

# William Charles John Tulett

## 15 March 1890 – March 1983



Photograph of Charles Tulett lodged with the Memoir at the West Sussex Record Office (RSR / Acc 3179 / B5)

## A Modest Hero

### By Elizabeth Everett

## Summary

Charles Tulett fought in many of the major campaigns and battles of World War One, enduring the rigours of training, the horror of the trenches, the loss of many friends, fellow soldiers and superiors. He was wounded on the Somme in 1916 and completed his convalescence in Kent before returning to the trenches for some of the most arduous battles of the war. He was awarded the 1914 (Mons) Star and the Military Cross in 1918 for outstanding valour. He was sanguine about his experiences, survived the mental stress of the war and was modest about his contribution to the Allied victory. He was a life-long advocate of remembrance of the sacrifices of the soldiers and wrote an article for the Chichester Observer in 1979 entitled 'Armistice, its meaning and Remembrance Day' giving particular praise to the British Legion and organisations that cared for ex-servicemen who were badly disabled or blinded. In 1983 at the age of 93 he wrote a memoir of his war experiences. I have quoted these extensively as cross-checking with other references confirm his record as being completely correct. Also his voice resonates with the unquestioning loyalty of a soldier and the muted horror of what he saw and experienced. His experiences reflect the total lack of preparation by the authorities and the haphazard pursuit of victory.

## Introduction

None of us know how we will respond when we face tremendous physical and mental challenges. Much is written about the heroism of soldiers during the war and equally on the mental breakdown that some of them suffered. There are fiction and non-fiction works documenting how men coped with the horrors they experienced. I am interested in a man who faced the worst of the war and took it in his stride, complaining rarely and then with good humour. What was there in his genes, background and upbringing that enabled him to cope without suffering the mental breakdown and long-lasting effects that affected others?

## Background

William Charles John Tulett grew up with his mother, Agnes, in his grandparents' home in High Street, Chichester. His grandfather, George Tulett was born in Hastings in 1822 and came to work in Chichester as a groom/coachman, marrying Jane in 1823. They had nine children between 1849 and 1969, Agnes being born in 1859, their fifth child. Her male siblings found work in occupations as diverse as bricklayer and roller skate mechanic, some of them remaining in Chichester and others living and working in other parts of Sussex. There is no record of any employment for Agnes. Charles, as he was known, was born on 15 March 1890 in Chichester and grew up at 28 High Street, Chichester, a small street off St. Paul's Road close to Northgate roundabout. All the houses in the road have been demolished to make way for a block of flats. The family had lived in no. 52 in 1871 when the family consisted of two adults and six children, and were living in no. 46 in 1911. It can be assumed that they moved to accommodate their growing family and then to downsize when only Agnes remained at home. Charles lived with his grandparents and mother until he enlisted. By then the family had moved to Grove Road, south of the town centre

which consists of rows of two bedroom Victorian terraced houses with the occasional detached residence.

He joined C. Shippam of East Walls which was quite a small company before the war and worked in the production department. He returned to the company when the war was over and remained with them for the rest of his working life, although he did consider becoming a policeman at the end of the war. He married and had one son, William Charles who was born in October 1920. By 1979 he was a resident of Glebe House Residential Home in Stein Road, Emsworth and died there in 1983, very shortly after completing his memoir.

### Recruitment and training 1914 – 15

Charles Tulett writes: "Our staff (at Shippam) was not a very large one in those days, many of them young lads between 18-20, but when the call came for volunteers to join the services, twelve of us went to the Depot of the Royal Sussex Regt. at Chichester to join up. After a brief medical inspection we were soon issued with our khaki uniform, something different to what we had been used to as civilians, and to get accustomed to putties and army boots was rather difficult at first.

However the response was so great, chaps coming in their hundreds, the accommodation was packed to capacity, one could not lie down but as the weather was very hot a very great number slept on the grass, but it was not too long before we were on the move elsewhere. Our Battalion was formed and we were known as the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment and our first destination was Colchester in barracks there when we were soon put through our paces as soldiers. After a while we then went for a short time under canvas at Dover, but the weather and conditions were so treacherous we had to move quickly to Sandgate in Kent, where huts had been prepared but unfortunately when it rained and it was winter months, the huts leaked all night causing us much discomfort by continually soaking our beds. After a short time we once more moved but under lovely conditions as were billeted in boarding houses along the front in Folkstone, many still with the occupants in. It was such a treat to sleep in a bed once more and we spent our first Christmas there. All good things had to come to an end and the time came when we were nearing the completion of our training ready for overseas and our next move was to march from Ashford to Aldershot by way of Maidstone, Tonbridge, Edenbridge, Dorking and Guildford leaving on 3<sup>rd</sup> March (1915). A very big trial for young chaps, billeted each night under different conditions, sometimes in schools or halls but fairly comfortable. During our longest march 25 miles from Edenbridge to Dorking we had the memorable experience of marching past Lord Kitchener. On arrival at Aldershot the battalion was quartered in Ramillies Barracks, Marlborough lines, shortly after being inspected by Lord Kitchener on Queens Parade. We were now going through some very hard training as all were now fully equipped.

