

## Fred Grout: Stretcher bearer of the 8th Royal Sussex Regiment



Pte Frederick Grout, with his mother. The photograph is owned by Frederick's son, Frank Grout and is used with his permission.

His personal account of his time as a Prisoner of War, written on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1967, written a few days before his death, aged 75 and edited by Ed Miller, Ferring History Group, 2013

## Remembering the First World War

**Frederick Grout, market gardener of Ferring, served in WW1 as Stretcher Bearer in the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment. He was one of 9,000 British soldiers captured during Battle of Cambrai, November 1917.**

*To those who this may be interesting:*

*I am writing about my time spent as a Prisoner of War under the Germans in the Great War 1914-1918.*

*I will start by the Battle of Cambrai where I was captured. The Battle of Cambrai was a big mistake like a lot more of them - just a big waste of men. It was a big tank do - the first use of the Whippet Tank and the big Brass nobs wanted to show off with their big noisy toys. Well in my opinion it was a washout and for the lads in the trenches, they were badly let down by not being relieved and having to fight far too long*

*Well my part in it was Stretcher Bearer (SB) and as we moved in overnight we were given a point to meet the Medical Officer (MO) after the tanks moved in and made a hash of things. I was one of four SBs so I was useless on my own, as I soon found out. For when it was time for us to move I said, 'Come on we had better get going, for someone will want us'. So I went off but the other three did not follow (Cowards).*

*I found the MO and he asked me where the others were and he said ' Find someone to help, but before he could say any more a German shell got us and when I came to, I saw the MO had a nasty wound in his neck. But I was lucky - a nasty smack on the wrist, and the MO was being treated by the RAMC so was in good hands. I found another chap to help me as one cannot use a stretcher on your own, so we got moving and the first one we found was a chap with his brains blown out. We could not do anything for him, so off in search for others. What a do! We were in the open and the other lads were in the trenches all around. Well it was some time before we found another. This chap was in a German trench with a shattered leg so I made him as comfortable as we could and started to get him to the 1<sup>st</sup> CCS (Casualty Clearing Station) when the Germans started to straffe us- so not so good and that chap was blown off the stretcher and in his place was mud.*

*Well I searched for him but could not find him. I looked down dugouts that had been filled with Poison Gas. So we got going back where we started from and the shells were coming over faster.*

*I found the other three and they (cowards) had not moved out so I had a job to control myself. Anyhow I said nothing or reported nothing so we joined the Company. I was just tired out but the other three were fresh. Well Jerry was just pounding us, and one of the cowards was wounded, but I got the stretcher in a hole and lay down exhausted. Then we moved to another part and then we had it, for Jerry made a counter attack. So, plenty to do and all had enough, but no relief. Well there was an officer and men lying in no man's land. They asked for volunteers to go and get them in. So I was one that went, three trips and got back OK, but some job - but no VC for that.*

*Well the night before we were captured I just could not care what happened. I laid the stretcher out and tried to get a little sleep but soon came along the Sergeant. He said, 'What are you doing here?'. I said,*

*'Trying to sleep. Where are all the others?' They had been relieved for half an hour. He said, 'I am glad I found you', as I was the only stretcher bearer left, and no MO. I had the lot to do. Well, as we were going back to form the Company we saw Germans going along at the back of us. I said, 'I don't like that' for they had got through. They got the artillery before they got us, we soon found out.*

*When we joined the Company I had a lot of wounded to see to down the dugout. Well, in the morning the Sergeant said, 'I am going up to relieve the gunners; will not be long'. And what next? He shouted, 'Come up Jerry is over'. But where the wounded went I did not know. I went up and a square-headed Jerry aimed straight at my head but I just moved it over and the bullet went over my shoulder. And before he got another one up the spout, I got away But what a brazey do! One of the officers said, 'Give me a rifle. Shoot the lot'. I told him to B... well keep quiet or we all will be done in. He said, 'Send a rocket for artillery'. I said, 'Too late for that'. I think he had our rum inside him.*

