

Born at the wrong time
The biography of Cyril James



Dave Foxton

Leeds 2012

Edited and designed by John Callaghan.

Published in 2012 by FeedARead.com Publishing – Arts Council funded.

An extended First Edition for Cyril's family and friends was privately printed in May 2012, with a second impression in October 2012.

This Second Edition November 2012.

amazonkindle

Also available in a Kindle version.



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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

← *overleaf: Sergeant James, 1944.*

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Foreword

by Professor Gary Sheffield

On the day that Cyril James was born, 19 September 1918, the British army was fighting the battle of Ep  hy, a step in the Advance to Victory that was to end on 11 November with the German capitulation on the Western Front. On the same day, the battle of Megiddo began; this was the offensive that was to destroy the Turkish army in Palestine. A few months later, at 11am on 11 November 1918, the First World War was over. The British Empire had suffered one million dead. People in Britain could have been forgiven for thinking that babies such as Cyril would grow up as a fortunate generation, spared the necessity of going to war. And yet, a generation later, it all happened again, against the same enemy. Cyril James was to find that he had indeed ‘been born at the wrong time’.

Dave Foxton's achievement is to tell the story of a very ordinary man who was thrust into extraordinary situations. Cyril James is not quite ‘everyman at war’, because although the broad outlines of his story, from life as a working class civilian to service in the army of the Second World War, were shared by many others, as an infantryman with extensive service his experiences were different to say, an artilleryman, or someone in the logistic services. Put another way, Cyril's story is far from being run-of-the-mill; on the contrary, it is intensely interesting and useful to the historian.

For a start, it is one of the most informative memoirs of twentieth century working class life that I have read. There is fascinating detail of Cyril's schooldays – for instance the stigma of wearing charity boots, and the influence of his radical, atheist father who stood out against pro-Empire propaganda. Cyril's understanding of the nuances and gradations of class had to be acute; while a teacher was a person of affluence and authority and needed to be treated as such, it was just as important to be aware of the ‘pecking order’ among boys on the streets, and to be able to fight in order to survive.

Likewise, the account life in Burton's factory in Leeds is enlightening. Cyril, a gentile, had many Jewish friends, and provides some interesting insights into Leeds' pre-war Jewish community from the perspective of a sympathetic outsider. His experiences as a young man shaped Cyril's political outlook. A socialist and trade unionist, he was typical of the many

working class men who might have found themselves fighting for Churchill, but eagerly voted for Attlee.

Conscripted into the Royal Scots Fusiliers during the Second World War, as an Englishman Cyril had some bad times in a Scots regiment. This book is invaluable for the rich detail of army life it contains as well as the graphic accounts of battle. To chose just two examples, Cyril's comments on the officers he came across and the role of leadership are insightful: here is clear evidence that the relationship between leader and led was more complex than it had been in the First World War. Likewise, his frank descriptions of the nervous toll that combat took on him, and the ghastly sights he witnessed, are equal to any I have read in a memoir or biography of a Second World War British soldier. And Cyril's memoirs, mediated through Dave's writing, ring true. Cyril's memory is remarkable, although inevitably there is likely to be a degree of hindsight after 70 plus years. His damning comments on the entire British Army of 1940 are based on his personal experience of the poor performance of one unit and are an understandable reaction to a traumatic period in Normandy with Second BEF.

Cyril's story is an important and very readable contribution to our understanding of the people's war. Dave Foxtton tells Cyril's story wonderfully well. Everyone with an interest in Britain in the Second World War has cause to be grateful to them both.

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November 2012

Author's Preface

The idea of writing this biography came through conversations with my good friend, Carl James. During our talks Carl related some of his Dad's experiences in the war. I had met Cyril a couple of times; he was, at that time, an amazingly active eighty year old; going out dancing and working at having a good retirement. I went round and talked to him. He had a formidable memory and the ability to recount incidents, particularly from the war years and earlier. It was soon clear that this was a man from an ordinary background, who had shown extraordinary qualities under extreme conditions; and that his story deserved a wider audience.