Aldershot was to be our first course of strict training and it was here the 12<sup>th</sup> division was formed, comprising 7<sup>th</sup> Sussex, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Fusiliers and 11<sup>th</sup> Middlesex, the 36<sup>th</sup> infantry brigades and our code was the Ace of Spades. As I mentioned our training was done on a very strict scale, all around Yately Common and Hartley Row, also firing on Ash ranges. My company officer, Captain Birkett, was so impressed he gave me a shilling for which I felt so proud.

Thus within nine months a magnificent fighting battalion was formed from 1,000 raw recruits. Our training was now coming to a close and all ranks were anxious to go overseas. Strict secrecy was maintained, but we woke up one morning to find that the 9<sup>th</sup> division had departed, wondering when our turn would come. But before further orders were received a great honour awaited us all and that was the attendance of His Majesty the King, accompanied by Her Majesty the Queen and her Royal Highness Princess Mary at a Church Parade."

### First experience of war

"At long last the great day came and the first units of the division began to move on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1915. The main battalion left on 31<sup>st</sup> May by two trains, 7.30 and 7.45 p.m. reaching Folkestone Pier about 11.00p.m., embarking on SS Victoria and not a soul to see us off, no smoking, no talking in the darkness and the sound of tramping feet. We reached Boulogne after a short and peaceful crossing around 1.00 a.m. on 1<sup>st</sup> June. After disembarkation we marched up a long steep hill to Ostrohove and settled down for the rest of the night. It was here that a French interpreter, Raol Vassas, joined us. We paraded at 4.25 a.m. next day, then marched for an hour to Pont du Brique and from there going by train to Blendeques via Arques, near Havre. It was our first experience of French Railway travel being in trucks and wagons causing quite a sensation among many of us. We arrived at about 11.15 a.m. and we occupied our first billets in France, welcomed by local inhabitants who seemed anxious to do all they could for us. It was here we were issued with our first type of respirators which consisted of a strip of gauze soaked with chemicals, useful but very unemployable. The early type of smoke helmet was issued to us shortly afterwards. On the 5<sup>th</sup> June we started a long hike to the front line area, with full equipment walking under a blazing sun to Hazebrouck a distance of 12 ½ miles where we slept in a field, and on this march 37 men fell out. The next day was even more trying. Leaving at 6.10 a.m. we marched by brigade 15 ½ miles to Steenwerck and the day was again very hot and in spite of the extra hats, many men fell out exhausted, reaching our destination 156 men short. Two thirds of the casualties were carried the last 1½ miles owing to the brand of equipment and full packs we were carrying, very hard going. I am pleased to say I never suffered with my feet once during my whole time marching or in the trenches. We arrived at Armentieres where we had our first training in trench warfare being in the line at Houplines. The trenches were quite good and a very short distance from the German lines where at times we could hear them singing and I can remember on one occasion hearing a Gerry playing a cornet, and that very old song "Love me and the world is mine". How we found it all so wonderful, as they were Saxons and could speak English. However, although not much shelling took place it was a likely spot for snipers and sad to say, we lost two lovely officers killed by patrolling No Man's Land. Working parties took place over the top exposed to German fire also many raids made and what was known as a listening post. This was a narrow trench dug from the front line across No Man's Land to as near the Gerry lines as possible, at the end enough room for about six men. I remember on one occasion, this being a field a oats, being so close as to see the rats nibbling away at them and we could

not speak or make much noise, being so close as to see German patrols moving around, rather weird at times.”

### First Battle of Loos

“The 25 September saw the start further south of the Battle of Loos, where we relieved the Brigade of Grenadier Guards. It was a long and trying relief which was not completed until after midnight, carrying full packs making the march extremely tiring. We were now in the thick of things and during the advance Gerry started to use gas and I believe we also started to release some of our own. Unfortunately the wind changed and it was blown back over own trenches causing quite a few casualties among our own men. I well remember seeing quite a few of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cameron Highlanders hanging on the barbed wire, an awful sight.”

