

1914-18 Ordinary Men - Extraordinary Courage

The war memorial in Little Downham lists thirty two men and in Coveney fourteen men (WW1) who lost their lives and the lives of many more unrecorded men and women were scarred by this conflict. An inscription on the Little Downham memorial reads "Their names liveth for evermore" and whenever I visit somewhere new I try to find time to read the names on the war memorial to honour this sentiment. The bravery, humour and fears of the men who fought are best described in their own words.

Lance Corporal Fred Hopkin of Main Street, Little Downham wrote the following letter to his mother: "On Friday evening last (Oct 27th) after a few more days in the trenches which for rain, mud and shells were absolute terrors, I was sitting just about dusk in a dug-out with a sergeant and a private of our platoon, making out lists of men for various duties. Another sergeant was standing just outside, when all at once a heavy shell fell on our dugout, blowing the roof in on us, and we were all buried beneath more than four feet of earth. Well, I knew we were there, and that it was no use trying to get out, as we couldn't move a limb. The

sergeant's head was close to mine, and I heard him shout 'help' a time or two. A minute later I heard him gurgling as if he were being strangled, and his hands were scratching my face. I thought he would be getting hold of my neck and doing me in all the quicker, so I shouted to him 'All right,

Sergeant, lie still.' But he had been trying to move, and had lost breath, and I knew that he couldn't last long under there. I lay quite still; all the same I thought each little breath I could get would be my last. I was thinking of you two only, and I didn't care a bit about myself. At last I heard someone talking and digging, and I lay quite

DOWNHAM.

Pte. Horace Hurd, of Oxlode, has been reported wounded. There are few particulars, but it is believed to be a slight wound, as the soldier himself has written saying it is in the right arm, and was caused by a rifle bullet. He is somewhere in France, and assures his people that he is well cared for.

Gunner Arthur Chambers, of Holme Farm, Downham, was wounded about Aug. 17th. He remained in France for some days, but is now in hospital at Napsbury, near St. Albans. It is not yet known whether the wound is serious, but it is in the left leg, and was caused by shrapnel.

Pte. Matthew Peacock, of Second Drove, was also wounded slightly by shrapnel in the left leg on Aug. 23rd.

DOWNHAM.

Official information has been received that Pte. George Garner, Bedfords, of First Drove, Downham Fen, was wounded on Nov. 7th, "somewhere in France," and died of wounds on Nov. 12th. No further particulars have been received, but his sister, Mrs. Jordan, of First Drove, would be glad of some.

NEWS OF A DOWNHAM SOLDIER THROUGH THIS JOURNAL.

A few weeks ago this journal published the news of the death in action of Pte. E. Barrett, of Downham, and stated that the parents would be glad of any particulars. That paragraph reached Barrett's mate in the trenches. He is Pte. J. H. Willson, states that he lived for seven years at Oxlode. Pte. Willson writes: "Having had a piece of the 'Cambridgeshire Times' sent to me asking for particulars of your son's death, I am writing a few sad lines. We came out to France together, and have been mates ever since, sleeping together at the base and in the trenches. It was on Sept. 13th, at Ginchy, that we were digging under the parapet of our trench all night to make a little dug-out for us two to sleep in, as it was raining hard. Just as we had finished and were lying down to see if it was large enough for both, our officer came round and told us we had got to get out of the trench ready for a charge at six o'clock. It was then half-past four. I jumped out of the trench, Ted following. When I had gone about ten yards from the trench I turned round to speak to him, and he was not there. This gave me a turn, as I knew that he was either killed or wounded, probably by a bullet through the head as he got out of the trench; but I did not hear definitely of his death till I was in hospital."

still. In a moment, which seemed a week, they got down to me, and I got my head out so that I could breathe. They asked me how many were in there, and I told them three, and who they were. I got an arm out scratched the earth from the sergeant's face. but it was too late. He was dead. The officer was telling me how brave I was after being buried all that time to try to save the sergeant at my very first chance and in telling them where to dig even before I was out myself. Then they finished digging me out, but the others were dead, and when I was out I found I could hardly stand. All the use seemed to have gone, and my back was hurt being crushed up in such a position with so much weight on me. The

stretcher bearers then took me to a dressing station, and a few minutes later I was transferred by ambulance to a rest camp, where I am now. But don't you worry yourselves about me, as I don't think I shall be many weeks before I am better again."

