YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War I Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 395

ARTHUR W. FISHER

Interviewed

by

Thomas Hess

on

October 22, 1975

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INTERVIEWEE: ARTHUR W. FISHER

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Hess

SUBJECT: Youth in England, Service in 55th Division, Life in the Trenches

DATE: October 22, 1975

H: This is an interview with Mr. Arthur W. Fisher, taken on the 22nd of October, 1975, at his home, 33 Stambaugh Street, in Girard, Ohio.

First, Mr. Fisher, we would like you to tell us something about your life in England as you were a young person, as you grew up and were educated, leading up to the time when you went in the service.

F: I went to school at St. Katherine's in Northampton. I left there when I was thirteen. The last five years I was the head boy of the class. At that time, at thirteen you could leave school. If you had the money you could go to grammar school, but since I was ten my family couldn't afford to send me to grammar school.

I started work then and went to the bakery business for a year. Then I transferred and went to the boot and shoe factory. I stayed there until I joined the Army.

The war broke out and I volunteered to join the Army. We thought it was going to be a picnic. We thought that it was going to last about six months, but Lord Kitchener told them to prepare for three years of war. Lord Kitchener was lost on a ship while it was torpedoed. They laughed at him when he said prepare for three years of war. Instead of that if lasted over four years. It started August 4, 1914, and it was finished up on November 11, 1918, Armistice Day. Kitchener was right. As I say, a lot of them laughed at him because they

thought it was only going to be a six month war. There was no conscription at that time, I volunteered. I had done it on a dare, really; my two friends said, "Let's go join the Army." I showed up and they didn't the next day, so I went alone with it. My mother was very upset about it because I was the only boy at home. My four brothers were over in this country and I was the only one left at home. She was upset. I said, "Oh mother, we'll only be about six months. We'll be back in six months."

We only had three months of training. We had done everything in those three months that ordinarily, in peace time, would take a year. Then we were shipped to France. Of course, we went over at night on the boat. We landed at Le Havre and went up the river to Rouen. That was our base and that is where they took us from. They sent us up the front line trenches from Rouen. We went to Ypres in Belgium; that's where we were for eleven months. That was an inferno. You saw comrades killed. We were an A salient up there.

On July 31, 1917, we tried to straighten out the A salient. They had us cross fired. We had to straighten out the line. Our division was 15,000, that was in wartime; in peace time it was 25,000. In the wartime it was 15,000 and we had 6,000 casualties wounded and killed. With the Canadians helping us we figured we obtained our objective, what we set out to do.

After this they sent us out for a rest for two weeks. They sent us to a farmhouse, our company, our engineers. They sent us to a large farm and we stayed there for about two weeks. Then we went back up to the line again.

We went from there to Givenchy. The Portuguese were on our left. The Portuguese retreated rather than weaken the line. We were on their right. They took some of our fellows and ours went after them. We went up to the front that the Portuguese had left. They retreated, I don't know why. We were sent up there. We weakened our front line, but we held them. We dug in at night when it was dark, and we put some barbed wire out in front of the trenches and fired occasional shots in case the Germans were coming. They didn't know where we were. A funny thing happened, our own artillery was shelling us. They didn't know exactly where we were. We got that straightened out anyway.

Then we went onto Ypres; that was like a wilderness. We were at a place called Bethune; that's where they brought

the tanks in action there. That was the first time they brought the tanks in and they didn't seem to be doing any good. In fact, one of them got stuck in the mud and we had to pull it out. That was at Ypres; it was like a wilderness. They had been fighting there before. I never saw a civilian for about six months.

When we were at Ypres we went over the top, over the trench. Before we had gone over at daybreak the Germans had some balloons up and they directed their artillery to where we were. Two shells dropped in the fire bays where our fellows were and killed all that were in that fire bay. We had to come through there to join up with the other part of the company, and you saw what a mess these fellows were that had been killed. Some of them had their insides hanging out. One had two holes in his head that you could put your fist in. Another one's face was like a current cake. It was something to last you a lifetime anyway. I'll never forget that. Our section was thirty-two strong and we came back with thirteen. That was at Ypres. I was glad that I got out of that. That will all stick with me the rest of my life, seeing those two fire bays with all of those fellows you had been with for a couple of years. They were all killed and you couldn't do anything about it. We accomplished our mission, what we were supposed to do. We dug in at night time and the next night we connected up and made a trench out of it. I'll never forget that. It rained all of the time. I dropped my rifle when we were going over that. It dropped in the mud and I had to fish it out. We had the shovel in one hand and the rifle in the other. Of course, we wore steel helmets and gas masks.

