

F 107-0 100

Tape 532

Mr A Pope-Russell

IT IS JUNE 1978 AND THIS IS MR LIDDLE OF SUNDERLAND POLYTECHNIC TALKING TO MR A POPE-RUSSELL OF GLENCAIRN, 11 NORTON VIEW, KING'S HEATH, BIRMINGHAM AND TALKING TO HIM WITH REGARDS TO HIS EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR WHICH WAS ON A FRIENDS AMBULANCE UNIT TRAIN NUMBER SIXTEEN.

FOR ANY RESEARCHER LISTENING TO THIS TAPE THEY MAY FIND SOME PUZZLEMENT IN THE FACT THAT SOME OF MR POPE-RUSSELL'S LETTERS TO ME WHICH ARE IN THE FRIENDS AMBULANCE UNIT AND CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION SECTION OF THE ARCHIVES ARE SIGNED BEN GUNN. THIS IS BECAUSE A NICKNAME GIVEN TO HIM BY A SCHOOLMASTER MANY MOONS AGO SEEMS TO HAVE STUCK WITH MANY OF HIS FRIENDS AND THAT EXPLAINS THAT.

When were you born Mr Pope-Russell please?

June 21 1900.

Where?

Darlington in the county of Durham.

And what was your Father?

Well, my Father was secretary of an engineering firm.

Where did you go to school?

Ackworth School. September 1911 to November 1915.

Well, that tells me straight away that not only might we have presumed that there could possibly be because of Darlington a Friends background but with Ackworth School we know straight away that you come from a background of the Friends?

Yes.

Do you recall in school or in conversation at home before the outbreak of the First World War any involvement at all in the question of militarism and what Friends could do to combat militarism?

No.

Well, then when war broke out although to some extent or to a large extent you would be protected from the feeling of isolation that those who could not join in the universal support of the war must have felt. You would be protected by reason of your association with the Friends and certainly going to a Friends school. I wonder whether you have recall of the conflicts of conscience at the time for you?

No conflict of conscience but just the deep dislike of destroying one's fellow men.

Yes, of course, I respect that particularly with your background but any young boy with his country at war must be tempted I would have thought and tugged at least some way towards my country right or wrong?

Yes. I have a great respect and a feeling for country and particularly Scotland because we are originally a western Aberdeenshire family.

But you don't recall an eagerness to see how things were going from the newspapers or an interest in the parading and training soldiers?

No. I did not read newspapers much. Very little.

Was your Father of an age which could have involved military service?

No.

And you don't recall any unpopularity that you or your family or your friends in both senses suffered at the time?

No, none.

Well, then when did you leave Ackworth?

November 1915.

And to take up what sort of work?

I went to an uncle who was hill farming up in the north Pennines to the borders of Scotland and we came to Birmingham.

That would be in August 1916?

Yes.

And what work did you take up then?

I went to an engineering firm and my parents feeling that they were connected with munitions I went to Cadbury Brothers.

Where again you would be to some extent insulated from any hostility which your pacifist standpoint might have brought you by being with the Cadbury's?

Quite, yes.

Was there any way in which people of your view even though of course, you were too young for military service could come together socially or was this done through your involvement with the Friends?

Purely as involvement as my parents were members of the Society of Friends.

And there was no need for you to take out a membership of The No Conscription Fellowship?

No.

You were not of an age?

No. We attended various meetings. My Father used to speak at various meetings. He went round and I used to go with him on occasions.

What was he speaking on?

Well, it was usually just a religious talk. Perhaps he would take a text from the Bible or something like that. There was no deliberate speech on pacifism or anything like that. It was just, he used to go round to various meetings as a sort of lay man if you like.

Friends meetings?

Yes. Friends meetings and adult schools.

What sort of work were you doing at Cadbury's? In the chocolate works?

Yes. I was in the printing to commence with and then I went into the general office and then I went into the planning office.

Now did you ever at any time despite your youthfulness receive a white feather or a curt reminder of the fact that when you were of age you would certainly not be enlisting?

Never. I had never had any criticism or sarcastic comments if you like.

Then how did you become involved in the Friends Ambulance Unit?

Well, my Father and Mother felt that I was coming near to a military service age and they felt therefore that service in the Friends Ambulance Unit would be something that they could agree with and I just fell in with that agreement.

And when did you go to, was it Jordans for your training?

I went to Jordans for my training.

In what month of what year?

I didn't go there until 1918.

At the beginning or halfway through?

I think it was about April 1918.

How long did the training last?

I think it was about 2 months during which I was bitten twice by

rats.

Really?

Yes. Nose, mouth and throat. Two different nights.