This book is the tale of a working-class man born in Leeds in 1918; the wrong time, as he would discover when he came of age. His family was poor, but most everyone was. He went to school and played round the streets with his friends. At fourteen he started work at Burton's the Tailors, and was apprenticed as a master tailor: made to measure, bespoke artisan work. He worked alongside many Jewish people in an environment where world events and politics were argued about, passionately.

Cyril was young but, like many people on the shop floor, he was a committed trade unionist and socialist; he still is. He was interested in politics. Many of his Jewish workmates talked to him about Hitler and the Nazis; they wanted people to know what was going on in Germany. One in particular, Joe Cohen, took the young Cyril James under his wing. Cyril had a job and some money in his pocket. He was young and wanted to have a good time; in the Thirties that meant dancing, looking smart, and taking an interest in women.

But he was the wrong age at the wrong time. A few weeks before he finished his apprenticeship in 1939 he received his call up papers. Before he could report for duty, war was declared.

Cyril's ordinary life was abruptly ended. He went through his basic infantry training in a Scots Regiment, and survived a doomed and chaotic expedition to France *after* Dunkirk, in June 1940. Evacuated from Cherbourg, he returned to England as it hastily prepared for invasion. The Division was reorganised, then transferred to Scotland. Incompetent officers and NCOs were cleared out. All ranks then trained and trained: to fight in mountains, invade from landing craft and from gliders. Cyril was now a Platoon Sergeant.

After four years' training, and some false starts, the Division was finally deployed in October 1944: to the Dutch coast, in an operation to clear a large German Army from the approaches to the port of Antwerp. Cyril and his men were immediately thrown into the violent chaos of war and a night battle: killing men they didn't know were there, men who died only yards away.

For seven months Cyril led his men through some of the worst fighting in the war, in Holland and into Germany, through minefields, bunkers, and fortified houses; across fields, orchards and woods; and into towns and villages. He learned that he could still do a good job while he was terrified. He had to lead his platoon. He never knew what he would be up against. There was street fighting; clearing houses room by room. Sometimes there was just rubble.

Cyril would rather not have been there. He was always his own man; sometimes insubordinate, often outspoken but never rash. Cyril knew what he was fighting for and made sure he did a good job; in training and in action. He wasn't patriotic, gung ho or out for revenge. Such people were a danger to themselves and their comrades. That didn't stop him volunteering to join more dangerous units but his officers persuaded him to stay; he's glad they did. Being a skilled soldier and leader was how he would stay alive, finish the job and come home.

Cyril never recalls being heroic; he didn't want medals. He was often frightened. But faced with prolonged mortal danger he did show courage: thinking coolly, acting decisively, being cautious when he could, and training and protecting his men.

However, he did things the army way; it gave him an easier life. He was diligent and he used his common sense; if he thought something was wrong he said so and if an order put him and his men in danger he looked for a different way of achieving the objective. He was a good soldier, a good NCO and (officially) an excellent battle school instructor. He didn't think men should be put in danger without having the right skills. He didn't, generally, like officers; some weren't up to the job and some put their men in danger when they didn't need to. He did like officers who knew what they were doing, and who were communicative, cautious and thoughtful.

After the final German surrender at Luneberg, Cyril was based on the border between the British and Russian sectors, organising the Occupation, searching for Nazis, sending slave labourers home. The job was now done, and he, too wanted to go home.

When he finally got back, Cyril made a new life as a civilian. He went back into tailoring, became a foreman and then a manager. There was

now a Labour Government building the Welfare State. The twenties and thirties were behind him. He started living a normal life, though he moved about in different tailoring jobs. He wasn't worried by change. When he could see the long term prospects in tailoring were bleak he moved to the Prison Service. When he retired he moved back to Leeds.



Cyril has a good memory; some incidents are seared into it. But over 60 and more years, some details go. What happened is clear, but when and where it happened has been less so. We started with a series of separate incidents; over time these were put in sequence using the two main histories of his Division and Regiment. The names of some officers have been changed. Most military histories look at major battles and large formations of men and material. The battles are here recounted through the eyes of a platoon sergeant; he knew what his men in the platoon were doing, he often knows about the Company but the bigger picture was invisible or irrelevant. His job was to focus on the dangers in front of his unit: the hedge, the farmhouse, the wood, the stream, the street that needed to be cleared and the sniper they needed to find. It was how infantry fought.

