



The
DISTANT
DRUM

A Memoir of a Guardsman in the Great War

F. E. NOAKES

Foreword by CAROLE NOAKES

Introduction by PETER SIMKINS

THE DISTANT DRUM

A record of 'old, unhappy, far-off things,
and battles long ago'.

'Oh, the brave music of a *distant* drum.'
Omar Khayyam



The Distant Drum: A Memoir of a Guardsman in the Great War

‘Dedicated to my friends in the Household Battalion and the Coldstream Guards.’

This edition published in 2010 by Frontline Books, an imprint of
Pen and Sword Books Ltd., 47 Church Street, Barnsley,
S. Yorkshire, S70 2AS.

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ISBN 978-1-84832-563-0

PUBLISHING HISTORY

The Distant Drum: The Personal History of a Guardsman in the Great War was
printed privately by the author in 1952. This edition includes a new introduction
by Peter Simkins and a new foreword by Carole Noakes, the niece of the author.

The Publisher would like to thank Malcolm Brown for his assistance
in bringing this important work to our attention.

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CIP data records for this title are available from the British Library.

Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books Limited

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Frontline Books, London

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FOREWORD

Frederick Elias Noakes was born on 27 January 1896 in Tunbridge Wells in Kent, above the draper's shop, the family business that he would eventually join. He was the first of four children, my father being the youngest, and as things turned out, my sister and I were to be Fen's only relatives of the next generation. The name 'Fen' was an acronym of his initials, and was used in the family to distinguish him from his father whose name was the same. He spent a chequered childhood being moved from school to school in a fruitless attempt to alleviate his chronic asthma, a condition that was not well understood in those days. He later lamented that he had not really had a choice about his career in the shop, and that he would never know what he might have done and achieved in other circumstances.

I mention the asthma only because it dictated so much of what was to follow. When the Great War came along nobody expected Fen would take part. After all he was still plagued by his 'old enemy' as he called it, and there was little hope of any change. By his own admission a shy and often solitary man, Fen was not on the face of it ideally suited to army life, and he was horror-stricken at the prospect. Even so, he did not want to appear unpatriotic and felt perhaps that he could satisfy his conscience by applying to enlist and being rejected.

Fen had forged a friendship with two of the young men who worked with him at the shop, and, within weeks of the start of the war, when these two decided to enlist, Fen went along with them to the recruiting station. He added a year to his age, as he hadn't reached the required minimum of nineteen, but got no further than the medical, defeated by asthma. The other two, however, were enlisted and sent for training despite one of them also having to falsify his age for the purpose.

For Fen, honour was only partly satisfied. Public opinion was becoming increasingly antagonistic to men who had not joined up, and once more he went to the recruiting station only to fail the medical again, this time on eyesight as well as asthma. At the beginning of 1916 he duly applied for attestation under the Derby Scheme and passed a very perfunctory medical, being rewarded with one day's pay and a khaki armlet. He was called to the Colours a few weeks later, but once again failed the medical and was discharged from attestation.

In July one of his friends was reported missing on the Somme, and Fen tried to enlist yet again. This time the medical board refused him on the grounds of his previous medical history. He began to exercise (something which had always been discouraged by his parents in view of his health) in an effort to toughen himself up. Meanwhile the other of his two friends was reported killed at Vimy Ridge and it was with a curious mixture of relief and trepidation that Fen was summoned to a medical board in May 1917, this time as a conscript. He was fully expecting to be assigned to Home Service or sedentary work, but to his and probably everyone else's surprise he was

passed Ai, and so his war began. His parents apparently expected him to succumb to his 'old enemy', and be invalided home within three weeks. Instead, the experience cured him permanently.

After his demobilisation, Fen returned home to run the family shop, and never went abroad again. He died on 12 April 1953, when I was not quite six years old, and my first-hand memories of him are necessarily few. I remember him as a quiet, thoughtful man who let me stand in the shop window, the man who had good ideas (he constructed an elaborate system of cords and pulleys so that his sister could draw her bedroom curtains without leaving her bed). He never learnt to drive, leaving this pleasure to his sister who, as one of the two million so-called 'Surplus Women' who were one of the war's legacies, devoted her life to making a home for her brothers. He remained in the family home with his sister, a large library and a succession of dogs until his death. Photographs taken throughout Fen's adult life show a man who one might describe as lanky – the word he used was 'weedy' – sitting on stiles, on beaches and enjoying picnics. Although his asthma had left him, he was never particularly robust and lived a quiet life, which I suspect suited him perfectly. A picture from the cold winter of 1947 shows a man in a posh suit, he was at a wedding, but with a fairisle jumper to keep him warm. He has Arthur Askey glasses and an Arthur Askey haircut. This is the Fen that I remember.

Even though my sister and I had little recollection of our uncle, he was often in our minds after that because my father had a good stock of stories of Fen's war service and how it had affected those still at home. There was an age gap of nearly ten years between them, and Dad was obviously proud of his brother. One of these stories was about Fen's infamous 'Field Punishment Number One' incident, which Fen himself relates in the book. I don't want to spoil it for you later, but briefly: a letter written somewhat unwisely was intercepted by the censor led to the sentence, from which Fen was saved by the removal on the appointed day of the battalion to another place. Although Fen does not mention it, in the version told by my father, Fen and his guard played cards throughout the train journey. As I grew older Dad sometimes told me that I 'took after' Fen, and sure enough, when he first gave me the book to read I found that there was a cog in my brain that meshed beautifully with a cog in Fen's. I don't think you need that much of a common point of contact to enjoy the book though. What struck me very forcibly was the 'everyday' quality of his writing: his inner thoughts even if not actually articulated, seem to push through and the reader can see what he sees, in the way that he sees it. One of the great strengths of the book derives from the fact that when Fen came to write it in the early 1950s he drew not just on his memory but on a large stack of letters that he had written home, which had been carefully preserved by his mother and sister. These letters were of course written without agenda and without any expectation of an audience wider than the military censor and the family, and the freshness that gave them is carried over into the book to a large extent.