Sleeping in the accommodation at the camp that was set up?

Sleeping in a barn at the camp, yes.

Well, we won't go into that. Tell me about the training?

Most of it seemed to be route marching and to keep fit and we had ambulance courses and of course, we had to cater for ourselves. Indulge in the cooking and maintenance of the camp but mainly it was ambulance service and a question of being fit for service physically.

You did what was then called PT?

Yes.

And when did you get out to France?

I think it was July 1918 and I went to, across to Boulogne and we were bombed in the hotel at Boulogne. In the billet at Boulogne and the next night we went up to Calais and then on to Dunkirk. To The Grand Hotel at St Malo-Le-Bain and from there, I think I was there 11 or 12 days. I nearly got drowned trying to swim out to see the number on a destroyer. We got shelled by a long range gun from near Ypres. There were 2 guns and they came over every so many minutes and seconds. You could time them and after 11 or 12 days doing very little or nothing I went down to Abbeville. I went into Boulogne and being extremely innocent I went into a shop and asked for something I could drink. I had 2 dog biscuits to eat in my greatcoat and unfortunately they gave me an intoxicant. It was dark as I went down and I sat on an open low conveyor cattle truck. I chewed these biscuits washed down with the contents of this bottle and I arrived at Abbeville somewhere about midnight and slept on one of the seats there in the coach and the next morning Corporal Pearson spoke to me and having drunk the contents of this bottle I heard him seconds later. I wasn't really conscious of what I had drunk of course, and from then on I was ambulance train 16.

Did you become aware immediately of the comradeship that there was on this train?

Yes. Very much so indeed. It was the thing that somehow pleased me very greatly. I wasn't conscious I was pleased by it but I enjoyed it.

Was there anyone whose manner or whose personality impressed you in particular?

No, I don't think so except one or 2 of the Ackworth scholars that I remembered. Roland Moore and Jimmy Moore. Two brothers that I was at school with and another, Ripley I was at school



with. Naturally I took to them because I already knew them. The others were strangers to me but I was impressed by the fact too that those who were non commissioned officers, NCO's, Sergeants or Corporals, they didn't show any authority really. They just asked you to do something as it were.

So these were Friends Ambulance Unit men who had and were within a hierarchy even amongst the Friends Ambulance Unit men?

Yes.

Were you surprised at how much of your time was spent in cleaning the train inside and outside?

No, I don't think I was.

How quickly did you become involved in the loading and caring for wounded?

Almost immediately. The first task was one that horrified me. We had to take 483 from, I forget where it was. I think it was to Le Havre and they were venereal disease cases.

The whole lot?

The whole lot and I was saddened. I was only 17. Not long from Ackworth School and I was saddened and horrified and mystified and one thing I noticed. The temperaments of several of them was most unpleasant and I put that down to the complaint that they had but other than being horrified I mean that was,

Were they all lying cases?

No. They were all walking cases.

You said their temperament was unpleasant. Do you mean by that that they made ribald remarks with regard to their condition or was it scathing remarks with regards to,

No. They were unsociable, bad tempered.

Did they look ill?

Some cases, yes.

Yes, and for you almost certainly the disease would be something with which you had no knowledge or acquaintanceship whatsoever and to see so many men must have been really quite a shock?

Well, I don't think I had any knowledge of the disease to be candid at the time. I don't recollect it but I do know that when I came home I told my dear Father all about it and I know he waltzed me down to Dr Hall for examination and all the rest of it and so on but remember that was the first thing I ever did.

How did you know that they were all venereal disease cases?

Well, we were told they were. I don't know it had just come up in

conversation. The whole lot, 483 of them and I remember that number well, I say I suppose because I was so horrified that the number has stuck in my mind.

I wonder whether you were told with regard to any need for very careful protection against infection?

Well, as a matter of fact a few weeks later I had got a rash on my thighs and spots on my chest and so on and I gave thought to it and I was most upset and I told Jimmy Moore who incidentally was born on the same day of the same year as I. We used to read each others letters at Ackworth and we started at Ackworth together in September 1911 and I know I was most upset and I told Jim Moore about it when we sat in our bunk. I can remember that very clearly and he said, well, Ben why don't you go and see Sergeant Hoyles the chemist. So, of course, I did go and see him and told him and of course, he looked at me, he examined me. He was rather amused in a way and he said, look, you have come from Dunkirk. You have been feeding on the fat of the land. You have been sea bathing every day. Going to bed at a decent time, all that. Now what do you have here. No fresh vegetables, tinned food, margarine that is rancid and some of it to throw away. You have chlorinated water and look at the hours you are likely to have been keeping and so on. Over nearly 2 days without any sleep and I remember he pumped all that sort of thing into me and he said that is all it is. I hope I need hardly say I had done nothing to deserve it and so on. The thought of it but in my youthful innocence I was very perturbed and I didn't know that it couldn't be contagious because he told me. He said, obviously also in some cases you have been eating and drinking out of the same utensils.

