

Transcript of Walter Tull video

Stand-to: an hour before dawn – you're stood on the trench fire step with bayonets fixed in anticipation of an attack.

Half an hour after dawn, the 'Stand Down'. Rum ration. Strong and fiery, drives away the cold. Clean rifles before breakfast – bacon if you're lucky, bully beef and biscuits if not. Sweet tea with just a tinge of petrol either way.

Next, inspections. As your platoon commander I don't rest easy until I know all is well with your gas helmets, rifles, ammunition, iron rations and socks. Dry socks stop trenchfoot.

Then there are your daily fatigues – sentry duty, repairing trenches, digging latrines, bringing duckboards, grenades and other stores from the rear.

Mealtimes – lunch around midday. Dinner early evening, around 1800.

Half an hour before dusk, Stand To - again for an hour. A lot goes on then – wiring parties go out into No Man's Land to repair gaps in the wire entanglements, and patrols are sent out to report on enemy activity and the state of their defences. Ration carriers bring our supplies to the front line – water, bread and tins of food.

I don't know why I'm telling you all this. You know it already. You've been living this daily routine for a while. We've been in these trenches for a couple of weeks.

Well. We're suffering a really heavy bombardment this morning – and we know what that means. Pretty soon we'll be under attack. So we're coming out of rest now and going up to the front.

If we want to keep our routine we've got to hold the line. If we lose this trench **line** we'll be in retreat, and last year's gains and last year's lives will be in vain.

It's going to be tough, no doubt, but I know that you are all brave and resolute. In hard times I look to the good book.

My mother often used to quote Deuteronomy 31.6. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

I remember asking who they were. 'Them' that could make me afraid or terrified. And she said that it could be anyone, and that I would surely find out. I'm glad I remember her wise words, because she passed away just before my 7th birthday.

And I've come to learn that she was right – that each man has his own fears, his own enemies to confront. And that, with the love of God, you can overcome them, you can succeed.

We've got a bit more time before all hell breaks loose, so I can tell you a bit about what I've come through, and put your own fears to one side for a while. I've overcome a lot to be here today, and do you know, I'm sure you will be able to overcome what lies ahead and be here tomorrow!

I don't know how you found the early days of army training. To me it was like coming home. Before you think my father was a tyrant, I should tell you he died when I was 9.

I went to the Children's Home and Orphanage, along with my brother Edward. Our day there started 10 minutes earlier than Army training camp, and we had to make our beds, fold the bed clothes just so, and perform chores - clean and polish all the shoes of the household, scrub the floors or clean the bathroom before breakfast.

As the day went on if you substitute school for drill the two timetables were pretty much a match. So I suppose I'm used to being told what to do.

In life things get taken from you. Parents, comrades, brothers. My brother Edward was adopted by a dentist in Glasgow, and I wasn't. I prayed that they would take me as well. But they didn't. I was really on my own then.

But I'm grateful to those at the orphanage because they gave me an education and an apprenticeship too. They also let me play football... And football's probably the reason why a lot of you are here...

Who do you support?

Before the War, as you probably know, I was a pro. From the orphanage team to Clapton FC, and then to the big time. My home debut for Tottenham was in front of 32,000 against Manchester United, and though it wasn't my best game, I was brought down for the penalty that earned us a 2-2 draw.

I was put in the reserves at Tottenham and never got back into the first team. In life things get taken from you. But if you work hard enough and long enough as I did you can succeed.

I was a striker then, but it's as a half-back that I've played more than 100 games in the Southern League for Northampton Town, where Herbert Chapman signed me, and was good to me.

When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, the football season was about to start. There were a lot of arguments about whether the season should go ahead, which only got louder as it became clear that the war would not be over by Christmas as many first thought.

The newspapers were full of remarks like – 'It would be a national shame and disgrace to our country if we have our best athletes charging one another on the football field, instead of charging the Germans on the battlefield.' And it wasn't just the players who were singled out: A letter in the Times said that 'Every club who employs a professional player is bribing a much-needed recruit to refrain from enlistment, and every spectator who pays his gate money is contributing to a German victory.'

Posters were put up at football grounds. You probably saw them. Perhaps you enlisted because of them?

Let the Enemy Hear the Lion's Roar (Millwall). Do You Want to Be a Chelsea Die-Hard (Chelsea) Sharpen Up Spurs – Shoot! Shoot!! Shoot!!! And stop this Foul Play. (Tottenham Hotspur).

So, when I heard that a Footballer's Battalion was being recruited, I knew I had to join up. I joined up in December 1914 and was given the number F55. Not bad I suppose, but I would have liked to have been in the first eleven! All together we were the 17th Middlesex (1st Football) Battalion and ended up 1600 strong. When it came to training, we took to drill like ducks to water!

Clapton Orient provided 40 recruits including the very first, their club captain— Fred 'Spider' Parker – not just players of course, but club officials and back room staff too, and 13 of Brighton and Hove Albion's 17 professionals joined up. Just like the Pals Battalions, men who all come from one town or city - the Accrington Pals, the Liverpool Pals and so on, it was felt there'd be a real bond between those who came from one place, or in our case were united by the love of the game.

Vivian Woodward was with us, he'd captained Britain to two Olympic gold medals for football and led the line for Tottenham and Chelsea. Imagine serving alongside a hero like that!