This lack of axe to grind is still present in the book, though he does mention that he had often thought that the memoirs of an ordinary soldier would present a truer picture than those of the Generals behind the lines.

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Fen's innate shyness perhaps carried him through the War, allowing him to draw on inner resources, and afterwards he remained as self-contained as he had always been. Addressing a large gathering would have been anathema to him, but I have absolutely no doubt that he would be gratified to know that his words will now find a larger audience.

Carole Noakes

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Great War, hundreds of memoirs and autobiographies have been written by officers and men who fought with the British and Dominion forces on the Western Front. However, only a comparatively small number of such works deal primarily with the tumultuous events of 1918 or reflect the experiences of the conscript soldiers who represented a considerable proportion of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in the closing months of the conflict. There are several well-known memoirs by Guards officers – including those of Allan Adair, Horace Buckley, Carroll Carstairs, Stuart Cloete, Duff Cooper, Wilfrid Ewart, Oliver Lyttelton and Harold Macmillan – but very few by soldiers who served in the ranks of the Guards Division, arguably one of the most famous formations in the BEF. Indeed, apart from Stephen Graham's *A Private in the Guards*, published in 1919, and Norman Cliff's brief, hundred-page account, *To Hell and Back with the Guards*, which first appeared as late as 1988, one is hard-pressed to think of any that fall into the latter category. Given the fact that, in the final and victorious Allied offensive of 1918, the Guards Division achieved a success rate of over seventy per cent in attacking operations – placing it among the top ten *British* divisions – the relative paucity of first-hand accounts by its non-commissioned officers and men is perhaps all the more surprising. It has certainly not eased the task of historians of the First World War who, in recent years, have sought to examine and explain how the BEF not only survived the attrition of the Somme and Passchendaele and the crises of March to May 1918 but also ended the war as a modern, all-arms force that was at the tactical and technological cutting-edge of the Allied armies in France and Belgium. For a variety of reasons, therefore, this new edition of F.E. Noakes's superb book *The Distant Drum* is both timely and enormously welcome to all those interested in the story of the British Army on the Western Front.

When Fen Noakes was at last called up for military service in June 1917, after his several fruitless attempts to volunteer, he was posted to Combermere Barracks, Windsor, for training in a reserve unit of the Household Battalion, an infantry formation created in September 1916 from surplus personnel of the Life Guards and Royal Horse Guards. Over the next two years or so, Noakes regularly sent letters home to his family, recording his experiences and impressions of military life in remarkable and illuminating detail. He belonged, of course, to a generation that wrote well and understood grammar and punctuation and, even when one allows for the constraints of wartime censorship, his letters provide a fascinating commentary on the progress of the war, containing candid views on wider political questions as well as highly personal reports on his own daily activities. In 1934 he collated and typed these letters – which can now be read at the Imperial War Museum – and in 1952, following another world war, used them as the basis for his privately printed memoir *The Distant*

Drum, adding many previously omitted geographical and military details as well as including mature reflections on the opinions he had advanced earlier as a young man. His aim in the book, he informs us, is to relate his adventures exactly as he remembered them, without exaggeration or striving for dramatic effect, and, above all, 'to avoid any perversion of the truth which might seem to display myself in an unjustifiably good light'. Because of the author's innate honesty and modesty, the letters and book, together or separately, give the reader a valuable insight into the final eighteen months of the war and can be accepted as a reliable guide to the morale and attitudes of British soldiers on the Western Front at that time.

Having completed four-and-a-half months of recruit training – fully covered in the opening chapter – Private Fen Noakes crossed the Channel in late October 1917 and joined the Household Battalion, then part of the 4th Division which was holding the front near Monchy-le-Preux, east of Arras. At this stage, his 'romantic idealism' was largely undimmed and he still regarded the war as 'a holy crusade for the salvation of the world', though he freely admitted that he felt 'windy' during most of the time he spent in the line. His letters home reveal that, after a few weeks in France, his views on the war had begun to change. On 8 January 1918 he criticised the 'spirit of savagery' in the British press. 'Could the fighting men...of both sides come together there can be no doubt that complete unanimity would result', he commented. He was now convinced that national pride or obstinacy 'will prove a great obstacle in the way of a reasonable settlement' and feared that, without 'much greater openness of mind and humanity', Britain might become infected with 'the very spirit of Prussianism we set out to crush'. By 12 February he was wondering when the 'indiscriminate murder' would stop. 'Everyone, except the people in power', he wrote, 'is heartily sick of it... There is not a man out here who would not make peace in a moment...' With the benefit of hindsight, however, Noakes conceded in his book that much of this was 'schoolboyish nonsense' and that his temporary wave of disillusionment was probably little more than the 'normal habit of grouching for which the British soldier is notorious'.