### Winter in the Trenches

“Winter was now beginning and we had our first real experiences of French mud. The trenches were in an awful state and we were preparing for an attack but owing to the weather had to remain in the line. It was now suggested we should try and bury some of the corpses and we managed to do this by scraping holes and rolling bodies in them, after removing identity discs. We felt the absence of duckboards severely and we lived for about a fortnight in mud and water in the dugouts but in spite of the daily use of whale oil etc. and massage of the feet, the sick rate was heavy and about 200 were treated for trench foot or rheumatism. Gum boots were now being issued and relief took place every 48 hours. I am pleased to say I was very fortunate not suffering from frostbitten feet nevertheless very cold at times and uncomfortable. When one realises most of us were civilians from homely homes, good clothes, food and bed and had to settle down to this new experience of trench warfare. The friendship and spirit was tremendous and it mattered not whether you were coming or going out of the line, someone was always ready to hand you a cigarette or a drink of char (tea) and we can never forget the parcels from home. I can remember my parents sending me out a nice rabbit pie but when it arrived it was in a very smashed state but I did the best I could and shared it around, most enjoyable, and we had jolly good laugh. The rations were one of the main problems and the transport doing a wonderful job in getting it to the front line. Of course, it was a very sparse, mostly dry food the biggest shortage being bread and it was often a case of as many as 24 sharing one loaf but we happily did and I was finding the bitter cold hard and one of the main things that kept us going when we could get it was the rum ration. After some hard fighting at Loos, around this time I was informed I was to go on my first leave.”

### Back to England

“This meant straight from the trenches in a very muddy unkempt state with a full pack and equipment; rifle and ammunition. I shall never forget my arrival at Victoria Station, getting into a compartment where there were both civilian men and women and as it was very hot we started chatting.

Among the friends I had brought with me, the lice began to make their presence felt. How sad that I shall never know if anyone else could see my discomfort and it was one of the most embarrassing and uncomfortable journeys I ever had. However, soon I was hiking towards 'Landy', Grove Road and it was not too long before I was having a nice bath, a good meal, complete change of underwear and off to bed for a real good sleep. My leave was one of 5 days, and during that time I was able to go and see a family whose son Harry had been killed in a working party I was in over the top, very sad and I to tell them all I knew. They were most grateful and we became good friends for a great number of years."

### 1915 draws to and end

"So it was back once more to the trenches and many hardships to come. It was 3<sup>rd</sup> December and we moved into so-called trenches in Festubert near Givenchy.

The conditions in this sector were unusually trying as the country was principally water meadows and the first line was filled with water, quite untenable so we had to have a series of posts on small islands there being about 100 yards between them. Six men and I had a spell on one of these islands, relief taking place every forty eight hours which had to be done at night. On the 24<sup>th</sup> December the Germans blew a mine under the company trench, causing heavy losses in killed and wounded. I shall always remember Christmas Day 1915. It was the usual custom to do what was known as Stand To. That meant about 5 minutes exposed to the enemy and the weather on Christmas morning, early daylight and the rain and hail was lashing down right across our faces and I know I cried as I was thinking of home and how they were faring there. In mid January It was a welcome relief when we heard the news we were to go on a long rest to a place called Ham en Artois and for the first time we were able to see the famous French Commander-in-Chief, Joffre. He was dressed in 'Senegal coffee' black riding jacket, red riding breeches and dark blue 'kepi'. He was accompanied by Sir Douglas Haig and numerous officers of both French and English staff. "

### Back to the Trenches

"After having such a wonderful time and rest these days were broken when the whole division received two days' notice to march back to Loos apparently due to the German Artillery celebrating the birthday of the Kaiser with continual heavy shelling of the Loos salient. Now it was our turn to occupy the trenches of that horrible part known as the "Hohenzollern Redoubt". Mining had become a science, the object being to blow up enemy trenches and a series of shafts had already been sunk, galleries being driven towards the enemy and it was jumpy work as great care had to be taken to avoid any noise when approaching the enemy galleries, a thin partition separated them and it became a question of which side would blow the sooner. I was on one of these weird working parties, and the soil was of chalk which had to be disposed of the best way we could. It was most unnerving to stand in the trenches knowing we were on top of a volcano which might explode any moment. Anyone in the listening

shaft could hear the danger was imminent. When that happened, sentries would be withdrawn from the sniper lines and a few moments later we could hear or feel the awful explosion which shook everything in a large area. There would follow a period of bitter hand-to-hand fighting, both sides endeavouring to seize the crater that had been formed. The Germans had already blown four large craters in no man's land which were known as 1,2,3,4 and occupied the rear lips of them.

During these operations the weather was awful, continuous rain and even snow making conditions something terrible, added to the mud and general discomfort. The state of the craters was awful, deep mud and no cover. Casualties were very high especially among the Germans, many dead in one crater, we also losing many brave men. It was a terrible sight; one I shall never forget. It was the worst action we had been in so far and the morale of the lads during these terrible operations was really wonderful. We were highly praised by General Scott for the way we held out during these difficult operations."

