

TRUE WAR STORIES

No. 1

THOMAS BAKER BROWN

1/2^d



PLUCKY JOHNNY BULL FOUGHT OFF THE GERMAN ADVANCE ARMED ONLY WITH A SPOON

Even in the run-up to the First World War, boys' comics were filled with hair-raising stories about the Germans invading Britain, destroying Big Ben and removing King George — however, in such stories they were always rebuffed by small bands of strapping young British heroes, triumphing against impossible odds and defeating the enemy with raw courage and British ingenuity.

But when the real War came, how did the typical soldier's story compare with the ripping yarns they had read ?

G.



R.

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1. Thomas Baker Brown was a typical young lad from Kettlewell School in North Shields. Throughout his boyhood he was taught repeatedly about the heroic 'derring-do' of British soliders, sailors and explorers throughout the ages; Kitchener, Kipling, Scott, Nelson, Clive of India, all were held up as shining examples of British exceptionalism.



2. So, at the outbreak of War, it was perfectly natural for red-blooded able-bodied young men of North Shields to sign up for the Army as soon as they could at the recruiting station in the Presbyterian Church in Howard Street - most Britons assumed the War would be over quickly, for everyone said that "One Briton is worth two Germans, three French and four Russians"

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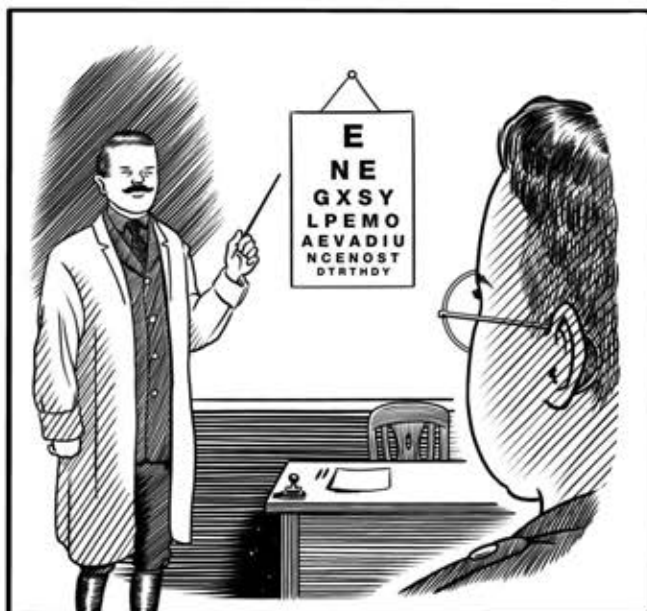
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1. Since the minimum age for service at the Front was 19, Thomas had to wait until November 1915 to sign up. He was sent to the Scarcroft Schools Training Camp in York, and put into the "Clerks' Platoon" of the 6th Northumberland Fusiliers. He was trained in bombing, signalling and musketry.



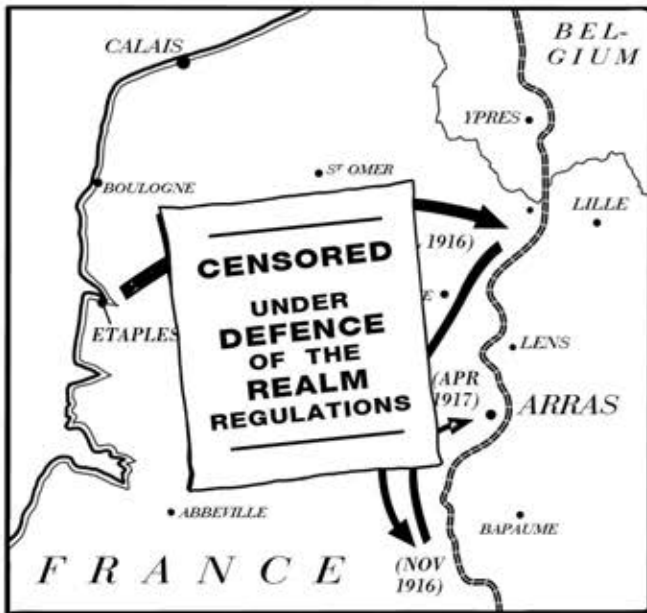
2. However, after medics tested Thomas's eyesight, they determined it was poor enough that he needed to wear glasses in order to hit a target with a rifle, and thus he also missed out on joining the Royal Flying Corps.



3. Instead, Thomas was placed in the Signalling Section in March 1916, and by July was serving in France alongside his brother George. Both brothers were transferred to the 21st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers.



4. Thomas was very proud of the 21st Tyneside Scottish Battalion, describing them as a "second-to-none brigade" and "not excelled by any battalion in the Army."



1. Thomas's letters home reveal little of his movements with the Fusiliers, since any mention of where he was based was censored by the regimental officers. That would reveal troop movements if the letters fell into enemy hands! But we do know that Thomas fought near the French town of Arras...



