

This is an account of his First World War experiences by Francis (Frank) William Clarke (22 Dec 1897-3 Apr 1992).

RFA/RHA No.222995.

He wrote it by hand in March 1969.

From October 1910, just under the age of 13, Frank Clarke had worked in coal mines in Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire. He had worked with ponies down the pits, hence his choice, when he went to enlist in the latter part of 1917, to join up as a Driver in the Royal Horse Artillery/Royal Field Artillery.



Francis William Clarke (RFA/RHA No.222995) after his enlistment in late 1917 (with his niece Lucy Birch)

Francis William Clarke in 1919, with some of his comrades





(To be rendered in duplicate.)

R F A

REGIMENT OR CORPS.

No 40152

ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Victory Medal and/or British War Medal granted under Army Orders 266. and 301.

of 19 .

Held by an individual in the Corps in respect of which the rolls are submitted.		NAME	In sequence Units and Corps previously served with by each individual and Regl. Nos. therein; the highest rank, whether substantive, acting or temporary, recorded as having been held for any period in a theatre of War, unless reverted for misconduct, being shown against the name of the regiment or Corps which is to be inscribed on the medal.	Theatres of war in which served	Clasps awarded (to be left blank)	Record of disposal of decorations			REMARKS
Regl. No.	Rank					(a) Presented	(b) Despatched by Post	(c) Taken into Stock	
222992	Gunner	WATSON Alexander	R.F.A. 222992 Gnr						
222993	Gunner	VICKERS James	R.F.A. 222993 Gnr						
222994	Driver	BROOKE John	R.F.A. 222994 Dvr						Died 25-3-18
222995	Driver	CLARKE Francis William	R.F.A. 222995 Dvr						
222996	Driver	DYSON Herbert	R.F.A. 22 2996 Dvr						

I certify that according to the Official Records the individuals named in this ROLL are entitled to the Medal or Medals as detailed above.

Place WOOLWICH

Date 21-5-1920

*John Smith*  
COLONEL,  
i/c R. H. & R. F. A. RECORDS.

Signature and rank of Officer certifying.



The War came with dramatic suddenness, to shatter many of our dreams, and change the whole tenor of our lives.

Some had envisaged a conflict of nations, but ordinary folks like us had no inside knowledge of impending events, and our lives were centred around our own small circle of friends, with an occasional day at the sea or a visit to the nearest large town.

The Railways had a prominence in the lives of most people, and Goods traffic must have greatly exceeded passenger traffic. Coal trains with a thousand tons were regular sights, so were Battle trains, Fish Trains, Strawberry trains in the summer.

I well remember my first experience in the war. Overhead we saw Zeppelins, we next heard the thud of bombs, next day I cycled to Stanton Ironworks to see where the damage had been caused. Apart from twisted railway lines and a few smallish holes there was little to show for the raid.

A reservist two doors away was called to the colours, and all the neighbours joined in a farewell party for the guardsman who would show what we felt about any enemies of the country.

Very soon the famous Kitchenor Poster with its pointing finger appeared on the hoardings, and men flocked to the recruiting office. A sister of mine with her two boys came to look after us, or live with us, her husband, a bricklayer, was one of six brothers all over six foot, who enlisted on one day and had their picture in the local paper.

She was still living with us until the day I was married in 1923, when I left her the tenantry of the house, which was in my name previously. As tenant or householder I always had "Collier's Coal", one ton each month, cost  $8\frac{1}{6}$  Ton.



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Food was difficult but obtainable at high prices, at least up to 1917 when I enlisted. I kept my own hens, so had always a fair amount of eggs, and the occasional chicken as I kept now all my young cockerels from my rearings in the spring.

My friend at the fruit shop from whom I always bought apples and oranges always sold English Dairy Butter of a superior quality, and at this period the price was 5/- to 4/8 per lb. Perhaps we felt the shortage of Danish butter to which we had grown accustomed, more than most things. Canned fruit was not in circulation yet.

Dried apricots, prunes, figs, mixed dried fruit were available; and large raisins were a staple diet with miners.

