

# NORMAN MANLEY

*A gunner, who faced prejudice and lost a brother*



Waiting in the Trenches

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Norman Manley is one of the few black soldiers to leave a memoir of his experiences of the First World War. In his memoir he offers a detailed account of his recruitment and life in the trenches. He also describes his feelings about losing his brother Roy at the Front.

## **Early Years**

Norman Manley was born in Jamaica in 1893. Both his parents were mixed race

of African, Caribbean and Irish descent. By 1909 Norman's parents had died, and eventually he moved to England, became a Rhodes Scholar and entered Jesus College, Oxford, to read law. In September 1915, with his younger brother Douglas Roy Manley, known as Roy, he enlisted as a private in the Deptford Royal Field Artillery.

## **Training with the Cockneys**

In his memoir, Norman describes the “strange circumstances” he faced when he joined the Royal Field Artillery in Deptford, a working-class area of South London, situated across the River Thames from the East End. Seventy per cent of the recruits he encountered were Cockneys “with a view of life all their own. I got to know them very well and a great affection developed between us. They were first-class thieves and would rob your last farthing if you gave them the chance, but for kindness and generosity I have never met their equal. If you were broke and did not have a cigarette to smoke they would not hesitate to give you one if they had two. They came to look on ‘Bill’, as they called me, as a great oracle and I was to settle a thousand arguments about everything under the sun. When deadlock occurred, the watchword was ‘Let’s ask Bill!’ I was careful to plead ignorance unless I really knew and could explain, and so preserved respect and confidence. They showed innate courtesy, I suppose because we liked each other, and soon found out that I did not like being called “Darkie” as came natural to them, and I have heard a real tough guy get hold of a new arrival, a casualty replacement, who automatically called me ‘Darkie’, and take him aside and

say, ‘Don’t call him that – he doesn’t like it. We call him Bill and we like him!’”

Norman also recalled the time he fell ill, and how his Cockney comrades took care of him, nursed him and looked out for him. If he felt too unwell for guard duty, someone took his place.

### **An odd life**



Trying to sleep

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When Norman served with his comrades on the Western Front in France, he remembered it as an “odd life”, once you had grown used to its hardships: “hard work, dull work, poor food and hard living quarters, to say nothing of the eternal misery of body lice which were found everywhere that soldiers lived...in spite of all these things, there was a strange and fascinating irresponsibility about the life of a private....Nothing in the future gave you concern. Your job was to do your job as a soldier and stay alive if

you could. You blessed each day, you prayed to be spared some fear-raising experience like being caught in a severe German artillery barrage or a gas attack with gas shells, but that aside, to be alive was to have a future and worry about the future had no place.”

## **Promotion**

When Norman joined the Royal Field Artillery he was part of the most mobile part of it: the ammunition supply. Within a month of enlisting he was a Lance Corporal or Bombadier as they were called in the Artillery, and by the time he left France in January 1916 (after four months of training), Norman had been promoted to Corporal.

## **Prejudice**

In stark contrast to the comradeship and friendship he had experienced with the working-class Cockneys when he was a new recruit, he came up against violent prejudice from the rank and file who “disliked taking orders from a coloured N.C.O. [non-commissioned officer] and their attitude was mild by comparison with that of my fellow N.C.O’s. Corporals and Sergeants resented my sharing status with them. They were more spiteful and later conspired to get

me into trouble. It was only the Officer class that I could expect to behave with ordinary decency and both aspects of this phenomenon I fully understood. ”

## **Leaving the Officers**

Norman was disgusted with the racist attitudes he confronted on the Western Front, including that of a Sergeant who placed him on a charge. The Sergeant’s rage, recalled Norman, “born of prejudice”, knew no limits. Norman explained to an officer that the N.C.Os resented his status because of his colour and “there would never be a peaceful relationship”. Consequently Norman gave up his stripes, joined another regiment, and reverted to the rank of gunner (gun-layer): “I remained as a gun-layer till I left the Army in 1919. I was the fastest gun-layer in the battery. A gun-layer, by the way, is the man who operated a fairly complex unit that sets the gun dead on target when it is fired...In my new unit I started with a clean sheet, did not repeat my earlier mistakes and built up a most agreeable relationship with everybody. They respected and liked me and would follow my leadership in any circumstances. I liked them as men and as human beings.”

## Losing a brother

In 1916 Norman was sent to the Somme which he described as “one of the bloody battles fought for four months with a limited advance of about six miles at a cost of half a million casualties.” At Ypres he was involved in battles with his brother Roy who killed in early 1917. Roy’s death devastated him.

## The sound of the guns



Howitzers

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Norman vividly evoked life on the front line, such as the time thousands of guns opened fire at a precisely-timed second of time: “It has to be imagined to realize how the world can dissolve into one vast sound, so that nothing exists except the continuous unbroken rhythm of sound, like a great wave drowning every feeling and every emotion – sound broken every minute by the vast roar of our 18 inch guns, and punctuated constantly by the

staccato tattoo of a couple dozen seventy eight pounders sounding a practised roll like super machine-gun fire – but mostly just sound – that you could feel that it enveloped you and bore you up.”

## A close shave

He also described how he avoided death. On one occasion he heard the roar of a coming shell “they come with an awesome sound as their velocity was just a little less than sound. I knew from the increasing horror of the noise that I was in for a near shave and at the last split second dived for the ground and felt the shake of the air as it passed so near to me...Then I felt myself showered with earth and the noise of an exploding shell and came to realise that I was actually at the bottom of the crater made by the shell...My escape was miraculous.”

## Passchendaele

In 1917 Norman took part in the Battle of Passchendaele, also known as the Third Battle of Ypres or "Passchendaele". The battle took place on the Western Front between July and November. He recalled the horror of seeing “a lot of dead people, three-parts buried by mud – you spotted them by an emerging hand or foot, or even a head. It was

indescribable...As a battle it was the great failure of the War. It is estimated it cost the British 750,000 men killed and wounded. The cream of the British Army and of the men who volunteered in 1914 to 1916 when conscription was introduced.”

### **Peace at last**

Norman was on leave in London on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918: “I was in Hyde Park that night with an estimated crowd of one million. It was over, but I could get no sense of joy. Long anticipation of some events leaves you cold and practical when they arrive...I remembered my fallen friends but the number was so great that each loss was reduced by some strange rule of feeling. I thought of the future of mankind but it did not seem that the spirit that had fused in unity with the slogans about ‘The war to end war’ and ‘Make the world safe for Democracy’ was going to survive the passions and hazards of peace.”

### **After the war**

Norman was awarded the military medal for bravery, returned to Jamaica, served as a barrister, and then went into politics. He was instrumental in bringing about self-governance for Jamaica.



Victory parade © IWM Art 11661

**Quotations taken from Norman’s memoir printed in the *Jamaica Journal* in 1973**