From late January until early March 1918, Noakes suffered from leg sores and a poisoned finger and in February was hospitalised for three weeks at Le Tréport, on the coast near Dieppe. While he was away from the front, ongoing manpower problems necessitated a large-scale reorganisation of the BEF and the Household Battalion as disbanded. On recovery, Noakes was transferred to the 3rd Coldstream Guards, part of the newly formed 4th Guards Brigade, which had been attached to the 31st Division. Two days after the Germans had launched their major spring offensive on 21 March, Noakes's battalion was in action near Ervillers, north of Bapaume on the British Third Army's front. Fen Noakes paints a vivid picture of the fighting in this sector between 23 and 25 March, recalling how desperately tired he was after three days and nights without sleep. Heavily shelled in error by British artillery, and in danger of being outflanked and encircled, the battalion was ordered to fall back on the evening of 25 March, Noakes having by now descended into a mood of weary fatalism. 'We scrambled out and ignominiously ran for all we were worth', he confessed: '...Then an

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indescribable feeling of disgust for the whole show swept over me, and I slowed to a deliberate walk, not caring whether I got through or not'. He managed only a few more paces, in fact, before he was wounded in the forearm and briefly rendered unconscious by a bursting shell.

This time, Fen Noakes spent almost three months in hospital and convalescent camps. The German spring offensives and the spectre of defeat had done much to restore his faith 'in the justice of our cause and the righteousness of our aims', even if his patriotism and idealism were never again so unqualified as in the past. By 5 May he was again sufficiently optimistic to note accurately – if a shade prematurely – that 'I think we have got Fritz on the toasting-fork...He has made progress, but it has cost him far more casualties than he expected, and all the result has been is to put him in an impossible position. He is weakened out of all proportion to his gain, but he cannot stay where he is...' Noakes rejoined his battalion towards the end of June 1918 but only two months later, with many of his comrades, he was transferred to the 1st Battalion, Coldstream Guards, to help replace casualties suffered in the opening phase of the British Third Army's offensive between Albert and Arras, which had begun on 21 August. Fen's new battalion was part of the 2nd Guards Brigade in the prestigious Guards Division, commanded until 30 September by Major-General Geoffrey Feilding and subsequently by Major-General Torquhil Matheson. Noakes was quick to appreciate the changed tactical conditions as the Guards Division advanced towards the Canal du Nord and the Hindenburg Line. 'It was an exhilarating experience, after trench warfare, to be moving freely over open ground in pursuit of a retreating enemy', he wrote. On 13 September he recorded that men coming back from forward positions were saying 'We can't find the enemy' or 'We've lost Fritz'.

The Guards Division soon faced a much stiffer task in its important set-piece assault on the Canal du Nord on 27 September, in one of the four massive hammer-blows delivered, over a four-day period, by the Allied armies in France and Belgium. Fen was hugely impressed by the weight and ferocity of the British supporting barrage – which he graphically describes in Chapter VII – and, although he felt 'stark naked' when crossing open ground under heavy fire, he also experienced 'an extraordinary sensation – curiously like relief – that I was no longer personally responsible for my own safety'. The attack was successful and the battalion's No.2 Company, in which Noakes served, became known unofficially as the 'V.C. Company', following the award of the Victoria Cross to Captain Cyril Frisby and (posthumously) to Lance-Corporal Thomas Jackson for their gallantry on 27 September. It is clear from the book that, more than thirty years later, Noakes's profound admiration for Frisby's leadership and personal qualities was undiminished. At the time, however, Fen and his comrades were too tired to celebrate their achievements in the Canal du Nord operations. In the aftermath of the attack, 'our mouths were dry as lime-kilns' he recalled: 'Nerves were on edge and tempers frayed, as always after the intense strain of "going over the top"...'

In the battalion's next action, at Wambaix, southeast of Cambrai, on 9 October, Noakes was wounded in the leg by another badly ranged British

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shell. 'This was the end of the war, so far as my insignificant personal part in it went', he remarks. While he was convalescing at Cayeux, near the mouth of the Somme, the Armistice was signed, affording Noakes 'a moment of such undiluted happiness and emotion as I had never known', although he was worried that the Allies might impose harsh and vindictive terms upon Germany. 'A lasting peace it must be', he wrote to his father, 'but it must be an absolutely *clean* peace. Otherwise, the war has been in vain'. Proud of his new rank of 'Guardsman' – introduced shortly after the Armistice – Noakes served in the British occupation forces in Cologne before returning to England in March 1919. He was finally demobilised on 9 October that year and went back to work in his family's drapery business.

Fortunately for us, Fen Noakes compiled and produced this admirable account of his experiences before he died, at the relatively young age of 57, in April 1953. His honesty, integrity and modesty shine through every page and combine with his lucid prose style and shrewd and objective judgements to give this record of his service a quality and appeal rare among books of this genre. *The Distant Drum* is not just about battle. It also offers the reader useful and detailed insights into routine trench warfare; daily life and conditions in the front line and in camps, hospitals and billets; recreation and entertainment; soldiers' rations; and relations with civilians in Britain, France and Germany. One fervently hopes that this new edition will bring the book the wider recognition that it has long deserved.

Peter Simkins

PREFACE

In this book I have tried to set down, simply and unpretentiously, an account of the chief events of my life in the Army during the years 1917 to 1919. I did not write it with any idea of publication, but solely for my own satisfaction, because I wanted to put on private record, while the memory is still comparatively undimmed, what I have always regarded as the most memorable period of my personal life. The part I played in the Great War was, of course, entirely insignificant, but (like many other ex-servicemen) I could not resist the urge to talk about my experiences-even though it might be no more than "talking to myself!"

