

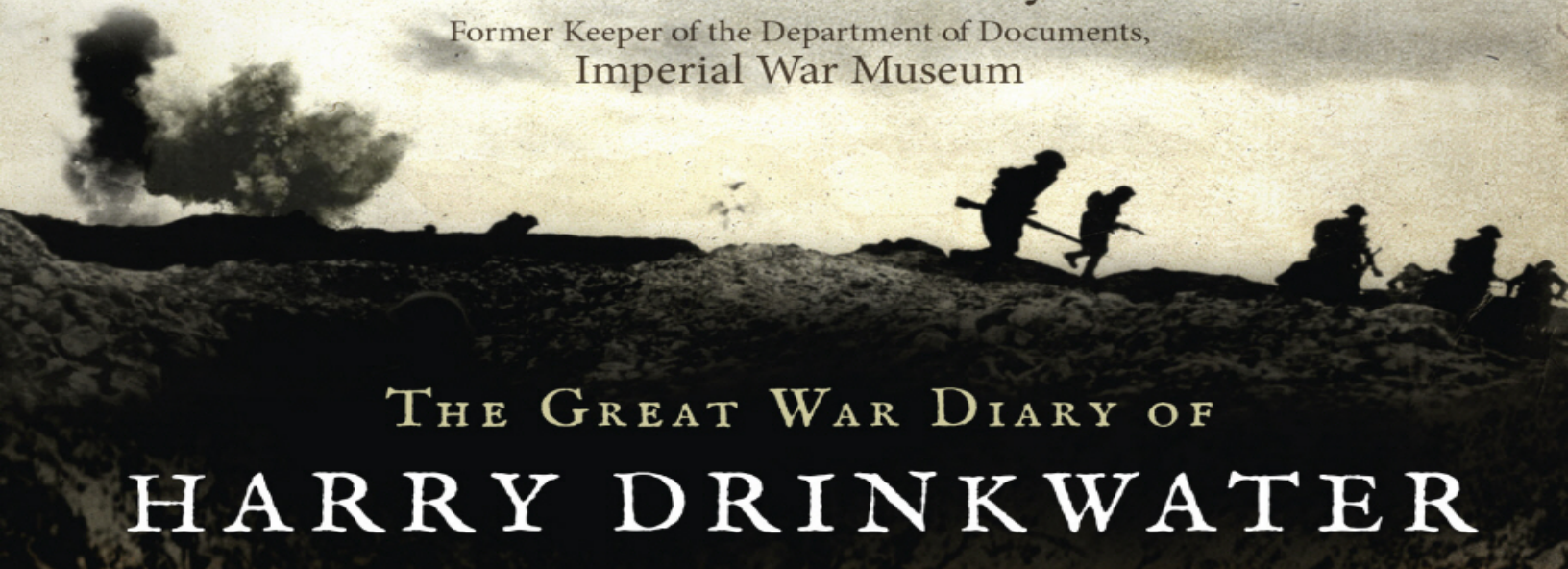


HARRY'S WAR

‘One of the best diaries
of the First World War’

Roderick Suddaby

Former Keeper of the Department of Documents,
Imperial War Museum



THE GREAT WAR DIARY OF
HARRY DRINKWATER

About the Book

'As I ran, I saw several fellows fall, one coughing up blood and all the time bullets were hacking about me. I ran for about 70 yards and dropped breathless into a shell hole, headlong onto a German who had been dead for months.'

Harold Drinkwater was not supposed to go to war. He was told he was half an inch too short. But, determined to fight for king and country, he found a battalion that would take him and was soon on his way to the trenches of the Somme. As the war dragged on Harry saw most of the men he joined up with killed around him. But, somehow, he survived.

Soldiers were forbidden from keeping a diary so Harry wrote his in secret, recording the horrendous conditions and constant fear, as well as his pleasure at receiving his officer's commission, the joy of his men when they escaped the trenches for the Italian Front and the trench raid for which he was awarded the Military Cross.

Harry writes with such immediacy it is easy to forget that a hundred years have passed. He is by turns wry, exhausted, annoyed, resigned and often amazed to be alive. Never before published, *Harry's War* is a moving testament to one man's struggle to keep his humanity in the face of unimaginable violence.

