

# Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

## INTERVIEW BETWEEN PERCY REBOUL AND ERNEST DAVIDSON OF PARK ROAD, EAST BARNET ON 3 DECEMBER 1978

PR I would like to start from the end. Can you remember what you were doing on Armistice Day?

ED About two days before we were working on a trestle bridge because the Germans were retreating very fast at this time. It took 22 hours to put up this bridge. The artillery officer demanded that his troops would go over even before we had finished the bridge. The first lot went over and the bridge started tilting and we stopped the rest going over. We went on to a place near Mons, that was on the 10th on a much smaller bridge and on the following morning for some reason there seemed to be no life and we weren't told until about 10 o'clock when an officer came along and said "all right you can pack up now – go back to your billets. It's the finish" and it was then that we learned that the war was over. This came as a tremendous shock to me and I walked for miles, absolutely stunned. After all this time, the whole lot was over. I began to wonder, what was I going to do in civvy life I didn't want to go back into the job I left, it was too uninteresting. Anyway, I came back, and most of us were just wandering about really, not a scrap of excitement.

PR You didn't have a drink or anything – you just wandered around?

ED This didn't last. We went into the town, and where the drink came from I do not know, I never have never been so paralytic in all my life. One very vivid memory, when I went out at the back of the garden and it came out of me from every possible part... It was the same with everybody else, there was no discipline at all, nobody worried... We tried to recover the following day. That was my memories of 11th November 1918...

PR What about the noise, because when people talk to me about the fantastic noise in the front positions and the turning off of the noise it must have made you wonder?

ED All we were doing was firing at the Germans who were retreating very, very fast. It's not like being in the front line where you were being bombarded. There was a certain amount of noise....

PR You were in the Royal Engineers and one of your roles was the key one of building the bridges. Can we now go back right to the beginning because I know from our previous talk that you were in the Territorial Army. Could you say a bit about that?

ED I joined in 1909 at the age of 16 in the Artillery as a trumpeter which is the lowest form of animal life. I eventually became a gunner there and by the time I had done

four years there I was looking for a change and I wanted to join this balloon section up at Westminster. I went up there and it was closed that night and walking up Regency Street I saw a notice there 'the London Electrical Engineers' and as there were some troops inside I was nosy enough to go in there and find out what it was. The sergeant-major in there wanted to know what I wanted so I when I told him I was interested because I saw the troops in there he said "Do you want to join?" and then he asked what was my trade and when I said "I haven't got one" he said "Oh, well, you can't join this crowd anyway" So said "You had better join the Second Fusiliers" I said "No, I am already in the artillery. I am just finishing up my four years now." He said: "We are allowed to bring in two or three non- tradesmen" Anyway, I signed up and I was in that lot - they were all highly technical individuals, most of them telephone managers and skilled electricians. We were able to go into any Army unit with far more scientific knowledge than even the regular troops.

PR They were already trained in telephone work in civilian life....

ED They were telephone managers in civilian life.

PR What was their role in the Army?

ED Mostly what was called coast defence...? That was all the fortresses all round the country – Plymouth and Portsmouth and places like that. And the Thames Estuary and right up to Newcastle. There were only two lots of engineers, that was the London Electrical Engineers and the Tidy (?) Electrical Engineers. They were really skilled and when they went round these forts putting up telephone exchanges it was their ordinary civilian occupation...

PR How many people were in the regiment?

ED There were four companies and each company would have about thirty in it.

PR Do you remember the name of the Commanding Officer?

ED Colonel Crompton .

PR How did the regiment get involved in the war?

ED We could take up Imperial Service.

PR What does that mean?

ED The ordinary Territorial in those days only signed on for home service, but taking over Imperial Service meant that we had other obligations, so we could be called out even if there wasn't a war on. or even the threat of war

PR Did you get extra money for that?

ED No.

PR What was the pay?