Recently, however, some friends to whom I showed the manuscript encouraged me to make it more widely available. I could not imagine that so undistinguished a story could be of interest to anyone except myself, but I finally decided (with some misgiving) to promote my poor effort to the "dignity" of print. I have made few alterations to the original, but I have bestowed fictitious names upon some of my friends and others with whom I came in contact during my Service life; I trust, however, that no-one mentioned in these pages, whether under an "alias" or by his real name, will take exception to anything I may have written about him. Indeed, on re-reading my account, I seem to have paid but scanty and quite inadequate tribute to the many good comrades whose friendship, at different times and places, made my war-service much pleasanter than it might otherwise have been. Though I have lost track of most of them during the intervening years, I have never forgotten how much I owed to them-I hope I never shall.

In writing about such long-distant events, I had to rely almost entirely on my own memory, for I have had no opportunity to "compare notes" with any of my contemporaries, and I kept no diary at the time; the only documentary help I had in compiling my chronicle was contained in the old letters mentioned in Chapter 2, which my Mother preserved. So it is not surprising if I have made mistakes in describing things which happened more than thirty years ago, though I do not think such errors are very numerous or serious. The events of my war-service made an indelible impression on my mind and many of them seem almost as clear and detailed in my memory as though they had occurred yesterday; but the standpoint from which I experienced them was that of an ordinary private-soldier (and a not very bright or intelligent one, at that!), who often saw little beyond his immediate surroundings, and then did not always understand what he saw.

My constant aim, however, in this narrative, has been to tell of my "adventures" exactly as I remember them, without exaggeration or seeking for "dramatic" effect-and especially to avoid any perversion of the truth which might seem to display myself in an unjustifiably good light. I was far from being a "hero," even in my own eyes, and it would be futile to pretend that I was even a "good soldier." But the passing of time can play strange

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tricks with the memory: “the brave music of a distant drum” is apt to sound romantic, even nostalgic, as it recedes “down the arches of the years.” I have done my best to confine myself strictly to the truth, and to resist any temptation to “shoot a line.” Perhaps if I had allowed my imagination more rein, and had been a more skilful writer, I might have produced a more “entertaining” story-but it would then have been other than I intended.

TRAINING

WHEN I left home, on the morning of June 6th, 1917, it was raining steadily, a straight windless downpour out of a uniformly overcast sky which looked as if it might go on for hours. The low clouds and dripping trees, the streaming gutters and general air of damp depression were in tune with my own feelings, for I was off to answer my call-up to the Army, and was oppressed by all the nervous apprehensions natural to such an occasion. I had been told many alarming things—and imagined more—about the hardships and humiliations which awaited me as a recruit, and although I was going largely by my own act and initiative, and was quite convinced that it was the right thing to do, yet I knew that at best it would be an utterly different life from anything I had hitherto experienced, and I dreaded the prospect before me. My despondency was apparently shared by the rest of the family, for my parents, sister and two young brothers were gathered at the door to see me off with melancholy faces, and my poor Mother could not suppress her tears. I must confess that I, too, had an uncomfortable lump in my throat and a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach as I bade them farewell and set off down the garden path, clad in my oldest suit and raincoat and carrying my “luggage” in a small brown-paper parcel.

Yet gloomy forebodings were only a part, albeit at that moment the most dominant part, of my emotions as I waved good-bye with as much cheerfulness as I could muster. The brilliant green of the young Spring foliage seemed to lend a luminous quality to the grey prospect, promising sunlight to come, and in spite of my nervous apprehensions there was an underlying feeling of excitement, of adventure, of novelty; in sudden involuntary flashes of exultation I realised that, at last, I had overcome my life-long physical disabilities sufficiently to be accepted into the ranks of what, in my naive idealism, I thought of as a great crusading army, fighting for universal Truth and Justice. Even I was to have the privilege of playing a part in the “War to end War” and of helping to “make the world safe for democracy.”

Although the War had already been going on for nearly three years and I had recently passed my twenty-first birthday, it was not by my own fault that I had not joined-up earlier. I had, in fact, offered myself several times since the outbreak of hostilities, but had each time been refused by the recruiting authorities on medical grounds. Most people who knew me, I think, believed—at any rate, in the early stages—that I was

permanently unfit for anything so strenuous as military life, for from early childhood I had been a chronic sufferer from asthma, the frequent attacks of which had condemned me to bed or semi-invalidism during a large proportion of my life hitherto; I had always been considered to be "very delicate," and had never been allowed to take part in games or the normal activities of other boys. As a result, I had grown up as a thin, weakly (not to say, "weedy") youth, with little physical strength and no athletic prowess; my education had been seriously interrupted and I made few friends, for by temperament I was shy and retiring to a degree I find it difficult to credit now; fond of my own company and entirely lacking in self-confidence or conceit. All my inclinations were for a quiet and inoffensive life—not, one would think, the type which would ever make a soldier.

But when the War came my imagination, nourished on a love of reading which had always been my chief interest and pastime, was strongly stirred and, like so many of my generation, I was fired by a romantic, though ill-informed and uncritical, enthusiasm for the national cause. I accepted without question all the propaganda stories about the origins of the War and the crimes of the Germans, and to me it seemed to be a plain case of "*white versus black*," a struggle of light against darkness, without any qualifying doubts. And that being so, the duty of every man of military age seemed no less plain—to volunteer for the Army. "Your King and Country need YOU!"

