharp at, the jewellers in Frederick Street, Edinburgh.

"Spud" Muirhead, brother of Rhea.

Semple. Son of the Manager of the Musselburgh Co-op.

3 McNairs. 3 brothers. Farmers or horse dealers from Musselburgh.

"Shirty" Watson. On the Board of Agriculture.

Gussie Patterson. Son of the Town Chamberlain Musselburgh

Captain Claude Miller? Son of a big shot Rio Tinto Mines.

etc, etc.

I was only about a month at Witley when the Battalion was split up. The latest recruits, of which I was one, were transferred to the 15<sup>th</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at (Gales Camp near Irving and Troon on the West Coast of central Scotland here I was with entire strangers and for a week or two I was out of my depth. In our hut we had a mixed bag ranging from:

Old man Russell. About 40 who had seen life in all its aspects in Spain and South America as a (heavy?) engineer.

Arbuthnot, an elderly lawyer from Paisley.

Rosenbloom, a Jew from Edinburgh whose people had a musical instrument shop in the arcade on South Bridge, Edinburgh.

There were shipwrights, ploughmen and various others.

After a bit of shaking down I finally became very friendly with:

Andy Stark from Kirkintilloch. A gas meter reader and collector.

Tom Mabon. A hairdresser from Glasgow. His grandfather had his own business and Tommy was the result of a broken marriage. He was a right cheery fellow with a wealth of worldly experience and knew a very varied repertoire of songs etc.

Pa Campbell. His work with a bit of a mystery. He had something to do with the Post Office. Of a very equitable nature but as thick as a lump of wood. Was not interested in (drill?) and to see him (rubbing?) up his rifle was a sight never be forgotten. While here we got good training in rifle shooting drill etc. Pa Campbell had friends of the family at Troon, an elderly gentleman and a middle-aged daughter, and we went with him for baths and tea every week or two.

One of the fellows in our hut was Charlie Paterson, the son of a Minister who lived in Portobello. Charlie was about 10 to 15 years senior to me and had played cricket for Scotland and Carlton. He was employed as a Company Clerk for A Company and was able to wangle us weekend passes fairly often so I was able to see quite a lot of Cathie. What a contrast these weekends were – clean sheets, plenty of good food, but ugh how going back on that Monday morning. This sometimes meant I had to have a taxi about 4/5 AM from Joppa to the Waverley and then train to Glasgow. Ham and eggs breakfast at Lockharts in Glasgow, then to Gales and on parade 9 or 10 AM. We trained at Gales and were routed to Hillside Distillery outside Montrose. It was a cold and miserable place (February to May) and when volunteers were asked for to join the 14<sup>th</sup> Argyle & Sutherland Highlanders again now at Blackdown Camp near Aldershot the four of us volunteered to go back to them. We joined No 8 Platoon B Company and our new fellow sufferers now included grooms, civil servants, cooks, labourers, and a grain merchant. Our draft were very (steadily?) drilled but we put up a good show. I was however very indignant when the RSM took our draft and told me “oh, you are the title leans on the wall waiting for the pub to open”. At this time 21 years, I had never taken any beers or spirits. After embarkation leave we had a few days respite and 4 of us went into Farnborough and here I have my first drinks with disastrous effects. Four pints of beer and I lost the others on the way back to barracks, landed up three hours late for lights out and next day I was paraded before the Commanding Officer Captain Claude Miller of Portobello who said, “this is too serious charge for me to deal with”. So I was sent to the Colonel's orderly room for trial. I had a soldier in front and one behind me as I was marched in.

“Hat off. Right turn.”

Colonel, “What have you to say for yourself?”

Nothing, Sir. Got lost on my way home.

As an example to others ten days CB.

Andy got the same dose. Tommy and Pa had gone back in time. This sentence meant I was confined to barracks which entailed the following duties:

1. Report to Guard Room before breakfast, fully dressed and with rifle and bayonet and full pack.
2. When off-duty answer all calls on the defaulters to report.
3. Do kitchen duty in the officers mess. Peel potatoes, wash greasy dishes with little or no hot water. It's a wonder none of the officers was not put out of action with “tummy” trouble.

