

EDITED BY TONY SPENCER

# STANLEY SPENCER'S GREAT WAR DIARY: 1915–1918

A Personal Account of Active Service on the Western Front

## STANLEY SPENCER'S GREAT WAR DIARY: 1915–1918

by

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**Edited by Tony Spencer** 



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### **Foreword**

My father, Charles William Stanley Spencer, was born in Sheffield on 2 July 1890.

He was the only son of Louis Spencer, a Sheffield bank manager. As a young man he also worked in the bank before volunteering for army service.

Stanley Spencer enlisted as a private in the Royal Fusiliers in 1915, was commissioned in 1917 and served with the West Yorkshire Regiment until being demobilized early in 1919. He saw active service on the Western Front from 1915 until 1918 and the end of the Great War, 'the war to end wars'. He was slightly wounded on three occasions and was awarded the Military Cross for his leading part in a successful trench raid on 1 August 1918.

'Babs' Ramsden (H. Warwick Ramsden from Leeds) was his friend from 1917 and served with him in the West Yorkshire Regiment in France. After the war he was best man at my father's wedding to my mother, Molly Breakey, on 3 July 1924, and subsequently became my godfather.

Not long afterwards my father fell ill and was an invalid for the rest of his life.

He suffered from tuberculosis of both kidneys and died on 7 July 1943, aged fifty-three.

John Anthony Spencer

#### **Abbreviations**

AA anti-aircraft

BEF British Expeditionary Force
CCS Casualty Clearing Station
CO Commanding Officer

Coy Company

CSM Company Sergeant Major
DSO Distinguished Service Order
GOC General Officer Commanding

GS General Service GSO General Staff Officer

HE high explosive

HLI Highland Light Infantry

HQ headquarters HVic high velocity

IO Intelligence Officer
 MC Military Cross
 MG machine-gun
 MM Military Medal
 OC Officer Commanding

OP observation post

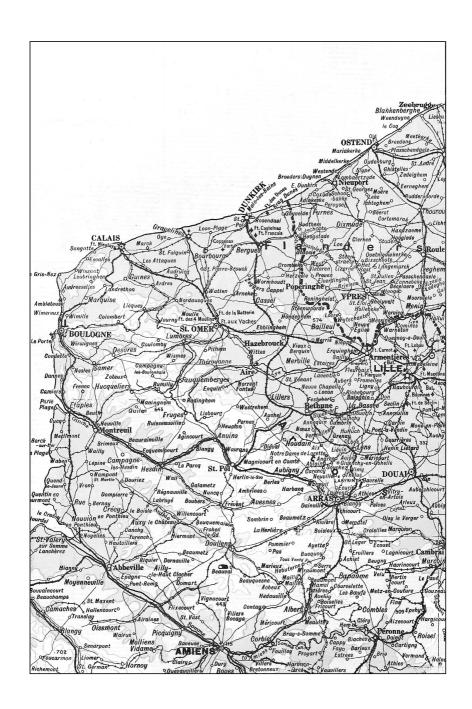
PMC President of the Mess Committee

PT physical training

RAMC Royal Army Medical Corps

RE Royal Engineers
RF Royal Fusiliers
RFC Royal Flying Corps

RTO Railway Transport Officer SAA small arms ammunition YZ the day before an attack Z the day of an attack (zero)



## 1915

#### January

I enlisted in the 24th (Service) Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (known as the 2nd Sportsmen's Battalion) on 14 January. I was a private in 13 Platoon, D Company, and we trained in England for most of the year.

From January until 17 March our Headquarters were the Hotel Cecil, Strand, London, but then we moved to our new camp at Gidea Park, Romford, Essex. We paraded on the Guards' Square behind Whitehall on that day, marched through the City of London, passed the Mansion House where the Lord Mayor of London in full robes watched us go past, and entrained at Liverpool Street Station for Romford. We remained there until 26 June when we moved to Clipstone Camp near Mansfield. On 4 August we left Clipstone and went to Candahar Barracks, Tidworth, on Salisbury Plain, where we stayed until ordered overseas in November.

