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A Very Unimportant Officer, Life and Death on the Somme and at Passchendaele by Alexander Stewart, edited by Cameron Stewart; Historical Consultant Jonathan Boff. Hodder & Stoughton, pp 318, £18.99. ISBN 978 0340 97118.

It is also available to download at £6.95 from <http://www.grandfathersgreatwar.com/>

Yet another diary of an infantry officer who served on the Western Front from March 1916 until wounded at 3rd Ypres in September 1917. Many of the entries are thin, to say the least - "*June 28th. Rejoin Battalion 6pm. Take over C Coy. Take on McLennan*" – what is so special about this recent addition?

The Battalion in which the author served, 1st Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) formed part of 19 Bde in 33 Div – the same Brigade as 2nd Royal Welsh Fusiliers – can one never get away from these people?

At 33 years old, the writer of the diary, Alexander Stewart, was relatively elderly to join the infantry as a subaltern on July 1st 1915. At the outbreak of war he was working on a rubber plantation in Malaya but was no stranger to military life – eight years service in the Volunteers, OTC, City of London Yeomanry and the Malay States Volunteer Rifles. He kept a diary during his war service but wrote it up and elaborated it in 1928 '*for the benefit and perchance instruction*' of his children, for '*the entertainment of his wife and nearest relations*' and '*possibly to a small extent*' for his own amusement.

To which he might have added the '*the erudition of historians of military tactics*'.

Notwithstanding a sardonic sense of humour, Stewart takes his responsibilities very seriously. He analyses in some detail the actions in which he takes part, seeking to describe exactly what he did and how he felt and what his soldiers and the battalion were trying to do.

For example his description of the attack on High Wood on 20 July 1916 runs for 15 pages (pp92-107) and he illustrates it with three sketches to show how the battalion deployed. His next big attack is at the Hindenberg Line on 26 May 1917. By now he commands C Company and explains exactly how he gets the platoon officers and sergeants together, instructs them on how to deploy in No Man's Land and then makes sure that they are lined up properly with the neighbouring company. Then they wait until 13.55 before the attack. It is a long time to wait but he says "*I do not think that any of us were at all 'windy' but the last few moments before an attack when one rather expects to be killed or wounded are somewhat tense.*" Indeed.

As they go forward behind the barrage '*which is like a wall*' it leaps over the German trench but he is unable to get the men out of automatic pilot and to run forward. With a small party he engages a German MG team with his revolver whilst smoking his pipe but eventually he has to fall back and finds most of his men back in their trench. In retrospect he thinks that this is because they have been lying up in the open under a hot sun for so long that they had become tired, lethargic and unable to think clearly despite the excellent artillery support.

Analysing these actions as he does, Stewart is not afraid to put his views forward to senior officers. He feels that he has an advantage here in that he is not a regular and so has no career



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to risk. At Nieupoort in August 1917 he struggles through deep mud to reconnoitre for an attack and reports quite bluntly that it would be pointless – whilst a regular would have taken the view that ‘theirs was to do and die.’ ‘*It seemed to me*’, he says, ‘*that the longer a man had been in the army, the less intelligent he was.*’ (p26) Despite these sentiments, however, he clearly has great respect and affection for the regular officers and the standards they set.

He also explains an unusual (or was it?) command arrangement by which he commands the company in the line but hands it back to a regular officer when at rest which saves him lots of form-filling and suits him very well as he is given a free hand to organise training.

His strongest feelings, however are reserved for those who prefer not to serve a rum ration, whether overzealous senior officers to the Temperance Movement at home. ‘*The blasted blackguards that tried to stop the soldiers’ rum ration should have been taken to High Wood and chained up there for a week*’ is a typical entry (p108).

Stewart is wounded at Ypres in September 1917 and although he recovers he spends the remainder of the war on ‘light duties’ at a training establishment in UK. One feels that he deserves a rest and senses that he does so too as the diary illustrates his growing weariness, both physical and mental. He has been in the line from March 1916 for 18 months, less some spells in hospital or on leave.

The diary is usefully edited by his grandson, Cameron Stewart, who has consulted wisely – the names both of our President and Bill Philpott being listed in the Acknowledgements.

This book is not, I suggest, ideal reading for those who prefer their Great War diaries to have been penned by a Greats scholar from one of our prestigious Universities – let alone a poet. The long battle entries that have formed the basis of this review are often separated by others that are almost monosyllabic when the author is out of the line. These are not without interest or humour – for example he commences his training at Nigg on the east coast of Scotland, a place that “*was not dull – it was nothing. It is not a place; it is a station on the Highland Railway*” – but its enormous value lies in the very careful descriptions of what an infantry officer thought and did at the moment of battle.

Andy Grainger