

# WW1

## Fact Sheet 2C

### Recollections from Working in a Hut



Recollections from working in a Salvation Army hut in the UK

Thomas Eustace Russell - later Lieut-Commissioner Russell - recorded 26 June 1975

Courtesy of The Imperial War Museum

#### Background

Thomas was born in Finchley on 5 February 1898, then moved to St Albans and grew up there. He was brought up in a Salvationist family. In 1912 he left school and got an apprenticeship for *The Hertfordshire Post* newspaper. Unfortunately this closed down but he found work at The Salvation Army's printing works in the town.

Thomas joined The Salvation Army's version of the boy scouts called *The Salvation Army Lifesaving Scouts*. In July 1913 he visited Hadley Wood and General Booth's house. He knelt by his bedside and promised to 'Give my life in service of God'. He then joined the corps cadet brigade to start the process of becoming an officer.

#### Wartime

During 1913/14 there was a lot of 'sabre rattling', a lot of rumblings about war. Britain was talking about more battleships and Germany had just increased its fleet. There was a lot of unease and a feeling that things were building to an explosion. A large amount of service army corps were re-located to St Albans and Thomas's mother had to billet four or five soldiers.

Thomas became involved in the war effort by making clothes in a factory with his elder brother. But he left after four or five months when his brother joined the Royal Flying Corps. The pay was good but he had not enjoyed the work. He still felt he 'wanted to do something', and he was determined not to be conscripted. So he registered under the Derby Group System which meant he could be enlisted with ease when he came of age.

#### Army Huts

During this time there a lot of military camps being formed, consisting of men from all round Britain and from abroad. A need for canteens started, where men could be treated to a bit of home comfort. Thus The Salvation Army's canteens were born. Thomas applied for a position to work in a canteen and was sent to Epsom Downs under the command of Captain Simpson. This was the first of four camps. He then worked in Bulford on Salisbury Plain, Shorncliffe and finally Rhyl in North Wales.

The canteen teams were usually made up of three or four people, often including an officer and his wife. But at his last camp it was just Thomas on his own, with a part-time helper - a young boy with a withered arm.

Work was hard. You had to be up before *reveille* - 06.30 - and tend to the boiler for hot water. The canteen provided tea, biscuits, sponge cake, doughnuts and homemade sandwiches.



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There was always a crowd ready for breakfast. Then there was a lull till mid-morning break where you had crowds of about 50 men wanting refreshment in their 10-minute break between drills. The next rush was for lunch and then teatime till the canteen closed at 9.30. Tidy-up had to be completed by 10.00 for lights out.

Speed was important while running the canteen. There was often a limited amount of time to serve the men before they were required back on parade or training. Tea was brewed in an urn with tinned milk and sugar already added. Thomas recalls that the tea was always referred to as 'acceptable', never getting any complaints. In fact they were often regarded to be of better quality than that of other canteens.

So why were The Salvation Army's canteens held in such high regard by the troops? It could be because The Salvation Army was seen as being there to help and not for profit. One Salvation Army officer's wife from Bulford - Mrs Windiate - insisted that everything was fresh and clean, 'just as these boys would expect from home'. Tea was always served with a cup and saucer. Everything was scrubbed clean and properly dried, all for the price of a penny per item. Everything had to be nicely presented. Bully beef, pork and beans from the army cookhouse soon become boring fare, but if served on a clean plate, toasty and warm, it became more appetising.

Some canteens also ran a shop where soldiers could buy items. Controversially they stocked cigarettes, even though The Salvation Army was against smoking. It was reasoned that if cigarettes were not stocked, soldiers would just go to other canteens and an opportunity would be missed 'to do good'. So cigarettes were stocked. They were available but never 'pushed'.

Despite the busyness of the canteen, soldiers never left without a kind word, a 'God bless!' or an enquiry after family. It was important to treat these soldiers as men. The attitude was to help the boys and do your best for them. It was a vocation not a business. You knew when you went to the Salvation Army canteen 'you would get a cup of tea and the other!' - a 'God bless you!', a 'How are you?', or help with a letter to be sent home. The Salvation Army was well liked: 'They knew we were friends.'

