A Test of Detection: the missing days of April 1918

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Under the heading of Wednesday 27 March 1918, Henry Williamson, somewhere in the vicinity of an Infantry Battalion Depot in the locality of Etaples, wrote the following words in his somewhat flimsy diary:

> *Return Felixstowe 5 am Left for Victoria 9.30 am Crossed to Boulogne 11.30 pm to IBD at Etaples. Up the line tomorrow, to 8th Battalion.*[1]

After which, for whatever reason, the pages are missing, until under the heading of Thursday 18 April, the diary resumes with:

> *Left Hall-Walkers Hospital in Regent's Park. Board at Caxton Hall in week's time.*[2]

Researching any participant in the Great War can be a revelatory process, but in the case of Henry, it can at times, take on the nature of a surreal quest within his legendary fourth dimension. On the basis of personal experience, it can be as exciting as the fabled journey of Professor Lindenbrock to the centre of the earth (in that novel by Jules Verne), guided by the runic clues left by the alchemist Saknussem. It can also be as infuriating as trying to find something that shouldn't be there, amidst all the blotches, zig-zags and squiggles in an overview photograph of a trench sector, as taken by an RFC scout pilot, and as bewildering as wandering lost through rooms full of distorting mirrors. Skills have to be acquired or utilised, akin to those that solve newspaper puzzles or medieval riddles, or to playing word games. There are shoals of red herrings to steer clear of, and mazes full of blind alleys and dead end corners to avoid. And all the while, there is the nagging sense of perhaps being the victim of one of Henry's practical joke fiascos. Yet even if finally one does not see totally as the sun does, without shadows, at least Henry becomes a little clearer.

There are army lists full of Great War officers who have so-called lost phases in their service records. The task of researching such characters is not helped by the fact that for many, their actual service records and confidential reports on their competence and prospects, were weeded out in the 1930s and destroyed, or lost later in the Blitz, often, but as will be seen not always leaving only the enlistment forms, officers' application forms, medical board records, and some correspondence in what are now the WO 339 and WO 374 files in the National Archives at Kew. Yet Henry was to be the man who wrote thousands of words about that same war, and who was to have almost the last word about it in that iconic BBC series *The Great War*, in which he describes the decisively overwhelming silence of the Armistice, ending the eerie way of life that the Western Front from Alps to North Sea had become. As if underlining the ultimate purpose of his life, he speaks to us in the valedictory note at the end of *The Gale of the World*, the fifteenth and final novel in his epic sequence of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, of the privilege of:

> *. . . experiencing hardship that had burned away the selfish dross of oneself, and thereby perhaps, made one worthy of an attempt to speak for those who had not come back from the Western Front.*[3]

Was there then, something significant about the those lost days in 1918, something that was to shape Henry as a man and as a writer? Did something happen that was to lead Nigel Jones, in reviewing the *Chronicle* novels in his own travel book *The War Walk*, to describe Henry as:

> *a writer obsessed with the war, which permeates every page of a strange, tormented, genius?* [4]

Or for Harry Williamson, quoted in Dan Farson's *Henry: An Appreciation*, to opine that Henry had met something out there.[5] Was it so terrifying that just thinking of it would conjure it up again? Why did Henry seem to be so elliptical about those days, writing or talking instead, about the first day of the battle of the Somme, or of Passchendaele as if he'd been in the front line and beyond, when in fact he'd been on convalescent leave in Devon and Cornwall respectively. Was it that in writing of 1918 in *A Test to Destruction*, he still could not face the awful reality of that time?

Given that other veterans, not only those of a sensitively artistic temperament, were physically intact but mentally scarred by the end of the war, it is not so outlandish to imagine, as the war poet Wilfred Owen could, a strange meeting in No Man's Land. It is therefore possible to contemplate in comparison to Henry and his novels, the post-war paintings of Gunner F. J. Mears, initially depicting tiny stick-like Tommies scurrying across a road on the Western Front, later replacing them with a single, nightmarish figure dressed in dark shroud, waiting on just such a road with scythe in hand, shortly before the untimely demise of Mears himself. Or one can think of the war poet and composer Ivor Gurney, cursed (in 'Ballad of the Three Spectres') on the road to Ovillers, spared immediate death or injury, but fated to end his days in a mental hospital. Given that the real location of the Keats Redan on the Somme features in Henry's 1916 novel, *The Golden Virgin*, as does the equally genuine Byron Farm located below Messines Ridge in *A Test to Destruction*, it would seem appropriate to consider the mystery in such literary Romantic settings, such as Henry, himself a Romantic, would have appreciated. It becomes easy to imagine him in the context of the poem by Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', as being like a traveller on a lonely road at night, who having once looked round,

> *Walks on,*
> *And turns no more his head,*
> *Because he knows a fearful fiend*
> *Doth close behind him tread.*

Or worse, like the mariner having a horrific vision of a macabre dice game, in which his shipmates are won by Death, but he becomes the prize of the Night-mare Life-in-Death, The Spectre woman. Henry's own character of Phillip after all, has a sudden, spellbound compulsion on the last day of June 1926, on being drawn up onto the Dorset Downs by a nature-induced vision of memories of ten years before (in *The Power of the Dead*), to write an article on the first day of the Somme on its tenth anniversary on 1 July, or for a Captain Reginald Berkeley, author of a play *The White Chateau*, to say of Phillip in the context of that article, that

> *. . . there is something in that young man dead beyond resurrection, but he holds the entire war in the palm of his hand.*[6]

Not to mention the extreme view of him by Miranda Bucentaur in *The Gale of the World*, as being not really cut out to be a soldier but a dreamer, like Shelley and Francis Thompson, forcing himself to do well, and now, like the unknown soldier, shut up in a tomb.[7] One other character in that novel portrays his own traumatised psyche as being one of imagining himself among the dead of Waterloo, as portrayed in a painting of the famous meeting between Blücher and Wellington at its victorious end, which patriotic-heroic image had only terrified him as a child, a flashback of which had occurred when he, like Phillip, was wounded out in No Man's Land, on 1 July 1916.[8] It may be however, that, as was said of the ghost stories of that enigmatic Great War veteran, Oliver Onions, a terror, a drama, but also a solution may be found here.