### A brief respite

"We were to have a well-deserved holiday after an exhausting tour of duty, the place was Bethune, a lovely spot where we could buy plenty of eatables such as eggs, chips, etc. and wine and the inhabitants were very kind and helpful to us. Our billet was in the public baths and the first days were spent in fitting out with clean clothing, bathing, inoculation, etc., also some route marches to get boots and feet in order. In the evenings we had concerts and its worth mentioning that we had a lovely concert party, also the corps of drums under the leadership of Drum Major Aytimore who whenever possible would come and meet us from the trenches during relief. As soon as we arrived it was so inspiring when the band struck up all the marches and old songs which we joined in and let rip at our hearts' content, so glad to be away from it all if only for a short while. It soon dawned on us we were now having the kind of training a prelude to some hard fighting and our stay was cut short by movements towards the Somme battle area."

### Horror on the Somme

"On the 6<sup>th</sup> July orders came of us to relieve the 37<sup>th</sup> Division in the trenches facing Ovillers, where instructions had been received for us to attack that village the following day. Undaunted by the sight of casualties suffered in action the preceding days we were on our toes knowing full well a whole brigade and two divisions had failed. At 11.15 a.m. we relieved the 7<sup>th</sup> Norfolk in the trenches in front of Ovillers. On the following morning at 07.00 Colonel Osborn issued orders for the attack which was to commence at 08.30 the following morning. Five lines of German trenches were included as objectives, the farthest being just east of Ovillers Church, which meant crossing 400 yards of No Man's Land and penetrating 1,200 yards in the German trench system. At 6.45a.m. on the 7<sup>th</sup> July intensive bombardment of our guns began and later the German Artillery started on our trenches causing heavy casualties and in the whole brigade about 350 were killed or injured before zero hour. On the evening before the attack I was detailed to go down to the transport to collect a

troop of 16 men with youngsters about 16 or 17 years of age. Of those we had four in our platoon, pitched straight into battle and over the top we went only to be met by artillery fire and a very heavy barrage of machine gun fire causing terrible casualties. I had gone about ten yards when a shell exploded quite close to burying me up to my shoulders, also killing many of those poor lads. Luckily some of the lads dug me out, very shaken and shocked but more was to come as when I had gone a few more yards, I had a bullet through my tin helmet, taking a small piece out of my ear and a hole at the back of the helmet the size of the palm of your hand. A very lucky escape but I still went on as many poor chaps were being bowled over like ninepins and to see the dead and dying and hearing the cries of the wounded was terrifying.

However, I still struggled on and most of the troops who were fortunate to do so had reached the German lines, but I now had come to some of the Kaiser's crack troops, Bavarians and Prussian Guards and engaged for a while in hand-to-hand fighting. I shot one but at that moment received a bullet through my right wrist causing me terrible pain but managed to get to the trench which was full of both English but mostly German dead. Here I met our commanding officer, Colonel Osborn, who said all those who are wounded but able to go back to our lines must not attempt to do so until darkness sets in. The wait was simply agony as I felt completely beat, many others the same. At last it was dark enough to make that attempt and I remember quite well a very young lad who had been shot in the shoulder asking me if he could come back with me so I said yes. We started to go over, in pitch darkness mostly on our knees and stomach as it was very dangerous to take risks standing up and we never knew actually where we were but occasionally flares would go up lighting up No Man's Land and the sight that met our eyes, the dead, the cries of the wounded and to think you couldn't help them was terrible. Still both of us a little exhausted with pain still making an effort to find our lines going by the flashing of our guns as a guide when all of a sudden, bang, and this poor young boy was killed his body sliding in a shell hole, which were plentiful. It was a shock for me at that moment as we were making fairly good progress and there I was entirely on my own struggling along, an awful experience and I offered up a prayer asking God to help me and shortly after this I was quite near our trenches. How wonderful my feeling was to be there but so sad to think of that poor boy of 17 lying dead."

### Recovery and Convalescence

"I was treated at once in the first aid post in the trench, inoculated and then taken down to the first aid at headquarters, tired and shaken. However although my wound was not all that serious I was lucky to get home to dear old England and I remember joining very many of these, some badly wounded, at Boulogne and going over on the S.S. St. Dennis and on our way over we were informed that a couple of torpedoes had crossed our bows - very lucky escapes. On arrival at Dover there was plenty of assistance for us everyone showing plenty of sympathy and making such a fuss of us. I was fortunate enough to go to a private hospital at Rusthall, Tunbridge Wells, where I had lovely treatment and a jolly good time. Then after leaving I had a spell of convalescence at Shoreham Camp, but all good things had to come to an end and it wasn't

so very long before I had to join my battalion at Newhaven, before returning once more to the front, this stay however giving me the chance to get out of that dreadful battle of the Somme."

