

Abstract

Thomas Ramsden was born in 1894 and lived in Pontefract, and he worked in Barnsley in an architects' office. Like millions of other young men in 1914, he volunteered to fight in World War One. He was determined to join the Royal Engineers, but there were no vacancies and so he deferred his enlistment to the early summer of 1915, when he joined them at Doncaster Barracks.

He was initially stationed at Aldershot, where he underwent rigorous training and learnt how to be a Royal Engineer. He also learnt about the realities of being in the army and this included badly fitting uniforms and lots of marching and drills. He also learnt how to dig trenches and build bridges, both of which were an essential part of serving in the Royal Engineers.

He was finally posted to France in the early summer of 1916, just after the battle of the Somme had started. He learned early on the realities of war, when a young officer in his division was killed dismantling an artillery shell. His was first billeted just outside Loos, which was only a few miles behind the front line. There he spent much of his time supervising the repair of trenches and the building of gun emplacements; all of these under enemy's fire. He also had to lay barbed wire, and this was done during the night, with the constant danger of enemy snipers.

Like all the soldiers fighting in the War, on both sides, he experienced the deprivations of living on the front line. Life in the trenches was incredibly hard and he spent much of his time in mud and living on poor rations. Also, bathing was difficult if not impossible and hence most of the soldiers on both sides had to put up with infestations of bugs, fleas and rats. Despite all these they did their duty. In 1917, his unit was involved in a major action at Bourlon Wood. Fortunately for Thomas, it coincided with his first leave of the War and so he was back in Aldershot, where he read about the actions of his company.

Thomas returned to the front and continued his duties. This included being asked to do reconnaissance in no man's land by bicycle. However, the enemy fire became so heavy he had to dismount and push the bicycle where he could. This was impossible in Armentieres, where the roads were reduced to rubble. It was here that he experienced his worst bombardment, and he admitted that "he got the wind up" and suffered a mild case of shell shock.

In November 1918, an Armistice was finally signed to end the fighting and he received the news while stationed in Nachamps, just over the Belgian border. However, his joy was slightly marred, as he was taken ill with suspected Spanish flu and he spent some time in hospital before being sent home. He did however briefly return to complete his service.

Thomas Ramsden made light of the dangers he was in and the hardships he endured, and like many soldiers his experiences during the War shaped the rest of his life.

Research shows that after the War was over Thomas Ramsden returned to a career as an architect and lived in Barnsley. He died in 1989, three years after the recording of the interview took place.

Transcription

HT: In August 1914 you were living in Pontefract weren't you?

TR: Yes.

HT: And working in an architects' office and you'd be 20 then?

TR: Yes.

HT: So I wonder if you could remember anything about what people thought about the War at that stage [TR spoke at same time but unclear]?

TR: ... at that time then, they didn't think the War would was going to last so very long and eh we were talking about going to join [HT "yeah"] and eh I got the eh communication from what eh from Uncle Chuck, "You didn't join anything but the Royal R. Es (Royal Engineers)."

HT: Yeah I suppose by that time he knew enough about the War to see?

TR: Yes he knew...

HT: What was wise to do?

TR: ... he knew that it was going to last, and eh as a matter of fact, it was after Mons (see note 1) you see. They'd eh they'd given us a good hiding and that they had to retire at Mons [HT "yes"] and they- then they started advertising for eh for troops.

HT: Was that when the famous poster?

TR: Eh that was one that poster Kit- Kitchener wants you.

HT: Yes.

TR: Sort of business, with the finger pointing at you.

HT: Yeah. And everyone would be keen?

TR: Oh they were [HT speaks at same time "to join ..."] all keen, all keen to join at that age, round about 20.

HT: And it was all voluntary at that stage...

TR: Oh it was all voluntary, yes it was voluntary then, there, there was no compulsion at that time.

HT: Well you mentioned eh Uncle Chuck, he'd been in the Boer War hadn't he?

TR: Oh yes, he-he was eh eh KOYLI's (King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry), had been down in South Africa and eh of course he knew what it was I suppose and eh gave me the eh instructions really, as to what to do. And eh three of us, two pals and meself, went up to

Leeds at our own expense to join and eh we got as far as the tramway eh, eh ... [pause]

HT: Somewhere in Leeds?

TR: In Leeds, yes, ah and any- anyway, they were eh they were recruiting at that time, and we went in there quite happy. But eh after passing A1 and getting down to the desk with the eh sergeant there. I told him I wanted to join the Royal Engineers [HT "yes"]. He-he said you can't and eh gave me a jolly good dressing down and so I left him and eh and let him stew in his own juice as it were. The other two got in, one infantry I think and other the artillery. I don't remember who they were, but eh that's how it finished in the first instance trying to join. Well I wrote up to Headquarters of the Royal Engineers, told them who I was, and all that sort of business and I got me own letter back "You are not required for the R.E. thank you. The Corps at present closed for recruiting" signed Captain R.E. I thought well that finishes it off and eh so I did nothing until early, well, early 1915 [HT spoke at same time "1915 yes"] and there was an advertisement on the eh-eh billboards, eh recruits wanted for the Royal Engineers eh apply eh Doncaster. Well, I wanted Pontefract Barracks. I got the King shilling, and eh they gave me a warrant to go to Doncaster, railway warrant, and eh 'cause I went to Doncaster and eh we eh reported to eh the racecourse...

