

Andrew James Rudolph Watts A brief service summary and diary extracts

Motorcycle Despatch Rider for the Duke of Westminster's Armoured Car Division.
Motorcycle machine gunner with Motor Machine Gun Corps.



From 1915 to 1916 James, who was from Pembrokeshire in Wales, served in the Duke of Westminster's Armoured Car Division in France as a Despatch Rider (2nd Battalion). The unit consisted of 2 Seabrook Heavy Armoured Cars with 3 pounder Hosskiss guns mounted internally on a capstan, one Rolls Armoured Car with a machine gun mounted internally in a revolving turret, one Seabrook Lorry, one Daimler Box Body Car, one Talbot Box Body Car and three Douglas Motor Cycles. Unit was at Lestram, near Merville. He was wounded in 1916 and spent six weeks in the 2nd Canadian Casualty Clearing Hospital in Aire Sur Le Mere during which time the Somme had commenced. The unit was disbanded and its members sent to East Africa.

On discharge from hospital he was transferred to the Motor Machine Gun Corps in mid August 1916 driving a Clyno Machine Gun Carrier and then to No 1 Division of the Motor Machine Gun Corps attached to the First French Division, known as the Stork Division or the Geymer Division to which was attached the famous Flying Ace with a stork painted on the side of his plane.

He was wounded again in 1917 near Beaumont-Hamel but after a few days in hospital returned to the Company. He was in Le Frere Wood on the 21st March 1918 when the Germans launched their great offensive and had to retire over the River Oise on to Sossions. As a result the Company lost all their Motor Cycles and Side Car Gun Mountings. The only one salvaged was his mount, a 1915 Triumph Motor Cycle. On 5th April the Company was issued with another complete unit of Motors and on the 10th were sent up from Clermont to Cassel in Belgium.

On the 12th April 1918 he was severely wounded when a shell burst 10ft above his head and this resulted in the loss of his lower left leg. He survived due to the brave action of his motor cycle companion who "went back for him" when he was blown off the machine. He was sent home to England and discharged as a Disabled Pensioner in August 1919 ending his army life.

Here are some extracts from his diary:

On training:

The first day of issue of army boots we had to fall in for a long route march to Aldershot. After interminable miles we fell out for a rest and I unfortunately removed my boots for some relief. When the whistle went I could hardly get them back on again. It was pitiful to see the other boys' necks chaffed raw by the high neck tunics. This, of course, we all got used to with time. We were soon "full-blown soldiers" and had got over that awful feeling of homesickness.

On volunteering for motorcycles:

One day they asked for men who could ride Scott motorcycles. I had never ridden a sidecar model nor knew the workings of a Scott bike but it seemed like an exciting opportunity and quite a heroic thing to do so I raised my hand. My delight at being one of the chosen was short-lived when I was sent to London with a small company of men to buy Scott motorcycle combinations. I had time to repent seriously about my impetuous action as we marched from Vauxhall, over the tramlines, finally reaching our destination and being assigned to bikes already complete with sidecar passengers. There was to be a parade by an officer and I wondered how on earth I would even get the machine started. I was positioned eighth from last in a line of 50 combinations and the column was to follow a motor van. I lost the van on the first bend and if I could have had my train fare reimbursed by the government and been allowed to go back to Bisley then I would have been greatly relieved. When we arrived back at Bisley the Sergeant Major lined us up and asked me to move my bike forward a bit. This I did and knocked him down! Luckily he was a compassionate man and I stayed on for training: machine gun practice, physical drills, square drills, engine instruction.

On France:

On the 20th September I volunteered to go to France as a despatch rider for the Duke of Westminster's heavy armoured cars division and following inoculations and farewells from my family I was shipped out from Southampton to Le Havre on a good wet and dreary morning with sleet falling. There followed an exhausting march to Harfleur camp with loaded kit bags full of extra equipment, water bottles, helmet and personal belongings. This camp, called a "rest" camp was far from it. It was the worst month I spent in the army. The food was poor consisting mainly of biscuits, even in the stew! There were Hill 60 gun drills and guard duty with rifles outside headquarters. Eventually after four weeks, at the end of October 1915, we were paraded, numbered and formed into three companies. I was drafted to the 2nd armoured car company stationed at Cassell. There followed seven months of "a very easy life" except for manoeuvres. I was very happy here and quite disappointed when the company was disbanded.

On the Horror of the Trenches:

In July I was taken to the 2nd Canadian Casualty Clearing Station with a leg wound and heard nothing from home for seven weeks as the hospital address was not to be revealed during the Somme attack. Following my release I was transferred to what was known as No 1 Company of Battery MGC (Motors). I joined the Company at Hersin just outside of Bethune and on enquiring of my pals was politely told that they were in the trenches. I had been a despatch rider not a machine gunner so this news was disturbing and within a few days I was soon to have a taste of modern warfare. The first trenches I experienced were at Alban St Claire opposite Vimy Ridge. To my horror I found that the trenches were absolutely cut through the dead bodies of French soldiers who were in a semi-decomposed condition. To keep what was called the "hum" down we had to use Chloride of Lime nightly. In one instance we had to complete a machine gun trench about 5 feet by 6 feet and during the digging we were forced to cut through eight bodies with jack knives covering with Chloride of Lime. After digging the depth of a couple of feet the form of the bodies could easily be traced in the side of the trenches. The "no mans land" was absolutely covered with shell holes. The show was very thrilling and during the lulls in battle you could see the population of Lens on the German line and also the German soldiers could be seen daily walking about the streets. I was often in the position of being able to see all the action from the OP (observation post) and the spectacular air battles ending in one of the pair crashing or pushed into a forced landing. The

battery were occupied on this line for two months and I have to confess that once one was used to the smell of the dead bodies things were, on the whole, quite interesting with a firework display every night. Toffee apple bombs could be seen flying through the air towards the front line dropping with a loud bang. The front line guards were so used to them that it was rare to hear of a fatal accident and instead there would be a guard blowing a whistle and yelling "look right" or "look left" to warn the others.

On an accident:

After leaving this part of the Front, the Company were sent to Estree-Blanche in France and put on anti-aircraft work. It was cushy work and more like peacetime with nothing more exciting than a few planes a month. From there we proceeded to Freschevilliers, just outside Doullens, with headquarters in a barn. I was one of four who was in an accident when the first floor laden with corn sheaves fell in. One chap, by the name of Cripps, was found dead. My gunner, who was on guard, had tried to rouse me just before the roof caved as it had moved and creaked, but had given up and had to get out. Had he stayed he would have been killed on the spot. I was saved by the machine guns having been mounted on the tripods in the centre of the floor. Poor old Cripps had been the last one to retire that night and had poo-pooed the creaking. His death was instant. There was a full military funeral and I was one of the bearers.



James was brought back to hospital in Oxford after losing his lower left leg. During his time convalescing he, like many other soldiers, spent time embroidering his unit badge.