### A brief respite

"I joined my battalion just as they were issuing out the new small box respirator, a vast improvement on the piece of shirting soaked in chemicals and worn over the head. The lads had just been relieved after one of the fiercest fighting battles of the whole war, the casualties being tremendous and now for a well-earned rest. It is worth mentioning that during that battle (of the Somme) the battalion had lost 38 officers and 900 other ranks. Our thoughts soon was of Christmas which was quite near and we were fortunate enough to spend it out of the line and enjoyed a lovely meal with plenty of wine etc. in a large barn waited on by the officers and tucking in to some splendid Christmas puddings which had been sent to us from England and they went down very well."

### The Battle of Arras – Vimy Ridge

"The weather was now becoming very cold and we were preparing for the Battle of Arras, where we had to do much night digging and tunnelling in preparation for the coming battle. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> we were marched to Arras in pouring rain, a very trying and long one, where the enemy was showing signs of activity and on the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup>, Easter Sunday, arrangements had been made and the front line wire was cleared away. At 05.30 on Easter Monday a tremendous barrage started and we began to advance and I shall never forget going over as it was snowing heavily but thankful to say met with very little resistance and reached our objective with very few casualties. We were able to watch, from a trench known as the Brown Line, very cold in the snow, the attack on the 8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade on Givenchy. The casualties in this attack were very heavy as the wire defences of Givenchy had not been cut, the result being the cavalry faced with uncut wire became an easy target for the enemy. For those who saw it and I was one, will never forget the scene of carnage. Dead horses littered the ground and many weary and unpleasant hours were spent by working parties to bury the carcasses. We were now established in the Brown Line which contained a chain of muddy shell holes about knee deep, the snow lay thick upon the ground and enemy shelling was severe. On relief we went back to the old cellars on the Cambrai Rd. This respite was to be a short one for soon we received orders to join the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Berks on the front line and continue the attack to which these troops had been engaged. Things were quieter after this attack I was sent on a patrol during the afternoon to reconnoitre and report the situation on the front and valuable work being done, including releasing a number of Royal Fusiliers who were held as prisoners in dug-outs. And for this work I received the Military Medal.

The weather had now turned warm and there was an uncomfortable shortage of water, the cans in which our water was brought up were badly tainted with petrol. On the 15<sup>th</sup> May our long expected relief came at last and were left the line for billets near Arras station. This was the end of the

most unsatisfactory operations during which the Division had lost 525 killed, 860 missing and 2,120 wounded, the results gained being negligible. After baths and a speedy reorganisation at Arras we moved off at the uncomfortable hour of 03.45 for Givenchy and the following day went into trenches as on the Brown Line. We had driven the Germans back about 5 miles and the inhabitants soon returned to find out if their homes would still be habitable. I was now mostly in working parties digging trenches of the most perfect system on the British Front. Deep dug outs were constructed in the support lines to provide shelter for officers and men and all trenches were duck boarded. Also, a railway known as 'the Givenchy Express' had been built in the back areas for bringing up rations and tools, and sometimes relieving troops. During the subsequent days it was noticed enemy aircraft was more active than usual and about 3.00 a.m. on the 29<sup>th</sup> July about 400 Germans attacked the trenches using flamethrowers and gas bombs capturing nearly all who were in there. Small parties of the enemy penetrated our lines and I was quite close to them, most uncomfortable, but we counter-attacked and around 11.am. regained possession of it. None who went through those terrible hours of gas, awaiting orders for what must have been certain death, is ever likely to forget them. The hours passed in complete silence when at last we had the news the attack was cancelled and relief would take place and the reason for this was the high command had decided to allow a perfectly useless piece of ground to stay in the hands of the enemy without wasting lives in attempts to recover it. However we were constantly being bombarded causing casualties and quite a number of raids were being carried out. On one I was in we captured 764 prisoners who seemed only too pleased to give themselves up. The division was now due for a long rest, having spent over four months in the Givenchy sector which had been a period of continuously active defensive operations of a most strenuous nature and had cost the battalion 178 casualties, killed wounded or missing. During the fighting at Arras and Givenchy I received four certificates which were awarded for Gallant Conduct also Bravery in the Field. These were signed by General Rawlinson and Major General Higginson. Our final destination was now in a pretty little village situated on both banks of the River Canache, in fact we had never been so far away from the front since our landing in France."

### Cambrai

"It was not very long before greater signs of events cast their shadows upon us, and we started strenuous intensive training for operators in the tanks. The preparation for this was shrouded in utmost secrecy. Most of us thought the training we were now undergoing was a new method of attack not realising a military operation was about to be launched. The time passed very quickly and it was impossible to train with real tanks but it was a great day when training with the real article was carried out. Preparations for the big attack was now near and about 380 tanks and 1000 guns were to be employed. The force was to break through the heavily entrenched Hindenberg Line.

