

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother

It was the ringing of the telephone that quickly brought me back to reality. How long I had been immersed in my thoughts, I just don't know, but it had been a while. Reaching for the telephone, I picked up the receiver. It was my sister Joan.

'Hello,' I said, 'what can I do for you?'

'How are you getting on?' she asked. By way of explanation, it was I, her older brother George, who was ensconced in our recently deceased father's house, sorting out the mass of papers and personal effects he had acquired.

'I'm nearly finished,' I lied, 'should be back late tomorrow afternoon.' The truth of the matter was that I'd been completely sidetracked by something and hadn't really done as much as I'd hoped I would. Still, whatever was left was only paper and could be easily put in the back of the car and sorted out in the comfort of my own home.

Putting the telephone down, I returned to what had distracted me. It was an old style exercise book with a red cover. You probably know the sort I mean: they had a lot of useful conversion tables on the back cover. I'd found it this morning at the bottom of the top draw of my father's desk.

My first thought on finding the exercise book was that it was probably a record of household accounts or something of that nature. My father, Phillip Cox, an accountant, had been meticulous in that way. However, on opening the book, I had found it was a journal of some sort. On further perusal, I was to discover that it had been written by my grandfather, William Cox. The first entry was from when he had enlisted at the outbreak of the war in nineteen fourteen and appeared to chronicle his service through to the sixteenth of May, nineteen fifteen.

I had known some details about the life of my grandfather. He'd been born in eighteen ninety-two. His father, Albert, had been killed in an agricultural accident four years later and a few months after this, William's mother gave birth to his brother John. Despite living in a tight knit rural community near Taunton, his mother, Agnes, had difficulty with working and making ends meet. She eventually put William into a children's home when he was six, hoping that he would be fostered.

William Cox was never fostered. He stayed at the home for destitute children in Minehead, received a general education until he was twelve or so and was then put to work in a local cider factory. Although the home at Minehead was less than thirty miles away from his mother, she had no contact with him. She never visited him. He didn't forget her entirely: it was just the pain of abandonment that blurred his memories of her.

At the outbreak of war in nineteen fourteen, William was 22 years old and a cooper in the cider factory. He immediately volunteered for service and joined the North Somerset Yeomanry. His journal shows that by 15th November of that year he was in the trenches at Ypres.

Despite only having a rudimentary education, my grandfather seemed to have had a flair for writing. In his journal, he described the horror of continuous shelling, gas attacks and death in all its shapes and forms. He described the boredom and futility, the rats, the fleas, and the frogs that inhabited the water in the craters and trenches. He wrote about the smell of death and decay, and the cries of wounded men in agony. He described the cold and deprivation and continual hunger. He was not irked by fear, but it seems that he was troubled by loneliness, probably fuelled by the fact that he received no mail or parcels.

Reading on in the journal, in May nineteen fifteen, he stated that they were still in the Ypres area but had moved to trenches near to Ballewaarde Lake. Everybody knew there was going to be a big offensive, but how soon they did not know. On the 12th May, about six o'clock in the evening, William was at rest in the trench, having a mug of tea and wondering if they'd be going over the top that night. His wondering was abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a runner, requesting him to immediately see his troop commander. William's immediate reaction was that he had again been selected to go over the top that night.

On arriving at the troop commander's dugout, the troop sergeant had smiled and informed him that he'd got a visitor. William had looked to where the sergeant had pointed and saw a young soldier smiling.

'Hello William,' said the soldier, 'I'm John, your brother.'

In the interest of brevity, I shall précis what was written in the journal about their reunion. John had discovered by accident that he had an elder brother. In order to find him, he had gone to the children's home in Minehead and they had directed him to the cider factory. Some of the older men at the factory, who were too old to enlist, had told John that William had joined the North Somerset Yeomanry. Eager to do his patriotic duty, he too had enlisted in the same regiment, hopeful that he would be able to catch up with the brother he had really never known.

The journal shows that William was pleased that he had made contact with his brother. John had also brought him a letter from his mother, which explained why she had put him in a home and expressing a wish to see him again, if William forgave her. William and John spoke for about two hours before it was time for John to go back to the trenches at the rear, where the reserve troops were billeted. They had agreed to see each other again as soon as possible.

The following day, at dawn on the morning of the thirteenth, the English guns began bombarding the enemy trenches. The troops sensed that something big was about to break out. At eight o'clock that morning, they were ordered over the top to attack the enemy lines. William's journal indicates that it was carnage. Many soldiers were scythed down as soon as they got out of their trench. Others were killed by the bombardment of both sides. His record shows that he advanced about two hundred yards before the order was given to retreat. When he was about fifty yards from his own trench, an exploding shell sent him flying and he found himself lying at the bottom of a bomb crater. Dazed, he quickly dressed a small shrapnel wound he had on his left arm. Two other men in the crater were dead. The third man seemed in a bad way but William could see the soldier was fighting to breathe. William crawled over and gently rolled the soldier onto his back. It was John.

Deeply shocked, William did what he could for John at the bottom of the crater. As gently as he could, he put John on his back and crawled up to the top of the crater. Looking around he could see there were bodies everywhere. No wonder they had used the reserve troops. Zigzagging and running as fast as he could, he covered the last fifty yards back to the front line. The trench was virtually empty; over half the regiment had been killed or injured in that attack.

With great urgency, William carried John to the regimental aid post for treatment. It had quickly become apparent to William that help would not be forthcoming as the aid post was swamped with the dead, the wounded and the dying. An orderly suggested that William take his brother to the casualty clearing station, about five miles away. Putting John on his back again, William set out.

On the road, there was little traffic and what he did see was overflowing with the dead and wounded. As he turned each bend and twist in the road, he wished that the casualty station would appear. John's breathing was getting shallower and more laboured as time went on. William was spurred on by the desire to save John. He realized with a heavy heart that he was responsible for John's welfare. Even after he'd been walking and carrying John for an hour, William wasn't tired. John wasn't heavy. He was no burden. He was his brother.

Half an hour later they arrived at the casualty clearing station. William instinctively knew that John hadn't made it. The orderly had said that John's wounds had been so bad that he would have died anyway. Despite his sadness, William was strengthened by the fact that at least he'd briefly met his brother and he had his family back again.

The final entry in the journal is the following, written on the sixteenth May, 1915:

The road is long, with many a winding turns
That leads us to who knows where,
Who know where

But I'm strong, strong enough to carry him
He ain't heavy, he's my brother
So on we go, his welfare is my concern
No burden is he to bare, we'll get there
For I know he would not encumber me
He ain't heavy, he's my brother

If I'm laden at all, I'm laden with sadness
That everyone's heart isn't filled with gladness
Of love for one another
It's a long, long road from which there is no return
While we're on our way to there, why not share
And the load, it doesn't weigh me down at all
He's my brother, he's my brother

Emotive words, which, I truly believe have only been seen by my father and myself and no one else. To close the journal, my grandfather had signed and dated it, drawing a line under the last entry. He died in nineteen forty-four.

Word Count: 1,623

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The North Somerset Yeomanry did exist and did take part in the Ballewaarde Lake offensive, suffering fifty percent casualties.

The song, 'He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother', (also known as 'He Ain't Heavy'), was written in the late nineteen sixties by Bobby Scott and Bob Russell. The song was popularized by the film 'Boys Town', which told the true story about an Irish-American priest who in 1917, founded Boys Town in Omaha Nebraska for troubled youth. 'He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother' became the motto of Boys Town, after the priest, Father Flannagan saw a cartoon depicting one boy carrying another.

All the rest is fiction.