That was another thing, that gas mask business. You had six seconds to put it on. In the first part of the war they had a different kind of gas mask. The British Isle never thought of that. The Germans sent out the cloud gas to start with. They made a gas mask that you pulled over your head. It was made of flannel and you tucked it in. You had a piece to put your nose in and keep it tight and you breathed through your mouth. That was the first gas mask. Of course, after a while they made the ones like the American Army had, the box type. They went through a trench and a swamp which had gas. You had six seconds to put it on.

In the first place, when they sent the gas over, we lost a lot of men. In fact, one of my officers got hit with the nozzle of a gas shell. It took half his face off.

We could smell it; it was called mustard gas. It smelled like mustard. We got through that all right. I had a taste of it, but nothing to speak of. We took a lotoof German prisoners and they were happy to be out of it. They did jobs at the base that normally our fellows would do. They were out of the picture. They were practically safe where they were at. They did lots of jobs down there. I was glad to be out of it anyway. In fact, some of the German fellows that we talked to had been in business in England before the war. They had gone back to Germany when war was declared and joined the Army. One fellow had a butcher shop in Liverpool. As soon as the war started he went over to Germany and enlisted in the German Army. Of course, he was one of the prisoners that we took.

We had a lot of reinforcements come out from England. That was the third battle we used when we straightened out the line. That was July 31, 1917. They sent out a new bunch from England. It turned out to be two or three friends of mine. We were built up again to full strength then. A section in our company is thirty-two men. That includes an officer and a corporal. I was what they called a sapper in the royal engineers. When they advanced our job was to go out and cut the barbed wire so the troops could go through. If we retreated we had to load things up. They used gun powder for an explosive. They used to blow up the bridges and anything like that. When they hit we would have to retreat. Going forward, if we were advancing, we had to build a bridge. If there was a river there we would build a pontoon bridge. They fit different parts in there and you can make a bridge over it. That was our job to do that. In advance we had to be in front to clear the way. If some of the houses were wired with bombs we had to have the bomb squad go and inspect them and look them over before our troops could come over there when the Germans retreated. They retreated in 1918, in March. It took us three days to catch up with them; they had gone so far back. They got some of these houses and they wired them and planted bombs there. We had a bomb squad go out and inspect them. One of our fellows went in there and he started playing a piano and he went up with the piano. It had a bomb in there. After that they were always careful about that. If they thought there was danger they put a sign outside; you weren't to go in there at all.

I was at a place called Labasy, in France, and they started shelling us. The buildings had all been blown down with shells. There was a little piece of wall

left and I heard a shell coming and I crashed down alongside of this wall. It exploded before it got there. There was a piece of shrapnel from the shell. It hit about a foot in front of where I was crouched. If that had hit me I would have been a goner. I went to pick it up and it was really hot. I think that was the narrowest escape I had.

H: Let me ask a couple of questions on some of the things that you already said. One thing that really interested me was that the people there in England thought that it would be a six month picnic when the war started. How did they come to this conclusion? Why did they think in six months it would be over with?

F: They thought it wouldn't last long because they had what they called a territorial army. When they saw it was going to last more than six months they were appealing. It was posted around--your country needs you. Nobody was conscripted at that time, but eventually when they hung on too long they conscripted them. All of those who signed up at the beginning of the war for four years, when their four years were up . . . the war lasted more than four years. When their four years were up they had the choice of signing up again and getting a twenty-five pound bonus. They got thirty days leave. If you didn't sign up then they could conscript you.

H: You mean a person who had volunteered, when his four years were finished he could be conscripted after that?

F: Yes. I think you got a twenty-five pound bounty and thirty days leave if you signed up again. The he would come back to his company. If he refused he could be conscripted. He would lose the thirty days and the twenty-five pounds bonus.

