

Introduction

In the Beginning ...

I hope to be back all right, but if I die on the battlefield, well, greater love hath no man than to die for his friends. If I die, I will be remembered by them and their children.

– Corporal Issy Smith V.C.¹

It's 1969. Or maybe early 1970. In any case, I am about seven years old and I've just had a huge fight with my best friend at primary school. She just won't listen and it's infuriating.

You have ONE set of grandparents, not TWO.

There are your parents, and your parents' parents, I tell her. Who the heck are this other set she is talking about? I have never heard of them. I storm home and unleash my frustrations on my father, Maurice, who listens and then quietly sits me down for an education on the facts of life and an explanation. The next day I have to eat humble pie.

Apparently, I do have another set of grandparents, I begrudgingly admit to her. There is my grandfather on my father's side, who I have just learned about.

I am over the fight already. Suddenly I know a little about a unique and truly special man who died nearly 30 years earlier.

Instantly I am incredibly proud of him. He was a war hero who saved many lives. At the same time, I am angry that we have wars in which lives need to be saved. If we didn't argue, then we wouldn't

have wars. And I would have a grandfather I could have met and loved in person.

Yet I have met him, through his legacy.

They say a cat has nine lives. If this fallacy was indeed true and could apply to people too, then my grandfather used at least that many more lives than his allotted one. Had just one of these near misses been a direct hit, then neither my father nor I would have been here to grace this earth and tell his story.

But this isn't just a combat tale about escaping death multiple times through fortuitous and sometimes fluky survival. This is also about a man with as many different livelihoods and experiences as escapes, each interwoven with a fabric of compassion, perplexity and intrigue.

So who was this man, Issy Smith VC?

What is published about him is extraordinary. Aside from the books and websites in which he features, I found close to 2000 newspaper articles about him, most printed more than a century ago, and likely just a hint of the true number that could be amassed from all over the world if every country's archives and every newspaper's pay service was utilised. Yet almost nothing written about him is consistent. The media varies his name, his age, his place of birth, where he lived and what he did. The man himself added to the mystery, being whimsical with his personal details and remaining modest about his deeds.

The only fact that remains the same is the award of the Victoria Cross – the highest award for military valour that can be bestowed by the British Armed Forces. Presented to him for one of his incredible acts of bravery at the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915, it became the story of the times in Great Britain, France, Ireland, and as far across the world as the Americas and Australia. After its announcement, the media went to town with both real and unsubstantiated stories of his life and exploits. According to the press reports, he became one of the world's greatest heroes, having participated (it would appear) in the capture of German New Guinea and the wreck

of the SS *Emden* in Cocos islands, as well as fighting in the battles of Givenchy, Neuve Chapelle, the First Battle of Ypres, the Dardanelles Campaign and Hill 60. Then, after the Second Battle of Ypres and gallant rescues which led to the award of his VC, he was apparently engaged in the battle of Loos and later, sometime after his ship was torpedoed, personally volunteered to row out and save Russian soldiers from their blazing and sinking ship. It would appear that he was involved in the Siege of Kut, the fall of Baghdad and the fall of Jerusalem, and he was purported to be the youngest, the first and the only Jew to ever receive the highest honour Britain could bestow. He became a film star with journalists claiming he featured in more than 20 films, was embroiled in a political drama and scandal, and in the course of this notoriety, the secret identity of the famous English boxer, Jack Daniels, was revealed with great excitement as his alias.

Which of these stories was real? Issy made no attempt to dispel the myths or to separate facts from fiction, and as a result, a mixture of truth and fantasy continues to be reported in the history books to this day.

This makes the mystery about the man himself all the more puzzling. Who was he really and what made him tick? Was he a ratbag, a rebel or a saint? It is obvious from the events that unfold that he wasn't a coward, a wise-guy or a misfit. Nor, from these tales, was he a slacker or a snob. Although inborn with a strong spirit and a wild streak, he bore no racist views, held no radical ideals and carried no grudges.

As I dug into his life and times, what I found underneath the hype was a battler, a fighter, a saviour, a good Samaritan and a man deeply proud of his faith.

All rolled into one.

Chapter 10

Neuve Chapelle

The SS *Miltiades* sailed to Port Said, Egypt, where it parted with the Australian troopships before continuing on to England, reaching Plymouth on 22 December 1914. Issy's military records state that he had arrived in Ashton-under-Lyne thirteen days earlier.¹

During the voyage the Ottoman Empire, including Constantinople, his place of birth, entered the war on the side of the Central Powers – the enemy. If Issy did not know of this development while at sea, he would most certainly have learned of it by the time he reached England. Whatever tugs of allegiance he had towards his birthplace, if he had them at all, were never displayed.