To solve the mystery of Henry and the lost days entails an understanding of the journey which led him, not as yet to an 8th Battalion in France, but to Landguard Fort in Felixstowe, Suffolk, garrison of the 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment, under the authority of Eastern Command, under the War Office, in October 1917. In doing so, he arrived there, among others at that time, with seriously impaired health. This was partly due to the gastro-enteritis which had sporadically bedevilled him since that winter of 1914-15 in the waterlogged ditches and trenches in and beyond Ploegsteert Wood. More recently, Henry had been exposed to phosgene gas at

Bullecourt in June 1917. This had further weakened an already debilitated metabolism, resulting in his evacuation back to England as a casualty. As Henry would have known all too well, his officer's file would also have arrived at Landguard Fort and been read by his new, as yet unknown commanding officer, the Colonel of the 3rd Battalion and 'bearded Viking', Lord Ampthill. This special file, containing confidential reports on Henry's aptitude for command, level of efficiency, his general competence and suitability for promotion, backed up by details of courses attended, results of examinations, and all round assessments of his character, must have made for interesting reading as a sort of rake's progress.

Starting with an account of idle days as a cadet in Sevenoaks in the spring of 1915, followed by the stormy time with the 2/1st Cambridgeshire Regiment in the summer of that year, the Colonel may not have been made aware of the details of the various joke fiascos and ungentlemanly behaviour inflicted on the regimental officers' mess (and others) in and around Newmarket, but such japes were bound to have coloured official impressions of him from that time. Regarding the abrasive, violent John Ward MP, known at large as the 'Buck Navvy' Colonel of the rough and ready pioneer battalion with its roguish, racketeering officers, to which Henry was briefly attached in the autumn of 1915, it may well have been wise of Henry to try to keep a lower profile. Overall though, he was not being given a good example as to the conduct of an officer and gentleman, albeit temporary. A transfer to the Machine Gun Corps from the 25th (Pioneer) Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment meant an introduction to Ray Colgate, his new Commanding Officer, who would befriend him.

Induction into the Machine Gun Corps Depot at Grantham also meant a more rigorous training in the theory and practice of horse management, being groomed so to speak, to be the Transport Officer of a section of drivers supplying ammunition to a machine gun company on the line. Such good prospects as existed, in terms of setting out for France with Colgate, were to be abruptly terminated when Colgate was suddenly detailed to go to France to take over another company (which process ended in his death), and for Henry with his gastro-enteritis flaring up again, forcing him to sit out the entire battle of the Somme as an invalid in the pubs and on the beaches of North Devon. On returning to the 208 Machine Gun Company (to which he had been attached) in the autumn of 1916, Henry found a very different kind of man in command. Captain Cecil Bishop Redman King, late of the more posh (in comparison with the Buck Navvy's mob which had been packed off to the Far East by now) 13th (Princess Louise's Kensington) Battalion of the Middlesex Regiment, was a quiet little man, but 'snotty', capable of verbally 'strafing' all of his subalterns without warning, as Henry was to recall in later years.[9] Fitting together the varied official data and personal descriptions of Henry's service with Captain King (the two clashing almost as soon as Henry had reported back at Grantham), it is a wonder that he lasted so long with the Company.

Even before the Company had shipped out from England, Henry had heard as early as February 1917 that he was to be fired, and was 'strafed like hell' (in his own words) by the C/O. It was in addition to further vindictive reports and angry summonses from higher authority that Henry, in the duty of censoring the mail of his section, had to read such openly derisory opinions of him by his Transport Sergeant as being a mad and scatter-brained fellow. By June, having just filed an application to transfer to another MGC as a Transport Officer, Henry must, judging by what he had to say in his diary and letters home at this time, have been greatly relieved to be evacuated back to England as a gas casualty. There was also the practical issue of Henry's service record. Two months' front line service as a private had occurred in the long outmoded conditions of 1914-15. A brief period of home service with a pioneer battalion and then active service in a Machine Gun Company, though interestingly varied, were not necessarily experiences that would be appropriate in an infantry battalion at the end of 1917. The new and alarmingly successful German stormtrooper tactics which had recently been used at the battles of Cambrai and Caporetto, would inevitably be used to greater effect in 1918 against such battalions, on the battlefield of the Western Front.

The confidential reports on Henry would be what counted, however, in helping Lord Ampthill decide what to do with this individual with a colourful history, and whether he was fit to command a platoon at Felixstowe, let alone the Western Front, in the new conditions of open warfare. Lord Ampthill, presumably not having previously met Henry or Captain King, had only the reports on which to base his judgement. It was unfortunate for Henry that, King apart, there was a second

opinion of him by another important authority figure in France, which in its way was as corrosively baleful. Portrayed in *Love and the Loveless* as 'The Blue Banded Dogsbody', Major Charles Edwin Neill, who in real life was the Assistant Director Veterinary Surgeon (ADVS) of the 62nd West Pennine Division (to which the 208 MGC was attached in its 187th Brigade), was a busy man, with many animals to inspect and report on, in atrocious wintry conditions in the early months of 1917. The Allies were preparing for the latest Big Push in April, and the Germans were pre-empting them by evacuating part of their front line in favour of the formidable new fortifications of the *Siegfried Stellung* (Hindenburg Line).

