

# Last Post

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## **Private Albert ‘Smiler’ Marshall, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Essex Yeomanry**

*Born March 1897*

In 1914, Lord Kitchener and the world heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, came to Elmstead Market. They appealed for us young fellas to join up into a fighting unit called ‘Kitchener’s Army’. Kitchener was on all these placards: ‘YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS YOU’. So in Christmas week, 1914, I knocked on the door of the Essex Yeomanry in Colchester. The sergeant-major said, ‘Come in.’ He asked, ‘Well, what is your name, and how old are you?’ I told him I was seventeen. He said, ‘I think you’ve made a mistake. What year were you born?’ I told him 1897, so he said ‘Look, go outside that door and think it over.’ When I got outside, a fellow came up and said, ‘Hello! You going to join up?’ I said, ‘Yes. I want to go where there’s horses.’ He said, ‘Well, I’m going to join the Royal Horse Artillery – why don’t you come with me?’ I said, ‘I’ve been in there once, and the old sergeant-major told me to go outside and think it over.’ ‘You don’t want much thinking over. You can’t get in until you’re eighteen.’ So, I knocked again. ‘Come in,’ said the sergeant-major, ‘what can I do for you?’ I said, ‘I’d like to join the Essex Yeomanry.’ He said, ‘Right, how old are you?’ I said, ‘Eighteen.’ He said, ‘What year were you born?’ I said, ‘Eighteen ninety-six.’ He didn’t query it at all. He just said, ‘Fair enough.’

I went to train at Stanway and I went into private billets. One day, at about six in the morning we were in a field doing physical jerks – arms upward, trunk forward – bend – and there was snow on the ground. When the sergeant – Sergeant Beavis of Clacton-on-Sea, said ‘Trunk forward, bend!’, I bent down, and I was a bit of a lad – I threw a snowball at the row in front. It hit a chap up the behind. He jumped up, and so did two or three of the others. ‘Ah! Very funny!’ said the sergeant. ‘You can break your mother’s heart, but you won’t break mine!’ I tried to look innocent. ‘Yes, son, I’m talking to you, smiler!’ The next morning and whenever I met my pals, it was, ‘Morning Smiler!’ and that went right through the war. Letters and everything. Even to this day, wherever I go, I’m known as ‘Smiler’.

I experienced gas twice – and it’s still with me now. The first time was mustard gas and the second lot – I only got a whiff of it – goodness knows what it was. If you got a proper dose you wouldn’t be alive, but as it reached us, blow my boots if the wind didn’t change and it blew right back over no-man’s-land – right back on the Germans. True as I’m here. That particular gas made my eyes water. You couldn’t stop crying – water was running from your eyes. When we had the first lot of gas, we had a piece of muslin and tied at the back of our heads: this covered our nose and mouth. By the second lot we’d got gas masks which came right over your head. They were terribly hot and awful, but still, they stopped the gas. But the gas is still with me today. It makes me itch every morning and at six every night. You can see my skin is all dry. Tonight, my arm will itch from the top to the elbow. And so will the back of my neck. It feels like a needle pricking you. And that’s from ninety years ago. I’ve got some ointment stuff that the doctor gave me, but that only eases it – it doesn’t cure it.

We got used to standing in a fire trench and trying to aim through a tiny hole, just big enough to get the rifle through. We used to watch there for the German snipers. When a German fired, you might see a little spark come out of the barrel, and you’d fire through

that tiny hole and try to get him. I remember when Lenny Paswell, my best friend, said, 'Let me have a go, Smiler,' and he jumped on to the fire trench and put his rifle through that tiny hole. I saw him fall – I was in the trench close by him and I put my arm out and I caught him. His rifle stuck in the hole – but the sniper had got him, right through that tiny little hole. I laid him down and sang 'Nearer My God, To Thee' to him until help arrived. When Geoffrey Weir, his sergeant, came along, I said, 'He's my best pal – let me take him to the communications trench.' The sergeant said 'He's in my troop. I'll take him.' I begged him to let me take Lenny – I knew where the first aid place was – it was in a chalk pit. But the sergeant took him and as he carried Lenny along, a trace mortar fell right on the parapet and blew it in, so the sergeant had to wait until that settled, and then he had to lift Lenny over it. For a fraction of a minute, he was exposed to the enemy. He got the DCM for that – for taking a wounded soldier to the first dressing-station. Well, later when I saw Lenny I said, 'You're very lucky! You've got a Blighty one. I'll write to your mum in England.' It was awfully difficult to write – but I did. I wrote and said, 'Expect Len home any day. I broke his fall and he's got a Blighty one. About four or five weeks later, I had a letter from Lenny's mum. She said that Lenny had died three days later. He never got back to Blight. He's buried in Béthune Town Cemetery. His mother received £800 – but £1 was deducted for the blanket in which he was buried. A few years ago I went to France, to Béthune, and I laid a wreath on his grave. So I know exactly where Lenny is.