About the Editors

Jon Cooksey is a leading military historian who has written a number of books about both world wars and the Falklands conflict. He is often asked to write articles about battlefield history for the national press, and has co-written and co-produced several radio documentaries for the BBC on the subject of war.

David Griffiths is an author, former soldier and collector of militaria, with an extensive knowledge of Great War battlefields. He bought Harry Drinkwater's diary, his military cross and other items in 1980. The publication of the diary is the culmination of a long-held desire.

CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[About the Book](#)

[About the Editors](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Preface](#)

[Introduction](#)

[A Note on the Text](#)

[JOINING UP AND TRAINING](#)

[August 1914 - November 1915](#)

[THE SOMME](#)

[November 1915 - February 1916](#)

[ARRAS](#)

[February 1916 - July 1916](#)

[RETURN TO THE SOMME](#)

[July 1916 - October 1916](#)

[FRENCH FLANDERS](#)

[October 1916 - January 1917](#)

[OFFICER CADET](#)

[February 1917 - July 1917](#)

[PASSCHENDAELE](#)

[August 1917 - November 1917](#)

[ITALIAN INTERLUDE](#)

[November 1917 - March 1918](#)

[THE LINE ON THE LYS](#)

[April 1918 - November 1918](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Index](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Copyright](#)

HARRY'S WAR

THE GREAT WAR DIARY OF
HARRY DRINKWATER

Edited by Jon Cooksey and David Griffiths





PREFACE

by David Griffiths

The Harry Drinkwater diary is unique. It is the only one, as far as I know, written day-by-day for five years by a private soldier who later became an officer in the British Army. As the owner of the diary and the many artefacts connected with it, I have often been asked how I acquired them.

By pure chance, that moment came on my birthday in 1980, at an auction in Stratford-upon-Avon. Amongst those bidding was the Imperial War Museum, which already held a copy donated by Harry prior to his death in 1978. This brave young man's Military Cross and other medals were also bought by me. Later, I acquired other related items from the family.

My interest in the Great War springs from the tales my father told me of his terrifying experiences as a Vickers machine gunner in the Machine Gun Corps. Then came the Second World War, and as a child, I remember only too clearly the searchlights, the guns and the bombing. Perhaps it was only natural that a lifetime interest in battlefields and militaria followed for me.

Many years ago, I spent a fascinating three weeks in France and Belgium driving to every village, building, field and forest which Harry mentions in his diary. It must have been an amusing sight to see this Englishman, parked at the edge of a field, rummaging through a library of Great War books, neatly arranged in the boot of his car. I climbed into attics where Harry had slept and explored stables where he had rested with his comrades, covered in mud, eating a slice of cold bacon and a piece of stale bread. A complete on-the-

spot reading of his day-to-day diary made me realise what an utterly brave young man Harry was, and lucky too, as he admits that he should have died many times.

I hope you will enjoy it. You will certainly feel his presence as the diary works its way into your soul. You will hear his voice and be lost in a world of mud, blood and screaming shells. You will feel the futility of war, as Harry sometimes did, and profound admiration for the young man who did his duty and endured fighting on the Somme, at Arras, at Ypres, on the bank of the River Piave in Italy and finally in the Nieppe forest. Decorated for gallantry once, wounded twice, after five and a half years of Army service he was still indomitable. He was, and still is, an example to us all. When you have read this book, perhaps you will salute him, as I do now with the publication of his diary.

David Griffiths
Gerrards Cross
July 2013

INTRODUCTION

by Jon Cooksey

If the angry Egyptian who stepped from a carriage in the central station square in Cairo on the evening of 3 December 1919 had raised his sights just a fraction higher before pulling the trigger of his revolver, this book might never have been published. His target was Harold Victor Drinkwater, a 30-year-old major in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, then serving as commandant of a leave camp for Indian troops on the outskirts of Cairo. Although one bullet struck the pavement and lodged in his foot, Harold Drinkwater - Harry - survived, along with his adjutant who was with him at the time. We know this because Harry later recorded the events in his diary, a diary he had kept faithfully for more than five years, ever since he had rushed to the local recruiting office in his home town of Stratford-upon-Avon in the heady days of the summer of 1914 in response to Lord Kitchener's steely gaze, pointing finger and patriotic appeal, 'Your Country Needs You'.