HT: I think that would be early summer 1915?

TR: It- that would be eh- yes that was early summer 1915, yes.

HT: What kind of things did they have you do?

TR Well...

HT This would be your first training wouldn't it?

TR: ... well the eh the thing was I was staying a few days our own clothes and that sort of thing and we doing a little bit of eh ac-acclimatising really. Eh bit of squad drill, but we'd no eh uniform, houses [word unclear] or anything. And eh day roll eh the eh uniform and eh the other necessary equipment rolled up. And that I remember we'd to all queue to get your hat and coat, and trousers eh socks, boots and one thing and another and they were thrown at you eh...

[00:05:14]

HT: And did they fit or ...

TR: I hope that...

HT: ... was it by chance?

TR: ... I hope that they'd fit ... [clears throat] and eh I remember Percy Fox telling me afterwards. He was eh with me in the office in Barnsley. He-he finished up as a sergeant in- in 9 eh in the 233, erm and... both eh the- the same, a similar erm field company to the- in the 40th division. 224, 229 and 233. I was in the 229 [HT "yeah"]. Well, we got the- I eh was sent back to Pontefract for a couple of days and got into me uniform and I could... I can remember the, the clod hoppers (see note 2) on my shoe- boots and having to struggle to get my patty- putties (see note 3) on so that they don't- didn't, didn't slip round my ankles. And going back to the station getting back, reporting, and that was eh at Doncaster again and that you were in. And eh then you started off and they gave us eh still continuous squad drill.

HT: You were saying about Percy Fox, had he some idea about how to get better uniforms?

TR: Oh yes, aye, in-in fitting up the uniform eh they didn't bother that they just picked a hat up for him and he, he couldn't he, he couldn't keep it on, it was far too tight. So when they got back into eh the quarters, he had a look around and eh picked a hat that somebody been issued with, fitted it and it fitted him better, and left his old [laughs] left his old and that was his first eh little bit of trust in the- in the army.

HT: The army game is it?

TR: Aye, the army game.

HT: [laughs] So that's how you got uniforms to fit in the end then?

TR: [laughs] Ye-yes eh you could get- you could get a fitment they'd had a tailor, and he-he fitted you up for it you know took the creases out of the shoulders and that sort of business and fitted you up a little bit better.

HT: So you were at Doncaster then kitted out, you'd been doing squad drill with imitation rifles...

TR: Yes.

HT: ... you did drill with picks and shovels didn't you?

TR: Oh yes, I was eh of course eh the-the thing was they were teaching us eh what the trenches should be like, model, and eh we used to roll up in a morning to the pick and shovel, a line on the ground, get in between, shovel in your right hand, pick in your left hand, eh right turn and eh manoeuvre, manoeuvre the two implements so y- [laughs] so that you didn't eh stab the chap next to you.

HT: Yes I can see that, aye

TR: And eh we got a way, and we certainly did eh some very very nice model trenches, firestacks, berm eh the eh they were really first class job. And they told us that we had to be able to do the job otherwise when we got out, we should eh probably have squads eh doing the donkey work, while we showed them how it should be done [HT "yeah"], which was very nice of course. We-we-we didn't do much eh on the repairs, eh front line repairs after they- after Jerry (a wartime slang for Germans see note 4) had knocked them about a bit. That was the regular eh [sighs] eh stunt that we had after getting to Le Breby. (see note 5)

HT: You said though you never saw any trenches in France like the ones you built...

TR: Oh no, no...

HT: ... on training didn't you?

TR: ... the ones we had were modelled eh and the, the eh the ones that were, were in at Loos and other places had all been smashed up in one [HT "yeah"] way or another. Eh you could repair them with eh eh sandbags or eh with eh, eh ... any-any kind, any kind of eh timber and hope that eh it wouldn't knock that be- it wouldn't be knocked about. But generally speaking, there were always eh something dropping on front line stuff [HT "yeah"], they couldn't keep- they couldn't keep a model.

[00:10:11]

HT: Well after this [clears throat] work in Doncaster you-you moved on to...

TR: To...

HT: ... Aldershot?

TR: To Aldershot.

HT: Where you enjoyed your 21st birthday didn't you?

TR: Oh yes, yes.

HT: July 15th?

TR: Eh well Al-Aldershot, under canvas on Laf-Laffan's Plain, which wasn't too bad really, it were nice summer weather from what I remember.

HT: And eh more squad drill?

TR: Oh yes, it was- it was definitely quite eh, erm intense, quite intense stuff that had to get us fit. One day- up at- up early in the morning you know when reveille went (see note 6), and everyone on parade, have us run around, do a bit of Swedish drill (see note 7) and we were really... they got us fit there.

HT: So fitness and discipline really?

TR: Oh yes that was the main thing eh at Aldershot.

HT: But for the, the engineering training, you moved to Blackdown Camp?

TR: Eh yes af-after, after eh Aldershot, we went to Blackdown and eh Blackdown was a permanent-permanent camp, hutments and eh we eh we did quite a number of eh stunts there. The main-main-main thing was eh eh ... bridge building.

