Silver Spoon

A SOUVENIR OF SURVIVAL

"It's a symbol of dad's incredibly lucky war, his survival, and therefore the start of the family of which I'm part"

A silver spoon may conjure up images of inherited privilege, but one particular spoon, albeit silver plated, serves a rather more meaningful reminder: that of the tenuous nature of our existence. This link between utensil and mortality can only be understood in the context of the life of the man behind the spoon, Walter Allison.

Working as a stableman, Walter boarded with coachmen and other staff in London from about the age of 19. His friends called him "Jock" as he really wanted to be a jockey, but he grew too big. As the motorcar became more common, he became a chauffeur and his interest shifted from riding to driving. This experience would later serve him well.

Walter was a mature 32 when World War I broke out. Determined to take part, he was among the first tranche of volunteers. One of his early medals was the Mons Star, also known as the 1914 Star, a British campaign medal for those who volunteered to serve in France or Belgium between August and November 1914. He certainly earned the medal, and more besides, spending his first 18 months in the trenches in Belgium as a front line rifleman with the Queen Victoria's Rifles. His son, John, says, *"He rolled a lot of sixes during the war. He went over the top in the trenches more than once and wasn't killed."*

On one such occasion, a bullet went through his hand, missing his body. It left a permanent scar, like a ridge line, across the palm of his hand, the fingers permanently half curled.

The whole of Walter's upper torso was peppered with little white marks; another reminder of his time in action. When a shell burst close to him in a trench, hot metal showered down. At a dressing station, a doctor was about to pull out the shell fragments with forceps, but listened first to his heartbeat with a stethoscope. A shell exploded very close to the dressing station and after the dust settled the doctor said, *"Well, if the Germans don't get you, you'll live to be a hundred because your heartbeat didn't change."*

One of his most desperate engagements was on a small promontory known as Hill 60 on the edge of the Ypres Salient, a projection of land into enemy territory that left troops exposed and one of the most blood soaked battle fields of the Western Front.

The 1901 census notes Walter was boarding above the garages and stables with 10 others at Hay's Mews in the City of Westminster, London.

An enlisted man, Walter rose from the rank of private to sergeant during the war. His son believes that Walter's maturity likely contributed to his survival, entering the war more than 10 years older than most others; that, and a bit of luck. He also credits his "phlegmatic, unflappable" character for the war not damaging him psychologically.

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Battle of Hill 60, 20–21 April 1915. Only 14 of the 150 men who went up the hill that night survived. Walter was one them.

(From a drawing by R. Caton Woodville published in *The Illustrated London News*, 17 July 1915. © Alamy Stock Photo)

Hill 60 was of tactical significance because it afforded the Germans a good view across British lines. The Allies dug tunnels under the German trenches there, then laid and detonated explosives. The hill had only just days before been captured by the British when 150 of the Queen Victoria's Rifles, Walter among them, were ordered to take supplies to the defenders of the hill. At that time, the Germans counter-attacked, bombarding them with shells, machine gun fire and grenades. They fought through the night of the 20-21 April 1915.

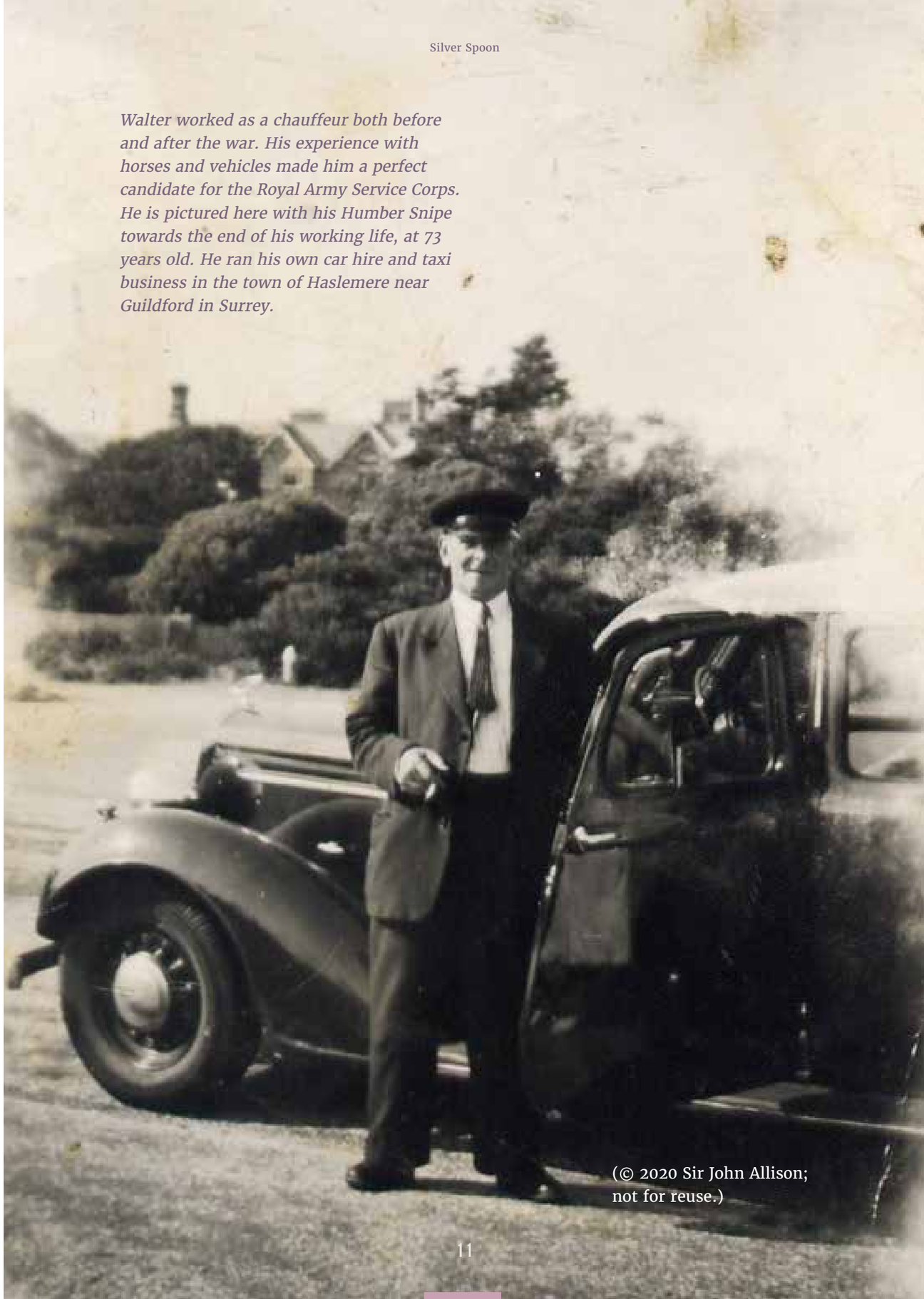
Nearly all the men around Walter fell and of those that remained, there was only one officer, Second Lieutenant Geoffrey Woolley, left alive. Twice ordered to surrender, he refused. Reflecting on what Woolley did next, Walter later told his son that he could not tell whether Woolley had just snapped and lost his temper or was calculatingly brave. He had leapt up and run at the Germans, lobbing grenades right at them. Woolley was later awarded the Victoria Cross for most conspicuous bravery. Either way, angry or brave, Woolley and 14 surviving men, including Walter, were finally relieved. Walter had also narrowly missed being subjected to the German's use of chlorine gas on Allied troops there between 22 April and 5 May; he had been spared only by the direction of the breeze.