We left Blackdown on 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1916 and landed at Southampton where we were billeted in large dock sheds. As I was still on CB I had to do fatigues such as cleaning out the rail slots. When the Defaulter's Bugles sounded miserable objects had to run down to the foot of the sheds to the accompaniment of cheers for not only our own battalion but from the other 2/3 in our brigade.

My CB ended immediately we embarked on “La Marguerita” on the 4<sup>th</sup>. We were packed like sardines and I was as sick as a dog. We landed at Dieppe? Boulogne? (*Probably*) marched to a village named Ecquedecques.

### **1916 June 8**

Left Ecquedecques and marched via Bethune to Annequin which was separated from Vermelles by the British and German trenches. While here we came under shellfire for the first time when our billet was shelled and reduced to rubble. Fortunately we were up in the trenches by then. When we reached Annequin we came under the 15<sup>th</sup> Scottish Division – a hard-bitten and war worn crowd. My platoon were with the Cameronians, a hard-bitten crowd recruited from all parts of Glasgow. Professional men, clerks, tradesmen and the scum of Glasgow. It was a hair raising experience. The part of the trench we were in was at Hulluch. The Cameronians blew up a German trench with a landmine and a hell was let loose. The Germans replied with mortars, machineguns, Mills Bombs and the wounded were lying all over the fire steps. It was my first (and worst (crossed out)) baptism of fire and the most bloody I ever felt (crossed out) saw. It put all thoughts of “King & Country” nonsenses out of my head, and I was very relieved when we were got out. We did a few turns in the trenches on our own in quiet parts of the line and we were able to stick it quite well. The drawbacks were the rats, lice and the smell. These trenches we were holding had been hardly fought over about a year ago and if we had to do any digging we would come on decomposing corpses which gave off a sweet gassy smell. The rats were very tame and they would run over your face when you were sleeping. As I was going down a dugout one day I met a rat coming up. I gave him a kick and he immediately turned and bared his teeth and jumped for my leg. I managed to kick away but I certainly got a fright. The lice we could not keep at bay and everybody in the line from officers to men suffered equally.

After a few tours of the trenches our Company was seconded as Guard for the General commanding our Division 40<sup>th</sup>. We were billeted in tents and as the weather was very warm be quite enjoyed our stay here. Our duties consisted of a guard on the Chateau where the General lived, emptying trucks of coal into lorries and the

usual drill. We also have the luxury with a capital L. of being able to have Pit Head baths at places like La Brebis, Maroc and Noeux-les-Mines. We left there and were billeted in Bruay till word came that we had to route march down to the Somme. This was in the Autumn of 1916. We made our way by stages of 14/20 kilometres each down till we reached round about the area of Calonne where we were billeted in large huts with earthen floors. While there we did fatigue duties up to the front line which was just a quagmire. We had to have our Rifle, Bayonet and 50 rds. of small arm (rifle) ammunition and carry either a box of small arms ammo which was carried between 2 men, each shouldering one end of a pole which was slung between the 2 rope arms of the box. We might, each man separately, have to carry a bundle of barbed wire. This was carried by a pole being put in the inner hole of the barbed wire roll and the whole carried over one's shoulder. If one was not careful or could not find something soft like empty sandbags to pad one's shoulder with one could get some nasty "Jags". About Jan or Feb 1917 we took over the "line" at Bouchavesnes. This consisted of a line of shell holes with water in them to a depth of 1 - 2 feet. Here I had to sit or stand for 48 hours with no warm food or drink. Snowing continually. Fortunately our Sgt in charge had a tommy cooker which was just a small tin with some flammable stuff at the bottom and if you put a dixie of tea on top it was possible to boil enough water to give the 6/8 of us a small cup of cocoa or beef extract. We were here for about 48 hours. We were relieved under cover of darkness and it was a terrible job to walk through between all the shell holes so that one was and did not fall in and get drowned. I half fell in and when I managed to pull myself out I found that I had left my kilt behind and had to walk in pouring rain and sleet to where the M.T. lorries were waiting to transport us back to our Billets. When we got back to the Huts the "details" who had not been up to the Trenches had scalding hot Tea, fried bacon, bread and Rasp. Jam waiting for us to devour! After this debacle we were issued with Khaki Trousers.