HT: Yes.

TR: And eh... they eh ... with eh... [sighs]

HT: You were filling derries [spelling unknown] were you for that...

TR: [talking over HT] There were one particular spot where we the built the eh, eh bridge, yeah, the suspension bridge.

HT: Yeah.

TR: We eh we cut our own trees down and everything and eh simply had them sawn up and eh lashed, all lashed together, there were no hammer and [HT "that's it"] nail or anything like that it was rope.

HT: Like super scout, work really.

TR: Super scout? Oh, oh yes. All-all the knots, you'd to be able to do all the knots, yeah in fact eh one of them was a that special knot you did behind your back you know that and eh you eh forget- I forget now which knot it was, but anyway it's a complicated one and eh you had to do it behind your back, so that you eh make it that actually need to make it in the dark.

HT: Yes. Well then there was some more specialist work on bridging wasn't there at Bordon Camp [Hampshire]?

TR: Oh.

HT: You had a bit of fun there didn't you?

TR: Oh yes, we eh [laughs]... we made trestles and these trestles were eh to be used across water [HT "yeah"]. And eh you started off with eh erm the eh pre-arranged eh fix-fixtures and then in order to eh align the eh trusses that they dropped into the- into the water to carry- to carry the main beams eh then you had a rope which was taken out into the eh erm well it was a pond where we... I think it were Mitcham Pond [spelling unknown] and they had to be lined up. Well, we-we had a flat bottomed boat that eh, eh wheeled. And I happened to be the unlucky one to be told to get into the boat. Eh 'nother lad and meself rowing it out, picked the eh rope up and let it drop into the water so that they could see the line [HT "yes"]. And eh, eh I finished up instead of keeping ahead- instead of lifting the rope out of the water, I pulled myself over and fell in head first [HT "yeah"]. Got- eh quite ok, the boat didn't completely capsize. I walked- walked out and was sent back to camp and eh I don't- I really don't think I got me hair wet, but it had gone- gone into my boots and putties and one thing and another by the time I had got back to camp I were dry. It erm very very nice, quite- quite a reasonable bath.

[Break in recording, possible edit]

HT: Well we- after all this then, you went to France in July 1916 [RT "aye"], which is just when the Somme battle got under way.

RT: Eh, eh yes it wasn't- it had be- it was over.

[00:15:01]

HT: Yes. Well the initial part was and...

TR: Yes.

HT: ... it were a big loss.

TR: Yes.

HT: Erm you're not sure whether you went from Southampton to Le Havre or ...

TR: Eh, eh...

HT: Dover to Calais are you but eh...

TR: No, I'm not absolutely certain, but at the-the eh the first thing that happened after we got- after we got off to we got off the ship in France was that I was collared on a work- ah working party and sent down into the hold of the ship in order to muck out the stab- stables [HT "yes"], that the horses had eh been in. And eh I hadn't been down very very long, there were a shout came from the top that eh Royal Engineers up and out and eh got back, eh, would be eh thought [word unclear] I didn't think that I need have gone, but you, you were told to obey the last order, it was a officer come along and eh requisitioned us and told us what to do and there you were.

HT: So that was your ...

TR: First.

HT: ... start in France?

TR: Aye that was the start.

HT: And then eh you moved up to a village called Le Breby.

TR: Yes I went to Le Breby just outside Loos and we're eh we were put up in a school and eh there were eh two sections. Section Two and Section Three of eh our particular crowd. And that were the first accident that eh really happened there was the Lieutenant of erm the Section Three. They'd found it a, a shell type eh nose cap and eh he was taking it to pieces and it went off and killed him.

HT: Hmm. Guess this was just behind the front line, wasn't it?

TR: Well no. It was eh...

HT: Three quarters of a mile back?

TR: [talking at same time] It were about three miles behind.

HT: Three miles behind?

TR: Aye, you got eh Le Breby to-to the front line would be about two to three miles.

HT: Yes.

TR: And we used to go as a regular daily eh trip eh up the main road from Le Breby to Loos, eh get into the communication trench at hole, at what we knew as the hole in the wall [HT "yes"]. Eh carry on and usually on a evening and get into the trench, finish up in the front line, do the necessary repair that were required there. And I remember eh we fixed up the first gas cylinders that I eh I saw there one- and we fitted them just lying on the fire step. Eh and the infantry were in there, in at Loos at that time were the eh Red Hand eh Ulster crowd and they didn't require, they didn't require any wiring out in front, they kept- they kept Jerry [appropriate word usage?] quiet by raiding him regular things.

HT: And you used to go each day to supervise t' infantry repairing trenches there, didn't you?

TR: Beg your pardon?

HT: You used to supervise the infantry

TR: Oh, oh yes...

HT: ... repairing trenches there didn't you?

TR: ... oh yes, take them, eh the- they sometimes pick up the necessary eh stuff that was required and eh cart it into the front line.

HT: In other words they'd been bombarded so often it was a continuous tool [word unclear] wasn't it?

TR: Oh, oh yes they were eh same as the pictures we've seen in eh since we've been in France recently, quite wide open some of them.