But how could I go?—what sort of soldier could such a one as I hope to make? My whole sensitive, cowardly nature shrank in dismay from so terrifying a possibility. Yet I must at least make the attempt. I think the secret mental torment of those first weeks was among the worst I have ever suffered, before I finally screwed up my courage and forced myself to go to the recruiting dépôt on September 14th, 1914. I was, indeed, at that time some six months below enlistment age, and might legitimately have held back on that account, but no-one questioned the false age I declared at the dépôt. I was weighed, measured and sounded—and found wanting. Colour-sergeant Callaghan, who known me at school, tried to get me through, but without avail; I was rejected, and dismissed with a paper to the effect that I had "tried to enlist."

That paper was my "passport" to personal self-respect during the next few months, but not for long. In 1915 I had another try, but after a much more thorough examination I was turned down even more decisively. In January, 1916, however, under the "Derby Scheme," a last attempt to make the "Voluntary System" of recruitment work, I was successful. There was no medical test, and I was formally enlisted; I took the Oath of Attestation and the "King's Shilling," and returned home proudly

wearing a khaki armlet. I was "in the Army"—or, at least, I had one foot in! But when my "Group" was called to the Colours two months later, the District Medical Board again rejected me, marking my card "Unfit for any military employment." Later I received an official discharge from my enlistment, after having served, as the document stated, "one day with the Colours and fifty-seven days in the Army Reserve!"

That ought to have set my mind at rest, so far as any imputation of not having done my best was concerned—but it did not. I knew that I should have no mental peace while the War lasted, unless I got into khaki. It was not—emphatically—that I *wanted* to go, or that soldiering held any attraction for me. I was too quiet and retiring by nature for Army life (as I imagined it) to be anything but profoundly disagreeable to contemplate. But I was continually driven, both by my ingenuous ideals of "patriotism" and by a self-conscious sensitiveness about what other people might think of me, to do what my whole soul recoiled from. I had to prove—to myself, no less than to others—that I was not the ineffective weakling that I seemed. I was more afraid, in fact, of being thought a "slacker" than I was of the unknown hardships of the Army.

Six months after my last rejection, hearing that medical standards had been relaxed and that many men, previously unfit, were now being called up, I put in an application for re-examination, and a date was appointed for me to go before a higher authority—I think it was the Southern Command M.B., at Southampton. But at the last moment I was officially notified that, in view of my previous medical record, the interview was cancelled. The Army appeared not to want me at any price! So, as a sort of "second line of offence," I enrolled for "war-work" in response to the call from Mr. Neville Chamberlain's ill-fated "Ministry of National Service," but beyond a card of acknowledgement no notice was taken of my application.

Meanwhile, I was doing everything in my power to improve my state of health. I did not believe in my own physical incapacity, and was sure that the Army would sooner or later find a job for me. It is not necessary to detail the amateurish measures I took—the long country walks and cycle rides, the exercises with a "chest-expander," the improvised "physical jerks," the efforts to harden myself against all kinds of weather and temperatures, etc. Much of this I did as unobtrusively as possible, for fearing of worrying my parents, who thought I should "let well alone" in the matter of military service. It is hard to credit, seriously, that my inexpert efforts can have done what the doctors had hitherto failed to do, but it is nevertheless a fact that my health did improve about that time. The attacks of asthma became progressively slighter and less frequent, and by the Spring of 1917 I was probably in better physical condition

than I had ever been. When, in May, I was summoned under the Military Service Act to appear against before the D.M.B., I had little doubt that this time I should pass for some form of combatant service. And pass I did, in the highest grade—Medical Category “A.I,” or “fit for Active Service.” A fortnight later I received my calling-up papers.

(It was rather ironical, though, that after all my unsuccessful “volunteering” I should finally have gone into the Army as a conscript.)

So that explains why, as I set forth into the Unknown, my timorous despondency was lightened by fugitive gleams of elation. For I had succeeded in my aim at last; I was off to “do my bit” and need no longer feel ashamed or inferior among other men. Nevertheless, although the barrier of ill-health had been triumphantly surmounted, there was still the obstacle of my weak and cowardly nature. At that moment I felt profoundly distrustful of my ability to meet the challenge of the new life without either incurring disgrace or making a fool of myself—perhaps both. But whatever might be in store for me, I do not think I would have withdrawn even if I could. A week or two earlier, I had written to a friend: “I would rather go and then wish I hadn’t, than not go and all my life wish that I had.” It would be useless to pretend that there were not times during the next two years when I did wish that I had taken the “easier” path, when I would have given all I had to be “well out of it”; or that there was scarcely a day when I did not earnestly long for an eventual return to civilian freedom. But, although in the event I neither distinguished nor seriously disgraced myself in the Army (the latter was probably more by luck than by merit!) and there was much about it that I detested, there were yet many things in military life and the friends I met there which now make me glad and proud that I went. I am very sure that I should to-day feel cheap and despicable in my own eyes if, professing the convictions I then did about the War, I had by any fault of my own “dodged the column” and taken no part in it.

At the station I met, by previous arrangement, a young fellow of about my own age, the son of a local builder—I will call him “Harry Barnes.” I did not know him well, for I had only made his acquaintance a few days previously, on hearing that he was due to report for service on the same day as myself, but I think that we were both glad that we did not have to set out on the “Great Adventure” alone. We had only about four miles to travel, and I suppose we went by train instead of by the more convenient bus because we had free railway warrants. We were both nervously anxious to do the right thing—and, besides, the bus would have cost us fourpence each!