It is not known whether Neill would have appreciated the darkly Wagnerian sense of German humour in giving their covert withdrawal and devastation of the evacuated territory, the code name of Operation *ALBERICH* (named after the malevolent dwarf in the operatic Ring Cycle), even if Henry, a fan of Wagner, would. What was of more concern to Neill were issues of efficiency, and what in 2007 would be known as issues of health and safety, as recorded in his ADVS war diary,[10] even in, or rather because of, a wrecked wilderness in an adversely record-breaking winter, followed by a hideously disruptive thaw. The 208 MGC and its Transport Officer had no hope of escaping his notice. After an initial inspection shortly after the Company's arrival on 3 March, and following a further inspection on 6 March, it was acknowledged that

> *animals in all units without shelter were suffering greatly from the severe weather.*[11]

By 11 April, improvement was noted in that

> *all the animals (were) keeping condition fairly and have had little or no casualties.*[12]

On 29 April however, it was recorded that

> *the animals in other units look fairly well except the 208th Machine Gun Company which have gone off in condition. I am of the opinion the stable management in this unit is not good.*[13]

If on 3 May a sense of improvement in every unit had been detected, by 10 May,

> *the animals in the 208th MGC require a little more attention. I think the Transport Officer i/c of this unit has little or no knowledge of his duties.*[14]

On 15 May, ongoing improvement was noted at large, with one conspicuous exception; the 208. There was

> *an inclination since the introduction of grazing to do as little grooming as possible.*[15]

The subsequent series of favourable comments on 23 May of marked improvement,[16] and on 3 June of being much improved,[17] on 10 June of being satisfactory,[18] and then on 18 June of there being

> *improvement in the Brigade, particularly the 208th.*[19]

were to be too late however, for Henry's benefit.

Reverting to Captain King, there is oblique criticism of Henry in the official War Diary of 208 MGC (written up of course by King), in as much as the account of a convoy of 16 pack mules sent up the line with two guns and tripods, 48 belt boxes and rations for two days on the night of 12-13 March, notes that

> *on the way, 5 mules lost. Arrived at the position about midnight with 36 belt boxes, nothing else. On return to Miraumont we found 3 of the mules carrying the rations, one gun and tripod. Returned to positions with these accessories. Mar. 13, 3.30 am. Back at HQ, 2 mules are missing, one sunk in the mud and with gun and tripod on its back; the other strayed.*[20]

The strayed mule was presumably the one which Henry gave King a description of,[21] duly printed in the Brigade's Routine Orders 'Lost' column on 18 March.[22] The incident of the mules was all the worse for taking place a day after Henry had been ordered by the Brigadier to visit HQ for a discussion of a report by King describing him as incompetent and useless, being greeted on arrival with

> *I have received this report from your Commanding Officer – I looked and saw a dreadful report – careless, slovenly, no control over men . . .* [23]

Protesting by way of reply that it was a bunch of lies, thereby implying that his Commanding Officer was a liar, would probably not have made a good impression at HQ. Yet Henry's version of what went wrong on the 12th differs from King's in that the convoy is described as having to take place under atrociously muddy conditions, and under heavy bombardment, including gas shells, something that King had not mentioned in the official version. As a rule, the quiet King does not seem to have attempted to give Henry any constructive advice or help, making each strafing as such, a complete and shocking surprise.

Even though the ADVS, following an inspection on 23 April and criticism of apparent neglect and overworking of mules, did accept Henry's argument that, among other mitigating circumstances, the mules were given too much work, and accordingly gave him permission to protest in the event of too-frequent fatigues, this did not spare Henry from being 'strafed like hell' over the mules, as he put it,[24] the inference here being that this was as much by King as by Neill. There was also the incident of the signalling course at the V Corps School at Bihucourt, to which Henry was sent, supposedly for a month. There was nothing unusual about this in the context of other Company officers being sent off on various courses at this time, and the War Diary of the V Corps Signal Company for May confirms that such a school had been set up, the first class to be drawn from officers and men of the 62nd Division.[25] And yet, apart from Henry, and presumably also King, being pleased that he was away from the Company for a while, it was strange that he should be chosen for this course, the theme of which he knew nothing about, as he admitted in a letter home, making it inevitable that he should be sent back for knowing damn all.[26] It also inevitably meant a damning report and strafing by the Brigadier.

This procedure was so peculiar that a suspicion arises that Henry had been deliberately put in a position in which he was clearly seen to fail by witnesses not associated with his Company, and that this was part of a deliberate ploy by King to undermine his position in the Company. Henry's departure to the course and rapid return was only noted in the War Diary without comment. The replacement, a 2/Lieut. Hamilton, completed the full course, as also noted, which makes one wonder why Hamilton wasn't selected in the first place, especially as he was only a sort of understudy Transport Officer, whereas Henry was fully occupied in his duties. The suspicion about King's behaviour only increases on reading the correspondence in the WO 339 officer's file of 2/Lieut. Cyril Wright (or Bright, as portrayed in *Love and the Loveless*). Wright, a former land agent, valuer and auctioneer from Cambridgeshire, only 5' 4" in stature, but a Suffolk Regiment officer veteran of Loos, recovered from a wound and illness, had been compelled to return to England on special leave on 19 May. It was not because of, as related in *Love and the Loveless*, the 'tarbaby' incident, in which the punishment of tarring and feathering an importunate admirer of the wife of one of the Wright brothers, and his resultant court martial, actually occurred in June 1919.[27] It was rather a case of having to manage an extensive farm in consequence of his father's sudden serious illness, and with his brothers absent on active service, that compelled Wright to return, and to request further leave in the form of agricultural furlough to manage the looming harvest. In the meantime, King, writing up reports in mid-June on his officers as regards their suitability for promotion, took the opportunity to make the prospects of Henry and Wright as hopeless as possible. By both being away in England, they were conveniently not in a position to personally counter his claims. These reports would effectively not only eject them from the 208 MGC, but terminate their careers in the Machine Gun Corps as a whole.