As had been used by the other men?

Yes.

Well, what about the other thing that I wondered. I mean you had no medical background. You almost certainly had never seen anybody dead never mind any poor man knocked over by motor vehicles or horses in the road. How did you accommodate yourself to the sights and sounds or indeed the very elementary business of cleaning up people who are not able to control natural functions. How did you accommodate yourself to this?

Well, from an early age I had always taken interest in helping old people. Quite old people. I used to even go and cut old gentleman's and old ladies corns and so on and I rather enjoyed looking after old people and at the other end of the scale very embarrassingly babies always took a fancy to me and that was very embarrassing but that is another story but seeing people maimed was certainly, it never turned me sick but I used to think how dreadful it was and people perhaps I felt if I may say so more sorry for were the Germans who were badly maimed because I realised that when they got back to hospital or out of it. They wouldn't have anybody to come and sympathise with them and it is funny you should ask me that question because I was only thinking about it the other day.

That what a dreadful thing it seemed to be. Not only were they badly maimed. Loss of leg or eyesight or other things but also they would have nobody to give them any sympathy or bring them any little luxuries or anything like that.

Recreation on the train. Do you remember playing football or do you remember the political discussions long into the night?

No. Oh we used to play cards sometimes and I think the only other recreation was blowing a cigarette end to make it glow and killing the louse eggs down the insides of our trousers but I can't think of any other recreation.

Did you ever have any thought as you saw so many men in khaki, did you ever have any thought that perhaps you ought to be in khaki?

No, I don't think I did although perhaps I do remember thinking that these people who are suffering in this way had perhaps done something towards preventing worst things happening to us. That could be but I am afraid in my youthfulness I never ever gave any great depth or continuation of thought on that.

Are there any special recollections that you have got either of journeys, of loading or of unloading, of long range shellfire or bombing or of men that you recall clearly today?

Yes. I remember going to number 56 casualty clearing station. We arrived about 2 o'clock in the morning. It was cold, it was wet and of course, very dark and rather breezy. When we got there there was only one NCO on duty. It was apparently intended to hold approximately 400 but it was estimated that there were between 2,000 and 3,000 casualties there. Mostly laid out in the open in the rain and it was said that vehicles had gone over some of them in the dark. We rejected several because they were already dead. They had been brought on stretchers and it was pretty terrible. We took them away. I don't remember where to. I do not remember where 56 casualty clearing station was. We came back the next day. There was nothing for us to take. All those that were left were dead but somebody else had been and taken the remainder of the living casualties and I remember there was a Crossley staff car with 3 or 4 staff officers there who had apparently come to see what it was because it was something rather bad that had happened.

Do you remember in your coach and by the way did you have individual responsibility for a coach?

There were 2 of us to a coach. I being the youngest it was usually my senior who was really responsible but when he went off for anything. You were obviously left to look after them.

Do you remember any men dying in a coach for which you had shared responsibility?

Yes. I remember an Indian off the Divisional ammunition column. His name was Mir Din and his legs were almost non-existent. They were in such a mess. He told me that he would die.



In English?

In English. He spoke English and he gave me his spurs because he said, he would not need them again and I had been very kind to him.

What were you able to do with regard to nearness, perhaps holding the hand of men who were in very great pain and needing some tangible support to bear the suffering of their wounds?

I don't think anything really. It was usually Matthew or Lyons I think. They were the medical senior officers who did that but other than give a man a drink of water or something like that. I don't think I was ever able to alleviate any suffering.

Were they allowed to smoke?

Yes. They were allowed to smoke. There was an Indian who had been endeavouring to juggle with Mills bombs and one had exploded and shattered his arm. It was his right arm and he smoked. He must have been in very considerable pain. He refused to have any medicine or anything and he just blew his cigarette end and burnt holes in the sling that he had for his arm but he never spoke. He would have a drink and something to eat but he wouldn't talk and he wouldn't have any medicine or anything to alleviate his suffering and I know it was said that he must have been suffering considerable pain.

