Eyewitness Accounts of Passchendaele

LANCE CORPORAL VIC COLE

At zero hour the regiment went over, slipping and sliding in the mud, bunching up, spreading out, going single file. Meanwhile, our artillery, large and small, with incessant scream and thunder, flung tons of shells towards the enemy. Then came a strange pause in the general uproar, with both sides trying to ascertain the new positions of their respective front lines. For ten minutes the battlefield was deathly quiet; it was pouring with rain. Then again the sudden rattle of machine guns and rifle fire and the smack-smack of bullets as they passed overhead or sloshed into the mud, followed by the whine of projectiles coming over in counter-barrage. I sent some signals, but whether headquarters received them, I’ve no idea, because nothing came back. I stuck the lamp into the top of a pillbox that was being used as battalion headquarters and soon after, a lump of metal hit it and put me out of action. A number of stragglers from other units began to accumulate behind our pillbox and there we crouched together whilst the storm of missiles passed overhead. A kid came over, spewing up blood. There was a concrete hut on the Menin Road, a dressing station about fifty yards from the pillbox, and I took him down. He’d been shot in the chest and I expect he died, but I pushed him down through the mud and shell holes and got him to this first aid post where chaps were lying outside waiting their turn for treatment. I squeezed in and there were men everywhere, and blood, and coughing and moaning, that was enough for me. I returned to the pillbox where half a dozen men continued to take shelter, and they looked at me with amazement. ‘They were shooting at you all the way across and you didn’t notice!’ I didn’t. By this time they’d got another man on a stretcher, badly wounded, and they were told to take him down. Everything was in such a mess that as I leant over him to say, ‘Good luck, old man,’ the water from my tin hat tipped onto his face. ‘Get out of it,’ and he swore at me. A few Germans began coming across. We had a pot at them round the side of this pillbox before we realized they’d been taken prisoner, and were being left to make their own way back. We stopped shooting and the ragamuffin crew I was with, not West Kents I’d like to say, began nicking everything they could off these poor buggers, making them empty their pockets of watches and money and suchlike, while the rain slashed down in their faces. From the interior of the pillbox our Colonel emerged. His name was Twistleton-Wyckeman-Fiennes, a wiry grey-faced figure. He was very agitated and was waving his Colt .45 revolver around. Spying me, and practically sticking his revolver in my face, he gave me an order. I got as far as the next row of pillboxes, when an officer came along with a group of jocks. They were shouting and pointing to a man stumbling across with his head in his hands as if he was blind. ‘Look after him,’ they shouted. I couldn’t, of course, it would have taken half an hour to get over to him and, in any case, he was going in the right direction. Shortly afterwards I looked back and he was gone. Just then a shell burst in the air above me, casting shrapnel all about. Blood streamed down my face and my arm felt immediately numb. I was wondering what to do when another officer came by, wounded in the shoulder. ‘You going back to Headquarters? Tell them that Lieutenant Lithgow is wounded and he’s gone back.’ That was all the excuse I needed, so I struggled back and into the dugout and reported to the Colonel, wiping blood out of my eyes as I did so.

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'One behind the other in a seemingly endless line, we made our way forward. Every step was heavy and laboured and our bodies were bent right forward. All our faces were serious, but determined. Nobody spoke a word; all were pre-occupied with their own thoughts of parents, wife and child. Everyone knew that we were to be confronted by an utterly appalling and chaotic situation. Initially we made reasonable progress, because the craters were not too tightly packed together and it was possible to go round them. Now and again a salvo of shells disturbed our movement. Now and then there was the sound of cursing and above the monotonous tramp of the feet could be heard low shouts of, "Wire!" From the rear came the call of, "Step short in front!" to be matched by calls from the front of, "Keep up!"' Detachments which had already been relieved loomed up towards us. In passing there were many exchanged whispers, but nobody stopped because they were in a hurry to reach their well-earned billets. The concentrations of fire became heavier. A stifled cry and muffled moaning told of the first wounded. The way forward became worse and worse. The soft earth which was raised up above the water had become trampled by the passage of the feet of hundreds of soldiers into a uniquely saturated and almost bottomless morass. It was rare to cover more than a few paces without sinking in over the ankles. Right and left were craters full of black filthy mud and water. They represented a terrible danger. We negotiated them with the utmost care in the darkness in order to avoid slipping and falling into the water-filled holes, a fate which soon befell one of our number.' It was important not to make too much noise during the rescue, but unfortunately the involuntary cry of the man who fell seemed to have alerted the enemy, because suddenly there was a burst of firing. Once having begun, the firing never let up. In the end we arrived and occupied the muddy shell holes. In order to make ours as homely as possible, we shovelled the water out, then erected a platform for the gun and tried to orientate ourselves with our surroundings as well as we could in the darkness. The sky was full of lights, flashes and flares and heavy bangs and crashes were heard from near and far. Spread out among the craters the men maintained a sharp look out forwards, for the enemy was not far away. The cold night air was viciously cold, so we huddled close together in our crater for warmth. From time to time we were forced to shift our position because the water kept running in over the tops of our boots.' Uncomfortable their position may have been, but they did not have long to wait before they were fighting for their lives.