Private Bertram Miller of Little Downham wrote:

"I am now the captain's orderly - my work now is to run messages for him - so, you see, I am one of those fellows who get either a V.C. or a bullet, so do not be surprised if you see me coming home before long with a medal on my chest. We are going into the trenches again tomorrow, and I hope our neighbours over the way will be a little quieter this time, as I thought they were going to finish me last Thursday. They whiz-banged the trench in on top of us. I lay there and did not know whether I was hit or not. I know I was not dead because I could see others creeping about. The other day we were taking up some hurdles when they turned a machine gun on us. we had to drop the hurdles and roll into the nearest shell hole. If your luck is out it will be half full of water. This makes it amusing when a nervous chap hears a gun in another section and flops down into the water. We have some sport then. But I am sorry for any chap that is nervous, for I tell you my nerves have been a bit tight, when I could feel and hear bullets going just over my head and back. It gives one an idea of what war is, and it makes one begin to wonder.'

Second Corporal Horace Fuller of Little Downham wrote:

DOWNHAM.

Lance-Corpl. Samuel J. Fincham, of Cannon-street, and of the Grenadier Guards, after being out since the beginning of the war, was wounded in the last big "push." This gallant soldier, who has already won the Military Medal and the D.C.M., now lies in the Great Northern Central Hospital, Holloway, wounded in four places—the chest, the right arm, and both legs. Fortunately three are only flesh wounds, but the left knee is more serious. The patient is in excellent spirits, and is looking forward to a spell at home in a few weeks' time. He received the wounds when carrying a message, and they were caused by pieces of a high explosive shell which demolished a captured concrete dug-out near which he happened to be. There is still a small piece in the left knee. The Adjutant writes: "He was extremely plucky, as one would expect from anyone with his record behind him. It will be a great loss to his battalion, but he richly deserves a rest after all the time he has been with us. I should like to hear how he gets on." Lance-Corpl. Fincham had recently qualified in signalling, and now holds the certificate and a testimonial stating that "he worked remarkably well and made surprisingly good progress. He now has a good knowledge of the subject, is very capable, and will make an excellent assistant instructor." Downham is proud of this soldier, and will be glad to hear of his speedy recovery.

COVENEY.

News has been received from the War Office that the Authorities have been regretfully constrained to conclude that Pte. George Coulson, of the Suffolk Regt., has died. He has been missing since July 1st, 1916. Mr. and Mrs. Coulson have never been able to obtain any information as to his last moments, which makes it doubly hard for them.

'We were travelling to the front all Wednesday and Thursday. We halted by the roadside the first night, and the second night we wanted to no rocking to sleep, although our guns were making grand music all around us. The next night I was on guard when a sentry reported gas. Though we have been out so long it was the first time we had to face that. We did not get it bad, and it soon passed over. the guns firing into the thicket to disperse the clouds. In the villages behind everyone, including the schoolchildren, carry their gas

PTE. J. DING.

Missing since the battle of Mons, and not having been traced as a prisoner of war, Pte. J. Ding, of the Northamptonshire Regiment, son of Mr. and Mrs. J. Ding, of Coyneey, has been officially concluded dead. The parents have just received a communication from the War Office stating that no information has been received regarding Pte. Ding, and that the Army Council have been regretfully constrained to conclude that he is dead. This late soldier, who was 31 years of age, had been in the Army since the age of 18, and was called up as a Reservist at the outbreak of the war.

helmets slung over their shoulders ready for use. The fine weather has made the air work most interesting to watch. We are always having Hun planes over us to spot the guns, but they don't stay long enough to see much. They generally put on speed and clear out while they are safe. Shells fired at them that

do not burst often fall in our lines, and we dig them up next day or at night, if daylight is too dangerous. A 13in dropped close to our hut the other morning. If it had dropped on us there would have been a bit of a move on.'

My parents generation fought in the second war and I remember them often reminiscing about their experiences but I never remember a single occasion when their parents generation spoke about experiences in the first war, it was too traumatic for them to want to remember and the above stories give a flavour of that . All the more reason that we should remember and be grateful.

Robin Pearl