Reporting at the Depôt in Tonbridge as directed, we were told that we should not be required for about three hours, so strolled round the town in the rain and had dinner at a café. There were about twenty other recruits waiting at the Depôt when we returned at one o'clock, and after a slight delay we entrained for Maidstone, in charge of a Sergeant of the Royal West Kent. On arrival, we formed up in some semblance of military style and marched from the station to the Barracks; our appearance must have fallen far short of parade-ground smartness, however, for (as I remember it) the Sergeant led the way, with Barnes and I following and vainly striving to keep in step, while the rest tailed behind in a more or less straggling mob, in every variety of civilian garb.

As soon as we entered the Barrack gates we were taken to the Orderly Room, where our papers were checked and—to our surprise—each man was handed the sum of five-and-sixpence. We all thought that this was the right way to begin! But it soon transpired that the money was not given us merely in order to create a good impression, but because we were not on the ration-strength of the Depôt and should have to buy our own food in the Canteen during the day or so we remained there. At the same time, every man was required to sign a form relating to any allowance from his Army pay he might wish to make in favour of dependent relatives at home. As it happened, I had been talking to one of the other fellows, who professed to “know the ropes,” during the train journey, about this subject, and on his advice I decided to allot sixpence a day in my Mother’s name. My Mother was not in need of financial assistance from me, but I was advised (and rightly) that Army pay was often in arrears, especially during Active Service at the Front, where pay-days were often very irregular and determined by a variety of circumstances. The unpaid balance, it is true, went to one’s credit and could be drawn on some future occasion (such as “Leave”), but that would not be of much help where day-to-day expenses were concerned. By making the allotment, therefore, I should be accumulating a fund at home on which I could draw from time to time without feeling that I was sponging on my parents.

But this laudable scheme nearly came to naught two or three weeks later, when my Mother received the official papers from the Army Pay Office. My Father wrote me indignantly—and not unnaturally, in the circumstances—to the effect that he would not permit me to contribute to my Mother’s support, and declared his intention of writing to the War Office repudiating the allotment. I had quite forgotten to tell them what I had done, and to explain that my motives in this case were purely those of self-interest!

After this, my first “Pay-parade,” we were conducted to our quarters for the night, and were instructed by an N.C.O. in the art of laying down our beds. We each had a set of bed-boards—three narrow planks resting on a pair of trestles about six inches

from the floor—a straw-filled palliasse and bolster, three grey blankets and a pair of unbleached sheets. The room was large and airy, and was not over-crowded, for the only other furniture was a deal table in the middle and shelves around the walls on which to dispose our scanty personal belongings.

Then we were dismissed for the day and adjourned to the Canteen for tea—or something stronger, according to individual taste. I was impressed by the amount of food which could be purchased for a few pence (in those days of civilian food-shortage) and the fact that the tea was generously sweetened. “We shall live like fighting cocks, at this rate!” I thought; but it was not always so!

Afterwards, Barnes and I proposed to go to the “pictures” in the town, but, being still in civilian clothes, we were turned back at the Barrack gate. So, after we had tired of watching the changing of sentries and other military evolutions about the Barracks, most of which were interesting though meaningless to us at the time, we lay on the grass beside some tennis-courts and talked. The weather had improved since we left Tonbridge, and was now brilliantly fine and warm. Our chief topic of conversation was, of course, speculation about what would happen next, and what regiment we would find ourselves in tomorrow. I knew nothing to any purpose about the respective merits of the various branches of the Service, though at the time I had some vague idea of “putting in” for the Royal Garrison Artillery—for no particular reason except that several of the other men who had come from Tonbridge that day had the same idea and I had a cousin in that corps. Barnes was quite decided: he wanted to join a motorised unit; but the internal-combustion engine was a closed book as far as I was concerned, and I had no ambition in that direction. (Of course, I knew nothing about guns, either!) But it seemed of little use to make guesses about the future—we should probably have little choice in the matter—so we had supper and, by mutual consent, turned-in fairly early. My first day in the Army had made me very sleepy, and I slept well that night, despite the novelty of my surroundings and the unaccustomed sounds of a barrack room.

Next morning there was a perfunctory medical examination—a mere matter of form, for we had all been classified by the Medical Board before being called up—and then were lined up in the Orderly Room to be posted to a regiment. It appeared that a certain latitude of choice was allowed to each recruit, subject to the intake needs of the unit chosen—though, perhaps, it would be truer to say that a show was made of giving each a free choice, for in nearly every case I saw where a man expressed a preference that unit was found to be full! Just so, when it came to my turn, the R.G.A. was in no apparent need of recruits at the moment, and the Colour-Sergeant in charge, regarding me speculatively,

said, "You're about the right height—how would you like to go into the Guards?"

The Guards! I had seen them outside Buckingham Palace and read of them in histories and historical romances; I think my mental picture of this famous corps was at the moment somewhat mixed up with D'Artagnan and the "Three Musketeers," and in my romantic ignorance I believed that to be a Guardsman was a great honour — one of the greatest the Army could offer. (I still think so, but now for more substantial reasons.) I swelled with secret pride as I answered quietly, "All right, Sergeant." He then said that he would post me to the "Household Battalion," about which he would seem to have known little more than I did myself, for he conveyed the impression that this was a part of the Grenadier Guards, in close personal attendance on His Majesty the King! I walked out of the room as if I had already received the accolade!