On arrival at the barracks, nearly all reservists were immediately promoted to Sergeant so they could bring the new recruits up to speed as quickly as possible.

But not Issy. He was appointed Acting Lance Corporal, Manchester Regiment. I can only assume this was due to his poor conduct record and the belief that his leadership qualities were unsatisfactory. More surprising, however, was that the rank he was given was lower than when he had been demobilised two years previously. I find that hard to explain.

For Issy, there was no time to argue the point. In less than a fortnight he would be equipped and transferred.

It is quite possible that the following incident occurred while waiting to be despatched. According to a family anecdote, he was on

the terrace of a café in England talking to a friend in Yiddish when an officer overheard him and, thinking the language was German, mistook him for a spy. Issy retrieved his boxing skills and wasted no time launching a swift uppercut that left the officer's jaw in a sorry state. Issy was a fighter who did not tolerate intimidation.

Where the army sent him first is unclear. Some newspaper stories reported, months later, that he fought in the Battle of Givenchy on 19–20 December 1914, copped a bullet and spent three months in hospital. The 3rd (Lahore) Division, his former unit, *was* fighting at Givenchy during that period and, taking into account the conflicting records, it is not impossible (though it seems unlikely) that Issy could have just made it by that time.

In 1927, Issy gave brief particulars of his service where he apparently told a reporter that he landed at Marseilles on 19 December, went into action at Givenchy five days later and was subsequently wounded there. This places him in the location, but after the main battle – which could be a simple memory loss of the exact dates, or the reporter's shabby journalism. There was also a story that he played soccer with the Germans in the Christmas truce of 1914. This truce occurred along a number of places on the Western Front in that year only and generally (with a few exceptions) was prohibited from happening again. But there is no evidence to confirm he was there at that time.

Instead, in a book written about him in 2014 by a member of the Manchester Regiment, he was believed to have been posted to the Special Reserve at its new base at Cleethorpes on England's east coast.² The Special Reserve was established to maintain a supply of additional manpower for the British Army in times of war. Organised into battalions, they provided a third unit for each of the regular army's two-battalion infantry regiments. Issy was assigned to the 3rd Battalion (Special Reserve) Manchester Regiment. In addition to training recruits and providing replacements, his unit's role at Cleethorpes was to guard the coast and, in particular, the River Humber.

Issy's stay there was short. As the fighting in France intensified in early 1915, he was sent to rejoin the 1st Manchesters, still part of the Jullundur Brigade, who were in the trenches between Festubert and Neuve Chapelle. Alf, who had stayed with the 1st Manchesters and seen combat in Givenchy in December 1914, was with them. Two more Indian brigades, the Sirhind and the Ferozepore, also part of the 3rd (Lahore Division), were there too, along with the 7th (Meerut) Division.³

The first of the Indian troops to arrive in Marseilles in August 1914 fell victim to the freezing weather. The new winter uniform wasn't ready and they were forced to endure the rain and snow in their summer khaki drill. Marching to their destinations would have been particularly unpleasant, and not just because of the climate. Packs were heavy, initially weighing over 70 pounds (32 kilograms) – about the same as a medieval suit of armour. Later, with the addition of steel helmets, box respirators, wire cutters and extra ammunition, stories abound that they weighed as much as 110 pounds (49 kilograms)! Clothing was often itchy and army boots, too, were frequently uncomfortable. Made to a few standard sizes, they rarely fitted well – a soldier was lucky if he didn't suffer raw and blistered feet.

By February 1915 the troops had warmer clothing, but were dealing with punishing conditions – operating often from shallow and poorly constructed trenches that offered minimum protection from the elements or the enemy. Continuously bombarded with artillery fire or picked off by snipers, they became known, like many other soldiers during that time, as 'cannon fodder'. The fierce combat came as a terrible shock. One soldier wrote home: 'This is not war; it is the ending of the world.'

The lines of opposing trenches now ran all the way from the English Channel to the French–Swiss border. The area between the Allied and enemy lines was referred to as 'No Man's Land' – a barren terrain consisting of craters, endless barbed wire, and broken and abandoned military equipment. Soldiers killed in this space

generally could not be retrieved without enormous risk. During heavy battles, trenches could be battered by artillery fire constantly during the day and then subjected to multiple incursions at night. Soldiers who died in the trenches lay or were buried largely where they fell.⁴

With the unrelenting rain, the trenches filled with water. Standing in the water, which could be waist-high, promoted frostbite and trench foot.⁵ Corpses, excrement and food scraps that littered the trenches attracted rats. Just one pair of rats could produce 880 offspring in a year and as their food supplies grew, so did their size and numbers. Lice, which accompanied the rats, caused endless itching, typhus and trench fevers.

Altogether the conditions, attacks, vermin and parasites compounded the men's misery, afflicting them day and night.