As men disappeared from the mines into the forces, the situation developed where Coal Miners were not allowed to join in any large numbers, but this became a "Reserved Occupation". The demands of the army for more men forced the hands of those in authority to introduce Conscription, but Miners were still reserved, but required to submit to a Medical Examination, so that if necessary they could be quickly drafted into the appropriate regiments.

As I was called for a medical, I decided to try to enlist in a horse regiment, so I asked the Colonel at the Recruiting Office if it was possible for me to enlist, and with a wink to me he said "Come and see me tomorrow."

Evidently, A.I. was the medical verdict, so on the morrow I received the King's shilling and was enrolled in the Royal Horse Artillery. A railway ticket to Newcastle on Tyne was dated for a few days hence to



enable home affairs to be arranged, and so I became a soldier.

The snow was six inches deep when we arrived around teatime at the Assembly Rooms at Newcastle, and when we asked for tea we were refused, and told to report in before eleven o'clock that night, and we began Army meals next morning.

I got a meal of sorts at the Y.M.C.A. in Newcastle, and passed the time until about eleven when I reported in.

Each of us was given one army blanket and told to get bedded down on the floor. There was a general uproar, and we demanded more blankets. The situation became decidedly ugly, and the guard was called to restore order. Fists began to fly and I received a blow on the chest somewhere which bowled me over so I joined in the trumps to give as good as I got. After a while the guard were either knocked out or thrown out, and a pile of blankets were forthcoming from somewhere, and we made ourselves comfortable for the night in possession of the rooms. Next morning we were informed we were under arrest, but we received an extra good breakfast, then a lecture from an officer, who said double the number had arrived which made supplies short, and that we should go up to barracks that very morning, and the whole episode would be forgotten. He were evidently fighting men, just what the country needed.

My first night in the army, shades of things to come!

After three or four days in our civilian clothes, we were fitted out in second hand clothes, not uniform, for nothing matched, nor even fitted, except the boots.

How we laughed when we received the razor we were supposed to use, it was valued about twopence at the most.



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Of course men had brought their own. There were no safety razors but we used "Cut Throats." I strapped mine on a leather belt I wore. The sergeant of our room in barracks had only a left arm having lost the right in France, and when he saw me strap my razor he promptly mailed me to shave him each day. In his words I was to be his right hand man. I had never performed on anyone before except myself, but I did it for him for three months, when I left Newcastle.

He, in turn, showed me the ropes, as the saying went. Some went into the stables with trepidation, but my experience with Mick at Bestwood had filled me with confidence for this new chapter, and I took to army life with horses comparatively easily, that is, after the usual stiffness with riding.

Sunday Church Parade meant a smart appearance, and my sergeant helped me obtain a well fitting uniform, and put me wide to blance and polish effectually used.

Listen in to our Parade Sunday Morning.

Parade Shun! (Attention) Church of England to the right  
March! Methodists to the left. March! Baptists Forward.

March! Other Religions. Stand Fast!

Corporal approaches the stand fasters. First ten. Stables to whitewash. March! Another Corporal. Next six men, cookhouse fatigues. March! Rest of you, Dismiss!

With wangling in the usual channels, I was able to make my way to a Church of our persuasion in Newcastle, where I was royally entertained by members, and dinner and tea assured every Sunday in the home of friendly people.

Maybe, many men had a harder time, but this friendly



hospitality of Church members was a Godsend to me in an otherwise difficult experience. Religion was again proving good to me and good for me keeping me in good company and neutralizing the roughening of army discipline.

Perhaps what I remember best was the occasion when along with others I was detailed to fetch two remounts from the railway station. These horses were unbroken, and we only had halters on them, no bridles or bits. The soldier walked between the two horses, keeping in line with the two in front.

As we entered the barrack gates men were coming down the iron steps with a clatter, the horses took fright and I was knocked unconscious as my two reared upon their hind legs picking me up and turning me upside down when the back of my head hit the granite stones, giving me a real swelled head. Some time afterward I came round in the sick bay, only to hear groans from the other three inmates. Presently an orderly came in and said, "Oh you have woke up, have you? Like a dish of tea would you? It's cold in here. I'll see about a bit of fire too for you."