King's report on Wright, preserved in the latter's file, describes him as being

generally inefficient. He does not understand the handling of men, and does not appear to be able to appreciate the salient points of a tactical situation. He has never displayed initiative in carrying out his duties, but on the other hand he has shown a marked lack of enthusiasm, which has had a decided retarding effect on his section. In consequence of this, I have never felt any confidence when placing responsibility with him.[28]

Having read the consequent opinion by the Brigadier that Wright

would be better employed with infantry than with a MGC unit,[29]

the divisional Major-General added his own view on 25 June, that Wright would not

be recommended for promotion.[30]

A copy of King's report and of the Major-General's endorsement were sent to Wright, just as a similar version was sent to Henry, in what seems to have been as much spirit of malicious solicitude (by King) as adherence to army regulations. There is certainly a similarity in the language employed, at least as regards the surviving copied extract of the report which reached Henry in Cornwall on 8 July, which states that:

I do not consider this officer qualified to hold higher rank. Work of unsatisfactory nature when with the Company shows lack of tact in handling men and I can't regard him as a reliable officer.[31]

Subsequent correspondence exists in Wright's archive, which tends to support Henry's statement in 1957, when writing *Love and the Loveless*, that King had got rid of both Wright and himself. The reports had reached the Headquarters of the VI Corps, Third Army (to which the 208 MGC was now attached) by late July, and on 28 July a critical response and question was sent back to the Major-General. It was stated that:

It is not understood why, in view of the inefficiency of these officers, adverse reports were not sent in before. To wait until they were struck off the strength of the 208th Machine Gun Company is in direct contravention to M.S. Circular s.s.470, paragraph 7, and I am to request that an explanation be forwarded at an early date.[32]

Replying on 29 July, the Major-General justified his handling of Henry's case at least, in that

the case of 2nd Lieut. Williamson is similar [in terms of reports which had been previously forwarded to Corps HQ]. *The Company to which he belonged only came to France in March and a report was originally rendered in May to Military Secretary to Commander in Chief. The suggestion that these reports were withheld until these officers were struck off the strength of the 208th Machine Gun Company has been made under a misapprehension of the facts. . . . In the case of 2nd Lieut. Williamson I have been unable to verify the date of his evacuation from the Corps area, but it first came to my knowledge at the end of June.*[33]

This in turn, only adds to the question as to why, if Henry had been evacuated from the Corps area on 14 June, there had not only been no notification up to divisional level, but no new Transport Officer either, until 4 July. Even though 2/Lieut. Hamilton was away on the signalling course until 27 June, it is peculiar of King not to have mentioned any temporary replacement in the War Diary. It is possible that King had connived in a situation arising from the vacancy caused by Henry's departure, in that the Transport Sergeant had been given a free hand in managing the Company. It is time to consider this individual more closely. The Sergeant, one Willie Mitchell, portrayed in *Love and the Loveless* as Rivett, a windy, treacherous crony of the C/O, 'Sharpshooter' Downham, was also recalled by Henry in real life as being

a conceited, rather pert man, who undermined my authority.[34]

In a clash over Lance Corporal Nolan's handling of the Section in Mitchell's absence, Henry had to remind the Sergeant as to who the real Transport Officer was.[35] This rather perceptive insight into Mitchell's underlying ambitions is borne out by the fact that Mitchell left the Company for the UK on 2 September, doubtless with the blessing of King, to commence training as a cadet, with a view to obtaining a commission. Whether or not Mitchell had a hand in undermining Henry, the verdict was signed on 3 August by the Third Army Commander, General Sir Julian Byng:

> *I recommend that 2nd Lieut. Williamson and 2nd Lieut. Wright be transferred to the Infantry for a period of probation. They are clearly useless as officers in the Machine Gun Corps.*[36]

The file was then sent to the Field Marshal's GHQ, where a W. E. Peyton, writing on behalf of the Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, passed it on to The Secretary, The War Office, on 21 August, with the concluding recommendation that

> *in view of the remarks of the General Officer commanding Third Army, and the unfavourable reports made on them, I do not consider that these officers should be retained in the Machine Gun Corps. I recommend that they be transferred to the Infantry where they will get more supervision.*[37]

While this explains why Henry should have been sent to Felixstowe rather than Grantham, it also says something for Henry's capabilities that he was allowed to retain his commission, and be given one more chance to achieve something in the military. This could be ascribed to the evident improvement in the Transport Section by June, as acknowledged by the ADVS, seconded by the failure of the divisional Machine Gun Officer to find anything amiss, during an inspection on 7 June.[38] A report that Henry himself made, presumably to the Brigade Intelligence Officer, in the aftermath of his literally blundering into the Hindenburg Line on 2 April, may also have helped give him the benefit of the doubt.[39] Henry could not, at any rate, complain that he did not have his kit with him, unlike Wright, who was still complaining about it not having been sent back to him from France in a letter dated 20 August.[40] Other officers were in worse situations, one of whom Henry may well have heard of at Landguard, and who might be in part the original of the pathetic Renclair, in *A Test to Destruction*. So abysmal had been Walter Frederick Eaton's service with the 7th Bedfords in 1917, that he had been ignominiously sent back to the UK with the assistance of the ubiquitous W.E. Peyton, ordered to resign his commission, and even told not to use the honorary title of 2nd Lieutenant, and was facing conscription into the ranks.[41]

Henry's pathway had taken him to the Bedfordshire Regiment, his original choice of regiment, at last. If he had not himself progressed in as extreme a form as Phillip had, from being a bumptious and buffoonish young cadet of 1915 to the trench fever-ridden, paranoid wreck who trudges into Landguard Fort in mid-December 1917, he must have been aware that he was under scrutiny. Assuming that, as seems to be inferred from his writings of this time, he had been given employment in the Adjutant's Office,[42] this awareness would have been heightened by the documents, files and correspondence that he would have handled in that office. Though unable to change what had been written about him in the past, Henry would have realised that in order to get a posting back to the Western Front, he had to not only rebuild his health and create a reputation for being a model officer, but use any means and opportunity to demonstrate to his superiors that this was so.

