

Brothers-in-Arms

By Jim Meehan



A tented camp in Egypt during WW1

It is Egypt in 1916. There has been a sandstorm. As it clears the men start to retrieve and rebuild the tents that were blown away. By an incredible chance two friends, four thousand miles from home, bump into each other. Jack Barlow is from School Lane, Standish, and James Harrison from Pole Street. An unlikely meeting in an Egyptian desert. We know it happened because James wrote about meeting his “old pal” in a precious letter sent home to his family.

Jack and James had much in common. Both were miners from mining families. By the time he was 14 Jack had joined his father down the pit and James was working at Chisnall Hall Colliery when the war started. They signed up within two days of each other in 1914. They joined the Wigan and District Pals, part of the Manchester Regiment. James was later transferred to the Leicestershire Regiment.

Their lives would end very differently though.

Jack’s house was in the row of brewery cottages on School Lane. He shared it with five brothers and four sisters. After signing up he spent a few months training before he sailed from Liverpool to the Greek island of Lemnos as part of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. Here there was a large British base that would be the launch point for the attack on Gallipoli.

This was to be one of the most notorious battles of WW1. Around 50,000 British and ANZAC troops were killed in an attempt to invade the Turkish peninsula in the hope they could advance to take Constantinople. The Turkish forces were well positioned, and the attack made little progress from the beaches where they landed. After eight months of fierce fighting the allied forces had to withdraw.

Jack's battalion joined the battle by landing at Suvla Bay. He endured several months of hell before being evacuated to hospital with a septic wound in November 2015. Although the battle started in the raging heat of summer by November as night temperatures dropped many men suffered frost bite.



Troops on a British Battleship approaching Gallipoli

The British Army had no plans to deal with the dead and injured on the scale that materialised. The wounded had to be transported 850 miles across the Mediterranean to the safe haven of Malta for treatment. Jack recovered at the Ghajn Tuffieha Camp on the island.

He re-joined his regiment at Imbros in January 1916 before sailing to Alexandria in Egypt. He was based at the Mustapha Camp before moving deeper into Egypt to El Ferdan where he would bump into his pal James Harrison. They were in Egypt to prevent the Suez Canal falling into the hands of the Turkish Army.

There was little respite and by July Jack was on the move again sailing from Alexandria to Marseille. He was on his way to the Western Front. His battalion fought at Arras before moving to the Somme in September 1916, and then on to Ypres in May 1917. These were some of the bloodiest battles of WW1 and his battalion sustained many casualties.

In August they were part of an attack to cross the river Steenbeck to take the town of Langemark. It was here that Jack was wounded in action on 16 August. Fortunately, he was not seriously injured and returned to his unit in September after being treated at Etaples in

France. His battalion was involved in further battles in October including at Poelcappelle where one of his Manchester comrades, Harry Coverdale, earned a Victoria Cross. The battalion remained in France until the end of the war.

Jack's records show he had unblemished conduct, but once he was late returning from leave in December 1918. The army asked the local constabulary to find out what had happened to him. Dr Ormsby from the Laburnums in Standish confirmed that John was suffering from pneumonia. However, John was made of strong stuff and was back with his regiment before December was out.

James also travelled from Egypt to the western front with the Leicestershire Regiment. He was at the battle of Arras in Northern France. The fighting centred on control of the Vimy Ridge. The offensive started on 9 April 1917. On the evening of 3 May James' company was ordered to advance on German lines. Cover was provided by an artillery barrage. Realising an attack was taking place the Germans retaliated with a heavy Howitzer barrage.



Men taking cover in a shell crater at Arras

James' company advanced along what they thought would be a deep trench. Suddenly they realised it was only a shallow "trace" trench that had not been dug. It was too late. They were left exposed and cut down by machine gun fire. James and 14 comrades were killed. The shelling continued, and James' body was never recovered. The battle ended on 16 May resulting in 150,000 Allied, and 100,000 German, casualties. A higher daily loss than the

Somme or Passchendaele. James and the other dead are commemorated on the Arras Memorial in France.



News of James reaches home, and the Arras Memorial which bears his name

Jack was finally demobilised on 4 February 1919 and returned to life in School Lane. The young miner had travelled thousands of miles and been involved in some of the defining battles of WW1. He had witnessed the true horrors of war and endured incredible personal hardship. Unlike many of his comrades he had survived.

Sadly, James did not return to Standish. He left behind a wife Margaret, and two young daughters Nellie and Lucy. He missed them climbing his knee to greet his return. He missed them growing up, and he missed the other simple pleasures that his friend Jack was able to enjoy. James however lived on in the memory of his family. There have been many generations since James was killed, but he has never been forgotten.

Jack got on with his life. He kept chickens and grew rhubarb on the allotment behind his home on School Lane. He kept racing pigeons and enjoyed trips to Wembley to support Wigan in the Challenge Cup. Kathryn his great-niece has fond memories of visiting him. He would boil her a newly laid egg and they would share some rhubarb dipped in sugar.

Jack had earned the right to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. He eventually passed away peacefully in 1960.

The old pals were together again.



Jack (right) on a trip to the Challenge Cup Final in the 1950s



Jack on his allotment with his great-niece Kathryn and a prized racing pigeon