Harry Drinkwater first fought in the squalid trenches on the Western Front in France in December 1915, took part in the titanic struggles against the Germans on the Somme and the charnel house which was the Third Battle of Ypres - always Passchendaele to those who fought it - then moved south to take on the Austro-Hungarian Army in Italy before a final stint on the Western Front which culminated in a serious wound and the award of the Military Cross for gallantry. Harry had promised faithfully in 1914 to serve his king and country and he had steadfastly done just that, as

both a lowly private and a bright, intelligent young officer, commissioned from the ranks to be a leader of men. Above all, Harry had survived the carnage which claimed the lives of so many of his contemporaries and robbed the world of untold promise and potential.

To have been murdered at the hand of a lone assassin in a Cairo square would have been an ignoble end to a tumultuous five years of this young man's life and Harry's diary, his remarkable record of those dark, dangerous times, may have been lost forever. That he survived was yet another remarkable piece of good fortune which allows his fascinating account of those years to be read at last by a wider audience.

Yet I almost allowed this exceptional diary to slip through my fingers.

The date 4 August 2014 marks the centenary of Britain's declaration of war on Germany and, for the British, the outbreak of the First World War. There are now no survivors left who served during the 1914-1918 war to tell their story in person on the centenary. The First World War has passed from living memory.

But a good many first-hand accounts remain. Several diaries and memoirs written during the war appeared in the 1920s, with other accounts published during the following five decades. But as the participants grew older, so the distance between what they had actually experienced and what they could remember grew greater. The link became more tenuous; the immediacy was lost and when, finally, they passed away with their stories untold, their memories were gone forever. As the centenary of the war approached, so it became increasingly difficult to find previously unheard, yet authentic voices of those who fought in the great battles of the 'Great War for Civilisation'. Harry Drinkwater's is such a voice, a rich, vibrant and powerful voice, yet one which would have gone unheeded by me except for a phone call in 2012.

The caller – David Griffiths – explained that he'd had Harry Drinkwater's war diary in his possession for decades, thought it very good – possibly unique – and wondered if somehow it might be published. Would I care to read it and offer an opinion? Over the years I have received many such requests. Keeping a wartime diary – although highly illegal due to possible breaches of security if it fell into the wrong hands – was not unusual. Many men kept some form of daily record but most consisted of just a few hastily scribbled lines; flimsy sketches of what a man had done on a particular day with only slight variations on the theme of 'went up the line', 'came out of the line', 'went into rest'. I had read several of those. Though valuable to the soldier in charting his progress through the great adventure of the war, or indeed to his family in the years that followed, such entries can rarely sustain a reader's interest for long or can be said to add significantly to the sum total of knowledge of the First World War. Did I want to make a long journey to read such a document? Yet Mr Griffiths was persuasive. Harry Drinkwater had joined as a Kitchener volunteer in 1914 and became an officer in 1917, he said; he had served on the Somme, at Ypres and in Italy and had received the Military Cross for bravery. Most important of all, he had survived. It was an interesting war record. I fixed a date in my own diary.

As I started to leaf through the pages of the huge, brown leather-bound war diary, and to read the entries, I began to hear Harry Drinkwater speak to me in a distinctive voice which carried across a distance of almost 100 years. The more I read, the more Harry's voice developed and became stronger, more insightful and more passionate as it matured. He began to draw me in and I realised that here was a very rare thing indeed; a Great War diary spanning almost five years of continuous service by a man who survived some of the worst fighting in which the British Army was involved. Here was a diary which chronicled

Harry's experiences of life and death in the trenches, containing vivid personal descriptions of the brutal vagaries of war written in real time on the battlefields, charting, with a refreshing candour and honesty, the mixed fortunes which befell Harry and the men with whom he lived and served.

With Harry acting as my guide and interpreter, I was transported to the very heart of the action; I felt the cold, cloying mud oozing into boots and the quickening pulse before action, heard the terrifying crash of exploding shells, smelled the acrid fumes of cordite and mustard gas and the sharp, rusting-iron scent of spilled blood. I also felt the hurt at Harry's loss. I knew, long before I had finished reading it, that Harry's diary was truly something remarkable. But who was Harry Drinkwater and what shaped him?

Harry was born on 19 February 1889 in Stratford-upon-Avon. His father, David, was a boot dealer who ran his business from a shop in Henley Street – a short stroll from the house where William Shakespeare first drew breath in 1564. Harry's father worked in the boot and shoe trade all of his life. Originally from Corse, Gloucestershire, by his mid-thirties, David Drinkwater had worked his way up to be manager of a boot and shoe business on Worcester High Street, having married Harry's mother, Rachel Wilson, in 1874.