Independent documentary evidence exists which supports this assessment of his prospects at this stage. A file in The Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service,[43] only lately publicised online, holds official correspondence and other papers concerning the 3rd Bedfords, dating from October 1917 to March 1918. Preserved within is a letter from the War Office to Lord Ampthill, dated 4 October.[44] He is notified of the impending arrival of Lieut. H.W. Williamson, transferring from the Machine Gun Corps to his battalion. There is also a further direction that a report on Lieutenant Williamson should be furnished to the War Office, two months from the date of joining, regarding his professional efficiency. The letter concludes by advising that:

> *a note should be made that this officer is not to be sent overseas again until reported efficient.*[45]

Lord Ampthill's report was duly sent to the War Office on 16 December 1917. It was stated that

> *owing to illness Lieut. Williamson has only done about five weeks duty here. He has always been willing and as far as I can judge in so short a time is proficient in his work. He is handicapped to a certain extent by ill health. His present medical category is C.i., next medical board is due 23rd January 1918.*[46]

A fair minded assessment under the circumstances, and to bear out Henry's own positive impression of Lord Ampthill, as reflected in his later writings on him, there is correspondence elsewhere in the dossier. In it, Lord Ampthill describes all the subalterns at Landguard as being not, in his opinion, unsuitable as officers. One officer, who had badly failed a map-reading examination in London, was defended by him as being otherwise good in his parade ground platoon drill examination, and coping with shell shock and inexperience in sitting examinations.

This should not be taken to mean that Lord Ampthill was so indulgent as to condone weakness, no less than three subalterns on the same day being disqualified by him in confidential reports as being capable of being training instructors. Yet when they were summoned to his office to discuss those same reports, it was with the intent of instilling in them what needed to be improved in themselves, rather than for the sake of disciplinary humiliation. There is no report on Henry's performance on the musketry course that he is known to have attended in January and February 1918, as noted in his diary.[47] He must have done well enough not to have to undergo any further training, and to be granted leave. The notes in Henry's notebook concerning gas training, which preceded his first attempt at a novel,[48] would also seem to have dated from this time. Henry must also have met a bomb instructor, Sergeant Samuel Impey, whose service record's account of his army service and wounds, and whose achievement in winning a Military Medal for his conduct at the Pommiers Redoubt on 1 July 1916, make him the original of Sergeant Adams in *Love and the Loveless* and *A Test to Destruction*.[49]

The routine business in the dossier indicates that this was a busy time for the 3rd Bedfords, one of six battalions in the Felixstowe garrison in early 1918. There are reports on night-firing practice, on guard duties at the pier, routine inspections of field dressing kits and regulation haircut checks. There are also special conferences on such matters as the latest trench mortar tactics to be put into use by the British Army. It is also both noticeable and, in the context of this study, significant to learn that far from being isolated at Felixstowe, in the offices, in the barracks, or on the parade ground and training range, the Landguard subalterns were frequently detailed by the War Office to undertake all sorts of errands. Lord Ampthill or the Adjutant's Office were regularly warned, and at very short notice too, to find someone, anyone, as long as they were capable of fulfilling the orders received. Such orders included attendance at a one-day lecture in Kensington or a week-long course in the Trench Mortar School in Lyndhurst. There was a directive to find an officer to be posted to GHQ, France, to conduct French political visitors round the old battlefields. Essential qualities required were that this officer should have experience of active service, but was at present debarred from further active service owing to their state of health; that they have steady nerves; a decent knowledge of French, and last but not least, that they also have the manners of a gentleman. A more practical sort of diplomacy underlay the request in November: to find two suitable officers to proceed forthwith to the United States, to assist in US Army training courses in light trench mortar unit duties.

This does not mean that the officers concerned could just wander off. The standard War Office procedures dictated that they had to be properly notified by official orders or by their certified copies, and that they could not go anywhere without valid, specific travel permits and railway passes. As if to underline all this and serve as a warning of the consequences of breaking loose (as opposed to the dismal example of ineptitude set by Eaton), there was the shameful example of 2nd Lieutenant Frank E. Tilton. Warned to proceed to Folkestone for service overseas in October 1917, Tilton had left the Bedford Depot on embarkation leave on receipt of his orders. Concern over an unpaid hotel bill, not least because it reflected badly on the reputation of the Regiment, led to the discovery that Tilton had never arrived in France. The Embarkation Commandant at Folkestone could not vouch for any officer of his description reporting to his office, although a considerable

number had crossed over at the time. The consequent investigation resulted in Tilton's arrest in Dulwich in mid-January 1918, and escort to Landguard to await court martial on a charge of desertion.

Tilton must have been the same nameless subaltern whom Phillip, in his capacity as Assistant Adjutant, visits in his cell at Landguard each day to ask if he has any complaints and to change the daily officer guard, and for whose sake Lord Satchville dictates a report outlining mitigating circumstances (in *A Test to Destruction*), namely his unfortunate attachment to a plausible young actress,

much remarked for her skill in suggesting innocence and charm.[50]

If Henry and his own little group of friends were, as he recalled in his article 'When I was Demobilised' years later,[51] all like himself, slightly unstable at this time, none would have dared provoke senior authority in any way, especially with Tilton and Eaton being embarrassing reminders of what the requital would be, either languishing in a cell awaiting what might well be a firing squad ultimately, or sitting at home awaiting call up as an ordinary private, just in time to face the German stormtroopers.

It is in these circumstances that Henry's medical board results on 27 February have to be considered. Henry was officially recorded as being still debilitated, still 20% unfit, Ci grade unchanged, passed as fit only for active home service duties. The diary entry of 1 March 1918, in which he noted that he

switched name from H.S. list to overseas[52]

does not now seem likely, as in *A Test to Destruction*, to have been an underhand manoeuvre on his own part to get back to the trenches. Rather, it was a bureaucratic acknowledgment of official permission to make him eligible to undertake errands which might take him as far as the base depots in France, as opposed to actually serving in some GHQ, fortress or lines of communication unit, on account of being awarded a B status, or being eligible for general service in the field, on account of the coveted A status. A further sign of Henry's improving health was the decision in late February not to give him a further Medical Board until late April.