H: About how many American dollars would be twenty-five pounds?

F: About $125.

H: You mentioned Lord Kitchener encouraging the people to prepare for a three year war. Who was Lord Kitchener?

F: He was one of the leading generals of Britain. He was in the Boer War in 1899-1901. He got to be one of the top generals.

We had a paper published called John Bull by Horatio Bottomly. He used to put on the cover--the war will be over by Christmas. But he didn't say which Christmas.

That was his cover on this magazine of whatever you want to call it. Horatio Bottomly was quite a character.

H: Before you went to France, what did you know about the German Army or about Germany? What did you think about these people?

F: We had been told that they had been training. The kaiser came over to England a year or two before the war broke out. First they took him around military places. He could see for himself and get some idea of what was going to happen. He was at a naval base in Portsmouth. He came over and had a good look. The war started on August 4, 1914. They were prepared for it and we weren't. He made the move first. We had to train our troops, which normally would take a year, in three months, sometimes less than that. They couldn't afford to be training for a year. Then they shipped them over to France. Mostly they went over at night time and landed at Le Havre.

H: Every war had this training problem, and we in America have the very same problem. Tell me about what you did in training, what they tried to teach you.

F: They taught us how to tie knots, for one thing, all kinds of knots that you would use in building a bridge or something like that. They trained us how to use this gun BSA for an explosive. They had us digging trenches too, and putting barbed wire out. We put barbed wire out on the front. We would make duck boards they called them. Those were to walk in the trenches if it rained at all. They were 2' X 4' pieces. We had them in the trenches in case it rained. The trenches would be all muddy and the duck boards helped you out to walk around. We went to the rifle range and took the time for rifle practice. Then they took us down the river Thames to build these pontoon bridges. One side attends to the other. That was quite a chore. You had to do it on the double and they timed you to see how quick you could do this job. They had the pontoons there and then you had to put the bridge across so that you could go over to the other side. It all had to be done on the double. We had to shine our brass buttons on the uniform; that was another thing they wouldn't let you get away with. In fact, I paraded one morning and the officer came around to inspect us and he said, "Fisher, did you shave this morning?" I said, "No, sir." He said, "Why?" I said, "I forgot." He said, "Did you have your breakfast?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Well, you didn't forget that. Do you want me to send you a postcard?" They

were fussy about that. When you went out on rest from the trenches you always had to shine up your brass buttons. I guess it was to keep you busy.

H: Uniforms change from one war to another. Why don't you start with your shoes and go right up the person and tell us about your uniform that you wore when you were in the trenches?

F: The shoes were all the same, made the same. They had the shoe factory working day and night making shoes. Of course, the thing was to get your own size. They had plates on the heel and the hobnails on the sole. The uniform was khaki and then we had khaki puttees which you would have to wear.

H: What is a puttee, sir?

F: You wind it around your leg like leggings. You started down at the bottom and wound it up to just below your knee.

H: It would be sort of like a bandage then?

F: Yes, that's right. It's like an lace bandge almost. It was khaki. The khaki was hard to distingush, that's why they picked on that type of dress. The Portuguese were in gray, the same as the Germans were.

H: How high up did your shoes come? Were they ankle high?

F: Yes.

H: The puttees would come from below the knee?

F: You started at the bottom and wound it up to just below your knee. Our puttees were to help us with our pants. With winding it around you wouldn't catch your pants in anything.

H: Your trousers came down and fit in the top of these puttees, right?

F: No. The trousers were ankle length and you would put the puttee around them.

H: What kind of a coat or jacket did you have?

F: We had what they called a tunic. You had a shoulder plate and then whatever division you belonged to you had an emblem.

H: Tell about your division.

F: I was with the 55th division. It was called the Red Rose of Lancaster. It said on our badge--those that wear the Rose of Lancaster, they win or they die. We had a cap badge in front and on that, for our particular regiment, it said--evil be to him that even thinketh. That was another thing that was brass; we had to clean that.

H: Did you have a steel helmet when you were in combat?