HT: And it was a hot spot this wasn't it? You, you talked about the rolling minis [word unclear]

TR: [talking over HT] Oh is it, oh is it a real, a real hot spot. It was the first time I came under eh the bombardment, getting into a, a little cubby hole with nothing but eh some reinfor reinforced metal eh...

HT: Corrugated iron?

TR: ... corrugated irons and eh bit of soil camouflaging, anyway rifle grenades and one darn thing flopping around after us [words unclear]. Probably, properly shaking at the knees [HT "yes"] and they got away with it.

HT: You said there were whistles that gave a warning when the eh minenwefers ("mine throwers") came.

TR: Oh yes, yeah eh the-the ones in the front line eh they always on standby and the others in eh eh dugouts and the-the point was anybody other than the lookout individual, you could see the eh eh minenwefers coming over with a long tail and bright eh well it's on fire really [HT "yes"] as flame, and down it came with a hell of a crash. And eh they could tell whether it was going left, centre or right and it depended on which whistle went they- all the remain- all remainder of the lads including us that were doing any eh repairs eh got under cover.

[00:20:39]

HT: And it was in this hotspot you built a pit for a trench mortar, didn't you one time?

TR: Oh, oh yes. They-they came, they came along eh eh we made we made actually a-a-a semi eh ...

HT: Like a cone shape?

TR: Eh yeah, yes cone shaped opening in the- in the ground eh more like a funnel [HT "yes"]. And eh then the eh artillery came along and fixed trench mortar in there [HT "yes"]. Eh d- it had only been going for eh what day or two when of course Jerry could easily see where it was placed, he dropped eh he dropped one of the minenwefers in, blew it to bits.

HT: Was this where a ration party passed you?

TR: Oh yeah, no it-it was at eh at another spot where we eh we were coming out of the line. We deen- been doing re- eh revetments again and repairs. And eh they u- they eh eh artillery used to send up a-a trench mortar crew and they fix up anywhere and they eh eh landed, we saw them, well they passed us, and we saw them fix up in the communication trench, and they used to what 20 or 30 eh r-rounds and then clear off. And we knew that er Jerry would eh eh give-re, give them a return for it. We told the party, as we were going out [HT "yeah"] that eh they wanted to be careful at such and such a spot in the communication trench. But they took no notice, they were eh they were really eh demurred to all this sort of business and eh well if there is one, it will have my name on it sort of business. But anyway they did get hit and they-they walked straight into it.

HT: There was a big mine crater (see note 8) wasn't there in that area?

TR: [talking over HT] At in-in Loos. In Loos there was a crater there and eh of course it was all

chalk and eh I suppose they camouflaged themselves. Our lads did using white [HT “yeah”]. And they used to go there lie on top. We had eh the one half of the crater and Jerry the other and you got to be very very careful at certain spots in the British line anyway. Otherwise eh there were one or two killed, you had quite a g-good view into the trenches from this rather high position, and it eh it be lying there all day, movement at night I suppose.

HT: Yes. Now with all this activity it'd be difficult to get change of clothing or ...

TR: Oh...

HT: ... baths wouldn't it?

TR: ... oh yes eh the first time that anything was mentioned about vermin was at Le Breby. We hadn't been there long when eh one individual, a [sighs] a young fella, he was very very worried and he reported to the MO that eh he was a bit itchy and that sort of business, and eh he finished up, he was told he was lousy. And eh well, we were all told to have a look at our own shirts, we found that we were the same. They eh used to be eh I s'pose [unclear speech] one thing about them the eggs were laid in the seam of your eh [HT “yeah”] shirt. And we used to sit down at night take your shirt off and eh pass it through the flame of a candle and used to go off they used pop off like-like a machine gun.

[laughs]

HT: But there wouldn't be any washing very often would there?

TR: Oh no. No we eh I-I don't remember, remember we got many changes there we'd to eh do our own washing. Take your shirt off and wash it. Y-you rather keep your own than get a fresh one. If they gave you a fresh one, you-you find you were eh just as bad eh after 24 hours as if you eh if you kept your own.

[00:25:11]

HT: And baths then, you didn't have many baths ...

TR: Oh no.

HT: ... on the whole did you?

TR: ... probably during the period, what was 1915 to coming out in eh war to the war finishing, eh probably half a dozen and there'd be special bath houses behind the line and we'd been there get into tubs, quite big- quite big eh tubs. I suppose they'd be at eh originally great big wine barrels.

HT: Yes sometimes the bath houses were in breweries weren't they, maybe that's why?

TR: Oh, oh yes I-I finished up in a brewery at Lille, when eh the War was over on eh the eh cadre]. I never got into Fr- into Germany when all the lads were going to Germany and that sort of business. Eh there was a party of ours left and eh we were what we called cadres C.A.D.R.E (spells word out).

HT: Lot of mud in-in Flanders, we-we read about...

TR: Oh blimey yes.