In Reggie Pollards magazines there was one drawing which rang very true to me amongst many which ran true and it was of a sideways view of a carriage on the train with perhaps 4 or 6 men being shown as lying figures with the proverbial bubble from the mouth of each one and with the varied question of where are we, how long are we stopping here, when do we move on, what time is it, I forget the other questions and I wondered about the sounds and the conversation of a coach during the day and at night? Obviously it would very much depend upon the severity of the wounds of the bulk of the coach and I suppose if men had been heavily dosed with morphia this would still further likely to act as a silencer over the sounds but what do you remember if you shut your eyes today and you put yourself back into your uniform and you see yourself walking up and down the lines to see if there is anything you can do for anybody at daytime or night time, what are the sounds that you hear as you recall?

I don't think that any of them who were conscious made any noise at all. They just suffered it.

No talking?

No, but I do remember one fellow delirious. He had got a piece of shrapnel stuck in here. Yes, it was this side of the head. Yes, it was here and it was about the size of a walnut in the shell stuck in there and he was wounded elsewhere and he was delirious and he was raving and of course, his language was fantastic and that was that but other than delirious I don't know. There was one other case that I do remember us having and that is



a fellow who had apparently laid in a shell hole. I don't know how many days and he had survived because it had rained and there were I think bully beef tins or something in that and he had scraped them and his fingers were grease and his mouth. Whether he ever survived I don't know but I do remember he was in the Middlesex Regiment. He was wounded somewhere up here and it had gone down into his groin.

From throat to groin?

Yes. Well, somewhere up here and it had run down into his groin and in his groin there was something like a desert spoon full of maggots and his testicles and his groin were eaten by maggots. I remember that one and I remember he was in the Middlesex Regiment.

What could you do for him? What had been done for him?

Well, they cleaned all that out and dressed it and gave it antiseptic and so on and I think that was all until he got to base.

I wonder whether you recall any occasion of humour?

You mean amongst the wounded?

Not necessarily. Of the time when you were with your train?

Well, we had a cook called Billy Williams. He was a Londoner. Dark haired fellow and he used to delight in getting the large bowl of tea leaves he had from the urn making tea. When the walking wounded were looking out of the windows admiring the countryside. He used to delight in hurling this bowl of tea leaves out and then walking down the corridor watching them pick the tea leaves out of their ears and hair.

Did they share the joke?

In a way. They didn't know he had done it purposefully. In fact, they didn't know he had done it you see and that was his. There is another perhaps rather more dreadful humorous one. We were at Le Havre and one fellow Reggie Gill who was the personnel orderly. We were on the dockside there all cleaned up. All was quiet. It was a sunny morning and Reggie walked out with 2 latrine buckets from the train. Crossed the dock and tipped those 2 latrine buckets over into the docks and Reggie walked quietly back. After he had gone 2 French sailors came up from below. There were about 7 or 8 soldiers standing doing nothing. Just with arms folded and of course, these 2 French sailors their French would be uninterpretable and the poor fellows were in a very sad mess.

Quartermaster Sergeant Hardy who was in charge of Le Havre station. You could hear him from here to London when he bellowed practically. Came roaring down but nobody had seen anybody do it and nobody knew anything about it and Reggie was perfectly innocent of this unfortunate act.

It had been an accident?

Oh yes. He was afraid of going too near the edge because there was a slight breeze you see. He wouldn't know that they were coming up these steep iron ladders at the side you see but nobody knew anything about it of course. I remember another incident at a place not very far from Cambrai and we landed there on a siding and then we were stuck. We couldn't move. We were there for 2 days and a RTO with a black moustache came along and Captain Maskew was just down underneath me. I was up on the train and they were down on the ground, with a movement order and I remember him telling Captain Maskew that the place where we were was heavily mined and he was very annoyed indeed about it and the RTO said something about unavoidable and that was all. Later on one learned that they got out of there I think it was 115 shells that had been made into mines. A few set and so on. They got 115 and this was only a very small place indeed. A very small station and we were lucky I suppose to get away with it.

You don't recall any occasion when there arose any issue of the train being used for an improper purpose? By that I mean for example taking troops up to the front.

None whatsoever.

You do have a recollection of some contact with Americans?

No. We only heard the Americans asking where is that God damn shooting gallery and the only other thing I can remember some ribald Americans singing the God damn Kaiser ain't what he used to be, ain't what he used to be. The US flag will fly over Germany, fly over Germany one year from now. Beyond that I know little of the Americans except them boasting about what they were going to do and the 48th Canadian Scottish, what was left of them, came down from I don't know where it was and those Americans went very silent.

Because of the evident destruction of fine men?

Yes. At what they had suffered.

I think now has come the time for you to tell me perhaps in conclusion this strange story you have of being involved in the guard room at Etaples?