The couple already had three children, Harry's eldest brother Robert, and sisters Ella and Clara, when they moved east to Stratford-upon-Avon, and soon the family increased by two more sons: William, born in 1886, then Harry, the last and youngest of the Drinkwater children.

Harry's birth coincided with a period of prosperity for the Drinkwater family. Within a three-month period in 1898 David Drinkwater bought his business and two other properties outright. Harry would grow up in relative comfort as the son of a successful businessman, an upbringing which included the instilling of a strong moral compass. The members of the Drinkwater family were committed

Wesleyan Methodists and prominent members of the local chapel. Harry attended the adjoining Sunday school regularly and was imbued with the core values which powered late Victorian and Edwardian society: those of duty and service to God, monarch, country and family.

Tragedy struck the Drinkwater family two days into the new year of 1898, with the death of Harry's sister, Clara. Death was no stranger to the families of Britain at the turn of the 19th century, irrespective of the social class from which they were drawn. Accidents occurred more frequently and disease was no respecter of privilege or position. Clara Drinkwater was just 16 and Harry, eight years younger, would have grieved and would then have had to get on with his life.

In September 1901, Harry followed in the footsteps of his eldest brother Robert as a boarder at the King Edward VI Grammar School in the heart of the old town. Here he developed his handwriting, grammar and punctuation and learned to organise his thoughts and ideas on paper.

Influenced by the ethos of muscular Christianity established in several leading English public schools, outdoor sports and team games were also features of Harry's schooling. He played cricket for the Second XI and by the spring of 1903 was playing for the 'Football' (Rugby) XV, sometimes as captain of the Second XV. 'This diminutive full-back should without doubt be heard of a good deal in the distant future,' commented the school magazine, *The Stratfordian*, in March 1903. 'Very plucky, quite willing to collar anyone and to stop any rush.' Harry would need every ounce of pluck he could muster a year later when, in February 1904, six years after the death of his sister Clara, his 28-year-old eldest brother Robert collapsed and died suddenly. Harry had now lost two close family members in the space of six years. He was learning to cope with loss.

With Robert's death, the mantle of assisting their father in the family firm fell on the shoulders of middle brother

William, two years Harry's senior. With no niche for Harry, he had to go out and find his own way and, by 1911, was living at a lodging house and working as a shop assistant at an ironmongers in Banbury in Oxfordshire.

Whether he enjoyed his job, or felt it had prospects, we will never know, for three years later, in August 1914, Britain declared war on Germany and Harry travelled back to his home town to join the army. He was one of more than 343,000 men throughout Britain who volunteered for the army in the first five weeks of the war. However, when called for his medical, he was told he was half an inch too short and was duly turned down. Undeterred, Harry travelled to Birmingham the following Monday to try again. He wanted to join the Birmingham 'Pals'.

Like many industrial towns and cities, Birmingham was intent on raising, equipping and training its own battalion of Pals - a recruitment tool which drew men from the same towns, trades, occupations or backgrounds into local units - which were then offered to the War Office as a complete battalion.

The concept behind the raising of Pals battalions seemed to be a sensible solution to the burgeoning logistical problems created by the nationwide tsunami of young men desperate to get into uniform. Spurred on by the desire to ensure that their towns and cities were in the vanguard of those contributing the most at this testing time, civic leaders tapped into the core values of duty, service to king and country, honour and self-sacrifice which had been drilled into the nation's young men in schools, Sunday schools, chapels and churches.

Though the seeds of the idea were sown with the raising of a Stockbrokers' Battalion of men who worked in the City of London, it really took off in Liverpool where Lord Derby appealed directly to local businessmen, telling them they need not enlist alone and risk being posted to strange battalions in distant parts alongside men who spoke in

strange dialects. They could live with their pals and eat, drill, shoot, crawl and charge with their pals. With their pals they would go to war and get a 'crack at the Hun'. And so the unique phenomenon of the Pals battalions was born. Swept along by the swirling currents of a great crusade, while clinging to those twin pillars of duty and honour, what everyone - both leaders and the led alike - had overlooked was that the logical corollary of 'join together, train together, fight together', might ultimately be 'die together'. The ultimate outcome in a big battle would mean whole streets, whole factories, stripped of their young men, leaving entire communities wracked with grief.