- HT: ... did you experience much of this?
- TR: There were certain, certain periods when we eh eh were going in and out of the line. Eh you couldn't stay in the trench- in the communication trenches, there'd probably be two feet of mud and eh the- you had waders on y- up to your thighs really. And eh I remember in one instance I got stuck in there and all I'd- you had to do, you got out of it and left your, left your boot [HT "yes"] and eh wandered out on top in stocking feet [HT "hmm"]. You eh you hadn't h- your normal boots were back at the digs. [laughs]
- HT: Yes, goodness. Eh what about sick parades, there must have had a good deal of need for medical attention?
- TR: Oh ye- oh yes you- y- regular eh regular parade eh and eh you could go- you could go sick eh if you were feeling off. I remember I went with toothache. I think I told you about the toothache business. They sat you in a chair, "which tooth is it?" and he wasn't a dentist, he was a young, young doctor, probably hadn't pulled any teeth out before. You saw them go for a box, take the necessary tools out, put them in a hot water and you sat on an ordinary chair. One, one individual at one side with his heel and knee on yours and the other and the third one behind you holding your head back [laughs] and eh you had hope for the best. He put the- he-he-he put- he put the implements into your mouth and he dragged you, he dragged it out, the point is he couldn't twist the damn thing [laughs]. He got it out finally but eh that put me against dentists for the rest of me.
- HT: Yes I can see that. Well speaking of teeth erm how about the-the rations you had?
- TR: Oh, the-the rations w- eh we did fairly well for rations. We did quarter of a loaf of bread was probably the worst. And the-the eh biscuits they were alright stuffed into the eh stew that you got. And the stew was really good. Then the tinned stuff. Eh we always used to look forward to Libbys (see note 9). Eh they were- that was quite alright bully beef. But some of the stuff, some of the American stuff were a little bit so so. Eh and MaConochie (see note 10) was a real nice one eh that was a, a stew really, eh beef and vegetables, occasionally got that and at Le Breby we left pork and beans, we- it the first time we had ever seen them. Eh it was beans and then on the top was great a big lump of fat pork, which of course we just took out, and whipped up away- threw away [HT "yes"]. Eh but later on, we eh we got thorough- we were thoroughly enjoyed them. Eh if you're on a march eh we used to do and we eh eh were out of the line keep you fit, you-you pull up and you-you probably have a tin of eh eh beans, open it and eh eat it cold. They'd to give you twenty minutes and you'd knock that back and it was alright [word unclear].
- HT: Now these biscuits were very strong, very hard are they?
- TR: Oh the biscuits were hard yes but eh they were quite ok and if you broke 'em and dropped them into your eh stew, they really went down quite well.
- HT: And you had lots of jam didn't you?
- TR: Oh them!
- HT: What did you call that?
- TR: Oh eh it was eh erm...
- HT: Is it Ticklers jam or something?
- TR: Ticklers jam, yes. (see note 11)

HT: He had a name for it, didn't yer?

TR: Eh pozzy. Pozzy. Aye, aye.

HT: Funny name for it. [TR laughs] During 1917 you were moved southwards to the Somme area [TR "ah huh"]. Now this time, the Somme battle had petered out and in fact the Germans had given up a lot of ground.

TR: Yes.

HT: Moved back to the Hindenberg Line (see note 12) [TR "yes, yeah"] hadn't they. So in fact they were just south west of Cambrai [TR "ah huh"] and you were with the 229th field company of the 40th division.

TR: Yes.

HT: They were bantams, weren't you?

TR: Yes, yeah. Eh well wh we were there in Gouzeaucourt eh and it was quite a- quite a decent sort of a spot because eh Jerry was going back in Cambrai and eh we were billeted on- by eh the shield of the railway, w- eh which was built up at that point and the trench at the side was just eh just right and it eh covered it over with eh corrugated iron and eh eh stuff eh from the railway, and eh we were billeted there oh for some weeks. We eh used to do a nightly patrol, but during the day we could play football and eh play cards or anything. Eh but never if eh the balloons came up eh on the Cambrai area on Jerry side, we kept quiet for what reason I don't know because up there he never bothered us there. And eh we u- we used to do a nightly patrol every night as regular as clockwork, better eh our movement, and put some wire up. Eh I suppose it would be eh be eh in front of our own front line [HT "yes"] eh but probably 4 or 500 yards and eh that was our stint. Get so many yards of wire out, coils of wire out and then you were back again and all you got to do then was to eh get in what to get what used to call kip and eh go to sleep until midday probably.

HT: Yeah. And we, we visited Gouzeaucourt in 1980 didn't we [TR "yes"], and we took some photographs of you standing looking over ground where we thought you might had been doing the wiring [TR "oh yes, yes, yes"] in fact in 1917 and that railway embankment is still there.

TR: It's still there yes. Eh but eh they-they hadn't used it to a railway. There were no rails there even when we went through. Huh?

HT: No. Now since the-the tank attack was to come quite shortly, part of the work was preparing a way through the ...

TR: Oh ...

HT: ... no man's land wasn't it at times [words unclear]

TR: Oh yes and eh you had to eh which eh sup- it was the first time I saw a tank there and eh we had to eh give some indications to where the tank should go, and tapes were laid out at night and eh the eh tank was supposed to follow the line we'd take. And eh hey we'd eh quite eh eh an incident. One party of ours had got along in front of us and eh they were on their way back when Tom Vinten [spelling unknown] who was in charge of them using strong language and that sort of thing for some reason or other and eh er we could tell that it was really good Yorkshire eh accent and eh it-it saved it- saved them from eh being eh

ripped up.

