Interview with 'Budge' - 2

MERRILL LILLEY

MERRIL: *We ended the last interview talking about your memories of St. Mary's School in 1917. In that year and the following one you remember a great many events which took place in Dover in the last two years of the war and to me these seem to constitute a fascinating historical record*

BUDGE: I certainly do remember much that happened to me in my very early life. I suppose, because almost everything that happened in those years I was experiencing for the first time, the things I saw and did more easily became entries in a great log of memory that has been with me ever since. So, go ahead, I'll answer as best I can.

MERRIL: *America entered the war in 1917 and you and your friends saw the first of them arrive in Dover. What did you think of them?*

BUDGE: All of us were interested to see these men from the New World, especially as they wore Boy Scout hats, riding breeches and puttees that very smartly covered their legs – very different from the untidy puttees that our troops wore and which sometimes came undone, when they very definitely should not. Their uniforms were not quite the shade of khaki and the material was closer woven and generally better than that provided for the British soldier. But their uniforms were often ill-fitting, just as were those of our own men. Where they mostly differed from our soldiers was not only that they spoke a funny sort of English, spattered all over with 'Heys" and 'says' and children were referred to as 'buddies', but that they seemed to have an enormous store of money at their disposal and were provided with enormous quantities of food to eat. They were however, at least to we children living in the area at the foot of Castle Hill, very generous. Their ration wagons, long narrow carts drawn by four mules, moved up through Castle Street to Victoria Park where some of the troops were quartered and then on to tented camps at Broadlees and next to the Naval Air Station on the road to St. Margarets. The ration wagons were usually piled high with cases, tins, jars and every sort of container, and mountains of sacks of potatoes. These things seemed to have been loaded in any old fashion and the stacking was precarious, to say the least. On top of all these packages, and even more precariously perched would be four or five 'Doughboys', as I remember they were called. As the wagons moved along the street various items would providentially fall off, always, it seemed, just where a little knot of children were standing watching. The frequency with which seven-pound tins of corned beef fell off kept us busy running off home with our 'findings'. Though I remember the corned beef more vividly than anything else, many other very desirable items 'fell off' as well.

At the time the Americans were here Castle Street was a water-bound macadam road with a high element of chalk in its surface mix. The camber was very high and the tilt it caused must have contributed to the ease with which items 'fell off' the American ration wagons.

The American soldiers quartered in Victoria Park were often 'confined to barracks' and would sit on top of the long wall that runs on the left of Castle Hill Road and would throw dimes and cents down to us, who, eager and delighted, scrambled for them.

MERRIL: *Of the sights and scenes you remember most, some are dramatic and others more mundane. There is such a contrast between some of these perhaps you*

could describe several different ones. One aspect of this which I find interesting is the way in which the children of the town could observe so much, unnoticed and unchecked by adults. Let's start with the De-lousing station on Castle Hill.

BUDGE: The De-lousing station was at the left-hand corner of the turning off to Canon's Gate where there was a fairly large open space, much like a shallow open bowl. At the present day the space is filled with nine or ten sycamore trees developed from random seedlings that grew in later years as a result of the neglect of the War Office. From 1916 onwards the space was occupied by two corrugated iron covered buildings and from one of them a tall black chimney belched forth smoke (and ashes) most of the time. The building with the chimney was the boiler house and was connected to the other by a number of pipes of varying diameters, all with leaking joints from which much of the steam escaped. Troops returning from France marched up Castle Hill to the station, undressed 'down to the buff' outside the larger building and then their clothing, their boots, their webbing, everything portable, was put into a large sack which was thrown into the building through an open door.

The men were then formed up in fours and were marched, naked as they were, the few yards to the other building, which they entered. The door was closed upon them and they were then disinfected by sprays of, I presume, diluted carbolic acid. I can still smell that carbolic!. They then passed into a hot steam chamber and we assumed on their re-appearance that they were louse-free, but I rather doubt it. One could see them picking over each other in their search, as one can only imagine, for further lice, though, perhaps, they might have been dead ones. Soon after this their clothing was returned to them and they put it on. There was a lot of laughter and ribaldry because much of it had shrunk, especially the underwear, and the boots in most cases had been subjected to such heat that the leather had lost any suppleness it might have had. The soldiers were then marched off to wherever they were to be barracked or billeted.

This was just one of the non-belligerent activities that as children we often hung around to watch, especially on the hills and open spaces around the town. Soldiers were everywhere and none paid attention to us, nor we to them.

MERRIL: *I can see why no one would be concerned in children seeing that. They might have found it amusing, but I am surprised that you were able to get close enough to see the sufferings of dying and wounded men being brought ashore at Dover, for instance after the assault on Zeebrugge in 1918.*

BUDGE: In talking to you about this incident I think I may have misled you. The wounded were landed at as many places as possible so that they could be attended to without delay and a relative few were landed, from smallish boats, on the Promenade Pier (under Admiralty command during both world wars) and as far as the Zeebrugge affair is concerned these were the only ones I saw. Some were crying out in pain and others lay motionless on the stretchers as they waited to be put into the ambulances. I stood in the garden of Mr Fred Kennett, a friend of my father's, next door, on the NE side, of the pre-war R.C.P.Yacht Club on Marine Parade. In no way could the public have watched the landings of survivors and casualties on the Admiralty Pier but it was possible to see the damaged ships alongside the Admiralty Pier through the open iron-work supporting the shoreward section of the Prince of Wales Pier and we could see the stretcher cases being lifted ashore by the huge cranes that lifted them thirty or forty feet into the air.

