

An Hour in the Life of Private Brown

by *Bill Dawson*

I feel all right - it's just the waiting. How can it seem so long? Ticking clocks exist in the physical world, but surely time can only exist in the mind: it's different for everyone, depending on the situation. I feel as if I've been on this bloody boat for days, instead of just a few hours. We'll be on the beaches soon, they said, but what's "soon" mean when you're waiting? I've got the wife's last letter here - not opened it yet - saving it for when I can enjoy with a bit more privacy, if I ever get such a thing.

Why am I here anyway? They put me into a uniform and told me I've got to go and kill the Hun, the hated Boche, the evil enemy that's out to destroy us - and our families. That's right, we have to kill in order to defend our families - as well as our country and the British way of life. They make such a big play on the family bit. That's what they ask the conscientious objectors: if your family was being attacked, would you fight to defend them? Course, who's going to say no? That's what our leaders have told us, and keep on telling us: we've got to go and kill for the benefit of our community and families. And if I don't they'll shoot me - I suppose for the benefit of my family.

I don't really understand it, and I don't think my family would either, especially my two little girls. But it must be right somehow, because all our statesmen and bishops and aristocracy say so - and they do all our thinking for us. And that's just how it should be, because they're cleverer and more educated than we are, and they're more used to dealing with diplomacy and the leaders of other countries, and all that sort of thing. I mean, it stands to sense, doesn't it: how can ignorant, uneducated, poor people like us be expected to deal with the high-born, educated leaders of other countries? "We'd make a right mess of it," my dad used to say.

He was in the trenches in the last war for nearly two years. Got gassed by our own side. Wind changed direction they said and blew the gas back onto our own lines. Didn't kill him though: he was invalided home. He said just imagine what a mess it would have been in Flanders if we'd all tried to think for ourselves, instead of being told what to think, what's right and wrong, by our leaders, who have to organise us and protect us.

Very patriotic and loyal was my dad. My mam got a medal for him - when he was dead, and when we won the war - the war to end all wars, my dad said they told him. That was a great comfort to my mam when he was dying in agony at home (mustard gas, it was), and later when we were nearly starving in the depression years because we had no man to work for us and look after us.

Must be all right though - mam was really proud when she heard all the speeches, about dad and others like him helping to make a land fit for heroes (that was before the depression) - and especially the bit about ending all wars. I saw tears in her eyes

when she heard it.

So here we are - waiting: us and the Americans. The most powerful army ever gathered together in history, they say. Going to be a piece of cake, this. That's what our commanders say - everything going like clockwork - except time, of course. But I'm still scared stiff, though, and it keeps going through my mind: what the hell am I doing here? No, I mustn't start thinking for myself, it's dangerous. "Ours not to reason why, Ours but to do or die." I must remember - I'm here to kill! I'm here to kill! I'm not here to think!

That's better - don't think about it. Don't think. My granddad was a soldier, too. He was in India, putting down an uprising of the Kurds - or was it when he was pacifying the Afghans up the Khyber Pass? Got a bit confused about that. Well, at least he died helping to sort out that problem once and for all. Won't have any more trouble there. You see, our noble leaders do what's best for us all, really - even if we don't think so at times.

I wonder if granddad had the same thoughts as me now, when he was waiting for the order to attack the Afghans? Was he thinking: what the hell are we doing here? Why should we be sent to kill Wogs, as he called them, up the north of India somewhere? I've never heard of the Wogs threatening to attack Britain. But what could he know anyway - he was just an ignorant, uneducated man like me. Still, it would be nice to know, before you die, just what you're really killing and dying for - you know, why we're really doing it, and who started it all in the first place. Even if they just told us in a simple way like, that we could understand.

My mate reminded me the other day that Germany didn't declare war on us - our government declared war on them. I hadn't really thought about that before. They said it was because we had promised to defend Poland if anyone attacked it. I can't figure out what that's got to do with us, it's probably a thousand miles away. Well, as long as we manage to get there and liberate them I suppose it'll be worth it.

Still, we've got to think of our proud British tradition - glory and our empire. And all those wars against France and Spain. And the Crusades when our king and nobles led our armies into battle.

Yes, that's funny, isn't it? And I know I'm being disloyal to my country for thinking it, but in those days our leaders actually *led* the soldiers into battle: they were real leaders. But nowadays, our leaders all lead from the back: so they're not real leaders, are they? They push us soldiers into the front to kill and die for them, while they sit at home in offices and bomb shelters. Yes, they're our rulers, but definitely not leaders. Still, they come from good families and are educated and trained at good schools - mostly Eton. They say that all Britain's wars were won on the playing fields of Eton. Could it be that all Britain's wars were *started* on the playing fields of Eton?

No, I mustn't think like that - it's treason. It's wrong to think for myself, especially to

think I'm capable of deciding who or what I'll kill or die for. I must keep in mind that I'm here to defend my country and protect my family - that's worth dying for.

I think I'll get out my letter from Mary now: I can't save it any longer, and it might take my mind off all these stupid things I've been worrying about. Let's see what she says.

Oh, my god. My two little girls have been killed in an air raid. NO, NO, NO! They can't be. They told me I'm here to help protect my family, and now this. It can't be true. I don't understand any of this.

"Come on now, lads, we're at the beaches. All personal things away. Over the side now, and let's give 'em hell. For god, king and country. This is D-Day."

Bill Dawson - June, 2002