The tea came along in a billy tin, and the fire was kindled.

That was the start of a chain of events. The room filled with smoke, the chimney was blocked, and soon we were gasping and choking, and the windows had to be opened the fire put out, water on the floor and the whole room in a lovely mess. I did not wait to be carried out, I thought of my friends in Newcastle, and sprang into action. It was tricky getting out of the barrack gates, but it was easy to fool the guard, and I made my way to a house



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I knew and lay up there a couple of days, where I received expert attention to my cranium.

On the third day I walked coolly into my room at the barracks and announced I was back to duty.

I never heard another word about it, and life proceeded as before. I still think audacity carried the day. I was learning fast. The old soldier had nothing on me, as I proved on other occasions, but that's another story.

The usual term of training was completed in ten weeks, and our squad was duly passed out and after embarkation leave our names ~~was~~ were posted for draft to active service. Rumours were around associated with France, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and one day a train load of us left Newcastle for an unknown destination, but though the train never stopped at any station we knew we were heading south.

In London, there was hours wait, as there appeared to be the usual military muddle of conflicting plans, but eventually all R. A. G. personell were to board another train on the Southern Railway, and I remember catching sight of Windsor Castle, so we concluded that Southampton was our destination.

The directors of our destiny diverted us to Salisbury, from whence we marched some miles to Larkhill Camp, where of course we were not expected, or so they said, but after an alfresco arrangement for the night, we were sorted out the following morning, and a brand new battery in a brand new brigade was to be formed. This must have been a hurried decision, as the officers joined us in ones and twos later.



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Most officers were new to army conditions, "newly commissioned" would be the correct phraseology. New methods, new ideas, based on the experience of the war, were to be experimented with on the vast areas of Salisbury Plain, and we were warned that we would have live ammunition all the time, and new types of shells and new types of fuzes on the shells would be used. In fact, the idea was to rehearse the open methods planned to be used in the projected 1918 offensives.

The attempt was to be made to break out from the trench system and use cavalry and tanks in open country.

First, the existing trench system had to be pierced, just where would depend upon the success or failure in a series of limited "pushes" in which these new troops were to be used. During that winter we gradually pieced all this together, so there was a fair idea in the whole company of men as to our function when we crossed over to France, which we did in the beginning of March 1918.

We were to be known as Flying Columns of Army Field Artillery, not be confused with Divisional troops or other balanced formations. A number of these Flying Columns were operating on the Western Front in 1918, being used as Spearhead troops in intermittent attacks. In this capacity our brigade went into action near Ypres, then cut and away, and going in about every few miles probing the enemy positions until we arrived at Loos and Lens. I recall the famous Vimy Ridge was amongst the places where we went in to attack enemy positions.

At times we found ourselves forward of our first line trenches in the night, and there was great haste to get back before daylight.



leaving the occupying troops to endure the enemy counter shelling. "This was a quiet bit of the line until you lot came stirring things up." "You come and blast them and leave us to catch the reaction." Usually expressed in stronger terms but this was the gist of the remarks of the lads who manned the trenches.

At Loos we took our guns in front of a slag heap, like those in our mining areas, and we had a grand stand view of the German trenches, one day I saw washing hanging out in the enemy lines. During the day no one came out at all, but at night it was a mighty firework display, with green and red werry lights, and some lights which hung in the sky, and we really imagined illuminated us and our horses. Only on one occasion were we really spotted, when we were peppered with High Bangs. The Veterinary Surgeon took upwards of thirty pieces of shrapnel from my two horses after this encounter.

I escaped with a few scratches and a few jangled nerves.

One team were not so lucky, neither men nor horses surviving.

Our battery was in action from March to August without a break, our losses being made up with new men from England.

In August we moved to Arras for the main offensive against the Drocourt Sedoubt, and going through Douai, Semain Demain, then crossing the frontier into Belgium we came to the outskirts of Mons, and its capture was the last action.