At length a distant rumbling heralded the approach of the tanks but lest the noise of their engines should reach the enemy they halted about 1000 yards behind the front line. Certainly to those waiting to go over the top it seemed as if the roar must be heard for miles. I well remember that wait

as it was so tense and we were beginning to wonder what was going on. Towards dawn – 6.00a.m. - the tanks began to show themselves disclosing for the first time the divisional sign. Twelve of them were operating on our battalion front, zero hour had been fixed for 06.20 a.m. on Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> November and from now onwards the minutes crawled and there was dead silence. Could the enemy forestall us at the last moment, these were questions in every mind and the suspense was terrible. 6.20 a.m. came at last. Instantly a hurricane barrage opened from guns of every calibre and to add to the deafening noise dozens of our planes flying very low appeared out of the mists of dawn and so the attack began, the infantry waiting in single file behind each tank whenever it was possible to do. In addition to the large tanks, there were others used known as Whippets much smaller and could move a lot faster. There is no doubt that from the opening of the attack surprise was complete and there was no real opposition at all, in fact chaps were lighting cigarettes, a pleasure denied us during the weary hours of waiting. As we advanced and got nearer the German lines we could see the tanks had done a wonderful job in smashing the wire of that formidable Hindenberg Line, in fact the attack was the most successful the battalion had ever made. The rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> was spent in consolidating the German trenches in which were more capacious dug-outs and enormous amounts of cigars, mineral water which was most popular, also great coats and I can assure you we collected as many souvenirs as we could get hold of. The next three days passed quietly enough and enabled our men to have a rest after the strenuous days through which they had passed. However it was not long before enemy hostile artillery increased after the attack and to make matters worse the weather broke, snow, sleet and rain had set in making the ground almost impassable. Conditions were deplorable turning the trenches into a mass of clinging mud, making it impossible to reach our assembly positions until 6.0 a.m. on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the attack starting at 7.0a.m. supported by a feeble barrage. We were able to occupy a couple of trenches recently held by the enemy but unfortunately C Company lost all its officers and Captain Ballard who had shown such admirable qualities of leadership was killed. Continuous heavy fighting was going on, something I shall never forget, terribly exhausting and we were forced to return over the open ground. The retirement was of great difficulty and the casualties which had already been considerable were sadly increased. So sad to see so many of your pals and friends being killed, not knowing if you would be the next, but the company was skilfully led back to their original line from which an attack from the enemy was successfully repelled. Thus the attack ended and great bravery and dash had been shown by all ranks but the dreadful weather conditions which caused rifles and Lewis guns to become clogged with mud were factors which made success highly improbable. I was a Lewis gunner so I know what difficulties we were in. So much had gone on during the terrible fighting and the trench warfare is so difficult to remember and give in detail all that happened and was still continuing.”

### Another brief leave

“Around this time I was given my second leave and I am pleased to say, under far more pleasant conditions than the first one as now everyone had to have a medical inspection, hot bath, complete change of clothing and no

equipment, rifles or ammunition which was a great comfort. It was a clear week this time and once again I had the sad task of telling a relative about their son's death. As before I was again on a working party over the top supervised by my company officer, Captain Woodhams, when he was shot through the head and killed. I met his father at the old Chichester station and explained all that happened. He was a very brave and well liked officer and was sadly missed by us all."

### The beginning of the end

"So once again it was back to action but fortunate as the lads were out of the trenches and I was able to take things easy before relieving for more action. We now moved on to a place called Fleurbaix and we found ourselves in a similar position as when at Festubert, the trench lines in the new sectors being of low lying ground consisting of round long parapets mostly derelict and perished, and the state of affairs was such as constant patrolling at night was necessary but a difficult operation owing to the numerous ditches and wire entanglements often resulting in partial affrays and small attacks on posts. Altogether so far in two sectors it was a question of things being rather quiet as at Festubert - a kind of let-live state of affairs. Working parties from two to three hundred strong were provided daily for about 5 days but it was not long before we were on the move again and more action in another sector. It was not long before we felt the trench mortars very active, resulting in the enemy successfully entering our trenches, killing three, taking four of our boys prisoner and on the following evening a report was received that the enemy was massing in front of us. The artillery opened a harassing fire but no attack materialised and the rest of the tour passed quietly. We now received orders to carry out a raid for identification of enemy divisions. The commanding officer had to select a spot to be raided and our company was the one selected for it, the men showing great keenness and it was quite clear that they meant to give a good account of themselves. All the preparatory work was organised by Lieutenant R. Clements. No Man's Land varied from two to three hundred yards in width and seventy yards of abandoned trenches, old wire entanglements and ditches full of mud and water. I was on this patrol and as Sergeant accompanied Lieutenant Clements to ensure that each leader knew his objective and the route clearly marked free from obstacles. The raid was fixed for the 8<sup>th</sup> of March (1918) and there was to be no preliminary bombardment and the opening of barrage was the signal for the advance. The cutting of the wire had begun previously by the artillery but had to be continued by the patrols who were wearing no equipment to hamper them but each carrying a rifle with bayonet fixed, thirty rounds of ammunition, two bombs and a pair of wire cutters. I myself carried a revolver. I can remember Clements saying to me as we were close enough to cut the wire, lying on our stomachs, "I wonder where the buggers are" as there seemed no movement of any kind.