2. One of Thomas's most vital duties as a signaller was as a 'runner' - he had to carry messages himself from one outpost to another, while risking being shot at from both sides. On 9th April 1917 at Arras, a particularly hazardous message run under enemy fire earned him a recommendation for the Military Medal.



3. Thomas - along with another North Shields man, Sergeant Crowe - was presented with the Military Medal at North Shields Town Hall by Sir Thomas Oliver, Honorary Colonel, Tyneside Scottish Brigade.



4. Sir Thomas was careful to tell the audience that the Army did not give out medals 'lavishly', and that many other soldiers would have been given medals if their officers had been there to see their bravery, or if the officers had not been killed before they could report it.



1. Many of Thomas's letters from France detailed the daily life as a combat soldier - there were many complaints about the vast amounts of mud churned up as rain washed down the Trenches, and requests for things hard to get at the Front - socks, books, gloves, razor blades, 'Gong Soups' and batteries for his torch, plus a 'Somerville's Body Cord'...



2. He also told of the simple but welcome pleasures to be had when the men were away from the Trenches - there were cinema shows, football matches, concert parties, and once Thomas was invited into a French home for coffee.

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I am quite well.

*I have been admitted into hospital
{ sick } and am going on well.
{ wounded } and hope to be discharged soon.*

I am being sent down to the base.

*I have received your { letter dated 8th
telegram,
parcel ..*

Letter follows at first opportunity.

I have received no letter from you

*{ totally
for a long time.*

Signature } *Tommy.*
only }

Date 15/4/17

[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

3. But there were many things that Thomas could not or would not write about. We already know that troop movements and locations were secret, and stories of deaths were demoralising to those at home, so such things were censored by the Army. So, often troops would use "Field Postcards" pre-printed with generic messages, simply crossing off the part which didn't apply; there were also green "Honour Envelopes" which the men used to declare that the letter inside contained nothing forbidden.



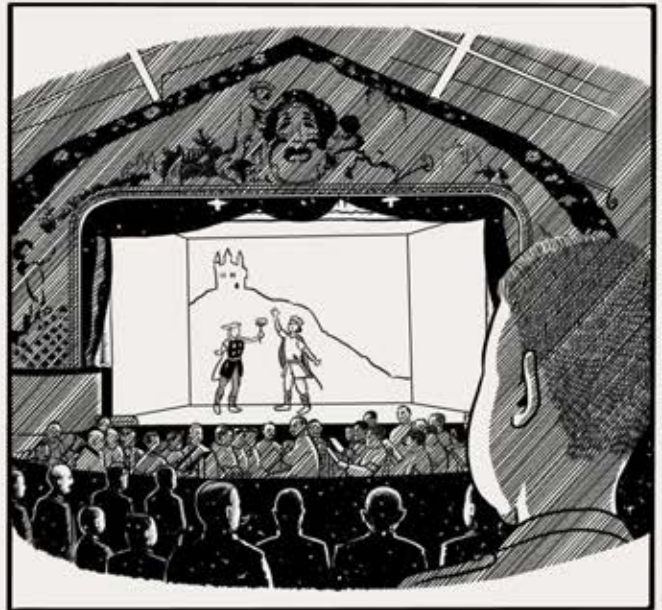
1. In March 1918 the Germans, realising that the arrival of the United States into the Great War meant they might soon be outnumbered, decided their best chance of winning the War was to launch a massive attack on the Allies and crush them before the Americans arrived.



2. Thus, on 21st March 1918, began their Spring Offensive or "Kaiserschlacht", in which the Germans poured over the existing Front Lines in huge numbers - it was during this 'push' that the Northumberland Fusiliers at Bullecourt were overwhelmed by the Germans, and Thomas was amongst 16,000 men taken prisoner.



3. Thomas was taken to a Prisoner of War camp in Dülmen (His family learned of this from a Red Cross postcard sent out after Thomas's name appeared on one of the regular prisoner list despatches from Berlin). He was one of the few survivors from his Company - as he said in a postcard from Dülmen, "all my chums were casualties."



4. However, life in Dülmen was in some ways better than being an active soldier - the men no longer had to spend days covered in mud, the Red Cross still delivered parcels, and Dülmen even had its own theatre - allowing Thomas to bring home a theatre ticket as a souvenir later.



1. Dülmen was classed as a 'head camp', meaning that prisoners were kept there temporarily until they were moved on to a 'work camp'. So Thomas was soon moved to Limburg, and finally to the mining camp at Herzogenrath near the Dutch border. Life there proved not so pleasant as Dülmen, as the prisoners were conscripted to work in the "North Star" coal mine.



2. The prisoners found small ways to frustrate their captors; men would hide in old mine workings to avoid work, and once Thomas managed to tip a full tub of coal back down the shaft while operating the mine's haulage machine.