It was Sunday afternoon as we fixed our guns in a public park, and Monday Morning was the Armistice.

I started with two black horses in March and after losing them and one other, I finished the war with two chestnuts.

I remember that one day we captured a complete German



battery with horses and drivers complete.

I also recall how many "sausage balloons" were shot down by aircraft of either side. These were used for observation and direction of artillery fire.

Every soldier could write a book, because so much was happening every day and every night, but most of it was unpleasant, and some of it worse than unpleasant.

I spent five months following the armistice in Germany in the army of occupation, but this was fairly uneventful, and I was chiefly interested in how soon I would get home again.

The German population seemed stunned to see the hated English appearing before some of their surviving troops got home, and the occupation was not in any way oppressive. The difficulty was rather to prevent fraternisation going too far.

Much against my will I was seconded to an officer as Groom, and accompanied him to various places sightseeing.

Brussels on one occasion, Haterloo another, an airfield on another occasion, when we went a flight in a captured German Fokker Aeroplane, but one day as I returned from

exercising the Major's thoroughbreds beside the Rhine, a message directing me to the Battery Office somewhat startled me, and overwhelmed me when I learned it was my release.

Soon I was packing, saying my farewells, and boarding the train for the three day journey to the Channel port of Calais, which I determined to by-pass on this final occasion. Memories of Calais were so vivid to me that all the journey in the train my mind was exercising plans to get on board ship without going through the official transit camp.





Francis (Frank) William Clarke, on his officer's horse, Army of Occupation, Köln 1919



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I had been over on leave from France via Calais to Dover. In Calais, very strict controls were in force to prevent men taking home souvenirs, especially firearms. I arrived there with an eighty pound oat sack full of such forbidden articles, with others secreted on my person. Hatching my opportunities, my sack was deposited inside the wire where I could retrieve it, and after passing through and having my leave pass stamped with the date the sack was soon camouflaged neath my greatcoat, so that it would appear to be a kitbag to the onlooker.

We were detailed to sleep in a large marquee, not knowing this had been erected on solid ice. As we lay, in about an hour there began a murmuring which became a growling, a mumbling which became a grumbling, and we were wet indeed. The warmth of our bodies had melted the ice beneath us and we were in a sea of mud.

I did not wait to see the ultimate outcome, but picking up my belongings, I invaded the nearest hut where more fortunates were sleeping, and was soon fast asleep like Goldilocks.

Next morning, as I emerged from the hut, I saw the ship, and made my way. At the gangplank the man said, "You are early, you look loaded, got yer pass?" Showing this I was allowed on board, and promptly scrounged some tea and food from the galley, and so had breakfast in comfort. There was a very good spirit of comradeship among the ordinary soldiers and sailors, the chief item being as to "where you came from and what was your home town, how long have you been out, do you think it will ever end?" As for me, I determined to avoid that transit camp on the way back, and I did, studying ways of



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eluding Military Police or getting past them, and making a bee line for the train in the railway sidings, and tagging along with the most likely to be friends type I met on the train. I also learned that travelling in the cattle trucks was preferable to upholstered carriages on long journeys, and I chose these every time. When you knew how, you could brew up in a cattle truck, and you could lay full stretch on the floor. With straw and blankets etc. you could be very comfortable, and there was a fraternity of soldiers who had made similar discoveries during the war. It was almost a clan, and you sensed at once if you belonged. The moaners, the sorry for themselves ones, were to be found in the carriages, the rougher, tougher types in the cattle trucks. There was not always a choice, when there was wailing and moaning galore.

The English Channel can be very rough, as we found out on a Belgian paddle steamer one crossing. Five times we came in sight of Dover and lost sight of it the next minute, one moment we could see almost underneath the front of the ship, and the next we looked to be perpendicular in relation to the waves, and snow obliterating the view altogether as a flurry enveloped the ship. Kind ladies on shore were most surprised as they proffered refreshments to be refused by most, who were suffering the nausea of sea sickness. In another half hour of such buffeting I should have been a victim too. The hard army biscuits I munched saved me. I was never without some in my pocket, just in case I was stranded or cut off from other supplies of food, and as most men detested these hard tack, they were easy to obtain.