The password by which the raiders could identify themselves in the darkness was 'Good byeee' from the popular song of the day. The raid, supported by a most effective barrage of artillery trench mortars, went off without a hitch; the main post was captured with scarcely any opposition, six were killed and two brought back as prisoners and our casualties were two slightly wounded. However it became impossible to go any further as

the remainder of the front was so deep in mud and water it proved we could not penetrate beyond it or even in most places to enter it. The raid was an unqualified success reflecting the greatest credit not only on all who took actual part in it but Lieut. Clements for his careful organisation. On the 24<sup>th</sup> March we marched to a place called Aveluy Wood but informed our destination was to be just behind Arras. It is worth recalling this march was 15 miles and commenced at 8.00 a.m. arriving at 3.30 p.m. The Germans had launched an attack on the 21<sup>st</sup> on a forty mile front and the attack had succeeded almost everywhere and by the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup>, when we reached the battle zone, the enemy was surging over the country which he himself had laid waste in 1917 and had reached the line of the old Somme battlefields of 1916. We had been ordered to take over a position in the line near Albert, which we reached around 9.00 p.m. and found it in a very sorry state the result of heavy bombing the previous night, the streets being choked up with broken transport vehicles, remains of buildings, dead men and horses. The brigade marched through the town, when notification was given that as the halt would be a long one the troops were to get as much rest as they could. Heavy firing was now heard and it was reported the Germans had occupied Albert.

Darkness had now set in and it was an awe-inspiring sight to see the whole of the old Somme battlefield a mass of flashing dumps, huts and camps. At length it transpired the Germans had broken through and I can remember it quite well as it meant a hurried retreat for us, and understood it was only about 8 miles from Paris, but for some unknown reason suddenly stopped. About midnight matters calmed down and we were able to resume our normal dispositions. We were subjected to severe bombardment and sniping causing many casualties and time after time the enemy tried to rush our positions only to be forced back from a steady and well directed fire from a small but determined garrison with heavy losses. There is no doubt that the stubborn resistance on the part of the brigade was largely responsible for saving the situation in that part of the line and shortened our time in the trenches at Albert. I must recall a most unpleasant incident.

My platoon officer and myself and six men were detailed to make a quick raid on a certain German trench and were given instructions as to the way this was to be carried out. The time came for the raid and over we went, and to my surprise on looking round saw this officer was crouching in the trench, so being the sergeant in charge I had no alternative but to carry on and luckily met with little opposition and entered the trench and to my surprise only one Gerry in there and he was badly wounded in the head and I said to myself shall I finish him off when suddenly I heard loud voices and on looking over the parapet could see quite a number of them returning, so I said to the lads "retreat back to our lines and I will cover our retreat". This was successful and as it was a daylight raid a real miracle not a single casualty occurred and I was able to myself to also get back, but by then several must have spotted me as I was subjected to much sniping and some quite near misses but I survived, unfortunately with no information. I reported the behaviour of this officer to my commanding officer and he was arrested and taken out of the line, awaiting a court martial. This took place in a meadow well behind the lines and was attended by the whole battalion on a three sided square. Captain Thompson was in charge of the situation and when my commanding officer was brought out in the centre of the

parade my thoughts were 'supposed he is sentenced to death for cowardice what will my feelings be' but this did not happen resulting in him being severely reprimanded and transferred to another unit.

All this over, it was action once more, and in this part of the line plenty was taking place, bombing, hand bombing, attacks and counter attacks on both sides and casualties heavy. Accordingly an attack was arranged to take place and our platoon was the one selected to do this, operating along a trench leading into the enemy position, with other platoons in reserve. The Germans were probably expecting this attack for in a short time a counter attack was launched against us in considerable force and we were forced to retire to the original lines. The battalion was relieved that night and went back to the old British lines but not before Lieutenant Clements, who was such a gallant officer, had been killed by a stray bullet, so the first phase of the battle of Amiens was over. In spite of our heavy casualties there was a general feeling of elation and we realised that a great victory, moral and material had been won.