The Household Battalion was stationed at Windsor, and I was almost immediately issued with a railway warrant for that town. After a meal in the Canteen, Barnes and I repaired to the station; my friend had achieved his ambition and was going to join the Motor Transport, A.S.C., at Grove Park. His train left a few minutes before mine, and we did not meet again until after the War.

I was the only man travelling from the Maidstone Dépôt to Windsor that day—a fact which might well have made me suspect that I had been "sold a pup" by the Colour-Sergeant, but which instead I preferred to regard as a personal compliment. Naturally, not everyone would be eligible for "the cream of the Army," as the Sergeant had described my unit! I travelled by way of Waterloo and reached the Royal Borough soon after five o'clock. Feeling in no hurry to relinquish my civilian freedom sooner than I need, I strolled about the town, which was new to me, for a while, to get my bearings. There was much of interest to see, in the quaint streets, the massive pile of the Castle and the old College buildings in Eton; the river was a sheet of silver in the sunlight, dotted with scores of small boats. I had tea in a café and wrote a postcard home, full of optimism and the imagined glories of my regiment.

Presently I thought it was time that I reported somewhere or to someone, so I set out to look for my unit. I had been given no directions or credentials of any kind before leaving Maidstone, apart from a scrap of paper on which were scrawled the words, "Household Batt., Windsor," and my name, so I made my first enquiry of the sentry on duty at the gate of the Castle. He told me that the Household Battalion was stationed in the Combermere Barracks, on the southern outskirts of the town, so I walked down Peascod Street and beyond, for about half-a-mile, until I came to a wrought-iron gate, obviously the entrance to the Barracks.

But I could not bring myself to go in straight-away. Faced with the decisive moment, my courage failed me and all my old shy nervousness came back; the glamour of "the Guards" faded, and I was filled with apprehensive imaginings about what might lie before me. I suddenly felt very small and lonely, my knees were weak and the bottom seemed to have dropped out of my stomach; it was as if I was a boy again, going to a new school, only many times worse! I walked on for about a hundred yards, under a high wall with a stone coping over which some trees showed, until I reached another gate. This was, however, of solid wood and uninvitingly closed, so I turned about and slowly retraced my steps, battling with my fears and trying to screw up my courage for the final surrender of my personal liberty. It had to be done, I knew; there was no going back now, and the longer I delayed the harder it became. So at last, giving myself a mental shake and murmuring a half-hearted "Here goes!" I walked through the barrack gates and into the new life.

Just inside the gate I was stopped by the sentry on guard, and at that moment a tall, impressive figure approached from the Guard-room, dressed in impeccable khaki and a "Sam Browne" belt. He wore an embroidered coat-of-arms on his sleeve, which denoted, as I afterwards discovered, that he was the Regimental Corporal-Major of the 2nd Life Guards. It seemed that, after all, I had entered by the wrong gate; the Household Battalion shared the Barracks with the Life Guards, but the H.B. entrance was the further gate from which I had turned back. The R.C.M. demanded my name and business, and when I said I was a recruit and showed the piece of paper bearing the name of the Household Battalion he gave me a searching stare and then asked if I wouldn't rather join the Life Guards. He enumerated some of the advantages of being a member of so famous a regiment—the only time I have ever known a "Regimental" to condescend to employ the arts of persuasion in dealing with the lower ranks!—but I had no wish to have anything to do with horses, so I diffidently but firmly resisted his blandishments. At last he let me go, and directed me to the H.B. Headquarters on the far side of the Parade-ground.

Reporting at the Battalion Orderly Room, where I interrupted a couple of N.C.O.'s in a game of cards, I found that no one knew anything about me, but particulars of my name and the *Depôt* from which I had come were noted and I was told that nothing could be done about enrolment until my papers arrived from Maidstone. There were several other new recruits waiting about outside, and presently we were collected by a rather bored-looking Corporal and taken to our sleeping-quarters; we drew blankets for the night, were directed where to find the Canteen and the latrines, and then were left to our own devices.

I cannot say that I was particularly impressed by the warmth

of my welcome into the Army. I had expected all sorts of things to happen, most of them of an unpleasant nature, but I had certainly never imagined that I should be ignored! For that was to be the fate of us newcomers during the next two days. We were not "on the roll," we were "civvies," therefore officially we did not exist; no one in authority took the slightest notice of us, though individual Troopers were usually friendly and helpful when approached; we belonged to nobody and had no duties—we were completely "spare." We slept on the bare floor of our barrack-room with our three blankets apiece—for my own part, I found it much easier to sleep under these conditions than I had expected—and got up when the bugle sounded at cock-crow or thereabouts; we got our meals in a group at the end of one of the long tables in the mess-hut, conspicuous in our shabby civilian clothes. With nothing to do all day, we spent most of the time until five in the afternoon lounging under the trees or watching the evolutions of the troops on the Square. From five until nine we were allowed to go out and wander round the town. We began to wonder why we had come!

But we did not allow our cool reception to depress us unduly. Some twenty or thirty more recruits joined us on the second day; most of them were ex-policemen from Dundee and Leith—a lively and high-spirited crowd, whose dialect was almost incomprehensible to many of us Southerners—and there were also men from widely-separated parts of England and from varied walks of life. "Schools" of "Housie" and groups of card-players soon established themselves under the trees between the blocks of Barrack-rooms, and, of course, the "wet" canteen was extensively patronised whenever it was open—as long as the cash lasted.

