



## A Soldier's journey back in time and place



by Joan Hebbes

WAR: The word is blunt, cold.

WAR brings to mind images of death and destruction; for many it is synonymous with hatred and fear.

But for World War I Signalman and Gunner William J. Weyman, war is "a vividly retained memory of the battles, the men who fought with me, and the men who lost their lives beside me."

The 94-year-old Bradford resident holds a special account of World War I, and it is, quite literally, his own account. Weyman maintained a private journal of events and experiences, from 1916 when he signed up with the 9th Scottish Highland Artillery Division, to the signing of the Armistice on November 11, 1918.

Though 75 years have passed since Weyman first fought in the war, he is still able to recall from memory, the words contained in his journal.

In an interview with *The Today*, Weyman read excerpts from his journal and described certain events of the war.

World War I, referred to on service medals as "The Great War for Civilization" had been underway for two years when Weyman joined.

On November 8, 1916, Weyman was sent across the English Channel to France, and from there he and others marched to a base camp south of Arras, near the front line.

"In those days" said Weyman, reading from the journal, "it was only the heavy artillery units that had mechanical transport. We had horses. With rain and snow and no overhead cover, the animals were almost always standing in deep mud and it needed the constant efforts of everyone to cope with this problem."

When they reached the next camp, rations in the form of tea, biscuits and canned pork and beans were distributed.

"This was my first contact with P&B" he said, chuckling. "In my ignorance I had thoughts of a succulent meal. Opening the can I commenced to eat, using a spoon

and soon began to wonder when I might find some pork."

"Eventually, now full of beans, I found in the bottom of the tin, an inch cube of some substance. I was assured by some 'Old Timers' that it was pork. So it followed the beans."

Christmas came and went for the soldiers, with extra rations, including a roast pig bought from a local farmer, and "a spot of rum." The end of the "severe" winter marked the resurgence of warfare.

In February 1917, Weyman and 16 others proceeded to the front line at Arras, about five miles south of Vimy Ridge. "This was my first sight of, and introduction to, war as it was."

He and others billeted in the partially destroyed and "desolate" town, and he said they would explore the town regularly. "We were all young and at this time there was a sense of adventure about it all. We had yet to learn that it was no game."

During his time in the town of Arras, a comrade of Weyman suffered a somewhat ignoble wound.

"One day as we were leaving the billet, we heard the noise made by an approaching shell. It seemed likely to fall close to us, so we dropped to the ground and remained as low as possible."

"One member of our party, who was always slow in his movements and generally awkward, got to a kneeling position with his rear end uppermost. Sure enough, he was the only one to be hit, a piece of shrapnel making a ragged wound in his exposed pant. We had always joked about being hit in that part of the anatomy...and there were some hilarious suggestions made as we applied bandages."

Though some of Weyman's journal entries seem lighthearted, he emphasized that without brevity, the constant danger would have driven him mad.

On April 1, 1917, Weyman began his journey into hell.

The British had planned a third battle at Ypres, at the village of Passchendaele. British Commander-in-Chief Sir Douglas Haig,

fresh from a mining victory at Messines, south of Ypres, ordered troops to storm Passchendaele, a bombed-out village still in the hands of the German army.

Historians say that the Battle of Passchendaele, in which Weyman fought, was doomed to failure.

Though Haig's intelligence staff advised against the offensive, citing poor drainage in the marsh-like area and the fact that the Germans had fortified their position there for years, Haig gave the order to attack.

History books indicate that nearly two million Germans and British Empire soldiers fought during this battle, known as the 'battle of the mud.' The price for advancing half a mile was high; 280,000 British soldiers died, and 400,000 Germans perished.

The conditions were so bad, that horses, guns, and tanks just sank in the mud. Men were mired hip-deep, and some even drowned in the liquid muck.

Reading from his journal, Weyman states, "A daily rate of casualties became inevitable, and to avoid being included in this list, one had to be in the right place at the right time, and in addition, enjoy lots of luck."

"One night," said Weyman, "a few hours before dawn, three of us had to go forward on observation duty. Some days before, mounted units were sent in against entrenched machine guns, and the result needs little description."

"The deadliness of that weapon was made evident by what was lying around. Dead horses and in many cases, men's bodies lightly covered with earth were everywhere. It was spring, the weather was warm, wet, and the stench was indescribable."

"The sights by now (of dead soldiers) did not bother me much. My urge was to get away from that smell. I don't think I ever have (gotten away from the stench) because even today when I think about it, the smell, it seems it is still to be detected. I believe that was the last time the Cavalry was used in battle."

Some time later, still at Passchendaele, the British soldiers were "greeted by a bombardment of gas shells and 23 men were gassed."

"During the next few days," said Weyman, "some unfortunates 'bought it.' That term," he explained, "referred to the fact that the men were alive, but had lost their legs. It was a most unfriendly reception."

It was during this battle that Weyman had an experience "more vivid and lasting than anything else I experienced throughout my time in France."

During the battle, Weyman stepped out of the dug-out and

looked west to the setting sun and then north, to the horizon. "As far as I could see," he said, "the land was fitted with shell holes, one merging into the other. Then suddenly there was a pause, complete silence. No gunfire, no rifle or machine guns firing, nothing. All I could see was the widespread devastation. With the evening shadows it was uncanny, for the shell holes were now emphasized by their own shadowy depths."

The fighting resumed and according to Weyman, the bombardment was the heaviest he had ever experienced. He added that the roar of so many guns firing in unison was supposedly heard in the south of England.

The British forces eventually claimed Passchendaele, but the quagmire that was the battlefield prevented further advance. Indeed, the troops were halted, and then withdrawn.

Weyman continued to fight

until March 1918 when a stack of 35 lb. shells fell on his right leg, fracturing the bones in his ankle. He was sent back to England and was convalescing and preparing to rejoin his comrades, when the Armistice was signed on Nov. 11, 1918.

The four-year war took almost nine million lives, wounding over 21 million men. An estimated 265,000 civilians were listed as dead or missing.

Weyman's 61 page journal ends with a few immortal thoughts.

"This is all old history now but, to we of that generation, it is never old because we lived it. So much happened in that short period of our lives that it seems but yesterday. We lived and, we measured our own time by each hour we had. A fatalism came and although "It" (death) could and did, happen to others, the thought remained, "It" cannot happen to me."



**WORLD WAR I SOLDIER** Bill Weyman narrowly escaped death on four separate occasions during the war. The signalman and gunner from the 9th Scottish Highland Artillery Division, 50th Brigade, fought in the third Battle of Ypres, at Passchendaele. The battles at Passchendaele have been noted for the large losses of life (280,000 British, 210,000 German) and the unbelievably bad field conditions. The unceasing rain converted the reclaimed marshland into fields of muck.



**BILL WEYMAN** as a young soldier in 1916; gunner and signalman with the 9th Scottish Highland Artillery. Bill Weyman at 94 years of age; 10-year resident at Miller Park, Bradford. His 61-page diary describing his experiences as a soldier, as well as commentary on battles, is "one of my most prized possessions" says Bill. Though the Archives are interested in obtaining the book, Bill says that he will present the diary to his son.

A few lines extracted from Bill Weyman's journal

*The hopeless expressions on the faces of so many of them were such as are seldom seen. We went back for rest, reinforcements and new equipment.*