A week or so later I was told to report to the Co. Office and told that I was to report to 40<sup>th</sup> Div. Headquarters where I was to do clerical duty. With a heavy heart I left Andy, Tommy and Pa. The latter accompanied me down the road carrying my rifle and we took an almost tearful good bye. This was the last I was to see of Tommy and Andy as a month or so later both were killed at Bourlon Wood. Pa was wounded but he survived and we got together quite a lot after the war.

I found when I got to Div. Headquarters that I was to do typing for the G.S.O. Dept. which I think stood for General Staff Operations. Unfortunately after being away from a Typewriter for so long and the machines being single keyboard instead of double I made a sorry hash of things and the RSM who was in charge of the office was arranging to have me sent back to my unit when he was taken ill and sent off to Base. A Sgt. Hawkins cancelled the order and within a few days I was able to type quite accurately.

Head of our office was Major Neame VC of R.E. (Royal Engineers) and from a Brewery Family. He was a Regular. Very strict but fair.

Next. Capt. Lawrie (actually Laurie). A Prof (Regular) Eton or Harrow. Wrote letters and envelopes with a crest to his Family Mansion up in the N of Scotl(and?)

Lt. Somerville from the Borders.

When I took the letters in to Capt. Lawrie for franking instead of handing them to me he dropped them on the floor for me to pick up.

We moved several times Elininheim?, - Flats, and the Somme and Villiers Bretonneux. While on the Somme the Germans retreated and I walked over the deserted battlefield with another fellow Heather from (Brighton?). It was ghastly. Decomposed bodies being devoured by swarms of rats, ..... round skeletons.

In June 1917 from Villiers Bretonneux I got 10 days leave. There was no place to sleep in Amiens so I slept on a sloping pavement leading down to the station. It was just like sleeping on the pavement leading down the Waverly steps.

After 10 days at home I arrived back in France and after a long journey thro' Belgium I caught up with them at Malo-les-Bains just outside Dunkirk. It was delightful here. Good weather, a lovely deserted beach But too good to last. After about a week of the idyllic weather I was awakened while asleep in the early hours of the morning by a terrific bang and when I came to my senses I felt blood trickling down my back and I saw also that the fellow in the next bed to me was very badly wounded. What hit the billet I have never been able to find out. It could have been a shell from a long distance gun from a monitor up the Belgian coast or a bomb from an aeroplane. I immediately rushed for the stairs but found to my horror that it had been blown away. After - I do not know or what I did to help myself - a figure appeared. It was our old Cook "Faggie". A real old cockney who worked in our mess and whose hands were never clean, always engrained with dirt. He had a heavy rope with him and he tied it to something strong at the window, let it down, got my good arm round his neck and proceeded to climb down from the top floor to ground level. An ambulance was waiting and I was transported with others to St Omer. That journey was very painful over pavé and bad roads. I must have passed out as I had no recollection of anything till I woke in a ward with standard electric light and nurses flitting about. In my doped state they looked like angels in their flowing robes. I was only there for a couple of days when I was transported by hospital ship to Southampton. The RAMC (rob all my comrades) who acted as a stretcher bearers asked "Where do you come from Jock" promised to put me on a part of the train destined for Scotland. I have a hazy idea I gave them some of the few Francs I had. The train pulled out and about 8 PM we arrived at a station where there were a lot of people congregated. I was taken to a hut and put to bed. It turned out to be an annex to Boscombe (near Bournemouth) Hospital and Kitchener Ward. I was kept in bed for about a week and then was convalescent for another week or two and was finally sent on sick leave to Edinburgh.