[00:34:58]

HT: Yes 'cause all these were in the dark of course wasn't it, yes?

TR: It were all in the dark. Yes it were probably about 2 o'clock in the morning or [HT "yes"] something like that.

HT: Now there was another incident during a recce (see note 13) in this period which involved yourself and some horses didn't it?

TR: Oh eh eh yes, well, they eh they wanted it- they wanted to make a recce into what was really no man's land and it was a barren area between them and us. Miles of it, and eh I was requisitioned one morning to go out with eh Lieutenant Leslie. And eh it was on horseback, and eh I had a bit of a struggle to get on, because I had put my rifle in the eh in this proper position behind the saddle and had to- had- [laughs slightly] do a little bit of crawling about to get on. Anyway, eh we must have gone 4 or 5 miles eh and during this little trip eh we passed through a village where eh the blinds were being blown about and in- and in a bedroom and my horse didn't like the idea and it was up and eh out over a eh well some of eh sunken road really eh and the barbed wire on the top, and I remember- I remember Leslie shouting to me "keep that horse out of the barbed wire!" and eh I did a little bit of a Lester Piggot (well-known jockey) there and got back- got down quite reasonably.

HT: Well then when the attack actually came after all this preparation you...

TR: Oh aye.

HT: ... had a stroke of luck hadn't you?

TR: Oh [laughs] I was in eh eh in England on leave, I don't know why I got leave at that time I hadn't had any for eh I think it was the first leave I'd had. And eh the Aldershot battery [word unclear] eh eh home, reading in the paper what had happened at eh in Bourlon Wood (see note 14) where our crowd had gone in. And I eh I missed all of that. It was the only time that we did eh do any really eh attacking. We'd been- we've been eh eh a division for consolidation really [HT "yes"] after-after that either reverse or an attack, quiet periods we used to have to consolidate.

HT: And in fact we eh had a look at Bourlon Wood in 1980 [TR "yes"]. I remember there's a cemetery at the bottom of the hill [TR "yes"] it's Anneaux [TR "aye"] and you did in fact see some of your old re... [word unclear TR talks over] eh...

TR: Yeah that's right... [words unclear] it were the 229 field company eh sapper eh and we found his [HT "yes"] eh grave.

HT: Yeah. Hmm. Your own group?

TR: Aye.

HT: [paper shuffling] Well then the next move you made was northwards. Now this was before the German made their- Germans made their final attack in 1918 and that you've been moved northwards to Croissilles. That's about halfway between [TR "yes, yes"] Bapaume and Arras.

TR: Ah yes. Well eh from-from there eh we eh we did the usual in and out of the line repairing and one thing and another and that- then they sent us down from there to Courcelette. And while we were at Courcelette we eh eh we were fixed up in a-a regular up to date housing scheme. It had been knocked about a bit and eh eh the main bridge over whether it was the canal or the river I don't know but the- it was already eh prepared for blowing up eh gun cotton laid and all that sort of business, all ready for destroying. And eh I-I was sent with eh two others to eh look after a pontoon bridge that had been eh put there by the side of the main bridge in order that any in- eh individuals could cross after the main bridge had been blown up. But eh eh when we got- when we got there, we found that eh the eh machine- eh machine gun crew had dug a hole- had dug a trench and were it enfiladed the pontoon bridge and they-they disappeared up on a-a-a-a spot on the main road up above. We took- we took ov-over that eh trench and eh he eh he were dropping shells all the way round the main bridge, I suppose in order to preserve it. And eh he dropped one just and blew the back of our trench in. It was eh eh quite a near thing, must have been and if it hadn't been eh eh it were sof-soft marshy ground by the side of the canal, I think we should have had it.

[00:40:53]

HT: But you got out of the trench hadn't you anyway? You were...

TR: We, we didn't stay there, although they say that they eh never dropped two eh eh shells in the same spot. We eh tried to eh hide under the eh main bridge, but he was dropping shrapnel and god knows what and they were flying all over. So eh we thought the best, best thing to do was to get onto the pontoon bridge. Well, they put one through the pontoon bridge which eh went straight through and didn't explode until it was below water level. And eh we eh we eh remained round there, wind up. Until we eh until the officer came along and told us what on earth [words unclear] quite eh we're quite ready to get rid of the pontoon bridge. So we eh broke it up and eh finally af-after trying to destroy 'em with an axe, which we always had there with you, we eh remembered to pull the plug out and eh the eh boat sank and the trusses [word unclear] and one thing and another floated down the canal. That was done and then we retired to eh the spot where the eh eh preparations with eh the exploder were eh waiting to blow up. Eh we blew the bridge up and it fell down quite nicely and broken in two. But eh it left- it left to eh quite an easy re-repair Lee said. And eh the officer wanted eh eh eh a trace of eh eh...

HT: Volunteers?

TR: ... gun cotton to be taken down there and blown up after-after eh it was dark. Anyway [HT "with volunteers"] I didn't go, I didn't go I wasn't one of them that went down but eh one of the lads got a nice blighty and eh I don't think we did much good.