*Well as Jerry got us lined up, for searching of course, hands up, the big square-head came along and cut a lot of lads' wrists. There again I was lucky. Well, then we were marched away, thrashed with sticks. I was beside the Sergeant when he was shot through the chest, so a near miss for me. I tried to help him but could do very little and was driven off him. I often wondered what happened to him but I don't think he got over it; so a sad end to my best pal. Sergeant Sams was his name, acting Sgt Major. The officers had a good thrashing as well.*

*Well, we kept going until we got to a river or canal. It was quite easy to see where the Huns started from for there was tons of human moisture [faeces] on the bank. We had to stop there to let the Germans and guns over the bridge. There was one of our guns firing at it. The distance was good- the shells were falling in the water only about 6 ft away. I wished I could push them over, although we had to cross over it. But if they could only have smashed it down that would have delayed the Hun for a time. What was amazing was there were no trenches or defences. We were right in open country so we were near to getting the Boche on the run.*

*When the road got clear we got going again, feeling very washed out having had nothing to eat or drink. We spent the night in a field with barbed wire all around. They filled tubs with water but nothing to eat and we had to drink the water like cattle. But after thinking things out I broke my gas mask and used part of that for a cup. Well, in the morning we thought we were going to get some food but no- they cut a lot of bread up and put it outside the gate and when they finished they marched us out past it and gave us none (they were very kind hearted). But after a time, still marching, they gave us a small loaf between eight - so that did not do a lot of good.*

*After marching all day we arrived at a village and they put us in a building that was used as a tannery and we were packed in so tight we could hardly lay down. We had to put up with these conditions for a few days. They used to get us out and march us around some trees, and someone in a house opposite was taking a film of us being chased round. Well, the sanitary conditions were just awful but we had to put up with it and there was nothing much to eat. Then they marched us to a railhead and packed 40 of us in a box truck to go to Germany and I thought, 'Well, this is the*

*end'. If it had been hot it would have been. After a time we got going but a rough ride - three days and nights in that truck and only let out once.*

*I think it was a Sunday morning when we arrived at Dutman, Westphalia and were marched to a big camp. The roads were very icy. When we got settled in the huts were very good but it was cold. Well, they began sorting us out. Then they had what they wanted off us - pants, vest, shirt, boots and gave us a thin shirt and clogs but no socks (so I think they were very kind). If we had a bath or shower there was no towel to dry us, but we just had to get used to things, and all had to have medical examination, with vaccinations inoculations and all sorts. Well, it was Christmas Day and they did us well - one spoonful of mashed potatoes for dinner and dry bread for breakfast and tea.*

*Well, after they had finished drilling holes in us they decided we were fit to do some work so we had a free ride in a train to Belgium again. What part, I cannot remember, but it was road work and one day we were lined up because the old Kaiser was passing by them. Fine big chap he looked. Well we did not stay there long. Where we were billeted. there were Russian [Prisoners of War]. We used to steal 'catafans' [kartoffeln] and serholes [?] when we got the chance - that was potatoes and swedes. The Russians worked in a mill. They used to steal meal - not too bad after it was sifted. We used to exchange for some but it was good. Well, we almost starved many a time; after lying down, we had a job to get up. I remember once a Russian did something he ought not to have done so the Germans put him in a tub of icy water and kept him there until he passed away, dirty dogs. I would like to have done the same to them but had to be careful or I would have had the same treatment.*

*After a while we were moved. We had various jobs sorting out shells but we mixed them all up and then we had a job to make a new railway for the 'Big Bertha '. That was the big gun they used to fire at us when we were at Arras. I never thought I was going to see the big thing; a train-full it was, on rails. well I must say the men that were in charge of the Big Gun were the best Germans I ever met. We had a job once carrying bombs to planes that were hidden in a wood - Gothes [Gothas], I think they called them. They told us they were going to bomb London with them. They used to carry one under each wing so they had to let them both go at the same time - but we only done it once. We would not do it any more, for that was against the rules of war. Well, then we had a job of road making and they did know how to make good roads. We had to fill a big wooden water cart with water from a stream and take it to where the water was wanted but it leaked and you can bet it got worse. So there was not much water left in it.*