Many military memoirs have been written by the officers who could take detailed notes or keep a journal. Sergeant James couldn't. This is why the NCOs' story is so rarely heard. But it needs to be told.

Cyril did extraordinary things, then came back and lived an ordinary life in the normal, decent world he fought for. We should value not only what he did, but also why he did it.

His principles have never changed. He condemns the greed and self interest of the few that have brought the return of the hardship and injustice to so many. Cyril's story shows us what our national life needs today, more than at any time since the desperate struggles described in this book: integrity, the passion to do the job properly, the sense of responsibility for self and others, and the courage to defy power and privilege and trust your own judgement.

Dave Foxton
Leeds, November 2012.

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I. Getting home

February 1946

Quartermasters' Stores, Fulford Barracks, York.

Cyril James moved along the queue. The quartermasters looked at the AB64 which stated the man's sizes: waist, chest, collar, shoes. As they moved down the line, each man was given a pair of plain shoes, two pairs of socks, two shirts, a tie and underpants. They could choose a suit or a sports jacket and trousers, and a raincoat. There were several rails arranged by size. Some men were trying on clothes alongside them.

Cyril took his time. He went for the suits. They all seemed okay, satisfactorily cut and stitched, reasonable quality cloth. Some were pin striped and some light coloured; he chose a dark blue three piece, single breasted, three buttons, with a waistcoat. He tried on two and rejected them both, off the peg was never cut quite the same. The third jacket was a good fit, almost made to measure. The trousers were an inch and a half too long but that was easily fixed. The raincoat would do as well, plain with epaulettes. Cyril thought he looked quite smart, considering. They offered him a hat. He chose a trilby; there were others but that was the only one to consider. Those in front went into a cubicle and changed into full civilian dress. When they emerged Cyril could identify those who hadn't tried their suits on; they'd picked the first garment in front of them. Some jackets were too tight, the sleeves too short, the trousers too long. "Daft buggers," he thought; he would never be seen out like that. If they were that careless he wouldn't have wanted them in his platoon; they would have been on the casualty lists.

Cyril left his uniform and army underwear in the cubicle. Then a stores man went in and rolled them all together.

He was then given back one sergeant's uniform - battledress, boots, shirt, trousers, Glengarry hat, socks and underwear - in a special cardboard box, together with a kitbag. His AB64 was updated with a discharge number. He signed his discharge papers; these said that he was listed in the Reserves and could be called up again at any time. That's why he was given his uniform. Cyril thought they would have a hell of a job to get him back in the Army. He was given a bank book with £84, recognising his rank and period of service, and a rail pass for Leeds. A truck came round; a Corporal said "Railway Station" and a group of men, newly changed into civilians, jumped on. Cyril was among them. He was going home to see Marjorie, his son and his parents. He'd survived. He'd often thought that he wouldn't.



The demobilisation process had dragged on. On his way back from Germany he'd been billeted in a holding camp in Boulogne. The men were grouped according to where they lived. Cyril was in the group destined for Yorkshire. All the NCOs and Privates were together in large tents. There had been thousands of men in the camp. Dockets were issued for meals, groups were slowly allocated ships to Dover and travel warrants on the other side. Some larger tents showed films, there was even a small hospital. The men had mostly sat around and read, wrote, talked and played cards.

His brothers had made it too. The day after he'd arrived, Cyril saw his elder brother, Alf, walking through the camp with a cup of tea. Alf lived in London, so was in a different part of the camp. The last time they'd been together was in Brussels. When they'd parted they couldn't be sure they would ever see each other again. Cyril and Alf had gone for another cup of tea and spent a bit of time together. They'd kept meeting up over the next two days of waiting around. When they were finally given a sailing they found they were on the same boat. Alf had been conscripted after Cyril but, being older, was demobbed at the same time. He'd been called up into the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry and been put in the Signals. Then he was transferred to work in the Intelligence Corps. He was a Corporal and on a nice cushy number, decoding signals and passing on messages in Headquarters. Cyril, as a Sergeant in the infantry, thought Alf had been lucky.

