

November 1917...

In the thirty-nine months of war, forty-nine Brandon men have been killed while on active service. Then, on just the second day of this month, that number rose to fifty-one when Frederick Wicks and Maurice Osborne were killed in Palestine. We might presume all men killed on active service have died valiantly in battle, or at least from wounds inflicted in the fighting. However this is not the case.

Wednesday 14th November. In Northern France, not far from the Belgium border, a train snakes its way through the countryside, heading toward the front line. Soldiers of the British Army are packed into basic carriages like sardines and one soldier is eighteen-year-old Lewis Halls. Lewis is a long way from his family and friends in Town Street, Brandon, although having been in France since spring he might now count his comrades from the Tank Corps as his 'family'. Yesterday, Lewis and his unit set off from Auchy-les-Hesdin, trekked a few miles to Érin railway station and then bed down for the night in readiness to board the train earlier today. Today, all around the train are rumours about where they are heading, Camrai has been mentioned.

It is 8pm and the train continues to chug along through the darkness. It has not long passed through Bray-sur-Somme and up ahead is a tight turn before they reach Le Plateau Junction. Loud grinding pierces the gloom, then Lewis' carriage suddenly and violently jolts to the side. Men are thrown about, like marbles in a tin can, before Lewis' world is literally turned upside down. Eventually the carriage comes to a standstill. Now all hell breaks loose with men screaming in agony, while others shout out instructions to help those in distress. It is clear Lewis' carriage has met with catastrophe, being derailed off the track and then overturning. Within the carriage men lie, caught up in the mangled wreckage, while outside it soon becomes apparent that some have been thrown clear, only to fall under the wheels of the carriages following behind. The scene is one of utter carnage.

A few days later in Town Street, Rose Royal has just received a letter about her son. The letter comes not long after she was told her son, who carries her maiden name on account of him being born out of wedlock, had been killed in a train accident in France. With trembling hands she opens the envelope and reads the letter. The words belong to a chaplain from Lewis' battalion, who has written to Rose in an attempt to offer some solace to Lewis' next of kin. No one can understand what Rose is going through right now and she reads the words,

"He was killed, as far as I can tell, instantaneously. So it is some comfort to think he did not suffer. We laid his body to rest with a comrade this morning in a cemetery near here. His personal effects are being sent back to you through the usual channel."

So now there are fifty-two names recorded on Brandon's Roll of Honour. "*Instantaneously*". Never has one word been used so many times to ease the pain of a mother, father, wife or child. Lest we forget.