F: Yes. They found that out on account of the shrapnel. They sent in shrapnel to find out where you were. That would burst in the air and shoot forward like a watering can. When they got the distance where you were at they gave it to the heavy artillery and then they sent over the heavy stuff. They had some shells 9" X 2", I think it was. They could go about fifteen rounds. We had some artillery over in the front; they only sent over eighteen pounders. That was really to pound on the front line trenches. Then we had a 5.9 which was very destructive. It could make a hole almost as big as this room.

H: Was that the British artillery?

F: Yes. That was our favorite shell, the 5.9. The eighteen pounds was just a small thing. That didn't do the damage like the 5.9 did.

H: What kind of a rifle did you carry?

F: It was called a BSA [Bermingham small arms].

H: Was it a single shot?

F: No, you could put five cartridges in it at once. You had a belt around you and each was a pocket. In each pocket was a clip with five shells in there.

H: Then you had to work the bolt to change the shells around?

F: That's right.

H: You told about a shovel that you carried and we've talked aobut the rifle, was there any other equipment that you carried with you while you were in combat? You talked about the gas masks.

F: The gas mask, in the first place you carried it low on your body. Then when we got the box gas masks, the latest model, you had it strapped high on the chest. You wouldn't dare go up the front line trenches without that and a steel helmet. Even when the King and the Prince of Wales came out to see us, we lined up there and they had to have steel helmets on.

H: Tell us about the King and Prince of Wales.

F: They just came out to view the troops.

H: Where was this?

F: At a place called Ronse in Belgium. They came out to visit us. That was Edward, the Prince of Wales who abdicated, and his father, King George. They came out and had to wear steel helmets and gas masks the same as we did.

H: Did they come more than the one time?

F: No, just once. They came to review the troops.

H: Some words that you use that we're not familiar with, would you tell us about a salient.

F: Instead of the trenches being like that we were in what they called a salient.

H: The Germans had pushed in there?

F: Yes. They pushed us back. We had to straighten this out. This was at Ypres. We pushed forward on July 31, 1917. We had 6,000 casualties as I said before. A lot of us were relieved for two weeks. We went out for two weeks and then came back again. In that time we made up our section to thirty-two again.

H: Got replacements?

F: Yes. There were thirty-two in a section and we had four sections in a company of Royal Engineers. We had three companies of engineers in the 55th division, 419, 421, and 422.

H: What was your company?

F: 419. It's an interesting thing because when the war first started our company was in the second division. Lord Derby came out and it was from then on that they got all of these Lancaster companies together and called

it 55th West Lancaster Division. Lord Derby was the one who recommended that.

H: What was this Lord Derby's position that he could ask for this to happen and it would? Was he a member of Parliament?

F: I think he must have been in the war Cabinet in Britain.

H: All of the Lancasters were put together in this one division?

F: Yes. They called it the 55th division. But before they were scattered.

H: Do you think that was good, or do you think it was better to be scattered amongst the other divisions?

F: I think it was all right. They had me talking the same way they do. (Laughter) I wasn't from Lancaster.

H: We don't know anything about trench war from experience because after the First World War it was not used. You used a term called a fire bay, what was that?

F: You dug a trench and it was zigzagged. The fire bay was cut out of a trench and they had a step in the front line trenches that you could step on and fire from. That was what they called a fire bay in the front line trenches. It was only in the front line trenches. There were two or three trenches further back that they called reserve trenches.

H: Were these connected now? Was the reserve trench connected with the front trench?

F: Yes, there was a communication trench. You would come down the communication trench and get in the reserve.

H: If you were standing on the duck walk in the bottom of the trench, how deep would the trench be?

F: I would say six or seven feet.

H: If you stepped up onto the fire bay you stepped up about two feet higher, right?

F: Yes, so you could see over the top of the trenches and fire if you had to. We used to have concrete pillars that we had the machine guns fire from. We called those pill boxes. That was 3' X 9' of reinforced concrete. You had a slit front where you could fire your gun from.

H: Did the engineers build these pill boxes?

F: Yes. We built several pill boxes and then we built a long one for the general staff. When the Germans retreated they left theirs and some of our fellows went in there and they put a shell right through the doorway and killed all our fellows that were in there. The doorway was facing the Germans. The Germans had left it there, and naturally when they retreated they could fire there. We bricked them up finally, we bricked their doorways up. We made an entrance on our side.