HT: Wasn't it about then that there's an alarm that the Germans were approaching and you got...

TR: Oh...

HT: ... one of your pals got panicky about his belongings?

TR: Oh, oh yes in fact eh eh you could see them. The-there was the eh open area between our eh eh eh kitchen where-where we'd- where we'd left. I left all me tackle apart from the eh eh eh march- just marching order and eh I lost it all and I never saw razors and pen and eh a few other items. I didn't and I thought that when we were sent there to relieve Albert Walker that eh we eh we were in for a, a real nasty eh day. Although we-we'd been under fire sort of eh short time say two or three hours. Eh Albert Walker and eh the other two with him would walk back to the digs and eh were captured [HT "yes"] and made prisoner.

TR: Hmm.

HT: So we eh we dodged that.

HT: Now wasn't it about this time that you-you made your first shots in anger at Germans?

[00:44:47]

TR: Oh yes, you could see 'em and eh I had a eh well you had to estimate the distance and I saw one wandering around a particular building and I just shot at him but eh I doubt whether I did him any damage. I had a one previous and that was at Loos with the- when we were with the Irish lads said eh "well if you want to- want to have a shot you see you might hit somebody".

HT: Yes. Incidentally we've got a picture of you by this canal haven't we?

TR: Oh yes.

HT: Hmm. We located what may have been the replacement bridge didn't we in 1980...

TR: Yeah, yes. It might have been.

HT: ... and eh there it is. Well [clicking sound possibly projector?] after this then eh you had a spell at a place called Bouchavesnes that's between Bapaume and Peronne...

TR: Eh...

HT: ...rolling chalk downland isn't [TR "yes"] it that country ...

TR: Eh...

HT: ... and a big water supply problem?

TR: Oh yes eh...

HT: You told me at this time wouldn't there?

TR: Aye at Bouch- at Bouchavesnes, it eh we were on top of a ridge there eh eh a deep valley behind us and we were interspersed there with the... [recording cut off a short while] some pozzy and eh eh taken and get some cigarettes and they, they eh we eh we were isolated there really. We couldn't get eh the only supply of water came up in a erm...

HT: Petrol tins? Yes.

TR: ... petrol tins and it tasted of petrol and eh...

HT: Yes, delightful.

TR: ... we-we only had a minimum supply because eh it was only by mule eh who were bringing these petrol tins up eh that eh we could get any, because of owing to gas shells we weren't allowed to touch the water, even-even for a wash and eh in eh on Bouchavesnes we were best part of a month there without a wash or eh erm eh a drink other than the eh ration, minimum ration that they gave us.

HT: Yes.

TR: And eh in order to- in order to get a supply as we hoped, they eh sent us down into the eh oh it be what eh say 70 or 80 feet below where we were on top of the ridge eh on-on the eh western side of the ridge eh and-and they, they started us digging a well. We- well we got down 50-60 odd something like 70 feet. And eh the eh there were one incident where sent quite a number of eh gas shells over and I remember Calcutt [spelling uncertain] being at the bottom eh...

HT: Bottom of the well yes.

TR: ... bottom of the well and eh we huh we'd to shout and tell him to come out and he climb out he eh eh we got a eh well I think he was taken short really...

HT: Yes...

TR: ... the lad ...

HT: ... he was ...

TR: ... and no wonder.

HT: ...deeply moved.

TR: Because eh I don't think he had his eh gas mask down below but eh if, if we'd had got a whiff of it he-he would have got it eh heavier that air ...

HT: Him below. Yes.

TR: ... and eh we-we cleared off at that particular point. They did get water after we left but eh it was around about 80-90 feet.

HT: Hmm. Now there were Chinese [TR "Oh!"] gangs weren't there in this area?

TR: Oh, after we left, after we left after we ran and went up north again eh they eh we got into the area where you couldn't eh dig trenches. You struck water at about 2 feet deep and [coughs] you'd to eh you'd to dig down about-about 2 feet and burrow and throw this in front in order to make an earth work and eh we eh we had the eh Chinese working battalion doing the necessary work and we were supervising.

HT: [clicking sound] By the end of the War [clears throat], you'd gradually moved northwards to well just inside Belgium [TR "aye"]. Just on the outskirts of the French town of Roubaix actually, but over the border to a place called Nachamps.

TR: Nachamps aye yes.

HT: And you were in digs there weren't you, in a, a family home?

TR: Oh yes we eh we were- Nachmaps was village that eh had eh hadn't been disturbed very much it had been well in the German area I think and eh we were- we were with a family eh an old lady and two daughters and eh eh an elderly gentleman I don't know- I-I don't remember him very much, but anyway they used to look after us quite well. Eh we were up in the attic half a dozen of us and eh take down in the morning and had a cup of coffee without sugar or milk. It-it were a little basin shaped eh what do you call them jhats ... J.H.A.T [00:50:34 words unclear] something like that [HT "yeah"] I don't know. And eh we

did quite well there. In fact that was the spot where I told you about the donkey eh...

HT: Oh yes.