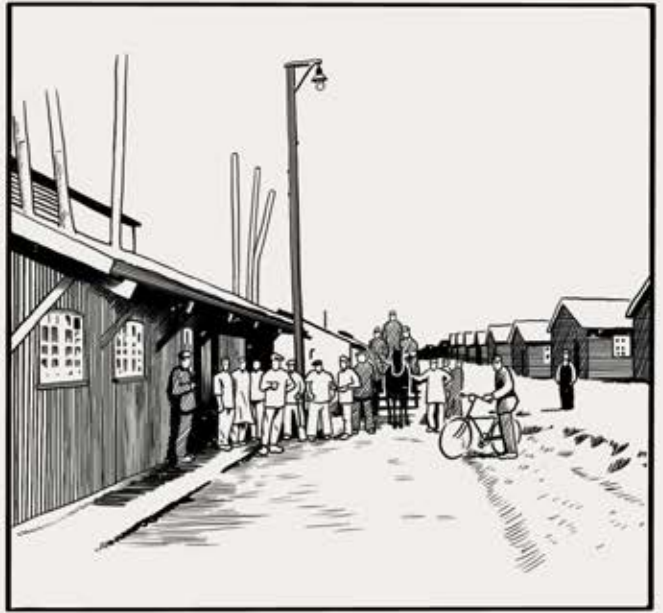
3. But when men were caught pulling such tricks, they were punished - some were sent to solitary confinement in the punishment block in the dark for 48 hours, while Thomas himself was once chained to a pole and made to stand to attention without food or water from dawn until mid-day.



4. The Great War ended on 11th November 1918; command at the mining camp broke down, so Thomas and five other prisoners took the opportunity to simply walk out of the front gate!



1. The six comrades walked westwards towards the Dutch border, skirting around the town of Herzogenrath to avoid the remaining German soldiers they saw there. A few days later, they crept through a breach in the frontier wire and encountered a Dutch soldier.



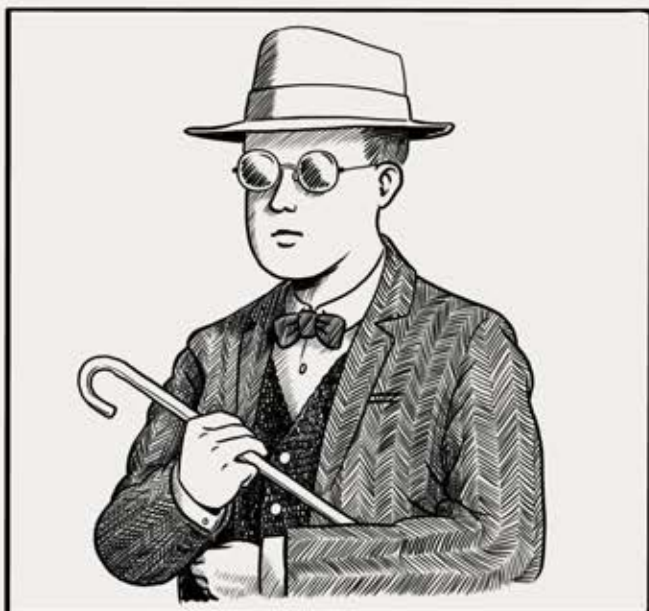
2. The men were transferred to Amersfoort camp, where they stayed briefly at Vlasackers Barracks. Thomas joined the large party of British ex-prisoners who then made their way to Rotterdam by the 3rd of December, where he was given a complete new uniform and plenty of food.



3. Thomas was brought home on a troop transport, the S.S. Arbroath, which took him to Hull by the 8th of December. He returned to Ripon Camp where he was given two pounds ten shillings back pay and six weeks' leave.



4. From there Thomas took the train back to North Shields.



1. Despite declaring himself “in the pink” and “champion” in his letters from the camps, Thomas’s eyesight had been made much worse by working conditions in the mines, and in the 1930s he became blind for five years. Although he recovered some sight, he was deemed unfit for fighting in World War 2, so Thomas served on the Home Front instead.



2. As time went by, Thomas took up the task of collecting his various letters, maps and souvenirs together in order to write his own memoirs of the the Great War. All of these are now preserved by Newcastle University Library.

“... So started, like tens of thousands of young men, a happy, adventurous, exhilarating, dirty, squalid, degrading and frightening experience.”

- Thomas Baker Brown, 21st Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers 38573 T.B.Brown

WRITTEN AND DRAWN BY TERRY WILEY

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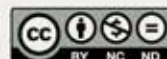
REFERENCES in the Thomas Baker Brown Collection:—

‘War & Rumours Of War’ TBB/2/7/1/1
Letters TBB/1/1/1
Newspaper article re: Military Medal TBB/1/2
Maps TBB/2/5/2
POW documents TBB/1/7
‘Escaping or Evading Work’ TBB/2/7/1/2

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