Successful in his second attempt to join up, Harry was given the regimental number 161 and placed in No. 2 Platoon, A Company of the 2nd Birmingham City Battalion - the 2nd Birmingham Pals - later to become the 15th Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Harry was now a proud addition to Kitchener's New Army with an insider's view of one of the most significant and, with hindsight, infamous socio-military phenomena of the First World War - the Pals battalions.

It is at this point that Harry starts to commit his thoughts to paper. His entries are at first concise. The battalion's early organisation and training followed a similar pattern to that of most of the Pals battalions which sprang up during the late summer and autumn of 1914. It is with his departure for the Western Front in November 1915 that Harry's war diary begins in earnest. Posted to the extreme southern limit of the entire British line on the Western Front, he enters the trenches for the first time just before Christmas in 1915. Conditions are truly atrocious and here the steady haemorrhage of casualties begins. Later, looking back on his war service, Harry regards that first month in the trenches on the Somme as 'one of the worst'.

In February 1916 he moves north to the front at Arras and helps dig beneath the German lines, experiencing the

terrifying power and ferocity of prolonged bombardments and the sudden, violent shock and awe of mine explosions. His diary points to the implications of advances in science, technology and engineering when applied to waging war in the early 20th century, and through Harry we begin to understand the overwhelming power of modern artillery to deliver indiscriminate death and mutilation. We sense some of the nerve-shredding fear of living every moment knowing that the earth beneath his feet could erupt in sheets of flame. We hear of the machine gun, the rifle grenade and the trench mortar and their devastating effects as, through Harry's words, we witness the fatal final moments of many of his contemporaries of the original Birmingham Pals. We begin to wonder how the human heart can live under such an onslaught.

Yet there are also precious moments of relief away from the front line – and this too is part of Harry's war. He records the enjoyment of watching football matches played in real football jerseys. That single and almost mundane detail serves as a stark reminder of a normality left behind. Later he goes for a walk alone and basks in the warmth of the sun, an experience that fills him with life, reinvigorates his hope and seems to wake him, albeit fleetingly, from a nightmare.

After service during the infamously harsh winter of 1916–1917, Harry enquires about the possibility of a commission as an officer. Plucked from the ranks, he is whisked away from the battlefield to Ireland, to be trained as an officer cadet.

Harry returns to the Western Front in the autumn of 1917, but he is not the same man who left it eight months earlier. By accepting the King's Commission he moves from being an educated, perceptive private soldier to being an educated, perceptive junior officer. The day he moves from the ranks into the officer class he enters a different world; a world ordered according to a strict hierarchy and governed

by an Edwardian paternalism. Whereas once, when he had been one of many in the ranks, he could sometimes be seen to fail, now, as a leader of men, he cannot, indeed will not, be allowed to do so. For almost two years Harry has been told where to go, what to do and at what time to do it. Now, he gives the orders and he knows exactly what he is asking of his men, for he has been on the receiving end of such orders many times.

Harry must have felt the burden of responsibility keenly. He would have been well aware that in following his orders the chances were that some of his charges would die. Now, instead of following an officer over the top it would be he who would be the first over. His men would look to him for leadership, and they would follow him into battle if he led them well.

His first opportunity to show his mettle could not have come in a harder school than that of Ypres in October 1917. The visceral description of his part in the disaster which was his battalion's attack on the German pillboxes around the atomised Polderhoek Château during the Third Battle of Ypres is jaw-dropping in its intensity.

Early in 1918 Harry and his men are shunted through southern France to the Italian Front. Journeying by rail via Lyons, Monte Carlo and Menton, Harry is struck by the delicious contrast to the squalid attrition of the trenches; for a time he forgets the war and drinks in the view.

But his southern sojourn is not to last. Returning to France immediately after the German onslaughts of 1918 have recaptured all the ground gained by the British at such a heavy cost, Harry leads his men in an audacious and dangerous night-time raid on the German trenches in which he is badly wounded and recommended for a gallantry award. After months of treatment and convalescence he is passed fit by a medical board, but freely admits to a sense of impending doom at the thought of returning to the fighting. In the event, he doesn't have to – he is still at a

depot in Dover looking out to sea and the distant French coast at the 11th hour of the 11th month of 1918, the moment when the Armistice begins.

