

A BRUMMIE BOY GOES TO WAR

Andrew Norman

Thomas Waldin, a 19-year-old from a working-class area of Birmingham in the English Midlands, volunteered for the British Army in the spring of 1915, and was sent to Ypres to fight on the Western Front. However, after only six months in the trenches, his luck ran out when he was blown up by shellfire. He was taken to hospital, where his wounds were adjudged to be so serious that he was left for dead. However, he refused to die and survived, terribly wounded and blinded in both eyes.

When despair threatened to overwhelm him, he was thrown a lifeline by Arthur Pearson, who offered him a place at St Dunstan's (a hostel situated on the edge of London's Regent's Park, which Pearson had created for blinded servicemen – not only from Britain, but from the British Empire – shortly after the onset of the war). Waldin now set off on the long road to recovery until finally, and against all the odds, he won his ultimate battle and achieved 'Victory over Blindness'.

There were many who were seriously wounded and blinded in World War I, but this account is unique, in that the author, Andrew Norman, knew this hero at first hand – Thomas Waldin was his grandfather. However, when Andrew was a child 'Tom's' blindness was a taboo subject, and all he was told was that 'it was something to do with the war'. Only now has the author managed, after years of 'detective' work, to discover the truth about his grandfather. The journey of discovery has been a fascinating one, a journey where the unimaginable horror of the trenches is in poignant contrast to the supreme courage and determination of one who survived it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

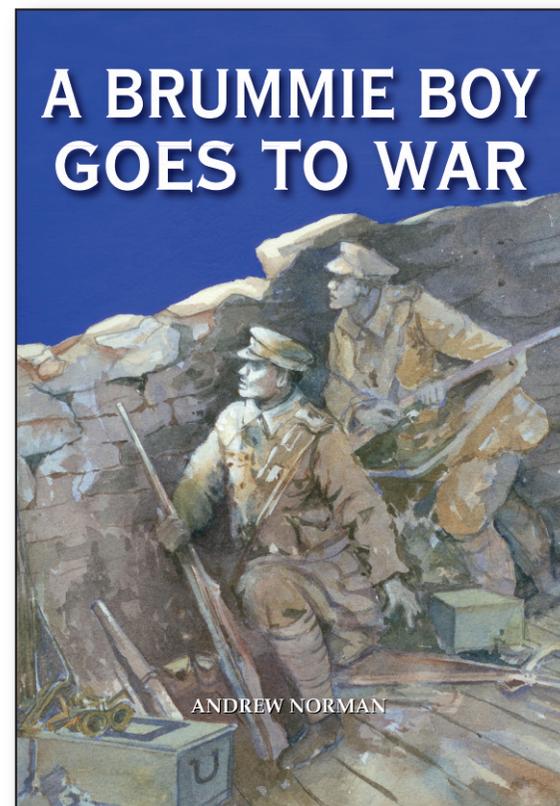
Andrew Norman was born in Newbury, Berkshire and educated at Thornhill High School, Gwelo, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), and at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, where he read animal physiology. In December 1970, he graduated in medicine from the Radcliffe Infirmary and entered into general practice in Poole, Dorset. In 1983 he sustained a back injury which forced him to give up his medical career; he is now a full-time writer. He lives with his wife, Rachel, in Poole.

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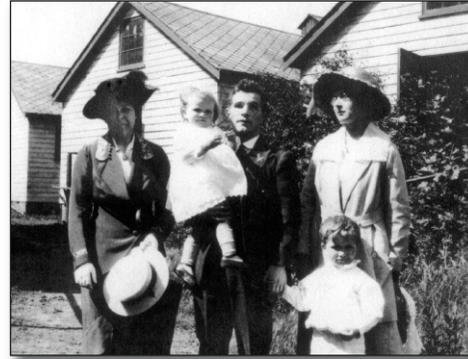
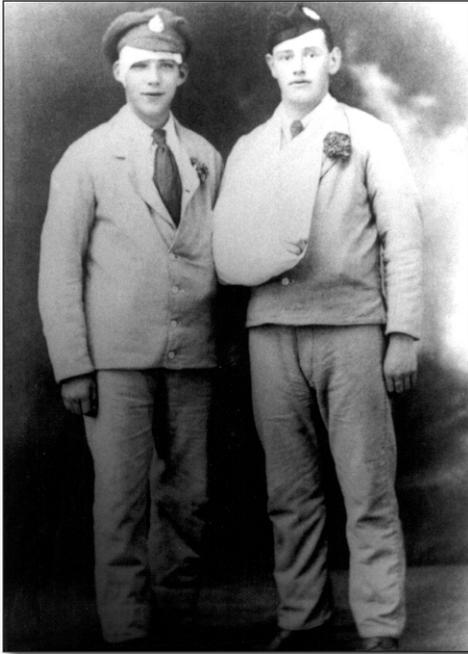