#### November

Our Battalion was in 99 Brigade, 33rd Division, and on 8 November a grand review and march past of the whole Division, with transport, was held on Salisbury Plain. The

King was to have been present but as he had recently suffered a serious accident, the Queen and Princess Mary came instead.

On the morning of 15 November we marched out from Candahar Barracks for the last time and entrained for Southampton which we reached at about 1.00 pm. We heard that because there were enemy submarines in the Channel we would not be able to leave port until after dark, so we remained sitting about on the platform until 5.30 pm when we went on board. The transport was the Mona's Queen, built in 1885 for the Isle of Man service. She had been painted black when requisitioned for trooping in March 1915. We were issued with lifebelts and went below at once. We were very crowded and I lay on the wood floor most of the night and by so doing probably escaped seasickness. At about 3.00 am we ran into the estuary at Le Havre and disembarked at 7.30 am. It was cold and bleak as we lined up on the guay and as we marched through the town and on to the 'Rest Camp' it began to snow heavily.

The Rest Camp itself consisted of a great number of Army bell tents in rows in a large field and the whole place was a sea of mud. There were no plank walks or even cinder tracks between the rows of tents and it was impossible to go a dozen yards without being ankle deep in squelching mud and pools of water. Fortunately the bell tents had the usual wooden floorboards and a little drain dug round each one, but as there were thirteen of us to each tent, and as each man's boots were smothered in mud as he walked in, it was not long before the tent floor became unsuitable to sleep on. We were issued with two blankets each and before nightfall collected some bits of stick with which to scrape our boots as we came into the tent. Early in the evening we set about the business of settling down as well as we could for the night. We laid our mackintosh sheets on the dirty floor, put all our equipment and our boots round the edge of the boards, stacked our rifles against the pole in the centre and all lay down with our feet to the middle. It snowed during the night and the tent leaked water onto several of us, but we were tired and used to hard beds so slept pretty well.

I woke up in the early morning stiff, cold and more or less damp, but reveille sounded soon after and we all got up, put on our boots and puttees (which were all we had taken off the night before) and splashed across the mud to the 'wash house'. This was a long corrugated-iron shed with a wide wooden bench down the middle. Cold water was laid on from taps at intervals along the bench and soap provided. Here we washed and shaved as well as we could. Light was admitted into the shed by the simple expedient of having no corrugated sheeting on the framework between the roof and the crossbar which was about four feet from the ground. This allowed the icy wind to blow straight through the place. Breakfast was served in a marquee. We all lined up at the entrance and were handed battered enamelled mugs containing a brown liquid referred to as 'tea' together with a hunk of bread and a rasher of bacon. We heard that we could get leave from the Rest Camp to go into the town from 10.30 am to 4.00 pm, so most of us went. I went with Scott, the signaller, and Hicks (Cupid). We wandered round Le Havre and had a good lunch and tea. After returning to the camp we had supper of bread and butter and cocoa before turning into our tents.

The next morning (the 18th) reveille was at 4.00 am and after an early breakfast we marched off to the station en route for the front. The train consisted of a series of carriages for the officers and cattle trucks for the men. There were thirty-nine men in my cattle truck! We moved out of Le Havre station at 10.30 am and spent 17½ hours in that truck. It was only heated by the bodies of the men themselves and we were too crowded to lie down on the floor properly. I spent the whole time either standing or sitting on my pack. We had a hurricane lamp lit during the night, and rumbled and chattered along hour after hour until at last at

8.00am on the 19th we reached Thiennes where we detrained. When we started on this long and miserably uncomfortable journey we each had a day's rations of bread, Army biscuits, bully beef and water, and in the afternoon we stopped somewhere and had hot tea brought round the trucks. We did not know where we were going and had no idea that we should be anything like that length of time on the way. Morning became afternoon and it gradually grew dark; then hour after hour slowly dragged by through the night and we became more and more tired, cramped, wretchedly uncomfortable and generally 'fed up'.