This was, when it was I don't know but at something after 1 o'clock in the morning we had to evacuate the train due to enemy action and Corporal Pearson came round. I didn't leave the train. I thought no. If I can stay in my bunk I shall be alright. If I am going to be hit I will be hit wherever I go. Corporal Pearson put his hand on my bunk and said look, I cannot go until you have gone and I am going. He was an Irishman. However, hurriedly I got out. Pink striped pyjamas. Slipped a pair of socks and boots on and a very short Cavalry cut coat and being a newcomer practically a nice new tin hat and out I went. I had been given a direction but when I got out I just couldn't make head or tail of it. The siding was devastated for quite a long way. There was nothing.



I looked at my luminous watch and it was 1.20. However, I walked about for a bit and I couldn't find anything and when I came back to where I thought the train was it wasn't. Eventually I went to a hut where I could see just a chink of light coming through and I was directed again in another direction and eventually I was picked up by 2 military policemen and taken into the transit hut of the military prison. That must have been I suppose something like 2 o'clock in the morning or just after. Next morning I woke up. The beds in there were, there was no mattress. It was just an iron part of the bed. They were 2 tier and I was on the top one. Next morning I awoke and I had to parade outside with 6 others. My tin hat had disappeared but before going on parade I had seen a very nicely decorated German or camouflaged tin hat which I put on. So I appeared at the end of the line of parade clad in a German tin hat, a short Cavalry cut coat and pink striped pyjamas. The military policeman came on duty and stood there. The others incidentally were men waiting to rejoin their units out of the transit hut. They hadn't bothered about uniform properly or spit and polish if you like and so on and there they were.

I remember the military policeman taking one look at me and he roared take that . . . . off your . . . . head and I immediately obeyed and that was that. I had nothing to do all day. The others were taken out to do some sort of work. I don't know while waiting to return to their units and for 11 days I just swilled myself and dried myself on my pyjama jacket and then hung it out to dry. On 2 occasions a Scottish Corporal lent me a piece of soap and that was that. The only thing I found to read was the remains of a library book in English. No back to it or cover. I don't know what the title of it was but I do remember it was something to do with the story of village life somewhere. A village church and a vicar and so on. There were several pages missing and eventually the whole book went because I had to hand it over at times. It was the hut toilet paper and we had quite a character in the hut called Warwick.

He was, they were a cut throat lot incidentally. I heard a lot about the Khyber Pass, the north west frontier and so on because apparently they were all regulars and 22 years service one and he was the prison cook for our section and he argued with Warwick who had only got 21 years service. Warwick was tall. Very thin, lined face, Roman features, blue eyes, brown hair going steely grey and he would pace up and down the hut left right, left right for perhaps quarter of an hour or 20 minutes cursing all the APM's in the Army. He would do the same another occasion cursing all the elephants in India and so on. There were frequent brawls, frequent fights in the place and our breakfast consisted of a bowl of tea and I suppose about a third of a loaf of bread with something in the way of fat scraped on it. Our midday meal was a bowl of stew come soup with all sorts of vegetables in it and another large hunk of bread and tea was similar to breakfast and that was our fare for the day.

There was one thing that upset me very greatly when I was there and that was some German prisoners. They were brought down in cattle trucks and it was rather hot on occasions during the day and of course, they wanted water and when the military policemen

came to unload them on one or 2 occasions they jumped into the truck with drawn revolvers and just booted them as they got out. Well, of course, the fellows were unarmed or anything like that and there were some of the Royal Scots Fusiliers there and in 1916 there had been a mutiny at Etaples.

1917.

1917 was it?

September?

There had been a mutiny and the Australians and the Scottish contingent were involved in it. Well, while this was going on. It was 4 members of the Royal Scots Fusiliers came down and they all 3 stood and one just looked up at the truck at one military policeman and said, isn't that enough and boy, he put his revolver away and stopped and that was that.

Now did you see that?

Yes, I saw that.

And you heard?

Yes, I heard and saw it and the thing that naturally, I think it sent a bit of a shiver down my spine was to see a man with a drawn revolver kicking another man who was defenceless.

One casualty we had on the train and he was blind as a result of mustard gas and his eyes. I remember him. He was a fellow in his thirties. Rather fair and his blue eyes and he just looked as though his eyeballs were set in custard and he couldn't see but I remember him now getting hold of my right hand. He was laid on that side of the bottom bunk and he grabbed hold of my right hand telling me would he see again and I remember telling him that I wasn't a doctor but I understood that many who had suffered the way he had done their sight was alright after they had been to hospital and I shouldn't think there would be any reason why he should not be the same and he said very sadly because he had got a very delightful little daughter of 5 years of age and he was most anxious as to whether he would be able to see her again when he got home.

Thank you very much indeed.