On the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> August we relieved the 6<sup>th</sup> Buffs on the outskirts of Morlancourt and shortly afterwards received orders that the attack was to be renewed two days later. There was heavy shelling from midnight onwards and we had to wear gas masks for a long time, very trying and most uncomfortable but the time for the big advance was drawing near. Eventually it commenced and there was to be no bombardment before zero hour which was at 4.45 a.m. Three heavy tanks were to co-operate with the battalion and a contact plane was to fly over three and a half hours after zero. The battalion advanced in two waves our company being in front. In spite of hostile bombardment there was very little shelling when the attacks actually started and not much resistance was encountered although the advance was considered difficult owing to the mist, which was made thicker by the barrage. Everything went well according to plan and we successfully passed through to gain our objectives by 10.00 a.m. with slight casualties. The advance of nearly three miles was the nearest approach to open warfare we had so far experienced and one I shall never forget because as we advanced it was so wonderful to see the hundreds of Gerys coming towards us with hands above their heads and I collected quite a few souvenirs.

Afterwards there was a lull in operations but only temporary and we knew there was to be many hard battles ahead but final victory was already assured. However things livened up again and heavy fighting was taking place once more and it was at this stage I was recommended for my commission by Captain Thompson. I was sent out of the line to Boulogne where there were quite a number of chaps from other segments for the same thing. Of course it meant away from it all for a time, it sounds queer, I know, but I was sorry to leave the lads. Anyway time passed and we didn't seem to make a move and couldn't understand why we had not gone over to England. This was now the month of September when suddenly an order came to all, return to your units, no reason given, so instead of going to Blighty it was trenches again. Now the enemy was withdrawing rapidly and we were in the month of October and moving up in reserve trenches. The whole countryside was littered with booby traps and we had to be exceedingly careful in our movements. However time passed and on the 28<sup>th</sup> October the whole brigade was relieved and on the following day marched back to a village named Vieux near St. Amance and remained

there until 10<sup>th</sup> November. During that time there were rumours of an early Armistice but wondered if we would be sent back into the line again before it came about, but as we all know so well about 9.00a.m. on the 11<sup>th</sup> came the fateful telegram – Hostilities will cease at 11 hours. The armistice was not unexpected and after the long and expensive attacks since the 8<sup>th</sup> of August it was more than welcome, so it was not long before we were out of the line and the first thing was the whole brigade attended a thanksgiving service conducted by the Padre, the Reverend W.G. Williams, M.C., this being a very impressive sight. The men went back to billet when the company commanders read out the preliminary scheme for demobilisation. The rest of the day was devoted to general rejoicing but it was a calm one the quality being one of relief than of hilarity. The war was over and those who won it were profoundly glad but they accepted the Armistice as they accepted the fortunes of battle without undue excitement just finished with and very thankful and that was all.

There is one memory that I shall always remember. On leaving the trenches we passed through a small French village where there were a small group of elderly men and women who came running over to us, hugging and kissing us with tears in their eyes so pleased to think it was all over, a very emotional occasion for many of us, one I shall never forget. It was on everyone's lips now wondering when we shall get home but there was clearing up to be done and it was quite a while before I came home but fortunate to be there for Christmas."

## Conclusion

Charles Tulett's words are a fitting conclusion to his experiences.

"Thus after nearly five years of life, the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Sussex Regt. ceased to exist and when one remembers the lads who served in it were mostly civilians at the start who had gone through rigorous training to prepare for war and come through with tremendous credit. We had known boredom, its excitements, its filthiness, found billets in scores of French villages, laid down in bivouacs under the stars, being tenants of flimsy waterlogged dugouts, fought in blizzards and blazing sunshine, wallowed in mud, dug innumerable trenches. We had heard the whistle of the rifle grenades, the clamour of great bombardments, the suddenly stillness of the whizz bang, the dreaded signal for gas and groped for our masks, looked out of dugouts a hundred times to ask 'where did that one go?' How we tangled in the front line, crossed no-man's land together in darkness and grumbled in our work-filled rest, but the sadness of it all was to look around and see our comrades crumpled into huddled heaps of khaki by our side, a terrible sad sight. And the experience of leaving civilian life to fight for King and Country came to an end. Something for those who took part in it for sure will never forget. It was a question now of returning to our jobs, if we had one. Luckily I did, but at that time in 1919-1920 things were rather difficult and times hard. It was always my intention to join the police, so I went to my boss telling him of my wish and I can see him now looking up from his desk saying "You will get the backing of myself and Sir Archibald (Garland) who was Mayor but I would rather you did not go". "Give me time to think about it Sir," I said "and I will let you know". As the firm had treated our parents so well during our absence overseas by allowing them 10/- a week while away, I thought to myself 'I think it's only

right to go back' which I did and given the job of supervisor in charge of the labelling, packing and despatch department but it was not until 1950 I became a foreman and remained so until 1955 retiring after 47 years' service working for a splendid firm and after all no regrets for doing so."

## Bibliography

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### Original Records

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RSR MS 7/11 Royal Sussex Regiment 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion War Diaries 1914-19 at West Sussex Record Office

Photograph of Charles Tulett lodged with the Memoir at the West Sussex Record Office

### Internet Research

All biographical information from [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk), census records.