We had brought with us from England one blanket each in addition to our mackintosh sheet and full marching order, and the blanket was strapped on the top of the valise (or pack). We were therefore pretty well weighed down that morning for our 4-mile march from the station at Thiennes to Steenbecque village. It was a terribly long 4 miles but we got there and our section was billeted in a hay loft over a stable. It was quite dark in the loft, but we crawled in amongst the hay and slept like logs for hours. Later on we noticed an unpleasant smell in this loft - where we were billeted for three nights - and discovered that it was due to the presence down below of three cows, two pigs and a WC! This last was of the normal French type, without any drains. For the next two days we had the usual parades and a march to Hazebrouck and back. In the evenings we went to a farmhouse nearby for coffees which were always served in small basins without handles. I never saw a cup with a handle in a French cottage or farm. I ran short of money here and wrote home for some, borrowing about 2/- \* for more coffees from Green in the meantime.

On the morning of 22 November we left Steenbecque and marched to Busnes. The roads were bad and we found the

<sup>\*</sup> Two shillings (10p)

French pavé particularly wearying. We were now carrying a very full kit, much more than we had been accustomed to in England, and the strain on our shoulders and ankles was very great. It was about 13 miles to Busnes and many men fell out before we got there. We were billeted in another hay loft at Busnes. In the morning we found all the water frozen and I shaved in the farmyard in some tepid tea in my mess tin. We were to remain at Busnes that day and I was detailed for twenty-four hours' Battalion Guard. The 'guard room' was a hen pen near the transport lines! It was very cold as two sides were only wire netting. During the night we were supposed to see that the horses were quiet and did not stray. We had a rather lively time because two of them broke loose and galloped off round the fields. We could hear them charging about in the mud but a rifle and fixed bayonet are not much use in attempting to catch loose horses and the transport men had to collect them in the morning.

We moved again on the 24th and as we were still the Battalion Guard we had to march with fixed bayonets. We arrived at Fouquereuil in the afternoon and were relieved by a fresh guard at about 4.00 pm. Our section's billet at Fouquereuil was a much damaged house with a very leaky roof. We were in one of the upstairs rooms and water dripped steadily through the ceiling onto the half-rotten floor. The glass had long since gone from the windows so we had plenty of fresh air. On the 26th it snowed again and was extremely cold. In the afternoon we got leave to go into Béthune which was about two and a half miles away. I did not think a great deal of Béthune; no doubt it looked better in summer and in peacetime. The roads outside the town were very bad and deep in mud; those in the town were all of very badly laid stone sets. The shops were small and most of the streets very narrow. We got back to our billet after dark and then went to a cottage for chip potatoes, wine and coffee. On the 27th we had our first pay day in France and I received five francs! On the 28th we had reveille at 3.00 am and at 5.30 am we left for Annequin on the main road between Béthune and La Bassée.

On the 30th two notable events occurred. I received my first letter from home enclosing £2.00 in gold for which I was very thankful, and we went up into the communication trenches for the first time for which I was not so thankful. We went up the La Bassée road, turned to the left at 'Cambrin Fort' along 'Harley Street' which was really part of Cuinchy, and then turned to the right just short of the 'Pont Fixe', through the yard and round the huge shell holes at the big ruined brewery or iron works there - I forget which it had been - and so reached the entrance to the communication trench that ran up to the front line. This trench had no revetment or floorboards but was paved with bricks. And it was two to three feet deep in water at the time, so it was not long before we were soaked to the knees and covered in mud from head to foot. We had the useless oldfashioned French type of shovels with long handles and we threw more mud and water over ourselves than we did out of the trench. Occasional rifle and machine-gun bullets 'pinged' overhead, but the trench was very deep and we were really quite safe from them. There was no shelling there that night.

#### December

A few days previous to this I had volunteered for a bombing course and on 1 December I went to Beuvry for the first of three days' bombing instruction. There was a Brigade Bombing School just outside the village and we threw various types of bombs from a series of model trenches. We had some excitement one day when a man who was taking the course threw a live bomb which hit the top of the parapet and fell back into the trench. The man and the Bombing

Officer and sergeant dashed round the traverse just in time before it exploded. On 4 December the course was over and on the same day the Battalion moved from Annequin to Le Preôl where we were billeted in the attic of a fairly large house. We got up and down by step ladders as there were no stairs.

