

The Kick-Off

By JULIET THOMAS

Percy Brown rested his back against the dry mud wall of the trench and pulled a misshapen packet of Woodbines out of his tunic pocket. He was nineteen years old, and a long way from Granby and his job as an assistant at Fletcher's butcher's shop. Although it was the early hours of the morning, he was too excited to sleep. Besides he wasn't sorry to be awake, to have a few moments to himself. It had been chaos when they'd arrived last night. It was already dark and the narrow trenches were crawling with soldiers trying to find their allotted positions. Men who had mistakenly gone the wrong way were colliding with men trying to go the right way. Amidst all this hectic activity there were arguments and much shouting and swearing. And even when Percy found the right trench, his progress along it was slow and tedious due to the enormous number of soldiers, most of whom were hauling heavy packs.

The sight of the artillery line gunners had shocked Percy when he eventually reached the front line. After almost five months of relatively peaceful warfare, the last six days and nights of heavy bombardment of the German trenches had taken their toll. Many were stripped down to the waist. Most had blood-shot eyes. Some had blood spilling from their ears. All were exhausted.

But now it was reasonably calm and quiet. Well, calm and quiet for a trench - just the occasional sniper fire or falling shell. Every now and then everything was cast into sudden brightness when a Very Light was set off over No Man's Land to search for movement from the other side.

Here in the trench every man was in his right place. Many were asleep. Percy glanced around him – there were soldiers crammed in every available space. He was standing in a tightly packed line and he had half a mind to raise both his heavily booted feet off the floor to see whether he would remain in the same position without falling down. The trench smelt even more horrendous than usual due to the sheer number of extra men. Percy found the usual body odour, urine and cordite cocktail almost unbearable.

'Giv' us a borrow of your light, Percy-boy.'

Percy turned his head to face the man immediately to his left. 'You not asleep either, eh Fred?'

'Nah. Don't know how that lot can.' He nodded his head towards a group of soldiers opposite who were all squashed together like a tied bundle of kindling; arms entangled, heads lolling on other's shoulders. All of them were standing but all were asleep.

'Funny aint it? How you can learn to sleep any old where. Normally I'm alright me. Normally, I go straight off but not tonight.' Percy leant towards Fred to try and create a space between him and the sleeping soldier on his other side. He reached into the itchy wool of his trouser pocket for his lighter. 'What d'you reckon the time is?' he asked?

'Dunno. Hard to say. Two, maybe three. Mind you, if we're going over just before dawn, thought they would have come round and told us by now.'

'Yeah. Let's hope it doesn't start raining again. I don't think I could stand it if it was put off for another day.'

'Nah, me neither. Your dad sent you another pack of Woodbines then Percy?'

'Yeah, got a parcel this morning. He's alright, me old man. Do you know when I joined up he was pleased as punch. Took me down the White Horse for a pint of mild. Funny aint it. The day before they wouldn't have served me but now I was a soldier fighting for my country, it was alright.'

'Bleedin' hell, Percy. Are you telling me you were under age when you signed up?'

'Yeah. I went into the hall and the corporal had his head down writing on a form. He asked me how old I was and like an idiot, I said I was seventeen. Then he lifted his head, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Okay, Lad. I want you to walk straight out of this room. Now when you turn around and come back through that door, you're going to be eighteen, right." And that was that. I was signed up.'

Percy's thoughts drifted back to that afternoon in Granby village hall. It hadn't seemed very real then. There was one of Kitchener's 'Your Country Needs You' posters tacked on the wall alongside other local notices. One gave details of the youth group day-out to Blackpool. Another was a request from the Church Wives for volunteers to run the tea stall at the Harvest Festival. It had all seemed a big, exciting adventure then. And now, almost two years later, here he was about to play his part in what was going to be the most significant day of the war. The Big Push. This is what the last two years of training had all been leading up to.

'Do you know?' Fred took a deep draw on his cigarette and flicked what little remained of the cigarette end onto the duck board by his feet.