ED You had two types of pay – one and three halfpence a day as your soldiers' pay and then you had working pay. You started off at fourpence a day at the lowest rank, then you would pass an exam and then you would get eight pence, then it went to a shilling and 1s 2d was the top rate. That was on top of your Army pay.

PR What do you remember about being called up?

ED On the day I was called up I had just returned from my midday meal and about half past two in the afternoon the telephone rang and somebody at the other end said: "Come up at once. Report back to Regency Street at once." I said: "I'm at work, I can't do that". So I went back home again and got into my Army uniform and went up to Regency Street where they had lorries there waiting for us and I was sent to Waterloo Station with several more and got the train at five o'clock and I was on my way to Plymouth. My boss was the Colonel of the Twentieth London and when he heard he was astonished, so he rang his adjutant up at Blackheath and said: "Have you heard about the Territorials being called out?" My governor was pretty annoyed to think that one of his staff had been called up in the Territorials and he knew nothing about the war. They were going to fortnight's camp the next weekend and, of course, they never came back from that, because the war had started by then. This was on July 26 and we went straight down to Plymouth and the following morning everything was at war stations. - fully equipped and operating.

PR Can we now go to France? When did that happen?

ED In the early part of 1915 they introduced what they called an oxy-acetylene searchlight and our regiment were the people to run that. I volunteered for that because I was very anxious to get out there and I thought it would be back shortly afterwards as I suffered from rheumatism. Anyway, we went out with these searchlights which were absolutely useless for the job. You were supposed to go into the trench and get the thing going and pop it up on a rod ....

PR How did it work?

ED They had a cylinder with oxygen in and it impinged on to the same thing that a mantle is made from and that reflected off a silver mirror which sent the beam out.

PR And this was a canister of carbide and a cylinder of oxygen and combined into a gas mantle.

ED Yes. It was like a blowlamp that would impinge onto the mantle which was white hot. The idea was to pick up working parties in No Man's Land.

PR So, they seriously suggested that you put up a searchlight .... You said it was no good, so what happened?

ED There was only one went up. When Jerry saw it he put up everything possible... He wrecked it. The only time we used them afterwards was when we had concert

parties – we would stick them at the back of the barn. They were discarded in the end and carted away, and we never saw them again...

PR When you went over to France did you go over by troop ship?

ED Oh, yes.

PR Was it escorted?

ED It must have been.

PR What was the reaction of the French when you got over there?

ED First of all, I went to Rouen, up the River Seine. I have never had a more enjoyable time.

PR Did the French welcome the Tommies?

ED Only from the money we spent. The conditions in Rouen were absolutely terrible. It was wicked the way we were treated. We had to go down the docks at six in the morning and unload boats. Chaps watching you until eight o'clock at night. And if you had the chance to go up the line, you voted for it.

PR Where was the line at that time?

ED We used to go in cattle trucks. You would go about 10 miles. We went into an old farmhouse and things were very very good indeed. We would go up the line everyday, which was about a mile away, and we would help keep the whole lot in repair where it had been knocked down in the night – sandbagging etc.

PR What was the role of this specialist regiment?

ED The people who started the searchlights in London when the Zeppelin raids. Only 72 of us went over and we were spilt up into six groups of 12. And each 12 went tot a different field company. We were discarded our role as electrical engineers and just became ordinary field troops... Those that were left in England formed the basis of London Searchlight defences when the Zeppelins came over.

PR So you were involved in the building of trenches? It's sad that the British trenches were far inferior to the German ones. Why is that?

ED They used all French stuff. The dugouts were all close timbered. We used to put a board in, then a bit of wire, and, of course it didn't hold the earth in. Theirs were magnificent – they were very skilled.

PR They were deeper too, weren't they?

ED I wouldn't say they were deeper, As long as you could dig a hole and get down there, we were quite content.