On the first evening I struck up acquaintance with two of the newcomers: John Redman, a precise, well-educated man who had been a bank-clerk in civil life (he was killed by a shell within a few yards of me five months later, in front of Monchy), and Lyon Mackie, who came from one of the D'Oyley Carte Opera Companies; whether or not the latter was indeed a "star," as he gave us to understand, I do not know, but he possessed a very fine baritone voice and was later a popular performer in the Batt. Concert Party. There were also "Jarman," large, genial and slow of speech, a typical Norfolk farm worker; George Egerton, swarthy and black-moustached, who had been a grocer in (I think) Lincoln; Angus MacDobbie, a powerfully-built, goodlooking youngster, one of the Scots ex-policemen; and several others whose faces I well remember but whose names I cannot now recall, among my first acquaintances in the Battalion. Most of the recruits were in their twenties, or younger, but one or two must have been over thirty—they seemed quite middle-aged to me then!

I soon learned the truth about the unit I had joined. The Household Battalion was not, as I had been led to suppose, a part of the Grenadier Guards, nor was it included in the "Brigade of Guards"; in fact, it was an independent and somewhat anomalous body of dismounted cavalry, formed originally from personnel of the Life Guards and the "Blues"—the "Household Cavalry": hence the name. It had been constituted some nine months previously, at a time when the failure of all efforts to break through the trench-lines in France had rendered cavalry as such comparatively useless at the Front. The Battalion itself was in France, and we at Windsor formed the training dépôt from which it drew reinforcements.

We ranked as Guardsmen, though we did not bear the title—"Household Troops," the personal bodyguard of the Crown—and because of our cavalry origin the non-commissioned ranks bore cavalry titles, such as "Trooper," "Corporal-of-Horse," etc.; but we were an infantry corps, and had nothing to do with horses. We were also paid at cavalry rates, and a Trooper in the H.B. drew one-and-nine a day instead of the usual infantry Private's "bob," which was all that even Foot Guards were paid at that time. It was this discrimination, as well as our (probably unfounded) claim to precedence by virtue of our derivation from the two "premier" regiments of the British Army—the Life Guards and the Horse Guard (or, "Blues")—which was the cause of the rivalry and bitter controversy which existed between us and the reserve battalion of Coldstream Guards who occupied the other barracks in Windsor.

Our uniform, equipment and training were, in all essential respects, identical with those of the Brigade of Guards, and most of our instructors and senior officers were seconded from one or other of the Guards regiments. In the H.B., however, a recruit's training, arduous though it was even by ordinary military standards, lacked much of the merciless gruelling which gave the Caterham Dépôt the name of being "the most terrible training-ground in Europe." I have no evidence that our more "humane" regime turned out worse soldiers, either in the field or on the parade-ground, because of this omission.

The Reserve Battalion at Windsor, like the Service Battalion in France, was organised in four Companies, though, unlike the latter, these in training varied considerably from each other in size and military efficiency. No. 3 Coy. was by far the largest of the four, and was the one into which all new recruits were placed on first joining, for foot- and arms-drill and physical training—a sort of preliminary "licking into shape." No. 2 was an intermediate stage, in which musketry, "company drill," hand-grenade and anti-gas instruction were the principal features; while No. 1 Company was chiefly concerned with such "advanced" matters as field-training, trench-digging, guard-mounting and ceremonial

drill. Recruits "graduated" from one Company to the next when they "passed out" (attained proficiency) in each stage of training. By the time one had reached No. 1 Company one was considered to be a more or less fully-trained soldier, and it was from this Company that drafts were drawn from time to time, to reinforce the Service Battalion at the Front. No. 4 Coy. was composed exclusively of ex-casualties rejoining from hospital, men with "categories" and men holding "struck-off" (administrative) jobs; they did not come much into contact with the recruits and, as "old sweats," were regarded with something like awe by many of us tyros.

My papers, and those of most of the other waiting men, arrived on Saturday, whereupon those in authority began to take some official notice of our existence. That afternoon we were lined up and inspected by the Battalion Medical Officer—a mere formality—but nothing could yet be done about enrolling us, until we had been O.K.'d by the Colonel. It was reported that our Commanding Officer was the only Battalion Commander in the British Army who had the right to refuse a physically fit man sent down by the dépôts, on grounds of personal appearance and general intelligence alone; and it was said that a week previously he had turned down all but three out of more than thirty candidates. This was, of course, just "eye-wash," but I was taking no chances and pushed-up for the occasion with great care, even to the extent of buying a clean collar!

The interviews took place next morning, in alphabetical order. When my turn came, I was marched into the C.O.'s Office by the Orderly Sergeant and stood rigidly at attention in front of the table, while the C.O. looked at me keenly and asked a few questions about my civilian occupation, sports, hobbies, etc. I answered with more confidence than I felt and with some deliberate exaggeration about the last two items, and was accepted.

Then, after all had been inspected, we were lined up outside the Orderly Room—I soon learned how much of a soldier's time is spent in queuing-up for one thing or another!—and given our regimental numbers. Mine was "3157." There was another line-up at the Q.M. stores, where we were issued with bedding, blankets, etc., and then taken (I cannot call it "marched") in a body to our billets.

Although No. 4 Coy., the Headquarters Staff, and the officers were quartered in the Barracks, the greater part of which was occupied by the 2nd Life Guards, our three Companies in training were all billeted in commandeered houses in the near neighbourhood, mostly in Osborne Road. The recruit-squad to which I belonged while in No. 3 Coy. was lodged in one of a row of semi-detached dwellings, No. 13 Osborne Villas—this struck me as a good omen, for my home at Tunbridge Wells was named