They'd talked about their younger brother, John, who was also safe, in the Middle East. He'd been in the Signals too, miles behind the front line. Cyril thought he was the unlucky one. But he'd got through.

Early the next morning a convoy of trucks had taken that day's lucky demob groups to the harbour at Calais, where they'd embarked on the ship to cross the Channel. NCOs and privates were placed on lower decks or in the hold, officers on the upper decks. It was crowded but Cyril and Alf had managed to get seats. A rumour had gone around the lower deck they'd be searched at Dover. If they had anything looted they'd be arrested and sent back to their units. Cyril still had the big revolver with him so he threw it over the side into the sea. Many men had got rid of contraband; a lot of valuables were dropped into the English Channel.

When the ship docked at Dover, the officers had disembarked first. The men were bunched up on deck watching them. Then they were lined up and filed towards the gangplank, everyone with a kitbag and a rifle. They were ordered off in batches of twenty. Some of the men in the line had started bleating like sheep; sarcastic. Cyril descended the gang plank. An officer and an MP were at the bottom. The officer asked "Anything to declare?" Cyril was

given a quick search: a pat round his tunic and trousers. Then he'd walked through a long covered corridor. He emerged into a large shed with railings: some customs pens. The bleating was much louder in here and, now they were through the search, more men joined in. The shed had sounded like a farmyard. The MPs had lined up at the exit side and screamed at the men to shut up. No one had taken any notice. There were too many of them and they were going home; leaving all this behind them.

Cyril and Alf had talked about what they were going to do when they got home, and about the election. Alf said the country had to get itself back on its feet and to make sure they weren't treated like their Dad when he came back from the war. Maybe the bleating showed that, this time, there were enough of them who would make sure. Outside were queues of men, hundreds of yards long, waiting for trains; some still bleating until they got bored.

Cyril and Alf separated, Alf to get to his home in London. It had seemed strange they weren't going to the same home. Cyril got on a train to York; his destination was Fulford Barracks. The journey had taken six hours. Soon there were civilians on the train but the passengers were mainly soldiers - over a hundred of them, a full company. The NAAFI was on some station platforms serving tea and sandwiches. At York Station trucks were waiting and they'd clambered in with their kit and been taken up to the barracks. The camp was full of men waiting for demob. Cyril's group had assembled and been taken across the camp to billets for the night. They were given camp beds, fed in the mess and bedded down.



His last morning in the army, Cyril woke up to Reveille: he got up, washed and shaved. There wasn't a parade. Men went across to the mess for breakfast, then packed up their kit and assembled on the parade ground in their groups. The men were lined up and sorted into alphabetical order. Then Cyril saw James Greaves. He'd last seen him in Hartlepool, in March 1940: before the disastrous expedition to France and all that had followed. Greaves was now a Sergeant in the Royal Army Service Corps, looking after food stores. He'd worked in the grocery trade right through the war. He'd never been near any action, got promoted and had a nice little number. Cyril wished he'd done the same. If he'd known at the end of basic training what it would be like, he would have done anything to get out of the infantry.

The parade was organised into groups of about twenty and moved in stages. It was 10.30 before they got to the "Js". Cyril's group was taken to the main barrack block and lined up in alphabetical order, Pay Book at the ready, outside the quartermasters' stores. Cyril's AB64 had been updated before he

left the Battalion; the Army discharge gave a character reference. It said he had shown “exemplary conduct” and that he was “an excellent instructor.” This was the official record. There was no reference to the occasions when he had disobeyed orders.

Once inside the stores, there was a long queue of soldiers, who were leaving as civilians at the far end. Firstly, they handed over all their webbing, equipment and spare clothing. Then they surrendered their weapons. Cyril returned his rifle and ammunition. The rifle had been a long way with him and seen a lot of action, but he was glad to see the back of it. The sniper sight had been left at Battalion HQ. There was still a faint mark where he had rubbed away the notch the Corporal had cut into it, a kill on the Rhine.