'Do you know that it's my Sylvie's birthday today? She's gonna be three. Mary sent me a picture – as bright as a button she is. Here, have a look.' He reached into the inside pocket of his tunic and pulled out a small metal tin. Gently he prised off the lid revealing a clutch of letters, a small gold cross and two photographs. Percy studied the curled picture that Fred was holding out for him. There was just enough moonlight for him to make out a small girl with tight curls and a shy smile.

'Pretty girl. Well Fred, look at it this way - there's no way you'll ever forget her birthday. First of July – the day we Brits took the Somme!'

'Been a funny old day aint it?' Fred asked.

'You can say that again. D'you know I saw Jack Planter crying. Six foot bleedin' three and crying like a girl.'

'I don't feel like that, you know. I'm not scared, just excited.'

'Yeah and me. The way I look at it, they've been planning this for months and months. They know what they're doing. There's thousands of us going over tomorrow, all up and down this line. They ain't gonna send over thousands of men just to meet their deaths. Besides, six days and six nights we've been hitting them. Let's face it, not even The Boche can stand that.'

The two men fell silent again.

Percy was the first to speak. 'I know this is going to sound real daft but I feel sorry for them bloody Bavarians over there. I mean, they've been alright really. Don't you think? Here, what you smiling at?

'I was just thinking. Remember that night when they sang for us.'

'Cor, not 'arf. They even did an encore! You know, they're only men just like us. They just happen to have a different governor and speak a different language. But we're all just doing what we're told.'

Percy leant his head back, his tin helmet pushing against the mud wall. He had an itch right in the middle of his back but there was no way he could relieve it. Not without removing his lice-infected tunic and giving his back a good scratch. He felt frustrated by the waiting. The Big Push had already been put back two days due to rain and the atmosphere amongst the Unit was dangerously thick with tension. He thought of Mary and Sylvie who would be anxiously waiting for Fred's safe return. He wished he too had a

sweetheart waiting for him. But he'd rushed off to war. Rushed off to fight in a country he'd never been to and where they spoke a language he didn't understand. But, he reasoned, he was nineteen and he had the whole of his life still ahead of him. Plenty of time for a wife and a couple of kiddies.

Percy didn't have too much longer to wait. The misty morning light began to seep through the gloom and the sun began its weary climb. Around half past five the Unit's Lieutenant Corporal squeezed himself along the trench to start briefing the men. Any soldiers still sleeping felt a hard rifle butt suddenly poked into their sides.

'Now Lads,' ordered the Lieutenant Corporal, 'Zero hour is going to be seven thirty am. Just remember everything you've already been told. You're to walk across No Man's Land calmly and orderly. There may be some fire but it is very unlikely that there can be much left of their units so just keep going. Keep in your lines – each man five yards apart and each wave one hundred yards apart. Keep your rifles at sloped shoulder and, if it makes you feel better, light a smoke. It's only three hundred yards to the other side – just a gentle morning stroll in the sunshine. When you do get there, make your way to Mouquet Farm. The field kitchens will be following and by I Iam we should all be enjoying a good hot English breakfast. Okay, lads. As you were.'

'Don't seem nothing to it, if you ask me.' Fred reflected. 'Gawd, look at old Frank.' Percy turned to crane his neck along the line of soldiers to where a young man was standing muttering to himself.

'Frank! Frank! Wakey, wakey!' Fred yelled along the line.

The man's head snapped up. He stared back at them with unseeing eyes before dropping his glance. He began muttering again. Neither Fred nor Percy said anything but the man's behaviour unnerved them. Luckily, their attention was diverted by two surprising arrivals. The first was hot coffee accompanied by a shot of rum for each soldier, which was cheerfully received. The second was even more unusual - Captain Wilson appeared carrying four leather footballs.

'I'm giving you a competition, lads. Each platoon is getting one of these and I want you to kick it between you as you make your way across No Man's Land. There will be a prize for the first platoon to get their ball into a German trench. But you've got to keep passing the ball – this is a team effort, don't forget.'