It was generally accepted that with Russia definitely out of the war, the German army had a temporary superiority in numbers, now that so many divisions could be transferred west from the officially defunct Eastern Front. If Germany was to win the war, it would have to use all of those divisions to launch a major offensive soon, before the American military units arriving in France were not only present in sufficiently large numbers to intervene, but were also sufficiently trained and equipped to do so decisively. The immediate question however, as Henry seems to have been aware from duties in the Adjutant's Office – and one being constantly debated – was of establishing when and where exactly the German attack would begin. Under the circumstances, it would be very odd if, standard routine apart, there wasn't a heightened atmosphere of tension and even excitement at Landguard as elsewhere. There must have been a sense that, one way or another, the war was about to enter its decisive phase, ending the debilitating stalemate and privations. A last chance of glory was to be had, for all who still wanted it. Meanwhile, a concert was allowed to take place in the Fort's Duke of Bedford Hall on the evening of Wednesday, 20 March. Organised in part by a Lieutenant Hedges (or Ditchings in *A Test to Destruction*), this concert, to be later described by the *East Anglian Times* as 'splendid',[53] had a well balanced programme, a highlight being a rendition of the opening aria from the opera *Pagliacci* by Furness Williams, the former leading tenor of the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. That this concert was also notable for the performance of two numbers from the comedy play *The Boy* at the Adelphi Theatre by a Lieutenant John Sinclair, recently returned to the Bedfordshire Regiment from that production, as well as from service in the Royal Flying Corps, also provides a clue as to Renclair's identity, or rather, bearing Eaton in mind, a part of it. When developing characters for his novels out of real-life personalities, Henry had a rare ability to take a genuine characteristic from one person, and make it a very plausible attribute of someone else's character, though Sinclair, rather than Eaton, may have been the one who knew how to procure morphine in Ipswich.

Next morning, on Thursday, 20 March, the great battle began on the Fifth Army front to the north of the French, and on the Third Army front to the south of Arras. Apart from his own, more accurate news in the Adjutant's Office as events unfolded, Henry, still in Landguard with its steady routine of regulated life inducing regulated thoughts, would have been able to read the sensationalised news of the battle in the evening papers, not least the *Ipswich Evening Star* and *Daily Herald.* Such papers, as on previous days, would continue to publish patriotically upbeat accounts of the battle, despite its progress. Henry would have read an account of a reassuring speech to the House of Commons by its Leader, Bonar Law, which also features in *A Test to Destruction.*[54] He may have recalled a recent story about German trench raiders overindulging in their spirits ration, getting lost, and being gently shepherded within allied lines by some kindly Australians.[55] This might have reminded him (if he knew) of his friend Freddy Tranter (Teddy Pinnegar in *Love and the Loveless*), arranging the surrender of 360 Germans with another officer in 64 Machine Gun Company on the Somme in September 1916, and being duly awarded a Mention in Dispatches.[56] Recollection of such incidents may well have been the basis for the incident in *A Test to Destruction*, in which Phillip captures over 100 celebrating Germans in Albert, and is awarded the Distinguished Service Order in consequence. As light relief, Henry may also have read syndicated short stories by up-and-coming young officer writers such as 2nd Lieut. A.A. Milne, or 2nd Lieut. J.B. Morton (the latter to become a friend of Henry in later years and comrade on Henry's Pyrenean walking holiday of 1924). Their example might well have encouraged Henry in his own as yet tentative efforts at writing. Yet if, as its Regimental History later noted,[57] a War Office telegram had arrived on this day in the Adjutant's Office of the 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment, also based in Felixstowe, warning all officers with an A status to prepare for mobilisation, then an identical telegram must have arrived in Landguard, and Henry almost certainly would have known all about this. The Bedfordshire Regiment battalions still in the field however, namely the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th, do not seem to have been short of officers at this time, at least not yet. One other officer with an A status, confirmed in a medical board in May, but not actually sent to the 12th Suffolks on the Western Front until July, was none other than Wright, posted to the 3rd Suffolks in Felixstowe in December 1917. It would have been odd for Henry and Wright not to have met up in that comparatively small military community. They would have had plenty to reminisce about.

Given that as early as Saturday, 23 March, Henry had an awareness, not available to the public at large, that the Fifth Army was in retreat from its original broken line to what was meant to be a more easily defendable one, it may seem frivolous, not to say irresponsible, of him to have gone on, and his superiors to have granted, leave from Friday, 22 to Tuesday, 26 March, and go gadding off to London at such a time of crisis. This is to misunderstand the continuity of normal routine in the British army, except for those units and individuals actually involved in the fighting, or actively mobilised to be sent into it. Even on the front line, the as yet unaffected First Army between Arras and Belgium, and the Second Army in Belgium, maintained their normal routine. Although individual divisions from both armies were increasingly mobilised and sent into the battle further south, the war diaries of battalions within these armies reveal such surprises as the Colonel of one battalion setting off to Scotland on leave,[58] while in another battalion, a junior officer returned unexpectedly from leave, only because he was unable to get past the crowds of reinforcements arriving at the channel ports.[59] Serious as the crisis was, with Fifth Army Schools of Instruction being closed down and non-combatant units being armed and sent towards the fighting, the entire British army did not and could not hare off to the Somme, which is what the Germans would have wanted, given that they were preparing offensives elsewhere along the line. The official 8th Division historians, contemplating all the organisation and logistics that went into shifting a single division from one front to another, had visions of its staff officers:

sitting weary eyed at their tables far into the watches of the night.[60]