Harry's war is over but his journey, faithfully recorded in his diary, is a remarkable story indeed. His years of army service, full of thrills and adventures, take him finally to Egypt from where - with the exception of a few broken bones in his foot - he is delivered 'safe home at last'.

Harry saw his war service as a series of small 'scenes' in a vast production across several theatres of war. He had squeezed more into the five years between 1914 and 1919 than most men achieve in a lifetime and, somehow, he had come through it all.

This, then, is not a diary which terminates abruptly with the death of the author, raising lingering questions regarding the 'might have beens' of one of the Lost Generation of 1914-1918. Harry's record of one man's war reflects in microcosm almost the entire sweep of the experience of the British Army in its major engagements during this 'Great War'. Here, reflected in Harry's words, are the proud successes and the desperate failures, the ready wit and the interminable boredom, the crushing grief and the long, hard and bloody learning curve traced by the British Army over more than four years of hard fighting.

Most of the men who survived came home, buried their feelings and never talked of their experiences again but, unlike them, Harry reviewed his diary and recorded his feelings later. Perhaps it was his therapy; his means of processing all that he had seen and experienced. Whatever the motive, his words serve to illuminate the experience of war shared by so many men of his generation - unimaginable for us now - but carried for the rest of their lives by the survivors, along with physical or mental scars inflicted on the battlefields. As such, they add significantly to our knowledge and understanding of that great conflict.

After a century of silence, I believe that history will come to recognise Harry Drinkwater's voice as one of the most potent of all those that have yet emerged from the First World War. It will carry far into the next 100 years.

This, then, is Harry's War.

Jon Cooksey
Stratford-upon-Avon
August 2013

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Harry Drinkwater began his diary in 1914 when he joined the army. He wrote in pencil in a series of six small notebooks which he named 'Books 1-6', several of which he purchased in France. He kept his diary throughout his training in Britain and carried his notebooks with him when he crossed to France, keeping the current book in his tunic pocket.

Harry was demobilised from the army in May 1920 and at some point in the mid-1920s he took a bold decision to revisit the entries in his original notebooks and embarked on what must have been a time-consuming process of copying the entries longhand into a foolscap, leather-bound book he had had embossed with the title, 'War Diary'. Having the unique benefit of being able to compare both sources side-by-side we know that he transcribed his entries faithfully, apart from correcting his own grammar and establishing greater clarity. At times he added notes and reflections on the pages opposite. Written so recently after the war's end - Harry was then in his mid-30s - these amplifications often indicate deep-seated feelings triggered by rereading certain diary entries and no doubt brought into focus as Harry's knowledge and understanding of the events of 1914-1918 gradually accumulated during the decade after the war.

This book reproduces the diary as Harry transcribed it, with a few exceptions. For example, the correction of the names of people and places he would only ever have heard rather than seen written down, inconsistencies in the format of recording dates and the amendment of some of the more archaic forms of expression which might appear clumsy to

modern readers. Harry was writing for himself of course; he had never intended his diary to be read by a wider audience and so there have been judicious cuts in cases where obvious repetition slows the narrative.

Precisely because Harry was writing for himself it has been necessary to interweave editorial additions among Harry's diary entries. These editorial additions - indicated by the use of italic type, or within square brackets - are intended to provide social and historical context or to add clarification.

JOINING UP AND TRAINING

August 1914 - November 1915

'Half an inch short in height was not going to stop me'

German troops crossed the neutral border into Belgium west of Aachen on the morning of 4 August 1914 with the intention of crushing the Belgian frontier defences and capturing the strategically vital, fortified city of Liège. Although the Belgian army put up a spirited resistance in the face of overwhelming force, it was clear that it would need assistance; the Belgian government called on Britain, France and Russia for help. Britain gave Germany until midnight in Berlin - 11pm in London - to comply with an ultimatum that Belgian neutrality would be assured and made it clear that if no assurance was given, then a state of war would exist between the two most powerful nations in Europe. There was no response.

In London, Downing Street, Whitehall and Parliament Square were thronged with people eager for news. An hour before midnight they listened in silence as Big Ben began to chime until the eleventh, and last, solemn note was struck. Many in the crowd burst into a spontaneous chorus of 'God Save the King'.