- ED You seem to be suggesting that this was because you didn't have the raw materials.
- ED We weren't so thorough,
- PR You have said you went over to France full of enthusiasm; it was all going to be over soon. What was the attitude generally among the troops?
- ED We were all youngsters. I won't say we enjoyed it, but the friendship among us. We were a couple of miles behind the lines. You went up the hill and you were observed by the Germans but there was nowhere near the shelling that there was later on.
- PR So the men on the whole were full of it. When did things start to change?
- ED The Somme, July 1916. Places like Rouen were absolutely packed with troops. Bodies all over the place, amputations going on. Shocking. We saw the hospital trains coming down the line, then we realised there was a real war on.
- PR This vast number of casualties, 60,000, how do you get that many bodies off the field?
- ED Well, you don't. You leave them there.
- PR The stench must have been absolutely appalling...
- ED Ohm, it was. There was no sanitary accommodation. A couple of sticks and a pole.....
- PR And you were very vulnerable while you were sitting there.
- ED There was a youngster, nobody had got to the rank he had at the age of 25, and he got one to himself, just sitting on the pole. But the worst part up at Ypres, the weather was terrible cold, the ground was solid and we had to put the wire pickets in with a sledge hammer. Without any warning a change took place and every thing went to mud. They were four or five of them in a shell hole and it was just oozing mud, it thawed very quickly. Gradually they started to sink. We got an SOS and we got long lengths of canvas and about every foot we put a strip of wood and we bundled them up and went across to the line to try and rescue these chaps – to walk on these strips. It didn't last very long, because very soon that was under the mud, but it was enough to get quite a lot of them out with trench boards as well and gradually got them on to firmer ground.
- PR I have often heard it said that as many men were lost in the mud as were killed by shell fire.
- ED Oh, that was true. When daylight came I had been sliding about all over the place and what I had been standing on was a body and his clothing had just rotted – he had probably been there for some months.

PR What was the first big battle you were personally involved in?

ED Loos was the first one. 25th September 1915.

PR This was before Kitchener's Army came on the scene.

ED Oh, yes. The regulars. There had been some gassing previous to that and we thought we would have a go. We took the cylinders up there and the wind took it straight back into our lines. Our chaps were choking on their own gas. People like the Scottish did well – they had gone past Loos and had to come back again because neither flank had kept up with them.

PR What were the men frightened of at the front?

ED We had no gas masks, just a hood with a bit of mica to put across. Just tuck it in your tunic. Two minutes after you got those on you couldn't breathe. Gas was the worst. There was quite a bit of good humour. In those early days they were a different type of soldier to those later on. I'm not blaming Kitchener's Army because they did wonderfully well, but they had so little experience. They gave them very short training over here.

PR This was really the cream of the British Army and they were getting smaller...

ED You were having to bring so many of them back to train Kitchener's Army.

PR What was the next big event?

ED As far as myself was concerned, they decided to disband us, the oxy-acetylene, and we all went back, to Rouen and several went to England – they were the real experts – and others felt that it was time they applied for a commission. I went up the line again with what they called Army Troop Companies they did more permanent jobs at the back of the line, somewhere about say ten miles. They did water supplies, pumping stations. There were two of us at a pumping station and I was there some considerable time. There was funny incident there – although the water was absolutely pure, what you had to contend with was that a soldier would put tea in his water bottle and tipped it out and it was never cleaned properly and then he would then put water in it. In order to overcome that they had chlorine to disinfect the water. We were doing the pumping up but there were one or two infantrymen who were doing the tanks. We had a gipsy there and he was told "put two spoonfuls to so many gallons." When he opened it, the tin fell out and he used his memory of scoops and he tipped half the tin in the tank. What he had thrown away was a tiny little scoop. The Australians were a little way from us and they came up with their tool cart and they boiled tea up the next morning. They went on parade and one chap runs, then another chap runs. Of course, you couldn't complain about this tea - they knew that it tasted funny, but it was all they had got.

PR Was there a post mortem on that?