The sheer complexity of the war by this time, and lessons learned by many bitter experiences, ranging back to Loos and the catastrophic deployment of the 21st and 24th Divisions after a chaotic march there, dictated that a division in the field, such as the 12th Division (containing the 7th Suffolks) in Flanders, had to be allowed sufficient time to mobilise and organise transport, before

being sent into the Fifth Army war zone (soon to be redesignated as Third Army territory above the Somme). Even then, it could only be permitted to arrive at a railhead unhindered, fully equipped and properly briefed. As if to prove the necessity of such arrangements, the French, as Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig somewhat irritably noted in his diary,[61] though quick to arrive on the southern side of the battlefield, had no supplies of food or ammunition except for what was in their pockets. This deficiency made them little more than useless spectators. As for the reinforcement drafts of officers and 'boy' soldiers being mobilised in England, the most sensible thing to do was to get them over to France as soon as possible, and concentrate them at the IBDs of Etaples. Only when the divisions which had been actively engaged in the battle could be relieved by the ones sent down from the First and Second Armies, then withdrawn to a safe, easily accessible rail location, and their adjutants had calculated the numbers required to bring the battalions up to full strength again, duly notifying GHQ, could the reinforcement drafts be allocated and sent where they were needed. This did not mean an immediate return for the divisions concerned back into the battle, but rather a relocation to a quieter area, ideally the waterlogged and therefore inaccessible Ypres Salient, to rest up, reorganise and acclimatise the reinforcements to front line life. This process was generally not possible until the end of March, reinforcement drafts before then tending to be for the First and Second Armies to cover what was euphemistically termed natural wastage, or for the Arras hinterland, with its direct rail link to Etaples, to await the next big attack, as the original one ended.

While GHQ staff were debating the likely location of that attack on the basis of varied intelligence reports, and drafting orders to redeploy its divisions like pieces on a chequerboard, Henry was having a get-together in London with his old friends Terence Tetley and the Brazilian Eugene 'Stany' Maristany. This would have been a poignant occasion, for although Terence would have been the reason for the celebration, having just been commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Artillery on 18 March, he must have known that he was being mobilised to go to France shortly, into a battle in which, as on 21 March, the Germans had been good at destroying entire gun batteries. This might explain the photograph of Henry and Terence, reproduced in *Henry Williamson: Tarka and the Last Romantic*, probably taken at this time, in which Terence tries to keep a stiff upper lip, while a concerned-looking Henry, 1914 Star riband attached to tunic, puts a protective hand on his shoulder.[62] This get-together, charged with emotion, might also explain the bizarre behaviour of Stany in actually giving Henry £2-0s-0d for once, instead of cadging it. Stany may also have been acting out of a momentary sense of guilty embarrassment, being faced by his two friends in officers' uniforms but himself a civilian, doubtless aware that the Brazilian Government was about to vote to send troops to Europe. The last day of leave, on which Henry would logically have been expected to return to Landguard Fort Station from Fenchurch Street Station, via Ipswich, was on Tuesday, 26 March. It was also the same day on which Albert was evacuated, the last British troops in the Square below the legendary Golden Virgin statue being the 7th Suffolks, with the 4th Bedfordshires in the vicinity; just the sort of (officer) eyewitnesses whom Henry might have spoken to later, and whose accounts of that day would have been a factual basis for its fictional portrayal in *A Test to Destruction*.[63] A top level conference was also due to take place at Doullens, north of Amiens, to agree on a unified Franco-British command under Maréchal Foch. The papers, forced as much by their daily maps, depicting the obvious German advance, as anything else to at last admit that a retreat was in progress, still sought to dazzle the public with thrilling reports enthusing about the heroism, the courageous rearguards inflicting massive casualties, or the brilliant counterattacks to slow up the advance. *The Times* was no exception, its coverage of the battle on this day featuring headlines such as

> *Tanks Counter Attack*
> *West Surreys Fight To Last Man*
> *Worn Out With Killing*
> *Fighting By Moonlight*[64]

A sign of how serious the fighting was, as *The Times* editorial board admitted, was in the unheard of decision to announce that a special edition would be printed on Good Friday, 29 March.[65] Yet if Stany's reversion to type as regards borrowing money from Henry on 26 March (having evidently

recovered from his fit of generosity) is all too predictable, Henry's own diary entry for this day, otherwise mostly too faint to read, ends somewhat cryptically with the words

for Canadians.[66]

Apart from one brief note in *The Times* about prayers being offered in Canada in this great crisis,[67] there was nothing about the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, in retreat to the south of the Somme, accompanied by Alfred Munnings, the war artist and later friend of Henry. Nor was there any reference to the Canadian Corps, its four autonomous divisions keeping a low profile since their capture of the swamp-surrounded ruins of Passchendaele the previous November. What nobody, not even Henry, could have known on the morning of 26 March, was that before the official Doullens conference, Haig had discussed the situation with his army commanders. One consequence was that General Horne, commanding the First Army, was directly ordered to concentrate the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Canadian Divisions in the GHQ area behind Arras, their purpose being to act as an as yet hidden strategic reserve against the day that the Germans would launch their next big attack, most likely to be against Arras. As for the 4th Canadian Division, that would remain under First Army control, poised in the hinterland behind the 56th London Division, on the front line sector above the River Scarpe, north-east of Arras. The 56th London Division, it may be worth noting here, included at this time the 1st London Scottish, on which the London Highlanders in which Phillip serves as a private in 1914-15 was based, the 8th Middlesex, on which the 8th Prince Regent's Own Regiment in which Phillip serves as a 2nd Lieutenant on the first day of the Somme is based, and, coincidentally enough, the 5th London Rifles with whom Henry had served as a private in real life. For the sake of reference, when it came to writing about Phillip's adventures with the 2nd Gaultshires in 1918, Henry used the 2nd Lincolns and their experiences on the March Retreat and later the Messines Ridge in April as a basis here, with the exception of the Albert sequence, for which he drew on the experiences of the 7th Suffolks (and 4th Bedfordshires).