Issy joined Alf and his original brigade in the trenches near the village of Neuve Chapelle.⁶ Since water levels in the area were close to the surface, these trenches were not deep and consisted mostly of parapets made from piles of soil and sandbags. They overlooked fields broken by many small drainage ditches and separated by rows of decapitated willow trees, behind which German snipers had cover and a considerable advantage.

Neuve Chapelle consisted of just a smattering of houses, already ruined and now fortified by the enemy which had broken the trench line in the previous October. The town was neither large nor of significance, but if Allied forces could penetrate and re-seize it and the slightly higher ground of Aubers Ridge, which offered a good observation point, they could move through to the city of Lille and then intercept the roads, railway lines and canals used by the enemy as transport routes. The little town thus became strategic and the site for the first planned large-scale British offensive. A consortium of 40,000 British, Canadian and Indian troops prepared to take part, with their attack approach used as the model on which all future assaults would be based – concentrated bombardment of enemy artillery followed immediately by attack. Efforts would then be

concentrated on preventing the enemy reserves from coming up.

On the night of 9 March it was cold, with steady rain and snow flurries that turned, in the early hours, to damp fog. The assault began at daybreak the next morning, with hundreds of guns firing at once. A British supply officer, Herbert Stewart, described the incredible bombardment and destruction:

As soon as the range had been accurately secured, a tremendous fire was opened on the village of Neuve Chapelle and the neighbouring trenches occupied by the enemy ... Under this hail of flying metal, the village, the neighbouring trenches, and the whole German position selected for attack were blotted from sight under a pall of smoke and dust. The earth shook and the air was filled with the thunderous roar of the exploding shells. To the watching thousands the sight was a terrible one: amidst the clouds of smoke and dust they could see human bodies with earth and rock, portions of houses and fragments of trench hurtling through the air.⁷

Once the line was broken, the infantry advanced. Indian troops provided nearly half the assaulting force and were the first ones sent in. The 1st Manchester Battalion, including Issy and Alf, proceeded as advanced guard with the 47th Sikhs and were attacked by heavy enemy shellfire. The soldiers ducked for cover behind breastworks and, as night fell, slept in ruined houses.

On the morning of 11 March, they again moved forward, but enemy fire killed or injured a number of officers and men, adding to a battlefield already littered with the dead and the wounded. Due to severe losses from the previous day, the 59th Rifles, who were to be the backup, had to be brought up into the front line – now there were no reserves. The troops sheltered behind houses, but the enemy's guns and shells turned and fired into the buildings, forcing them to retreat. At 8 pm, as the shelling eased, they withdrew to the ruins where they had spent the previous night.

At 5 am on 12 March, the Jullundur Brigade, with the Manchesters

leading, moved again towards Neuve Chapelle, the road on which they travelled being constantly hit by enemy fire. At 9 am they received orders to attack the Bois du Biez, behind the German line. There were gaps in the line where the trenches were crossed by roads and dykes, and as men scurried across to move into position, they were hit by shells and rifle fire. There were heavy casualties and, when coupled with the previous day's shellfire, resources were rapidly diminishing. Due to these impacts, the attack was postponed until 1 pm.

Orders were eventually given to commence the assault and soldiers bravely clambered over the parapets into intense enemy fire. Many were killed. In the midst of the fighting, Issy came face to face with a German soldier and was at the point of bayonetting him when something held him back. He didn't bayonet the man, but took him prisoner. On searching him, he found he was wearing a Jewish token. According to Issy, that told him that there was a God, and with his help they would win the war.

The battle was fierce and raged over and around the trenches for hours. It was 4.30 am before the battalion was eventually withdrawn.

Although the history books describe the battle as 'finishing' on the fourth day, 13 March, with the capture of Neuve Chapelle, the fighting did not stop. Over the next three days, Issy's battalion were forced to escape and return several times a day from the church where they were attempting to rest until safer billets could be found. On the night of 18 March, they moved back to the trenches at Bois du Biez and relieved other brigades. For the next four days, despite still being shelled, they strengthened the defences and at night buried the dead. Issy was reported to have been wounded – apparently shot in the arm; but if he was, it went unrecorded and it is not known how he was treated.

The attack at Neuve Chapelle did not go as planned. A breakdown of communications caused confusion and allowed enemy reserves to seal the break in the trench line more quickly than it could be

exploited. Only a small area was gained for a huge loss of over 11,500 British and Indian soldiers killed, wounded or who were missing. Of these, 1694 were from the 3rd (Lahore) Division. The Germans also suffered, with around the same number killed or wounded and many taken prisoner.

A Neuve Chapelle epitaph to the Indian soldiers who died there reads:

Tell them at home,
There's nothing here to hide:
We took our orders,
asked no questions,
died.⁸