The army learned that Walter had been a chauffeur before the war, so transferred him to the Royal Army Service Corps. This was the unit responsible for all logistics; keeping the troops supplied with provisions. Walter was sent by ship from Rouen to Salonika, the main supply base for the Allied Forces in the Balkans. Unfortunately for Walter, this was a time when German U-boats were ruthlessly engaged in unrestricted submarine warfare in an effort to starve out the Allies. Reportedly, a quarter of ships on the transatlantic run were sunk during this period. On 26 June 1917, Walter's ship was torpedoed without warning and sunk.

Bobbing in the water in a lifeboat, he was picked up by a passing commercial freighter en route to Canada. No sooner had he returned to the UK when he was sent to German East Africa. He spent the last year of the war there, but despite the action around him, it was a mosquito that nearly killed him. He developed a raging fever and fell ill. In fact, many troops struggled with the climate and tropical diseases. For each man the Allies lost in battle, a further 30 were lost through illness.

With a severe case of malaria, Walter lay on a stretcher at the quayside of the Tanzanian fishing port of Dar es Salaam, waiting to be loaded onto a hospital ship. There were many more casualties, both wounded and ill, than the ship could accommodate. Medics moved among the stretchers, deciding which patients were fit enough to survive the voyage. The others were to remain behind and take their chances. Walter was not chosen.

Walter worked as a chauffeur both before and after the war. His experience with horses and vehicles made him a perfect candidate for the Royal Army Service Corps. He is pictured here with his Humber Snipe towards the end of his working life, at 73 years old. He ran his own car hire and taxi business in the town of Haslemere near Guildford in Surrey.



“He recalled very clearly being on the dock side with rows and rows of stretchers of soldiers who were either ill or wounded”

British soldiers on stretchers awaiting transfer by ship.

(© Alamy Stock Photo)

Walter watched as loading began. One stretcher had got half-way up the gangplank, when the bearers suddenly stopped, turned and brought it back down. The occupant had died. John says, *"They turned to the nearest stretcher, which happened to be my father's, and he was loaded."*

The ship was the SS *Maheno.* The 5000-ton ocean liner had been converted into a hospital ship to care for and transport the wounded. It was painted white with a broad green stripe along its sides and large red crosses. The New Zealand ship, longer than a football pitch at 400-feet, was fitted with operating rooms, isolation wards and a mortuary.

SS Maheno as hospital ship during World War I. Maheno is now a wreck off Fraser Island, Australia where it ran aground after a cyclone in 1935.

“He soon became well enough to ‘liberate’ the spoon”

(© 2020 Martin Patmore/ per stellas)

The dessert spoon bore the emblem of the original New Zealand-based shipping line – USSCo – the Union Steam Ship Company. More than a hundred years after the spoon’s acquisition, the emblem provided a clue to work out which ship Walter had boarded.

During the voyage he started to recover. Because the ship he found himself on had been a passenger liner before its reincarnation as a hospital ship, it had quite a nice dining room and its pre-war silver-plated cutlery was still in use. Perhaps as he sat and had a meal, he may have contemplated the rather fine spoon with which he was eating. Turning it over, he would have noticed that the heavy and classically-shaped dessert spoon bore the emblem of the original New Zealand-based shipping line – USSCo – the Union Steam Ship Company. *“He soon became well enough to ‘liberate’ the spoon,”* said John.

This particular spoon, from which earlier well heeled travellers had supped on the luxury liner, was purloined by a working man: a man who had cheated death in a terrible yet purposeful war. *“It’s a symbol of dad’s incredibly lucky war, his survival, and therefore the start of the family of which I’m part.”*

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Walter never thought he would have children, but aged 62 married a younger woman, Mollie Poole, and was twice blessed. He was immensely proud of his son John and daughter Louise.