It was a date which would change the course of history; a day on which the very globe rocked on its axis and which led to unprecedented bloodshed and political and economic dislocation. Britain was at war with Germany. Nothing would ever be the same again.

August

The actual outbreak of war came as a shock to most folk in England. Leading politicians and some army men (notably Lord Roberts) told us that war with Germany was always possible, but no one took much notice; therefore on 4 August when war was declared, except for our small army, nothing was prepared and the country started to get itself into a state for war.

September

Large towns all over the country started to raise battalions of men for overseas service and for a time, so great was the rush that recruiting stations had to close down. Such was the state of affairs when I applied for enlistment. My name was taken but it was a month later before I was called up for medical examination only to find I was half an inch short of the required height and so for the time being was turned down.

October

Half an inch short in height was not going to stop me getting into the army. The following Monday morning I again applied to Birmingham hoping that this time I might find a different medical board. I was not disappointed and taking my turn I was passed fit for general service and so, on paper at least, I became a soldier.

Birmingham was at this time raising a battalion of infantry to be known as 'The City Battalion'. So great was the rush of city fellows to join, that first the one was completed, a second was formed and completed in a few days, and in less than a week a third thousand had flocked to the recruiting station. With the regimental number 161 I was placed in the Second Battalion. In the early days we were known as the 1st, 2nd and 3rd City Battalions, afterwards 14th, 15th and 16th Battalions, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

The war had been going on now for some seven or eight weeks. Germany, fully prepared for war at the outset,

started to invade France through Belgium and each successive morning and evening paper brought us news of some advance on their part whilst we on our part were kicking our heels at home waiting whilst someone in authority was working day and night to try and fix up quarters and a drill ground.

The popular idea was that the war would be over long before we were in a condition to go overseas.

Definite orders were received on the 10th and on the 12th, in company with other Stratford fellows who had joined the same unit, I set out for Wylde Green, Birmingham where the battalions were assembling and were going into training.

It was Mop Day at Stratford [the ancient annual fair at which agricultural and domestic labour was hired] and the thought crossed my mind, as no doubt it crossed the mind of other fellows, as we walked down the street and saw the showmen uncovering their shows as we passed, how many more Mop Days we should see, for the rumours were somewhat startling to fellows who had not handled a rifle in their life; boys and young men in Belgium were being given about six hours' instruction in the use of the rifle and then rushed into the firing line to try and stop the German invasion. Buildings all over England, suitable and unsuitable, were being commandeered for the use of hospitals and concrete facts in the shape of the arrival of wounded and the publication of long casualty lists in the paper all gave colour to the thought. Things were going to be rapid, we thought.

On 10 October 1914 Harry received a postcard from Captain George Smith, the temporary commanding officer of the 2nd Birmingham Battalion, who had been the chief recruiting officer responsible for enlisting more than 8,000 men. Harry's orders had arrived:

You are hereby warned to entrain at Stratford-on-Avon at 7.0am on Monday the 12th... (G. W. Ry). On arrival at B'ham proceed to New St Station, No.2 platform by 8.45am. You will meet Pte P E Kennard at Stratford who holds the travelling warrant.

Monday, 12 October 1914, Sutton Park, Wylde Green, Birmingham

Arriving in Birmingham we found specials waiting to carry us on to Wylde Green, a suburb about five miles from the city. We had been previously informed that we were to be billeted on the inhabitants pending the completion of huts which were in the course of construction. On Wylde Green platform we were given instructions regarding our movements for the immediate future and then made off, some thousand fellows, in varying directions to find our billets.

I was separated here from the other Stratford fellows and joined in with the general throng going in the direction where the majority of the billets appeared to lay. Getting in conversation with a fellow here and there as I passed along comparing addresses of billets I eventually found [Harold] Drakeford who was going to the same house as me. Together we made our way to Jockey Road and introduced ourselves to Mr and Mrs Blackband, our billet people, till the huts were ready for use.

In the afternoon Drakeford and myself made our way to the parade ground. It was for all the world like going to a football match; men appeared to be coming from all directions. Punctually at 2pm, a bugle sounded and we fell in according to instructions in four companies A, B, C and D. The afternoon was spent in sorting ourselves out, finding who and what we were and what obligations we had assumed in becoming private soldiers.

