



Two Lads from Wimborne

By Malcolm Haynes

(Adult Category)

It's the 26 July 1917. England has been at war with Germany for 4 years. Wimborne square is full of men in Army uniform. Two are from the village and are beginning their first journey to the war in France. Peter, just 17 and his friend Charley only a few months older have said tearful goodbyes to their parents and joined the others on their way to the railway station. They talk nervously about what each have heard about their destination of Passchendaele.

A train was waiting spilling steam over the platform. A loud-mouthed sergeant ordered them into a carriage where they stowed their kitbags and found places to sit. It was getting dark. A shrill whistle sounded and the train carriage jolted as the engine took the strain. It was soon pulling its young cargo towards their destination in Portsmouth.

It stopped a few more times to pick up more soldiers until the train was packed with men. The next afternoon the 27th the two boys were on the dockside in Portsmouth harbour where a large converted general cargo ship awaited their embarkation. Its bulk was mostly hidden by the dismal mantle of fog that cut visibility down to a few yards. A drizzle came off the channel dampening down any remnants of spirits that the men might have had. Standing on the dock waiting to embark Peter shakily lit a cigarette and shared it with his friend. On board were eight hundred men and fifty horses. The horses were to become Peter and Charley's responsibility when they arrived in France.

Both boys had left school at fourteen and joined a local company that bred infantry horses for which Wimborne had become famous. Peter and Charley would be responsible for getting the horses ready for battle. This being said both boys had no prior experience about what it was like at the front. The ship left the dock as darkness came. As it gained speed a slow heave and roll started as it moved into deeper water. Some of the men stood with their heads over the side.

On arrival in France late in the day of the 28th July Peter and Charley disembarked onto a dockside with not much room to manoeuvre the horses. From an area at the back of the dock a captain marched across. They saluted and identified themselves to the officer who explained what was happening on the dockside. Two horses that were already saddled were handed to Peter and Charley while a group of men fitted halters and bridals to the rest. Some of the men who had come across with the boys were going to be in charge of two horses each. Peter and Charley would be riding the jet-black chargers giving them a commanding view of the column and surrounding countryside.

A staff sergeant marched briskly across the dockside, stopped in front of Charlie's horse and gave a sharp salute; he was carrying a closed pouch that he gave to Charley. Giving a second salute, he turned on his heel and marched off. Charley opened the pouch; inside were their orders and a route map to Passchendaele. Charley read them though carefully then went over to Peter. The horses fidgeted while Charley explained what they had to do, his voice sounded very shaky. There was a large wagon full of fodder and a second one full of equipment they would need. Charley moved his horse to the front of the now ready column of men and horses and gave the order to march. Peter took up the rear to make sure there was no slacking as it moved off into the darkening countryside.

Both Peter and Charley had side arms but no other armament while the men walking the horses were in full kit and finding it hard to control two horses each with all this around their person. One of the men started singing and before long most of the column was in good voice. It was near dawn on the 29th before Charley ordered a stop.

Rested they marched through that day into the following night with a further two stops. Early on the 30th rumbling and bright flashes were visible on the dark horizon. Charley broke out into a cold sweat, they were getting close. A group of soldiers found them and kept their rifles pointed at the convoy. Charley calmly dismounted and showed the officer in charge who they were and where they had to get to.

On the left there was a farm gate that led into a field, its far side flanked by a stand of mature trees. Charley led the tired soldiers into the field where they were soon erecting tents, feeding the horses and settling them down. Peter circled the field on his horse looking at intervals into the wood. It was not very wide and the thunderous explosions were plainly to be seen. A new sound was now added, the rattle of spent bullets ricocheting off

the branches. Charley made base camp near the road and Peter settled down near the trees so that they could survey the camp from each side. On the 31st the camp stirred to the sound of a bugle calling men to roster. It was followed almost instantly by a huge explosion from a German siege mortar which had landed on top of Charley's command post. Peter ran across to Charley's position to find a hole in the ground some twenty five feet deep where his lifelong friend had been.

Eventually Charley was found along with three other soldiers on the edge of the field, there was not much of them to see except the surprised look on Charley's face. Peter reached over and closed Charley's eyes then stood and said a prayer for his best friend.

Peter came home after the war in 1918, but was never again the young man who had left Wimborne with his best friend. RIP.