H: You talked about after a big battle you would get taken off of the line and sent to rest. How long were you in Belgium or France from the time you left England and went with your outfit?

F: I would say approximately three years, possibly more.

H: During those three years did any of your rest leave, did you get to go back to England?

F: I was there and I got an eight day pass to go back to England. The second time was just before the armistice; I went back for ten days.

H: That would be in 1918?

F: Yes.

H: Did you ever go to Paris on any of your leaves?

F: No. I went to Brussels, Belgium, and I went to Antwerp. My brother was in the Canadian Army over there and we met. He came and stayed with me just outside Brussels. He went to Paris, but I didn't. I had two leaves and I went to England both times.

H: What did a soldier in the First World War do when he got what we would call a rest and recuperation leave?

F: I went sight-seeing and I went to Waterloo where Napoleon Bonaparte was. They had three or four memorials there of the Battle of Waterloo.

H: You said about running into a German prisoner that had had a business in England. Can you speak German?

F: No, he spoke English.

H: Did you talk to many of the German prisoners?

F: A few. When I was down in Rouen for a couple of weeks

I was in charge of some of them. Some of them spoke English and they talked to you. They didn't want to be in the war any more than we did. As far as they were concerned they were out of it. They were treated good. In fact, they got bread one time and we had to go out and have those hard, tack bisuits. They got fresh bread. We gave them jobs just to keep them busy. When we advanced the Germans left bread in their dug-outs that was black. They were eating black bread.

H: Did you see much German military equipment as you advanced, weapons and stuff that they left behind?

F: Yes, just the guns and some cannons they left behind. In the dugouts where they had been, they left some stuff in there. Some of the equipment was different from ours all together.

H: Soldiers often argue about the enemies having better equipment than we had. What were your feelings? Did you think that the German stuff was better?

F: No, I don't think so. They were prepared for war though, and we weren't. We learned a lot from that First World War, the whole world did. In my opinion, it advanced aviation twenty years. During the First World War the planes were almost like a box kite, a crate. I've seen as many as ninety planes in the air at one time.

H: In Belgium?

F: In France.

H: What did these planes do? Were they just observation planes?

F: Yes.

H: They weren't bombing or machine gunning?

F: No.

H: Did German planes attack any of your positions?

F: We had antiaircraft guns firing at them and we kept them at a distance.

H: What did you use for antiaircraft guns, machine guns or light artillery?

F: No, they had anti aircraft guns.

H: What caliber would they be shooting?

F: About a 3.2.

H: I'm very interested in your relationship with those German prisoners that you were with for a short period of time. There are always stories that come out of wars about the treatment of prisoners. Do you know of any places where British prisoners captured by the Germans might have been mistreated like some of ours were in the Second World War?

F: No, I couldn't say that at all. The German prisoners that we had were treated human. We never treated them badly. I can't say how they treated our fellows because I was never over on the German lines.

H: There is a story that is told about the First World War of some sort of comradery between the German and the allied soldiers at Christmas time. Do you know about any of this actually happening, or is this just a story?

F: I wasn't in on it at all.

H: You would have been there two Christmases wouldn't you?

F: Yes.

H: You didn't observe anything like that?

F: No. They were supposed to cease fire for Christmas Day. Of course, we heard stories about fraternizing, but not where I was.

H: The French were south of you fellows, weren't they?

F: Yes.

H: They had their own line?

F: That's right.

H: Did you have any direct contact with the French soldiers or Army?

F: No.

H: Among allies there are always feelings about we're better soldiers than they are or they get better breaks than we do and so forth, was there any of this sort of feeling that you were aware of between the British and the French?

F: No. The only thing was that in the first part of the war we were the highest paid soldiers in the war until the Canadians and Americans came over. Then they had the money. I think they got about $30 a month. I was one of the highest paid British regiments; I got 50¢ a day.

H: About half of what the Americans got?

F: Yes. That was a high-priced regiment. The average infantryman in the British Army got 25¢ a day. If he was married half of that went to his wife.

H: Different regiments were paid a different rate of pay?

F: Yes.

H: Could you expand on that a little bit?