By contrast, alternative canteens often had fewer standards. Prices varied. Cups were used without a saucer. Often they were cleaned by just dipping into a basin of warm water then re-filled straight away. A deposit was required before the cup was used. Soldiers were paid just a shilling a day - 12 pence in old money - and a deposit of a shilling was often required for the loan of the cup.

The cakes were supplied under contract with a local baker - bakers were keen to keep these contracts as it meant a steady supply of ingredients at a time when food was becoming limited. Bread and cheese was scarce and supplies of vegetables were low. But the canteens were always well supplied and delivery was often before 9.00 every morning. Good relations were important and there were never any issues with supply and demand. In fact, if additional goods were urgently required that day, the baker quite happily fulfilled the need and made a second delivery.



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Thomas wore a special version of the Salvation Army uniform to show that he was undertaking camp work. It was grey, and for a while it was adopted as a Salvation Army general summer uniform.

He lived on the camp, in a tent next to the canteen, often sharing it with other canteen staff.

Thomas worked hard all day. He was constantly tidying and sweeping the tents. He filled buckets with used crockery before bringing them back to wash. It was heavy work and he had little or no time to himself. Thomas recalls having little time left even to say his prayers, though some canteens managed to do weekly family prayers for the staff.

On Sunday afternoons the Salvation Army canteens did a 'Big Tea'. Everything was free for all the soldiers. Afterwards, when everything was cleared away, the doors were closed and they held a service. Soldiers were invited to stay, but if they were not inclined to they were invited to leave while there was a song being sung. Most soldiers felt happy to stay and there were usually approximately 200 men present. The service consisted of preaching and singing.

Thomas recalls Mrs Windiate speaking to the men, trying to give guidance during wartime. She often spoke about 'What your wife and children think about your actions. Are you going back with good or with bad thoughts?'

When Thomas worked in Rhyl he was essentially on his own. There were problems getting water to the canteen. Essentially all Thomas recalls doing was work. There was no time for prayers or any services.

#### **At the front**

In June 1916 Thomas joined the armed forces. He was attested - 'They called when they wanted me.'

During the war in France Thomas unfortunately did not meet any Salvation Army canteens. He met only one other Salvation Army member - Harold Blake, a conscientious objector who was a stretcher bearer and was awarded a medal for carrying wounded under fire.

Thomas wore his red Salvation Army jersey under his tunic. Once he was so hot the colour bled through, so he felt he had to take it off before he went 'over the top'. He left the jersey behind in a bag in the trench. He was separated from his unit and took three days to return. As was customary, if you did not return, your possessions were made available to others. When he returned he was walking back to the store with the troop's Padre (military term for a minister) to look for any of his possessions that were still there. They passed a soldier wearing Thomas's Salvation Army jersey and the padre made the soldier give it back to him!



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Thomas had a sergeant who had been part of the Boer War campaigns. He was a Catholic and had been particularly hard on Thomas. Once, before they were about to start an offensive, the sergeant asked: 'Do you mind if I stand next to you? I feel safer if I'm where you are.'

Part of Thomas's rations were tins of bully beef. Soldiers became so sick of it that Thomas recalls seeing parts of trenches being made with the cans that contained it! Rum was also distributed as part of daily rations. Thomas, as a Salvationist, never drank it but gave it away. It was safer to share it among the other soldiers, as one soldier had become so drunk he wandered carelessly on to 'no man's land', shouting.

#### After the war

Thomas survived the war, although he was wounded in the leg and the shrapnel was left inside. He applied to enter the Salvation Army training college, but his entry was delayed as he was suffering from 'nerves'. Loud noises distressed him, bringing him back to his war experiences. The Salvation Army band was not allowed to play near his house and straw was put on the road outside to muffle the sound of the traffic. It was a long time before he could even travel on a bus.

But eventually Thomas entered the Salvation Army training college. He became an officer, married and had a family.



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