On the night of 6 December we went into the front line for the first time. We left Le Preôl at 2.15 pm and marched up to 'Harley Street' where we were met by guides from the 2nd Highland Light Infantry who we were going to relieve. It was raining hard and we had to wait in Harley Street for some time until it was dark enough to go forward as the HLI reported that the trenches were flooded and impassable so that we should have to reach the front line over the top. Just after dusk we started off – wet and cold to begin with – and slithered and slid and stumbled over the shell-torn, corpsestrewn wilderness known as the 'Valley of Death', where the English Guards had met and defeated the Prussian Guards many months before.

It was still raining and soon became inky dark and impossible to see even the ground under our feet except when a star shell went up. Weighed down as we were in full marching order we slipped and fell, caked ourselves with mud, paused for a few seconds quite still as a star shell lit up the waste of mud and then scrambled after the vanishing figure of the next man in front as the column moved on once more. Once Billy Haigh dropped on hands and knees in the slime and as a light went up found he had put his hand into the decomposing face of one of the enemy dead.

On our way over the top we had to cross over several communication and other trenches, and planks had been thrown across them for that purpose. Owing to the extreme darkness and also to the temporary blindness induced by the occasional vivid star shells, it was difficult to see exactly where they were or whether any trench was being crossed at all. When we were a short distance from the front line I

walked off the edge of one of these planks before I realized that a trench was there below and I fell with a splash a distance of about seven feet into the mud and water at the bottom. A light went up as I slipped and I well remember seeing the black sides of the trench apparently shoot upwards before I landed on my back in the thick mud. I had some difficulty in regaining my feet as my heavy pack was stuck in the slime and when I did get up I had to grope about under the water for my rifle which I had dropped in the fall. The platoon was moving on without knowing of my sudden disappearance, but fortunately for me Green, who was one of the last men, saw me trying to scramble up the sticky sides and grabbed one end of my rifle and helped to haul me out. I was caked thick with mud and soaked with water. When we got into the front line and packs were taken off, one of the fellows had to help me to find the buckles at the back of mine before I could get it undone.

A few men of the HLI had been left in the trenches to give us an idea of how to carry on as this was our first time up. I spent the night partly standing on the slippery sandbags of the fire step, partly digging mud from the bottom of the trench and partly helping to remake the parapet a little farther along where it had been blown in by a shell. As it gradually became light in the early morning we had a better idea of our immediate surroundings. The trench was about nine feet deep without revetment or flooring. The mud at the bottom was very thick and it was impossible to walk about in the ordinary way as we sank in a foot or eighteen inches at every step and had the greatest difficulty in dragging our boots out again. During the night we had attempted to dig some out with spades but it clung fast and it was impossible to throw it clear. We soon gave up that method in favour of picking up huge handfuls and slinging it over the parados like that. The result of this was that about a week later all my fingernails dropped off and it was several weeks before new ones grew and got hard again.

We could not see beyond the traverse of our fire bay on the right-hand side, but on the left the ground fell away somewhat and we could see where the firing line ran over a slight ridge about 200 yards distant. One word summed up the view - mud. Everyone was deep in it, everything was thick with it, the trenches were half full of it and the whole district seemed made of it. During the night I was cold and in the morning I became hungry. Some bread and a pot of jam arrived from somewhere and we were about to have 'breakfast' in our fire bay when the enemy began to shell the front line on the little ridge to our left and the lower ground rather nearer. This was our first experience of anything beyond an occasional long-range shell or two while we were in reserve billets round Annequin and Beuvry. Most of the men gave up the idea of breakfast as little shell splinters came hissing round, but I was too 'fed up' by then to worry about such trifles and went steadily on with my bread and jam while the going was good. During the night there had been a fair amount of sniping and by the light of the star shells we could see two little wooden crosses out in 'No Man's Land' which had been put up by enemy snipers to show where they had shot our men out on patrol. During the day there was little to do except watch the front as well as possible with the aid of little pocket 'periscope' mirrors clipped on to bayonets held above the parapet.