TR: ... going forwards through Nachamps and it was pulling something up there [words unclear]. Well eh anyway about 2-3 hours later the donkey was on the eh cart and eh it had been [laughs nervously] been hit and eh they rather enjoyed themselves they took into eh I think it must have been a garage, cut it up, hung it up and that sort of business and had some fresh meat.

HT: My word. There was some incident with a bicycle [clears throat] in this town wasn't there?

TR: Oh, oh there was one period yes and that was eh we were round about eh behind Armentieres eh we eh eh it was, it was during the period where eh Jerry had retired and I think it- they wanted eh an idea of what the eh land was like at a particular spot and I were sent out on a bicycle, plain table and that sort of business and I had to eh eh pick out any particular items that were eh easily visible and eh at the- it were just beyond the crossroad and this crossroad, why they picked-picked there I don't know, but eh I suppose it was a spot where they could measure easily. Eh when they were firing but they there eh Artillery had a number-number of eh small guns there. And eh I was on the way back when eh he replied to- replied to one of their salvos and eh I got off the main road and had to carry me bicycle and I was- I was carrying it through Armentieres. You couldn't ride because of the rubble and one thing and another...

HT: Yes.

TR: ...and eh that was another spot where I got the wind up. They eh they had one or two drop in where I was on the way through and eh it-it-it just made me feel a little bit shell shocked.

HT: Well all this time [TR clears throat] Germans had been retreating hadn't they? This was their final retreat [TR "yes"] 19- and towards the end of 1918 [TR "aye"]. And eventually of course the Armistice [TR "yes"] (see note 15) was eh signed and you got news of this while you were near Nachamps didn't you, in that area?

TR: Oh well at-at-at Nachamps we eh eh while we were there we knew that the Canadians were doing a-a bridge further up- further up quite a- one of these heavy trestle bridges. And the news came down to us on-on-on the eh eh u-usual stunt of eh eh whether it was true or not we didn't know that an Armistice had been signed and eh that was that. It eh and I think it probably the following day or the same day, I went down sick with eh what we considered was trench fever but I think it must been eh Spanish flu (see note 16).

HT: Yeah, the great- the-the worldwide epidemic almost wasn't it...

TR: Yes that's right...

HT: ... yes that's right killed many people in Britain too and you were in an asylum?

TR: Oh, oh yes [HT "well, it had been an asylum"] it was a case of an-an a 102 I think it was eh...

HT: I hasten to add it wasn't an asylum when you were in it.

TR: ... and eh they said righto, get your, get your stuff and eh report to the hospital eh so many miles away and I wandered along there, reported and the only thing, only thing I can remember is getting there, being told to lie down on a stretcher and eh that was that. When

I came round eh cleared, I was given leave of absence and eh came-came back on leave if I remember rightly. And then I'd to go back again and I, I can't remember in detail how on earth I got back to me own crowd again but I did. And eh we were eh left I was left on cadre, I didn't go in with the eh main eh main crowd to eh Germany we were left at eh eh Lille.

HT: Well whatever your memory was of that particular part it's, it's eh amazing that you've retained so much so clearly over 70 years, and it s- it seems to me it must have made a tremendous impression on you as a young man.

[00:56:01 to 00:56:18 no one speaking and slight background noises]

[00:56:18]

End of interview

Notes:

1. The Battle of the Mons took place at the end of August 1914 and it was the first major battle between the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the German 1st Army. The BEF tried to hold the line at the Mons Conde canal, but suffered a heavy defeat which caused them to retreat towards Paris.
2. "Clod hopper" is slang for a heavy awkward boot.
3. Putties were a binding that was wrapped around the leg from the knee to the ankles.
4. "Jerry" was colloquial slang used by many English speaking soldiers for Germans at the time during World War One.
5. Le Breby was just outside Loos in France.
6. Reveille is a bugle call used to wake up the soldiers and was usually at 4.30am.
7. Swedish drill is a form of exercise that involves the movement and stretching of the legs and arms and was popular in the army.
8. The crater was a large hole that was blown in the German lines and was caused by the detonation of a large amount of explosives by the British under the German trenches. During the war both sides employed tunnelling companies of men that dug underneath the enemy trenches. Large amounts of explosives were then used to blow a hole in the trench above. Some of the tunnelling companies were composed of engineers and soldiers experienced in mining. Hence many miners from South Yorkshire and South Wales were enlisted into the tunnelling companies.
9. Libby's was a brand of corned beef and was popular amongst the British soldiers.
10. MaConochie was a brand of tinned beef and vegetable stew, which many said was a meal in itself. The MaConochie Company is no longer in existence.
11. Ticklers Jam was a popular brand of jam made in Grimsby. However, the company no longer exists today.
12. The Hindenberg Line was a strong fortified defensive line constructed by the Germans in Belgium during 1916-1917.
13. Recce is slang for reconnaissance in the British Army.
14. Bourslon Wood was a strategic position near the town of Cambrai (which was the scene of the first major battle to use tanks).
15. The armistice was signed on the 10 November 1918 to end the fighting on the western front. It took effect the following day at 11 AM on November 11th.
16. Spanish flu was a worldwide pandemic which started in 1918 and lasted into the early 1920s. It was estimated that it infected 500 million people worldwide killing over 50 million.