F: In the Engineers you were supposed to be a tradesman in the first place. They need them for building bridges and different things. The poor infantrymen got 25¢ a day and no more. He didn't get a raise or anything and he didn't go out on strike for more pay. I think the highest priced regiment was two and six a day in English money. That is one and a half times more than the infantry.

H: How much were officers paid then in comparison to the enlisted men?

F: I couldn't tell you that. They never told us and I never asked.

H: We know that in the French Army there was trouble with almost desertion with large numbers. Did anything like this happen to your knowledge with British soldiers that were there for so long?

F: No.

H: What about these Portuguese that were up there on your left?

F: They were on our left at Givenchy. I guess it got too rough for them so they retreated. That left a gap up in the front line and they weakened our division to take over. I remember quite well we were running across an open field and we got to a couple of farmhouses and some of our fellows got killed going over this open field by machine gun. We got to a couple of farmhouses and there were a couple of women in there and they took the handle off of the pump so we couldn't get any water.

H: Belgium women?

F: Yes. When we moved forward a couple of days after, the Germans put two shells right through those houses.

H: When the Canadians came there weren't Canadian troops over there when you first got there?

F: No.

H: About when did they come?

F: I would say about 1915 or 1916.

H: What about other colonial troops?

F: The Australian troops came over. They were high-priced like the Americans. The poor French only got 4¢ a day. We were rich compared to them. Then when the Yanks came out and the Australians and New Zealanders and Canadians, they were way up. A lot of the French girls fell for that.

H: You were on the Seine then when the Canadians got there?

F: Yes.

H: Did the Aussies come about the same time?

F: Yes. That was when they had the battle. That was when the tanks weren't too good.

H: That's when you had to pull them out of the mud?

F: Yes.

H: Did the tanks improve as the war went along?

F: Yes.

H: Were these British tanks or what?

F: British. Everything was improved in the war towards the end.

H: Did the Germans have tanks?

F: Oh yes.

H: Before the British tank or after?

F: I think they had them first, but it was long after when we discovered that. The Germans had the gas first too.

We weren't prepared for that. They had tear gas, and mustard gas.

H: How about chlorine gas, did you run into any chlorine gas?

F: They sent it over in waves to start with. If the wind was in the wrong direction it brought it back the wrong way. They would have to wait until the wind was in the right direction before they could let this cut. Then they used gas shells too. They did a lot of that.

H: A gas shell with artillery?

F: Yes.

H: Did the British or the allies, to your knowledge, use gas against the Germans?

F: They used gas against them, yes.

H: The same kinds of gas?

F: Yes.

H: Let's end the war. Can you tell us where you were when the war ended and how you reacted to this? What kind of rejoicing or reaction was there to the announcement that the war was over?

F: The Belgians danced from one side of the street to the other; that was in Brussels.

H: How soon were you taken off of the line then after the war was over? Did you have to stay there in Belgium?

F: Yes, I had to stay there with the equipment. They promoted me to take care of the equipment. I had to stay there until a certain time when we shipped the equipment back to England. We landed at Dover and were fed overnight.

H: Were you in contact with American troops over there at all?

F: When they first came out there we had so many attached to us. They sent them out one morning and they were attached to us to kind of break them in. As the troops came in numbers they put them all together and they had their own. When the first cue came out they attached so many to each division and tried to break them in.

H: When they got their own divisions built up they were south of you too, weren't they?

F: Yes. We never came into contact with them much after that.

H: What did you do after the war then?

F: I took a month's vacation. The boss where I worked wanted to know when I was coming back to work. He said, "Are you mad?" I said, "No." They had a union where I worked and a married man got twice as much as a single man. He said, "Don't get married." I took a month off and went back to work and I made up my mind I was coming over here to see my brothers. All four were in this country at that time. Of course, my brother was in the Canadian Army. He got more moeny than I did naturally. My other brother, the second oldest one, was in the American Army. He was a sergeant. He never left the country. He was a minister, and the oldest brother too. The oldest brother had the Baptist Church in Albany, New York for ten years. He was fifty years in the ministry. He would get up and preach a sermon without any notes. He really had his heart in the church. He didn't smoke; he didn't drink; he gave ten percent of his salary back to the church. If anybody should go to heaven, he should.

H: I appreciate very much what you've told us about the war.

END OF INTERVIEW