From there I was sent to a retraining camp at Randalstown in Northern Ireland. This was a hateful place full of boasting "Jocks" recounting some marvellous tales of derring-do etc. I was fit after a week there and was posted to Redford barracks etc. From there I was sent on NCOs course at Castlefield School up the Lawnmarket and just next to the parade ground at the Castle. It was very hard work up and down the parade ground drilling nearly all day and very cold. The food was good of the discipline was iron, most of the instructors being Guardsmen. I do not think I passed with flying colours as when I went back to Redford Barracks I was transferred to the Company Office, given a stripe, and I was perfectly happy as I wanted to get into Edinburgh to see Cathy. While I was there I contracted chickenpox and when I is discharged from the battalion had moved to North Berwick and then to Cavalry Barracks Dunbar. I was here for about September to March when I was discharged. Just before that I was picked for another draft for France but fortunately the Armistice interrupted and I was spared this nightmare. *Finish of war diaries.*

I came back to civilian life and as my father was dead I took digs in Argyle Place off Haymarket or rather Dalry Road. I resume my work at the Distillers Company Limited but found it boring so asked to be transferred to the manufacture of yeast and alcohol side. I was sent to Liverpool Vauxhall distillery for a year and had a happy time there from about March to September when I was transferred to Dundalk Distillery, Dundalk, County Louth, Southern Ireland. I stayed in digs there till Cathy and I were married 11/12/20 where after a couple I got a small flat in Clanbrassil Street. It was

not up to much but by the time Cathy had got to work on it it looked very nice. We moved to "St Andrews", Castle Road where our son Noel was born 24/12/23. We liked Ireland alright but as there was a lot of shootings and reprisals taking place every night life was rather hectic. The distillery was closed down in October 1926 and we sold most of our furniture and came back to 10 Ormelie Terrace, Joppa. We were not exactly welcomed with open arms and I was unemployed from November 1926 to March 1927. We were so fed up and I bought a coal business and started to sell coal about Leith. I should never have contemplated such a move as I had not the physique nor experience. I could not carry coal and the men I got to drive and deliver the coal were all petty thieves. I bought a new Ford 1 Ton lorry and a second-hand one also. The result of this was that by November 1929 I was almost bankrupt. I managed to sell the business for £100 or it may have been £50. I tried for jobs even contemplating going round doors selling brushes but I suddenly had a brainwave and called to see one of my coal customers, a Mrs Ettrick - whose husband was crippled. He had a small business importing roof slates from France. He was very hard up as it took him a long time to pay his coal but I got a job with him - no salary, on commission. I went out with a list of his so-called customers and after walking the feet of myself I managed to sell to sell 2x56lb drums of bitumastic, a roofing compound for sealing holes in slate on roofs, for which I got the large sum, I think, of £1. I carried on and gradually was able to meet some of his old customers whom he had lost touch with owing to his not being able to call on them because of his infirmity. I got some large and regular orders from some of these people despite the fact that I was selling slates of little durability. Great Britain was in the throes of the big depression of 1928 to 32 and was forced off Gold Standard with the result that these French slates became too expensive compared with Welsh and other home-produced slates.

We were back to square one and with the exception of some the West Highland Slates had little to sell to builders. I must have been very alert then as one day when I took an hour off to look through some of the building magazines in the Public Library I noticed an advert "For sale: 500,000 Norwegian slates going at bargain prices". As Norway was on the same Gold Standard as Great Britain this looked promising and I immediately showed the advert to Mr E. He said some firm in Dundee had tried to import them but gave up as the slate was more like a piece of granite stone than a slate and just shattered when a slater tried to cut it. However, the price was so attractive that we thought it worth a trial and ordered a small shipment from Alta in the Arctic Circle. *End of diary. This was what started him in the "Roofing and Building Supply Company" which kept him for the rest of his career.*