What mainly concerns this study, however, is why Henry should have concerned himself about the Canadians in some way, enough to bother mentioning them in his diary. Granted that he had had a very convivial dinner with some of their engineers on 10 March 1917,[68] and that he had played 'truant' to see their plans for a big offensive on 8 April, and that the next day, 9 April, he had wandered off to venture inside the 2nd Canadian Divisional HQ on the first day of the Battle of Arras, when jubilant staff officers told him that Vimy Ridge was now in Canada.[69] These long-past incidents, though of interest at the time – in that on the occasion of 8 April at least, contrary to Henry's hopes, his absence (and activities) would have been informed on to Captain King, presumably by Sergeant Willie Mitchell – still did not explain why, in the present crisis, Henry should have had any interest in the Canadians. If, however, Henry had been placed under orders to undertake some task for the Canadians, as his diary stated – either having been given his orders relating to them before leaving Landguard, or directly from the War Office since, as late as 26 March – then a new interpretation of subsequent events starts to take shape. It is time to look again at that diary entry on the page for Wednesday, 27 March:

Return Felixstowe 5 am. Left for Victoria 9.30 am. Crossed to Boulogne 11.30 pm to IBD at Etaples.

There are two peculiarities about that entry. The first concerns the journey. Why go all the way back to Felixstowe in the early hours of 27 March to receive his orders (and collect his kit if Henry didn't already have his valise with him), when he could easily have done so from the War Office, their actual place of origin? If Henry had been under orders to return to Felixstowe, why not do so on the afternoon or evening of 26 March, when such a journey would have been more feasible, and when his leave was due to expire in any case? Even assuming that Henry had made a nocturnal trek all the way from Brockley and was then able to board a night train to Landguard or at least Felixstowe, why go to all the inconvenience of turning up at Landguard at such an outrageous hour, just so that when the real journey began at 9.30 am, it would be made all the more inconvenient by having to start from Landguard rather than from London?

The second, even bigger peculiarity is one of tense. If Henry was describing a journey which had already taken place as described, why start with the present tense, and then switch to the past tense

in describing the rest of the journey? Such a simple grammatical error would be inexcusable in a serving officer who, like all serving officers since the era of the Crimean War and its vague communications such as the infamous one which initiated the catastrophic charge of the Light Brigade, would have been taught to appreciate the essential importance of clarity in communication as being, literally, a matter of life and death. Evidence in the form of Henry's field message book in 1917 (printed in Anne Williamson, *Henry Williamson and the First World War*) shows that abbreviated as his messages were, he fully appreciated that need for clarity, which would have been second nature by now, even if he had been incapable of making sense of the increasingly elaborate communication systems that the signallers were using. If in writing 'Return Felixstowe 5 am' as an event which did not belong to the past, but which was about to happen in the near future however, then the journey as a whole, in terms of itinerary and timing starts to make more sense, as does the reason for his taking the journey. Anne Williamson has already considered the possibility that Henry had gone over to France as a draft-collecting officer, literally collecting a draft of reinforcements from some designated location, and escorting them all the way to an Infantry Battalion Depot in Etaples, where they would then be handed over and selected for some battalion up the line.[70] Draft-conducting officers were of such an age or physique akin to Henry's (at this time), for though debarred from an A or B status posting, they were yet capable and well enough to undertake this duty. A perk of the job was usually an afternoon off in the nearby seaside resort of Paris Plage before returning to England the next day, and these officers were even awarded medals together with the rest of the BEF in France and Flanders, after the end of hostilities.

It is therefore possible to reconstruct more plausibly Henry's journey to Etaples in the following sequence. Leaving home in Brockley at 9.30 am on Wednesday, 27 March, he would have reached Victoria Railway Station well before midday, and would have reported to the Transport Office there, with permit and passes at hand. (Note that Victoria Station would NOT have been the station he would have used for Felixstowe or Landguard, which would have been Liverpool Street.) Setting off for Folkestone, he would have arrived at its main station, or more conveniently, Folkestone West, from where he would have proceeded to the Canadian Training Division base at Shorncliffe which, like Landguard, was under the control of Eastern Command. Once the paperwork had been collected and the draft inspected and signed for, it would have been marched to the docks to await its turn. The delay in crossing, despite the excellent weather and absence of enemy aircraft, may be attributable to the transport bottleneck now developing here, as thousands of troops were gathering at the port. Having marched the draft down the famous little cliff road above the docks, where a memorial to the thousands who took that same road now stands, surrounded by forget-me-nots, a visit to the Embarkation Commandant's Office to report arrival and obtain embarkation details would have been followed by a period of waiting, and then the actual process of embarkation, before departure under escort, at 11.30 pm. Henry could never have imagined at the time that Folkestone was to be the setting for his affair with Mabs Baker the next year; that it would be where he encountered people such as the officer in the Royal Naval Air Service base nearby, whose libertine lifestyle would make him notorious in the Roaring Twenties, and guarantee him a place in Henry's novels as the character of Naps Spreycombe; that a bookshop in this port would be where he would discover *The Story of My Heart* by Richard Jefferies, and that the resulting psychic inspiration would propel Henry into writing as a way of life – one result of which would be his shimmering vision of Folkestone and its archaeo-literary surroundings in the post-war summer of 1919, *The Dream of Fair Women.*

Returning to the prosaic reality of 1918, the troopship arriving at Boulogne in the early hours of Thursday, 28 March, Henry would have disembarked with the draft and immediately boarded a waiting troop train at the dockside. Under present conditions, there was no time to rest the draft in the base camp on the hill above Boulogne. Instead, Henry and the draft would have had to proceed straight to Etaples, or at least an IBD railstop outside it. The War Diarist of the Canadian Infantry Base Depots and Reinforcement Camp at Etaples specifically records the arrival of a draft of 330 reinforcements from England on this day.[71] It is possible that Henry's train had arrived by about sunrise, at about the same time that the German attack codenamed Operation *MARS* was launched against Arras. By evening, the attack was abandoned, though not without severe loss in some battalions of the 56th London Division, including the 5th London Rifles, before being relieved by the 4th Canadian Division on the night of 29–30 March. For Henry, arrival at the IBD with the draft