

Mr Robert Cramp

A First World War Veteran Remembers

Robert Cramp was a farmer's son, born in March 1899, the oldest of 9 children. The family large house opposite the Crown Inn in Tur Langton. Late in 1917 Robert was conscripted into the Army, joining, not the local Leicestershire's but a regiment depleted by the casualties in France, the Manchester's.

His initial training was at Cleethorpes and he adapted quickly to army life, but not to army food. At home the family always ate well and the change from Mother's roast meat to cookhouse stew was a problem that had to be solved. A resourceful and personable young man, Robert got permission to take early morning Holy Communion instead of normal Church Parades. This obvious devotion so impressed some of the ladies of the church that he was invited to their homes and once more could enjoy home cooking!.

Young Private Cramp was posted to France early in 1918, spending the first few days in a large transit camp. Seventy eight years later, he still remembers the names of two of the soldiers with whom he shared a tent. Recently released from "the glasshouse", Pte. Kennedy & ex-Sergeant McCauly, were accomplished thieves, a skill demonstrated when a whole cheese arrived in the tent!.

Some later when in the front line and moving cautiously under cover, McCauly was on top of the parapet showing every sign of having made a successful raid on the rum store. They found his body later. Even before this Robert was a teetotaler but the incident must have

strengthened his resolve not to drink alcohol. Indeed, he attributes his survival of the battles of the following months to having a clearer head than some of those who did take the daily issue of rum.

The seven or eight months before the end of hostilities, were spent not far from Cambrai, and his recall of names like Le Cateau, Pommereuil & Mormal Forest, show that despite his mostly light-hearted tales, he was indeed where some of the fiercest battles of the war were fought. Yet, in retrospect, Mr. Cramp still says, "Soldiering was easier than farming".

His farming background may well have saved his life. He recalls that at one time his unit was living (resting?) at a Chateau and they came to me and said, 'the Aid Post is

short of milk. Can anyone milk a cow?' ". He set out for the nearby village which was reported to be clear (of the enemy) and found it desolate. In the gateway of a smallholding he found a dead cow, but in the cowshed were two live ones. With his Dixie full of milk, "I set off to where the Chateau was but before I got there the Germans had blasted the place." Beating a hasty retreat, I never stopped running until I got to Le Cateau".

A rather more somber recollection was of a time when, back in the trenches, his Sergeant asked him and two others to accompany him to recover a man severely wounded in no-mans-land. With great difficulty they carried him back on a stretcher, but he had died before reaching their own lines. Looking in his pay-book for identification, Robert found that the poor fellow came from Empingham.

The great offensive in July 1918, in which the British Forces were involved in the Cambrai area, marked the beginning of the end of the war. We asked Mr. Cramp what was the reaction of himself and his comrades to the announcement of the Armistice. "Dumb. There was no jollification. I never saw a man smile ... A man said, 'My mate was shot at 10 minutes to eleven'."

The three or four months before returning home were wasteful and frustrating. There had been the chance of a Veterinary course for which farmer Robert had eagerly volunteered. "Draw two days rations and find your way to Amiens and report at Le Cateau on the way", he was told. He got a lift on a lorry but it did not go to Le Cateau and he never got to Amiens or the Veterinary course. What is more, "I left my two days rations on the lorry"!

Of his reactions to France as a country, he said, "I saw little of real France. Only desolate villages I have never been back". On mementoes, "My only souvenir was a German bayonet. My wife didn't like it so I got rid of it."

Pte, Cramp became Mr. Cramp when he was demobbed in Cambrai and in March 1919 he docked at Tilbury en route to Tur Langton and a long life as a successful farmer.

He joined the British Legion in 1922 but is not sure whether he was a founder member of the newly formed Market Harborough Branch.

Postscript;

Sadly Mr. Cramp passed away on the 12th June 1999. 10 weeks after his 100th Birthday.

He was awarded The Légion D Honneur by the French in December 1998.

He was widely known and respected and will be greatly missed by all who knew

him.