Andrew Lansdown

THE FIFTH TIME

Now I'm not claiming to be special or anything, but I reckon the Germans had their sights on me from the start. Four times they had a whack before they woke up to themselves.

First up, I was posted sentry on the firing step. This was about two years into the war, but I'd only been in France a month. It was just on dark, and down the trench a bit a few Koylis — that's what we called the troops in the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry — were singing "God Bless You, Tommy Atkins". Some of the older chaps had fought in the Boer War, and they liked that song. I did, too.

You're a stout fellow, Tommy Atkins,
Chin up, cheerio, carry on!

Anyway, I was humming along, feeling pretty cheery, when I sensed a movement just beyond the barbed wire. My heart went skipping like a hare. I looked hard, but couldn't see anything definite. 'Better shoot than shot' was my motto, so I put a few rounds out into the dark. Don't think I hit anything. Probably wasn't anything there. But that's beside the point, because some Jerry spotted my rifle flash and replied with a machine gun. Their front trench was 200 yards away, maybe less. Bullets belted into the loam about a foot in front of my face. Talk about scary! My heart thought my throat was a burrow and tried to jump into it. I ducked below the parapet. Chin-down-cheerio. And that would have been the end of it if one of our lot further down the line hadn't opened up with a Lewis gun. Well, that fairly put the wind up the Germans. Half a dozen of their troops let go with rifle fire, and another one of their machine guns opened up. By this time, our chaps were skittish as cattle in a slaughter yard, and they started blasting away too. The Germans sent up a Very Light to see what was going on. They thought maybe we'd launched an offensive, and our lot thought the same about them. Suddenly there was more lead in the air than flies around a dead horse. Then one of their light batteries opened up. From behind us, our boys lobbed a few rounds. Before we knew it, the heavy batteries were pounding away, shaking the earth like a china shop by a quarry. Then a shell landed just in front of me and shovelled the side of the trench on top of me. The next thing I knew, some chaps had hauled me out of the dirt and a corporal was yelling at me to clean my rifle. Well, that was the first time.

The second time, the Germans were firing gas. It didn't bother me because I had a gas mask. We were up top, retreating. I was running back with three other chaps. It smelt a bit funny, but you don't

worry about that when there's a horde of Huns at your back all wanting to make your acquaintance. Besides, those masks aren't perfumed. They're not made for gentry. Well, when we finally got back, I was short on breath. My hose was cut — shrapnel, probably. I'd been breathing gas all along. Didn't hurt. Just difficult to breathe. Couldn't get a deep breath. Well, they packed me off to the field hospital, and I was hardly between the sheets when we had to evacuate because the Germans were coming on so fast. They finally put us on a hospital train and packed us off to a little French town called Baune.

Met my first Australian there. Decent chap. Shrapnel in his legs.

Met my first Yanks, too. They weren't sick or anything — except maybe in the head. Just loafing around town, trying to buy souvenirs to send back to their mothers and sweethearts. This was at the beginning of '17. Hard people to like, the Americans. Loud people. "Have you got any German pistols? Have you got any German helmets?" We told them where they could get plenty.

The nurses at Baune were all French. Very pretty, some of them. I'd come out in terrible blisters — on my back, mostly — and the nurses used to heat up a fish-paste jar, then place it over a blister. As it cooled, a vacuum would form and break the blister. It hurt like the dickens. Not that I'm whingeing. A lot of chaps would have thought it was Christmas, having just blisters.

The third time they tried to knock me off my perch was only a few weeks before Armistice. We had a push on. The Germans had abandoned their front trenches, and we hoped to rout them from their second line. I was advancing with my battalion, the Northumberland Fusiliers, bent double, when a bullet smashed through my collarbone and skimmed down underneath my shoulder blade and burst out halfway down my back. I blacked out.

When I came to there wasn't a soul in sight. I crawled along and fell into one of our communication trenches — one that linked a forward observation post to the main trench. It was a five foot drop, and I landed on my bad side, so I didn't feel too shiny. When I finally began to stir, I heard this *tat! tat! tat! tat!* My blood's turning the mud to syrup, and I'm pinned down by a machine gunner! Every time I lifted my head, off it went — *tat! tat! tat! tat!* After a while — I don't know how long — I discovered it was a cricket. Near my head, just in front of me.

Funny really, thinking back. But I've hated crickets ever since.

I was in hospital in Wales when they announced Armistice. And I remember thinking, You missed your chance, Kaiser Bill. But I was wrong.

My brother and I leased a farm in Sussex shortly after the war. We struggled along with it for a while, then we got the bright idea of turning a profit on potatoes. Planted twenty acres. We estimated it'd cost us about 28 pounds an acre, including harvest, and we expected to get about eight tons to an acre. Well, the very day we started digging up our crop, the jolly Jerries started landing spuds in London for a pound a ton! "That's it!" I said to my brother. "I'm going some place Herman Hun can't get me."

There was an Australian film showing at the picture houses in London called *The Sentimental Bloke*. And I noticed the land in the film looked pretty good, especially the orchard where the bloke meets his girl. That's what made my mind up for Australia. I was thinking of Victoria, actually. But the immigration people said "The Mallee" land settlement scheme was just finishing up, and I'd have better prospects here in Western Australia. So I signed on for assisted passage and was off within a fortnight.

We'd only been at sea a few days when I noticed this young woman on the games deck, playing quoits. Talk about graceful! By heaven, she moved lovely! Throwing, walking, bending. Fluid as mercury. Curved like mercury too. She set my mercury rising right enough!

Anyway, by the time I found out she was German, it was too late. I was schmitten.

So after all the shells they fired, they finally got me with a skirt. Cunning lot. Mind you, it's been sweet, falling into enemy hands.

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