

November 1914 ...

Ethel Carter has lived all her life in Brandon. She never thought the politics of Europe would ever reach into her life, but this month the grisly fingers of this war did just that.

It is November 1914. Brandon played host to the cyclists from the 2/6th Battalion, Norfolk Regiment, who arrived on the 11th but stayed only a week before packing up and moving on. It seems today's cavalry prefer cycles to horses. Over in France a Brandon cavalry-cyclist is already taking on the Germans. Twenty-three year-old Robert Bullock, from Lode Street, enlisted a few years before the war and by all accounts is a top notch Lance Corporal with the 16th Lancers. Another Brandon lad, Leonard Carter, is also over. He joined the army as a farrier with the cavalry, fitting horseshoes for the war horses of the Dragoon Guards. This is a skill he learnt as an apprentice blacksmith in Brandon before he left the town years ago to join the army.

Not only are both lads local, of a similar age and went to war with the cavalry, you see there is another more permanent link. Ethel Carter is Leonard's sister and she is engaged to marry Robert. The lads are destined to become brothers-in-law.

We know what the lads are getting up to from the letters they write back home. Occasionally the flow of letters is disrupted, which probably means the men are involved in the fighting. Sometimes the letters stop altogether. It goes without saying we get concerned when that happens, especially when this is followed by official notification that they are "Missing". "Missing", it is such a vague word. It gives us nothing. No reassurance, nor confirmation of the worst. However we do have hope because some of those listed "Missing" have been found! Ambrose Field of Bury Road, and John Linge from George Street, were found in German POW camps. Pity poor Ethel though, she had no news of either her brother or fiancé for a while. Then, a few weeks ago, the authorities stated Leonard was "Missing".

So what news of her fiancé? Well, this week a letter finally came to Brandon. It was not addressed to Ethel, instead to Colonel Hamilton at Brandon House. I guess Robert sees the colonel as a more kindred spirit who can share the excitement of fighting the enemy. The colonel shares Robert's letter with us.

"The worst really started on November 4th, when we were ordered up to the trenches. I cannot state where the trenches are, as it is not allowed. Anyhow from the early hours on November 4th there was one continuous roar of artillery shells and shrapnel. Nobody of our regiment got hit. But November 5th I shall never forget. The Germans got the range of our trenches with their shells. Our boys would not give in, not even after three lots got buried alive in the trenches by the shelling. We lost poor Captain Onslow, our squad leader, who had half his head blown off. Major Dickson was shot while going back to the trenches to cheer his men up because a report came through that the Germans had broken through the French lines on our left. It was a false alarm, and through that Major Dickson was killed.

About 9.30 the boys came to relieve us and in doing so they had one killed and ten wounded. So you can guess what it was like. We then went back for 48 hours'

rest before going back up to the trenches again. We had an easy time there until it was dark, then the snipers got at it, which makes it very uncomfortable.

I enclose you a cutting from the paper, which dates back to October 15th, and it was there we had a lively time. It was where our artillery men handled one of their guns in the main street. When it was fired the noise was dreadful, and the poor women and children screaming. It was shocking to see and hear them. I really cannot express what it was like that night, as the place was all lit up with burning houses, and the Germans were one end of the town and us the other. The civilian people were in the town afraid to move. It was also one of the nearest times I had of getting hit. I was sent along the main road and ran across a patrol of Germans 300 yards from me. I was lucky enough to fire a round off just as four of them were getting into a kneeling position to have a pot at us. But as soon as I fired they disappeared round the corner. Had I been a second later they would have had me and my three other men.

I had another narrow escape whilst our regiment were taking Mont de Cats, a place close to Caëstre. We were the leading squad and it was a very thick morning. The squad got to Caëstre all right, but then our patrol ran across the German barricades. At one of them we lost Sergeant Cooper and Private Richardson. Sergeant Cooper was murdered because he alerted another patrol, preventing them from being caught in the same trap as he was. Before Sergeant Cooper could turn round they had him.

Then we moved forward. We cyclists had to go by road but the rest of the squad galloped across country. We had hardly turned the corner when four Germans came galloping round. Instead of coming for us, which would have been an easy thing for them, they turned sharply into a gap leading to a house. I threw my cycle down and rushed up to where they went through. They were going for their lines across some fields, but two were missing. I fired at the two going across the fields. As I fired, one of them who was caught in a trap between a house and a fence, looked round, and it was then I spotted him. I turned my rifle on to him and killed him with the first shot. The poor devil was only ten yards from me. I could not spare him after what they did to poor Richardson.”

Ethel was none too happy to hear about Robert being so involved in the fighting, but at least he lived to tell his tale. There was no silver lining in the next letter Ethel read. It was addressed to her and was written by a Private Frost. He says he served alongside Leonard before Leonard went missing. His words punch a dagger deep into the Ethel’s heart ...

“It is my painful duty to inform you that your dear brother Leonard was killed in action at Le Gheer, near Ypres, on or about 11th October. I and Leonard were the best of chums. He died a hero’s death. We buried him beside a Railway Station, and erected a little wooden cross on his grave.”

Postscript.

The site of Leonard’s grave site was subsequently lost over the course of the fighting and his body was never recovered. Along with other missing men he is remembered

on Ploegsteert Memorial, in Belgium, and on the war memorial in Brandon. Robert received leave from the fighting in January 1915 so he and Ethel could marry in London.

Throughout the war, national and local newspapers carried obituaries of those who had been killed in the fighting. Today their names adorn memorials throughout this land. This month, in our act of Remembrance, we should perhaps also spare a thought for those people back home who did not die a hero's death, but nonetheless still had to carry on with their lives never knowing if their loved ones were safe but constantly fearing the worst.