- ED Oh God, yes. The Medical Officer came down and he realised it was the tea... The first thing he did was interview the chap ion the tank and he said: "How much did you put in?" "Well" he said: "I didn't have the scoop so I just shook the tin in" "But you had got a scoop, there was one in the tin!" "Oh, you don't mean that little bit of tin..."
- PR What was every man allowed a day in rations? Were you always hungry?
- ED The cook had to go to the back area to pick up the rations for the day and he had a dirty old sack and he used to put the whole lot in there.
- PR It didn't poison anyone, presumably?
- ED No.
- PR And you had a pretty good billet behind the lines...
- ED We were up in the loft of an old farm and the civvies there used to get us down in the kitchen. She used to cook us some soup which I had an idea was made out of grass, anyway it suited us. They were very friendly indeed. And one girl there, she was very keen. To her the war was absolutely glorious, she had been living there with no life and now she had or twelve soldiers all chasing her. One chap there spoke very good French. They used to clean the place up in the day and get it ready for us at night time.
- PR What are your memories of the battle of Passchendael?
- ED At that time I was never so fit in all my life. We walked up what they called the corduroy road made up of planks. They had to get the ammunition up, so they had to keep the road going. This was forest planking – you put two bearers down and then planking across. Of course, the job was to get it up there. You had a party of about two hundred infantrymen down at Ypres with two men to a plank, one at one end and one at the other and then go in a single line in the mud, they would dump it there and our chaps, the engineers, would lay it down. We looked at their records and they had done minus eighty yards and they had been there for about three months. We took a very dim view of this, and the other sections, too. The Germans knew the exact range and our two hundred yards went up in about four seconds! So, we were minus a darned sight more. To get something solid everything was dumped in the holes dead horses, the lot.
- PR You were trying tom build this road so that the troops could come up for this battle?
- ED This road was more for getting ammunition up to the artillery. There were other jobs in the back area; four or five chaps would be in the gun positions. They had built several gun positions in the back area and they would rely on those for defence.

- PR I've only read about this colossal barrage that went on for seven days before the battle. I know you could hear the gunfire from England. The row must have been absolutely colossal.
- ED Yes.
- PR So where were you when this barrage went on?
- ED I missed the Battle of the Somme; I was not far away though. Shortly afterwards the field companies were losing men pretty rapidly and I went up from the Second Division to the Eighth Division and was in the Armentiers area which was absolutely shocking. Directly you put your spade in, the hole filled up with water, so we put sandbag walls up but even then you got at least two feet of water. This is the peculiar part – I had rheumatism as a youngster but all the time I was out there I never had the slightest touch of it.
- PR What were the things that afflicted you in those conditions? Obviously, you were lousy.....
- ED That was one thing you couldn't stop. Trench foot was another but from a RE point of view we were far too active. We went up there to work whereas the ordinary infantry soldier was just sitting down in the trench. They were in there for four days at a time.
- PR So you were an onlooker. What was your view of it all?
- ED I feel that we had no other option but to fight. It is one of those things you have got to put up with. I don't see how you can avoid it with the enemy coming against you. I wouldn't be a pacifist.
- PR You would do it all again?
- Ed I don't think I could avoid it.
- PR I think you believed in King and Country even though it had very little to offer you.
- ED I had some lovely times.
- PR Did you hate the Germans?
- ED I didn't get that until I went down to a school where everything we said and did was hostile to the Germans. We were all NCOs and we went back to our regiments and instilled this spirit into them. We had instructors there – guardsmen – and I was picked out to show them wiring at night time, how to wire a fence at night without making a noise. The guardsman would take us in bombing, something like that. They generated a lot of excitement; we were really spiteful to each other with bayonets. I always remember a chap from the Worcesters, they were always moaning about us having working parties when

they came out of the line, and when he was asked “Who is going to be your opponent?” He said: “Where is that bloody RA man?”

PR Did you feel any sorrow for the Germans?

ED No.

PR Presumably you had thousands of prisoners flocking in?

ED No. We were making troughs for the horses and we had some German prisoners there and, honestly, we were as friendly with them as we were with our own chaps. And they worked a darned sight better than we did. When we broke off for a meal they would sing these German songs...