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Above: A family visit to St Dunstan's. Left to right, Mrs Benwell, baby Jean, Tom, Peter, and Esther. Photograph taken by Sister Winifred Boyd-Rochfort. Photo: Peter Waldin.

Left: Tom (right) with comrade, both men attired in 'hospital blues'.



Barnardo's Receiving House, Stepney, East London.

6

'Your Country Needs You!'

On 15 March 1915, when the war had been in progress for 7 months, Tom enlisted in the British Army's 8th Rifle Brigade which was recruiting at Birmingham. (Between 22 August and 20 December 1914, the first four [regular] battalions of the Rifle Brigade had been dispatched to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force [B.E.F.].) Tom had done this despite his mother, Helena's protestations that he still had one year of his apprenticeship to run. In the previous month, Tom's hero, Tommy Barber of Aston Villa Football Club had enlisted in the 17th 'Football' Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment.

In the early months of the war pressure on sportsmen to join the armed services came from a number of sources, including some prominent figures of the day. For example, on 6 September 1914 famous Scottish writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (founder member of Portsmouth Football Club in 1884, and the team's first goalkeeper, and also one time captain of Portsmouth Cricket Club) added his weight to the Army's recruitment campaign by making a speech in which he declared:

... there is only time for one thing now, and that thing is war. If the cricketer had a straight eye let him look along the barrel of a rifle. If a footballer had strength of limb, let them serve and march in the field of battle.

On 2 December 1914, the Bishop of Chelmsford preached a sermon exhorting professional footballers to join the armed services:



He [the Bishop] felt that the [outcry against professional football at the present time was right. He could not understand men who had any feeling, any respect for their country, men in the prime of life, taking large salaries at a time like this for kicking a ball about. It seemed to him something incongruous and unworthy.

Here, it should be mentioned that the professional footballers to whom the Bishop refers were bound by legally-binding contracts, which their clubs were not always willing to release them from. However, public opinion would soon force the clubs to relent.

Charles Burgess ('C.B.') Fry, an athlete and sportsman who performed at the very highest level (but nonetheless retained his amateur status), saw matters in much the same light and demanded that all professional footballers' contracts be annulled forthwith. One day, as will be seen, Tom would meet the great C.B. Fry in person.

The outcome was that, on 12 December 1914, Conservative politician, William Joynson-Hicks (First Viscount Brentford), established the 17th Service (Football) Battalion of the Duke of Cambridge's Own Middlesex Regiment; the first to join this so-called 'Football Battalion' being Franklin ('Frank') Charles Buckley, former England international and midfielder for Aston Villa.¹ Had he possessed the wherewithal to travel in excess of 100 miles from Birmingham to London, Tom would undoubtedly have joined the Football Battalion, whose members included not only the footballers themselves, but their friends and supporters also.²

Tom's other footballer hero, Will Walker of Adie Brothers and Aston Villa Reserves, did not serve in the armed forces; for although he volunteered, his shoulder problem prevented him from using a rifle.³

Seven months later, on 11 July 1915, Tom's half-brother, John Deeley, joined the Army Service Corps and was sent to the Western Front.⁴ As for Harold Deeley, the brass and iron factory where he worked was now engaged in manufacturing materials for the war effort, and he was therefore required to continue there – his work being designated as a 'reserved occupation' (one vital to the interests of the country).

The B.E.F., consisting of both infantry and cavalry divisions of the regular army, together with support units and numbering in total some 120,000 men,

36

37



Postcard, sent by Tom to his sister May, 5 September 1916, showing him (bottom right, seated) convalescing after being wounded. Photo: David Waldin

Example of a double-page spread.