After the wounded had been dealt with the other survivors came ashore and then some time later a convoy of lorries took the bodies of those who were killed in to

the Market Hall in the Market Square which had been cleared and prepared to act as a mortuary. I can still see the area being hosed down to dispose of the blood and little bits and pieces that ran or fell off the stretchers. For many years it was impossible for me to go into or near the Hall without sensing again the nauseating stench of violent death, and the ultimate neglect and desecration of a building used for this purpose in the aftermath of such a valiant enterprise has always been a matter of great concern to me.

Later, with a great number of the townspeople, I watched the funeral of these men. The coffins were put on army lorries, eight on each, I think, and covered with Union Jacks. I had never before seen a military funeral with a guard party. The guard was drawn up in two lines across the Market Square and along the length of Castle Street. They stood a yard apart with arms reversed, the muzzle of the rifle resting on the toe of the right boot and the funeral, with its naval and military escort, passed between the lines on its way, at slow march, via Maison Dieu Road (where a normal marching pace was assumed) to St. James's Cemetery.

MERRIL: *Obviously this is the kind of memory which one never forgets. Another is the tragedy of H.M.M. Glatton. In this instance I understand you should never have been on the sea front to even see the details of this event.*

BUDGE: H.M.M. *Glatton* caught fire in September 1918 after an on-board explosion as she lay in the harbour at the north-eastern end of the outer line of buoys, where she had been moored to minimise the danger that her cargo could present to other naval craft. Much effort was made to rescue the crew and small ships and little boats went as near alongside as possible to pick them up. I know that fire-fighting and rescue parties from other ships went aboard, that one magazine had gone up in the initial explosion and that a second magazine had been flooded. But the valves to flood the after magazine could not be reached and it was eventually realised that it was not possible to save her and, with the considerable store of live ammunition still aboard, she presented an enormous hazard to the other ships in the harbour, to the harbour walls and to the town itself. On the orders of the Senior Naval Officer of the Port, Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, in order to avoid an even greater tragedy, she was torpedoed. She quickly capsized and lay in the harbour, nearly upside down, for some years and was treated locally, though not officially, as a war grave.

I was able to see much of the *"Glatton"* incident from behind a hedge in the front garden of the house at the eastern corner of Marine Place and Marine Parade, Marine Place being a continuation of Woolcomber Street, across Liverpool Street, to Marine Parade. I was on the Sea Front with a friend who lived in St. James's Street. 'Boney' Liddon was his name and I think he became one of the lifeboat crew. With fixed bayonets soldiers cleared the occupants from the houses on the Sea Front and townspeople who had gathered there at the sound of the first explosion were forced off the Parade.. The soldiers then lined the footpath in front of the houses; each had a small pack on his back and wore a steel helmet, all had a rifle but by then bayonets had been unfixed. They were spaced at about two metre intervals all along the Front and they stood 'at ease' with their backs to the sea.

'Boney' and I had seen the smoke and the light of the flames when the ship caught fire but as everybody was 'shooed' off the Sea Front we didn't see the torpedoes fired, or the resulting explosions. I would think it was the noise that drew us back towards the Sea Front, inquisitive to discover what was happening. Perhaps the soldiers near Marine Place were short-sighted or perhaps they didn't care, but we were able to creep along close to

the house in Marine Place until we got to the front garden of the corner house where Marine Place joined Marine Parade. A cast-iron fence enclosed the garden and near the house one of the uprights was missing and that space allowed us to squeeze through to hide ourselves in the thick privet hedge which was a feature of most established and fenced gardens in those days. We peered through the hedge, not more than three or four metres from the soldiers and we saw what we were not intended to see. The screeching, writhing, badly burned men were brought ashore on the Promenade Pier just a little off to our right and sou'eastwards. This picture and the one of the Zeebrugge aftermath, will be with me always.

MERRIL: *Thank you for describing these happenings in such detail, as I said before, this, to me, is the stuff of "real" history. You were at the impressionable age of ten years and obviously these events will always be indelibly etched on your memory. I think this is one intriguing aspect of memory. The mind retains certain sounds, sights and happenings which remain with us forever, while other events of the same period are remembered only vaguely, or forgotten completely.*

Budge: I remember there was an enormous 'Peace Treat' in Connaught Park – that would have been in 1919. I do remember that the weather was good. Most of the details escape me, but there was a long slide down the grassy slope from the top path – whether we slid on mats or a simple kind of sled I am not sure – but the long slide was exhilarating. I do remember there was so much to eat! – it made a great impression on me. There were also street parties, where the streets, in many cases, appeared to be decorated with more Union Jacks than there were children.

I have been told there was some form of Victory Parade but I have no memory of it though I do have some pictures that prove that a Victory Parade was indeed held in the town.

This picture of the Promenade Pier was taken in 1909 (during the building of the national harbour) but throughout 1914–1918, when it was used by the Royal Navy, there was no significant change.

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