At five o'clock that afternoon we were relieved by the Worcesters and began to move out. It was dusk when we started and on account of the flooded condition of the trenches it was decided we should go out by way of the towpath of the La Bassée Canal which ran through our lines and back to Béthune. It was very necessary to make no noise as the towpath was directly exposed to enemy fire from further up the canal towards La Bassée, so we crept stealthily out of the trench and down a muddy bank on to the towpath and underneath a large bridge that spanned the canal. It was a tiring march along the muddy path in the dark with the

water of the canal gleaming a foot or two on our right and occasional little streams or dykes to jump across blindly, but after about 2 miles we were clear of the trench system and came out onto a road. The whole of this way we were under occasional machine-gun fire from further up the canal but fortunately no one was hit.

It was difficult in the dark to distinguish the path from the rushes that grew in the water close to the bank and one of our platoon, little Wright, fell into the canal and was rescued with difficulty from drowning by the HLI officer who was guiding us out. When we reached the road our guides left us to make the rest of our way back to the billets at Le Preôl, but it was not long before we reached a fork which was not recognized by our officers and no one knew which road we should take. Somebody went to enquire while we waited at the fork but we were all so completely tired out that every one of us, careless of the muddy road, lay down full length to rest just where we stood – and many of us immediately fell sound asleep – until the right road was decided upon and we wearily and miserably scrambled to our feet again, and trailed back to our bare, hard-boarded attic at Le Preôl. During the latter part of the march it rained steadily and when we reached our billets at 10.00 pm we were soaked with rain and plastered with trench mud from head to foot. None of us had had any sleep the previous night in the front line and everyone was dead beat. Nevertheless I stayed up until 1.15 am getting my rifle thoroughly clean again and then, as we had no fires and it was impossible to dry any clothes, I simply took off my mud-caked puttees and boots, rolled myself up in my blankets and slept like a log with my soaking clothes gradually drying on me.

We had certainly hoped for a day's rest in our billets after this first experience but we were disappointed. At 6.00 am (after I had had about four and a half hours' sleep) reveille sounded and we got up, had breakfast, scraped the thickest of the mud from our boots and puttees and 'fell in' for the trenches again at 7.45 am. We started off in the driving rain, stiff and tired at the very commencement, carrying our full marching order as before, and at length reached a part of the support line in the 'Brickfields' area at 12 noon. We relieved our own B Company there. The trench was not revetted (i.e. the trench sides were not supported by wood frames or walls of sandbags or in any other way) and it was not long before the sides began to fall in here and there under the influence of the continuous rain, filling the trench bottom with heaps of earth that were soon churned up into slimy mud, and raising the level of the water that was already several inches deep when we arrived.

As the afternoon passed and it grew dark the conditions got steadily worse. The trench sides continued to fall in, the water got deeper and deeper and it looked as though we were going to be drowned out. It was said that the enemy on the higher ground were pumping water out of their trenches and down the slope into ours. It continued to rain heavily all through the night. Billy Haigh had taken off his greatcoat while digging mud out of the trench bottom and afterwards could not find it in the dark. It was not until hours afterwards that someone digging under the water and into the bottom slime felt something spongy and difficult to move that proved to be the missing coat – in a perfectly indescribable condition, of course. When dragged out it was an enormous weight on account of the water it held and when we were relieved the next day he was obliged finally to abandon it in order to have sufficient strength to get out himself.

There was a sheet of corrugated iron over the bit of the trench we were in and during the first part of the night four of us crowded under it out of the rain, three sitting on the firing step and I on a burnt-out brazier, all of us nearly up to the knees in water. Our matches were too wet to strike but someone had a lighter and we all smoked cigarettes until the lighter got lost somehow. Then we smoked one at a time in