Men with artificial teeth simply could not eat them, and in the dugouts and trenches, when bread was short, these biscuits were soaked for days to make them eatable, and even then one had to be desperately hungry to tackle them.

Bully beef stew was my chief abomination, most other things I could bring myself to accept. French and Belgian people thought the English lived on Eggs and Chips, for these three words were chalked on the shutters of every estaminet in villages behind the lines.

I could always trade my rum ration and allocation of cigarettes for foodstuffs, which helped me considerably.

What was my funniest experience? Two I think.

One was early one morning when we were sleeping in some pit headstock buildings, when suddenly a rain of shells made a shamble of the roof, and we sat up almost to a man and laughed to see all the others around as black as the black and white minstrels, we were covered with black dust like soot.

The second was an occasion in the advance, when we came to some houses. Rain had been incessant and we were all soaked to the skin. He had the brain wave to light huge fires and take off all our clothes & boots to dry them. Into this steaming place full of naked soldiers came the voice of a sergeant. "Come on, jump to it. Limber up and away in five minutes! What ever is this, a nudist camp?"

This story told against us was bringing smiles many months afterward. It even went the rounds of the beer halls in Cologne. It was told to emphasize something about the English, probably another proof that we are mad.



My return to civilian life was not what I had expected.

It was as though I had been killed, for all my clothes, my cycle, my every prized possession had been sold, and I had what I stood up in, a cheap demobilisation suit, and shoes, more for I had elected to keep my army boots, as they would serve as pit boots. Gratuities due to me totalled just under £30, and this with my bank balance was all I had.

In the first few weeks, I ordered two suits, bought the rest of my requirements, and went back to the colliery.

I had planned to have a look round for other employment, but financial considerations precluded this, so I went back to Bestwood Colliery as a Ganger, but in a different and better district. I had two ponies and worked a main and tail rope. The ponies hauled twenty four empty wagons and a rope trailing behind. This rope was attached to the twenty four full wagons, and these were hauled by an engine to the pit shaft. This was well paid work and I was making up my bank balance when the disastrous strike of 1921 put us out of work all that summer. Single men were asked

not to draw strike pay to enable the unions to support the married men for a longer time, so I had no income.

Possibly that year 1921 was the best summer for weather for a decade, and armed with books in my cycle bag, I spent much of the summer in the surrounding countryside, or going for long walks in the pleasant sunshine. The strike dragged wearily on for many, but merrily on for me, and I found adjusting to a life of ease well within my powers. God's sunshine was infinitely preferable to coaldust.



Motor traffic increased each year, and army surplus vehicles were modified to civilian needs, which resulted in the most varied assortment of lorries and vans, and motor cycles of all descriptions appearing on the roads. Even aeroplanes began to fly over and around us, and they had developed considerably since the day when our teacher shewed us the newspaper describing the historic flight of Bleriot over the English Channel.

So many new things apparently owed their speedy development to the war, though of course the fact was that five years had been lost in the life of people, and they had to catch up with life.

A whole generation of young men had gone from life, and the gaps were obvious in every family. Many who survived only lived a short time or suffered loss of limbs and sight, and England became like one great convalescent camp.

My particular legacy from the war was the effects of Phosgene Gas poisoning, which became increasingly worse with the years, and eventually I went into hospital for the removal of the organs affected, and after six weeks, I came out completely cured, and able once more to eat whatever I fancy after forty years of milk diets and light foods.

Life began again at sixty, and as now I sit with eggs and chips, or pork pie, and know they will stay down when swallowed, the forty years is as a nasty nightmare, consigned to the limbo of forgotten things, well almost!

The price some of us paid in terms of human suffering make one marvel at the tenacity of humans for life and living, but leave unanswered the great overriding question

Why? Why? and a million more Whys?

Scribe. 19/3/69.