Sometimes we used our swords, and funnily enough – even though the Germans were good fighters – as soon as they saw the swords, or the lancers coming at them with the horses, they skedaddled as fast as they could, back to their trenches. On one occasion at Cambrai, we came across a group of about a hundred Germans out on reconnaissance. They were very surprised to see us and scattered, but we charged them on horseback across an open field. We drew our swords and simply cut them down. It was cut and thrust at the gallop. They never stood a chance. The Germans wouldn't stay put against a cavalry charge. They scampered into the trench right quick, and into the tunnels.

The worst sight I saw in the war was Mametz Wood. It was a small-scale Somme, if I can put it that way. There were two woods, and the German front line was on the edge of one wood, and ours was in the open, on a hill. It was about 200 yards long and 150 yards wide. The Ox and Bucks infantry had been sent out to Mametz village from Bury St Edmunds. They were beautiful, clean and smart because they'd just arrived. I was in Mametz village with about twenty of our regiment on a working party. We were a bit muddy and rough. They'd taken us away from our troops and our horses. For two days and two nights, our artillery bombarded Mametz Wood and it was thunder and lightning – that's the only way that I can describe it. There wasn't a tree or a stick left standing. The earth was blowing this way and that. Having spent the night in Mametz village, the Ox and Bucks went over at half past six in the morning. Their objective was to capture Mametz Wood. Well, they went over this short bit of no-man's-land in two waves. And by nine o'clock there were nine or ten of them left – the whole lot were dead.

The next night, on our working party, we rolled their bodies into shallow holes and covered a little dirt over them. But the next day, there was nothing. You couldn't see them – just plain ground again. But the whole regiment was under there, just a foot deep. All dead. I reckon Mametz Wood was the worst sight I saw in the war. I reckon so, and I saw lots of terrible things.

During a battle, you couldn't tell how many were killed on either side. All you knew was what your part was. There could be a terrible battle going on no further away than the end of your lane, but you wouldn't know until you were told the next morning that your mate was killed. You'd only know the part of battle that you could see but the rest was just a matter of shells bursting here, bursting there, bursting everywhere – and you couldn't get out of the way of them. It wouldn't have mattered what you did. So really and truly you never thought beyond the area that you were in. Now and then it would become quiet, and you could hear them catching it a little further away. You knew people were getting killed but you couldn't tell how many. You lost people every day.

We used to try and write letters home but – oh crikey. Say that you had an envelope and a writing pad – well – it poured with rain and it got soaking wet and that was no good. Even if you managed to write, you couldn't stick it all down because it had to be censored by the officer. The best thing was the Salvation Army. They used to come right up to the support about half a mile from the front line under shell fire with a pony-covered wagon – and they'd bring oranges and bananas and cigarettes – and if you were lucky you could buy a tin of fifty Gold Flake or fifty Players. I bought my fifty and I was well away. I used to swap my fags for the rum rations. The sergeant would come along with a spoon of rum. In the front line you had to drink it – but beyond the front line you could do what you liked with it. Once the officer and the orderly sergeant had gone past I used to take my socks and boots off and rub the rum into my feet. You weren't supposed to take your boots off. First I'd lick a bit – it was very strong and it took your breath away. Then I'd rub me toes and feet. That's the reason I've got good feet now. I've got a smashing little pair of feet.

I think one of the worst things of the whole war was being so lousy – we hated the lice. You could take your shirt off and you'd run the seams along the flame of a candle and it would kill off all the eggs. You could do that today – but you'd be just as bad tomorrow. Terrible, terrible. The shells didn't worry me – the snipers didn't worry me – the Germans didn't worry me. The lice worried me. And the rats were big blooming things. They used to sit there and look at you and more or less ask for food. We had all the ammunition we liked so sometimes to amuse ourselves, we used to have a shot at the rats as they ran along the parapet. Of course, our bullets sailed over no-man's-land, across into the Germans.

There were punishments at the front. There was Number One Field Punishment. I remember this fellow – Barber. He threatened the sergeant or some such thing, so his hands and feet were tied with a strap to a wagon wheel. I was on guard through the night. I was guarding him and the rows of horses. Well, he wasn't able to move so I went along and put a fag in his mouth and lit it. After the war I was in London one day and I ran into him. 'Good God! Is that Smiler?' 'Yes,' I said. 'Barber?' 'Yes.' He was now an insurance agent and he took me to a posh hotel and we had a wonderful tea. He said, 'I'll never forget you as long as I live. You saved my life.' Of course, they'd have tied me up too if they'd found out I was helping him – but they didn't. He said, 'You're a marvel.'