After months of training back home we were very keen to get to it. And when we did, we wanted to be in the thick of it - we felt it was a very monotonous life in France when one was supposed to be resting and most of the boys preferred the excitement of the trenches!

When we first got to the front we saw that our reputation had preceded us.

We were relieving a Scottish unit, and one of the soldiers saw us, gestured to the German lines and said "They are leading over there at half-time 1-0, go and have a shot at equalising it!"

We made the trenches our own too, with names like Footballer's Avenue and Middlesex Walk, and enjoyed the extra socks, Vaseline, cigarettes, toffee, peppermint lozenges and candles for the battalion sent out by the Footballers' Battalion Comforts Fund and bought with money from clubs and collections at matches.

But it was hard work. I've come to learn more about lice than I ever thought I'd have to, and mud, rain, rats and mustard gas. And lost some good men too: Vivian Woodward was wounded early on in the thigh by shrapnel from a grenade, and Cpl Ben Butler of Queen's Park Rangers knew he'd never play again after his thigh was shattered. He died of his wounds 10 days later - the first professional footballer in the ranks of the 17th Middx to give his life for his country.

After serving 7 months in France, without leave and the constant thunder of the guns and whizzbangs. I was diagnosed as suffering from 'acute mania', or shell shock, and returned to England.

We're at the reserve trench now, not far at all from the fire trench, the front line.

After hospital and recuperation in England, I was passed fit and able by Army medical staff and returned to France, this time posted to the 23rd Middlesex (2nd Football) Battalion with you lovely lot, fighting on the Somme.

But when I arrived back in England on my first official leave on Boxing Day last year, to find I'd been recommended for a temporary commission by commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Haig Brown.

Now Army Regulations say I shouldn't be an officer because I am not of 'pure European descent'.

It's not the first time I've come against prejudice.

Playing for Tottenham, at Bristol City I was abused throughout the match. But I didn't let it get to me.

Again, I remembered my mother's words: Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.

My brother Edward told me that when he went to Birmingham to take up his first dentistry job, the dentist who opened the door said: 'my God, you're coloured, you'll destroy my practice in twenty-four hours.' ... Don't worry, he's got a successful practice in Glasgow now.

I'd heard too that Army medical officers would often use the medical to fail black soldiers. But it would have been hard for them to do that in my case... You have to be pretty fit to play football.

I've heard all the arguments now - that there were concerns about courage under fire, that if a black soldier was given a gun he could be a source of danger to his comrades and not his enemies, and that his colour would make him conspicuous on the battlefields. It had also been said that white soldiers would not accept orders from men of colour and on no account should black soldiers serve on the front line. Sounds a bit like the sort of argument on the terraces at Bristol City, or from a blinkered dentist in Birmingham.

But my CO's recommendation did the job for me, and I've always tried to be brave, and volunteer wherever I could, this had been noticed, and I was accepted for officer training in Scotland. Four months in a place that was even colder than here! And an exam that was none too easy – but I passed.

As your platoon commander I need to be quick to act, take real command on all occasions, issue clear orders, and see them carried out.

Now as you know, I always lead from the front. I wouldn't tell anyone to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. Some of you were with me in Italy when we chose to celebrate Christmas Eve by crossing the freezing river Piave on a reconnaissance raid.

And this year, 1918, began with another raid across the same river, as an advance party, preparing the way for a very successful attack on the Austrian and German positions – we made our way across, and we brought everyone back without a casualty despite heavy fire.

So that should reassure you.

So it's time to make our way, now to the front line, and when we get there, I'll blow my whistle, and you'll know what to do.

Puts Battle bowler on.

Attention!

Here we are.

There's already been heavy fire this morning, but we've been through that before.

I remember once setting out on a mission to inspect a portion of trench, that was being heavily shelled, and with sections of it being flooded causing very slow progress, and the need to cross no man's land, by then just a mass of shell holes, by the time the inspection was done I was returning to the nearest village when I almost collapsed and realised I hadn't eaten for 17 hours! A YMCA Canteen was my salvation and I succeeded in persuading the orderly to cook me some sausages and make a cup of tea.

Didn't I sleep that night though! All the Guns in France couldn't wake me.

We're going to go through something now, and I don't know when we will eat or sleep again. But we will stand firm. The Middlesex Regiment are the die-hards, and we will live up to our name, and our reputation today. I believe in each and every one of you.

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you."

Be brave, Die Hards.

So, in you go now, you know what to do.

Blows the whistle

We're going over the top. It will be alright. I'll see you on the other side.

Over you go, be brave my die-hards, be brave!

Walter Tull - Epilogue

Your meeting took place with Walter Tull on 24 March 1918 near Arras in Northern France.

The German Spring offensive began four days earlier on 21 March and the shelling was so intense, that the sound of over 6,600 German guns firing 3.5 million shells on the first day of the offensive, could be heard as far away as London. British and French forces suffered combined casualties of 250,000.

One of those fatalities was Walter Tull who was shot and fatally wounded on 25 March.

It is reported that one of the men in Tull's battalion, Private Tom Billingham, attempted to drag Tull's body back to the British position so that he could be buried. His efforts failed and Walter's body became one of the thousands that were left to lie in the soil of France, with no known grave.

Walter Tull is commemorated on the Arras Memorial along with 34,785 soldiers who fell in the Arras sector and have no known grave.'