As soon as he'd moved off down the trench, Fred leant down to scoop up one of the balls. 'Right, who's got a pen?...Anyone?...Ah, thanks...There, that should do it.' He

turned the ball to face Percy - 'The Great European Cup Final. The Manchester's vs. The Bavarian's. Kick-off at Zero hour.'

After the calmness of the night, the intensive attack on the German trenches just before half past six was almost overwhelming. The trench walls shook with the force of the guns and shells. The thundering sound vibrated around the walls inside the trench which made Percy's ears physically hurt. He spread his feet to steady himself against the wall. Talking was now impossible so the men stood smoking or reading letters. Adrenaline was starting to surge through Percy's body and he wondered if the others felt the same. The ferocity of the barrage had surprised him but filled him with confidence too. Surely nothing could survive six days of it. Minute by minute the nervous tension within the trench was growing palpably. Most of the soldiers were excited and eager to get going. Some dropped to their knees to offer a final prayer. Many took the opportunity to look at photographs of their loved ones. As for Percy, he thought of home. Of his parent's small terraced house in Granby. What would they be doing right now, he wondered? His father would have probably already left for his shift in the steel works. His mother would probably be in their scullery getting breakfast ready for his three younger sisters who would all still be tucked up safely in bed.

Percy became aware that the young soldier next to him was visibly shaking. He nudged him with his elbow. 'It's just a game of football,' he mouthed at him and squeezed his arm reassuringly.

Almost as suddenly as it started, the bombardment stopped. Reassuringly, not a sound could be heard from the German side. An eerie silence fell onto the trenches and battlefield beyond. For a few surreal moments not a single human voice could be heard. All Percy could hear was the sound of larks singing, and not just one or two larks but maybe ten, twenty or even thirty. It was as if they knew that this was their one moment, their one chance to be heard. To Percy the whole thing felt like an anti-climax. He was almost disappointed, as if he'd been cheated out of this moment. But it was short lived. All along the trenches there was the sound of whistles being blown and shouts from platoon commanders. Percy grabbed the football under one arm and joined the almost intoxicated line of soldiers queuing to climb the trench ladder.

Percy focused on the pair of boots clambering up the ladder in front of him. However, when he reached the top he felt disorientated by the scene being played out before him. His unit was part of the fourth wave to leave the trench. Where he should

have seen a neat straight line walking ahead of him, was a jagged, broken one. Just a handful of stumbling soldiers was all that remained of the first two lines, probably being kept going by shocked fear and blinkered determination. As Percy watched, the wave in front began to fall to the ground, almost systematically, like a line of dominos.

‘Oi Percy!’

He turned to stare at Fred who was bellowing across the field at him.

‘The football!’

Percy dropped the ball, he had almost forgotten he was holding. He sent it flying over to Fred with a firm kick before starting to walk forwards. It took Percy’s attention away from the death and noise and horror of the action ahead of him. But as he watched the ball make its way back across the field towards him gaps began to form in the line. Finding a soldier to kick the ball to was becoming increasingly difficult. As was finding the way across the field. Percy found he was having to step around or over or, worse of all, on top of the soldiers who had been shot down. He passed the ball back to Fred who, realising that the gap on the other side of him was too big, turned back to face Percy. Just as his boot landed a well-placed kick on the ball, Fred took a hit to the chest. His head flew back. His knees buckled. And he crumpled into a heap on the grassy field. Percy watched emotionless. It almost didn’t matter to him now. He had a job to do. He, alone, had been left with the football and it was down to him to get it to the other side. Without looking up, Percy began dribbling the ball across the field, weaving in and out of the dead or wounded soldiers on the ground. The sun beat down mercilessly on his wool-encased body. He was sweating profusely. But he kept going; he was totally focused. *tac-tac-tac...* He was going to get to the German trench. *tac-tac-tac...* He was going to win the prize. *tac-tac-tac...* He was going to get to breakfast. *tac-tac-tac...* He was going to get to go home in a blaze of glory. *tac-tac-tac...* He was going to...

tac-tac-tac...