*Then we moved to another place then on to Tarnia, where we had our longest stay, and then we were glad to get our Red Cross parcels from home. There were emergency parcels for us but we did not get those. We were supposed have had them in Germany but we found out there was a Black Market for them - a British RSM used to flog them, so a dirty swine but I think he was given away after the Armistice. I made a report about it but found out someone else had done it. Whether he was punished or not - I don't know. We had to work in stone quarries, and hard at that, but it was nice to have something to eat. I was lucky I had two lots sent me, one 'Grout', one 'Grant' but same number, so OK.*

*Well, one Sunday we had a head Jerry come to see us and he had us all out on Parade to give us drill because we would not salute the German officers But he did not get much out of us. On 'Halt', we kept going. On 'Left', we turned right, and so on. He got furious, so one of our lads got out in front and we did it OK. So the Big Head cleared off, foaming at both ends*

*Once we got a Belgian to get us potatoes but our guard saw what was going on and went to see the driver and his mate (of the train they used to drive). While he was gone I threw them in a quarry which was full of water so he could not take them back and report. We were all searched but all they found was stones, so more paving.*

*Once I had a bet with another POW who could lift the biggest piece of stone and put it up on the truck which used to take it up to the cracker which got it small enough for road making. Well, we put so many large bits up, the Belgian got frightened said, 'Machine kaput!' and so it was all smashed up and we had a rest from stone work. They got us on to make a rail road but they never got it straight, so that was a wash out. Then they got us loading a lorry with bricks and it was a new lorry. It looked the right place for a few bricks and 'Bash, Bong', one went through the windscreen. Oh, the driver when he came! Well, I was working the other end so it was not me that done it.*

*People talk about air raids in this country {Britain}: we used to be got out of kip every night to go to shelter from our own planes and often when on the march used to get gunned by our own planes. Well, so it went on until we had to move because Jerry was being pushed. They had to get us out of the way but we had to leave our parcels behind. They were in Rail Truck, so goodbye to them. We never had them.*

*Well we kept marching for a few days. We got to a place where we could kip in an old brewery or something. Then we had orders to move or stay as our lads were pushing Jerry back: we could hear the guns. So we decided to move out as we did not want to get in the way or otherwise.*

*Well we kept on until we could go no farther so we lay down in the road like a lot of sheep. We should have been drawing Jerry wagons but left them behind as we had been bombed by our planes So Jerry had to carry their own packs, like us. Then we were done in - nothing to eat or drink for a long time but we had to keep brave as we knew it would not be long before we would be free.*

*We got to a place called Turbeige [Belgium] and one morning about 9 am the Guards had sticks instead of rifles, so the war was over. We went out and got what we could to refresh us- 'La Bierre' (beer, no good but something different) and 'Du pain' (bread). So one day after, we got going - as we wanted to get to transport or to a railhead. Jerry was to hand us over to our people, but we decided to find our own way to Brussels. We got a small Union Jack and got going with that. A Jerry tried to get it but we stuck to it. Well, still a long way to go so we were resting. I went to a cottage asked for bread. The dear old lady gave me half of what she had. God Bless her and Reward her.*

*We arrived in Brussels weary and lame but soon got taken over by some kind Belgians and nothing was too good for us. Knowing what rich food would do, I kept very light on eating but a lot of chaps went down, through having too much. Well, I had the pleasure to be a spectator to view the Homecoming of the Belgian King and Queen. The people that*

*sort of adopted me and my old pal Tom got a place over a shop so we had a good view all day. The troops were marching in; something of everything that was in the war. Well we had a Grand Time thanks to our kind friends.*

*So the time came we decided to get to a railhead to get to the coast. We were hoping to get a ship to England. We got on a train at Courtrai for Boulogne but we were not allowed to, so up to a camp where we were cleaned up and had a shave, given fresh uniform and made soldiers again. As our Regiment was called out, we had to join. So that was that - and the end of the POW days, thank God, and we were soon to get home. So, ship to Dover and the necessary check- up before having leave to get home. I was Stone Deaf, but looking forward to seeing my dear old Mum and Dad, Sis and Bro. On arriving at Goring I was met by Miss Penfold who gave me a ride home in a pony cart so I finished in a grand way, after all the hardship of war and as a POW. Thank God I was spared to get back Home but sad memories of those left behind. F.G*