When the Mayor of Birmingham, in concert with the mayors of other large towns, first started to raise these battalions, they had in mind the fact that there would be many thousands of fellows in the country not desirous of, or

willing to wait for a commission, but providing they could join the ranks with their friends and remain with them, were keen to become private soldiers. These battalions came to be known as 'Pals Battalions' and afterwards partly formed Kitchener's Army.

We were an extraordinary collection of fellows. The commanding officer appointed to the battalion was an old regular army man; the adjutant was a regular and the remainder, for the most part, were officers who had had some military experience or training to a degree of sorts. The NCOs were without exception old army men long pensioned and roped in again for the purposes of this new army. There were barristers, solicitors, bank clerks, qualified engineers and men and boys who, by their looks at least, required some good square meals before they would ever be able to stand the conditions which we were beginning to understand existed in France. Later on I found out that the fellow next to me in the ranks had never done a day's work in his life but had had something in the nature of a valet to do it for him. He was barely 17. A boy of 16, who gave his age as 18 so that he could join up, later became our lance corporal and we learned that breeding and education do not always count.

It was evident that there were not sufficient NCOs to go round the battalion and that a lot more would have to be forthcoming before we could be anything like organised. We were told this on parade the following morning and that any fellow who liked to volunteer for a stripe would have his application considered. But we thought this was going to be a short, sharp war - quick training, over to France and back again, and finished. With the foregoing in our minds and the fact that for the most part we were fellows with something in common, we decided in the main that as we had joined as privates we would remain privates. Therefore shortly afterwards, when our platoon officer Lieutenant Rubery asked any fellow desiring a stripe to step forward, we

remained in the ranks. It was some moments before there stepped forward a pale, anaemic, undersized little fellow who might have been 18 for army purposes but actually barely looked 16. We looked aghast at this boy when we thought he might be made a non-commissioned officer. We were staggered a few days later when we found he had been made a lance corporal and, still worse, put in charge of the section we were in, but we agreed that we had had an equal chance and it was therefore up to us to play the game.



Comfortable billet: Harry (right) and fellow Birmingham Pal Private Harold Drakeford pose with Mr Thomas Blackband – holding a rifle and wearing cavalry boots – outside Mr Blackband’s home on Jockey Road, Sutton Coldfield. The 2nd Birmingham Pals Battalion was so short of space for its recruits that many men were billeted in private houses until they could move into purpose-built huts in Sutton Park. Harry shared his billet with Harold Drakeford who, in October 1917, became an officer in the Somerset Light Infantry and was killed on 5 April 1918.
(David Griffiths)

How well did he show us how to play the game? In a month we liked him, in six months we said he was as good

as any other NCO in the battalion, in 12 months we were glad to help him carry out any difficult command he had to obey and by 18 months we would have cleaned his boots. This little fellow had a great hold on us. He seemed to have made up his mind at an early date that he would do his job, whatever was given him to do and he always got it done by first showing the way himself. We took our hats off to this lad in the end - Lance Corporal Sidney Page. Such were the fellows I found around me when I fell in on the afternoon of 12 October 1914.

Training now began to take shape. We were instructed how to handle a rifle, how to skirmish, how to take cover from observation and so forth.

Some month or six weeks passed before we began to get into uniform. Owing to the abnormal amount of khaki required, those battalions training as complete units of raw men were togged out in blue, called 'Kitchener's blue' and I duly appeared in mine at Christmas. To do this I gave the quartermaster of the company a tip to rig me out, complete with shoulder badges and cap badge. These were at a premium at the time and were only obtainable by putting the hand in the pocket. We were issued with two suits; one for working in and one for walking out. The latter were very swagger; red striped trousers and peaked caps with red band. We certainly looked a fine lot on parade, what we could do in the firing line was yet to be shown.



Milestone: Two days after Harry joined the 2nd Birmingham Battalion he and his comrades were issued with their first item of uniform – a blue forage cap – an event so momentous for these citizen soldiers that it called for a group photograph. The tidal wave of volunteers joining Kitchener’s Army in August 1914 caused shortages of khaki uniforms, so men like Harry (standing, second row fourth left with pipe) were issued with uniforms of dark blue material. (David Griffiths)



Working dress: Harry was issued with a second uniform which he wore for heavy manual labour. Here (fourth from left), he nonchalantly shoulders a pick as he and his fellow Birmingham Pals take a breather from trench digging practice in Sutton Park. (David Griffiths)