



In a weekend of remembrance, **Steve Snelling** remembers the architect-cum-soldier whose grand designs endure in the shape of a deeply personal war memorial to the Norfolk men who did not come home.

Caught in the warm embrace of a beguiling autumn sun, the uniform row of red-brick cottages contrived to unleash an unexpected confusion of dislocated images of war and peace, courage and carnage and, above all, of one man's escape from a living hell.

One moment I was standing in the emptiness of a deserted cul-de-sac and the next I was imagining the same scene 90 years ago filled with an army of veterans, widows and orphans come to see the official inauguration of a war memorial like few others.

Prominent in the crowds that swarmed across Mousehold Heath to pass between the serried ranks of serving soldiers were an unprecedented array of civic dignitaries that included the Lord Mayor of Norwich and the mayors of Great Yarmouth and King's Lynn together with the Sheriff of Norwich and the High Sheriff of Norfolk.

They had journeyed from every corner of the county to see for themselves the arc of semi-detached memorial cottages, each bearing the name of places where blood sacrifices had been made and which were designed to honour the dead by offering homes to the living whose war wounds had rendered them unfit for work.

And there, amid a ceremony of much pomp and circumstance, they had paid their own respects as the Lord Lieutenant, the Earl of Leicester, unveiled the memorial stone that has recently been restored to its former glory before laying a laurel wreath with the simple inscription: "A grateful tribute from the county of Norfolk to the gallant memory of those of the Norfolk Regiment who gave their lives for their country."

But my focus was elsewhere. Somewhere in that vast assembly of the mind's eye I couldn't help picturing one man in particular, a slight, bespectacled figure who had somehow managed to conjure a peculiarly English rural idyll from the wreckage of a conflict that had laid waste to a generation.

Cecil Upcher knew all about loss and the nightmare of war. He bore the physical as well as the psychological scars of a conflict that had claimed the lives of so many of his friends.

And his response was a deeply personal act of remembrance that endures to this day.

As the architect of his former

regiment's magnificently utilitarian memorial he designed and oversaw a project that had its roots in a trauma of death and despair he chronicled in a remarkable correspondence with the girl he would later marry.

The letters held in the archives of the Royal Norfolk Regimental Museum are a treasure trove of experiences from the trenches of the first world war which, in this weekend of remembrance, enable us to remember a soldier whose most notable military accomplishment was achieved not on the battlefield but back home in the county of his birth.

For Cecil Upcher was a Norfolk man and proud of it. Descended from a long line of parsons, he was born at Hingham in 1884, the son of the rector of Hingham.

Educated at Haileybury, he trained as an architect and spent two years working in London before returning to Norfolk where, in 1908, he established a practice in Norwich.

Six years later the outbreak of war interrupted his career and, at the age of 30, Cecil found himself one of the oldest subalterns in a battalion of volunteers. The 9th Norfolks was a part of Lord Kitchener's so-called New Army made up of units filled largely with men with little or no military experience who had answered the old warrior's famous, finger-pointing call to arms.

Almost a year spent drilling, marching and fighting mock battles in England was followed by the move to France that marked the beginning of Cecil's 'letters from the front' written to his sweetheart Hilda Ward.

It would be a week before he heard the distant "rumble of the guns", a phoney war period characterised by a deal of humour and high spirits that filled the architect-turned-soldier with a mixture of hope and pride.

Typical of his jaunty letters home was one written on September 9, 1915: "Usual work in morning by companies - fire control and fire order - foot inspection, also boots and socks. Then I made my platoon do a little extended order work.

I killed off all the NCOs, making any old body carry on. Have got a top-hole lot of men, all true Norfolk



“ I only got about halfway when I got this rotten bullet in my leg. Nothing much but I couldn't walk. Fortunately, I went down near a shell hole so got into it... ”

Cecil Upcher: Left, architect and a casualty of war as a serving officer of the 9th Norfolks. He designed the cottages and the layout of the memorial project.



men." All too soon, however, the peaceful pastoral landscape, with its "gorgeous" views, gentle valleys and tranquil villages that featured a "ripping little arbour covered with vine", gave way to drenching rain and a "gruelling" march to the frontline that left many unfit men straggling behind.

By September 24, Cecil was nearing the action and could see "a terrific bombardment going on in the distance". It proved a grim augury for a baptism of fire that would prove to be the first and last experience of combat for all too many among the 9th Norfolks.

Cecil's war might have ended there too. Instead, he was lucky enough to escape with a leg wound and it was from a hospital train steaming back to the coast that he related a saga of squandered courage and wasted training that would become familiar for myriad New Army units pitched ill-prepared into battle.

"We marched till about 4pm up to where our guns were firing and got a halt for food for about two hours," he explained to Hilda. "We were all pretty dead. It then poured with rain which was a bit of a bore. We then started to carry on the advance and eventually got somewhere beyond Vermelles which was a mass of



Soldier's lasting legacy to his fallen comrades



ruins up to the German trenches which had been taken that morning.

"Then we got our first bit of fire. Shells dropping about. We lay in that spot all night nearly, with these beastly things dropping about, but got used to it after a bit... Then, about 4am, on again till we got to some more German trenches which we took over from some of our troops... and at quarter to 7am I was ordered with my platoon to take a German position ahead..."

"Well, I only got about halfway when I got this rotten bullet in my leg. Nothing much but I couldn't walk. Fortunately, I went down near a shell hole so got into it..."

There he remained, with bullets "whizzing over all the time", until that attack and another petered out amid renewed slaughter. Finally, as darkness enveloped the bloody battlefield, he crawled back with the help of another wounded soldier and was carried out of the trenches he had only just reached.

Unaware of the scale of the disaster, Cecil bemoaned his plight. "It's rotten luck being knocked out first go in," he wrote, little realising just how fortunate he had been.

Rushed into the offensive around the slag heaps and mine-heads of Loos, the 9th Norfolks lost more than 200 men,

A living memorial: Designed to commemorate the 6,000 men of the Norfolk Regiment who died in the first world war, the cottages were to house men whose physical and mental scars prevented them earning a living. They were opened amid much pomp in August, 1921.

killed, wounded and missing in an attack that achieved nothing.

Hospital and a spell of convalescence followed before Cecil returned to his unit the following March. Despite a late fall of snow and bitterly cold winds, he was feeling as "fit as a flea" or, rather he observed lovingly to Hilda, "as fit as a flea can feel without its kindred flea".

After the wretched failures of the previous autumn, he was struck by the Army's growing strength and a renewed sense of optimism. "Everyone out here," he noted, "is quite hopeful about the end of the war. Of course, no one can foresee it, but things point to going the right way, I think."

For the first time, he faced prolonged spells in and out of the frontline and, to his evident surprise, found himself revelling in a strange new subterranean world of dugouts and trenches with "messy meals amongst mud, matches and mugs".

Placed for several weeks in a relatively quiet sector where he could still hear cuckoos singing amid the shell bursts he discovered his biggest enemies were rats and mud.

Writing home to Hilda in April, Cecil described a "mucky" journey up to the frontline that involved wading through mud up to his waist. "I heard last night that in a recent attack men were actually drowned in the mud and water," he added.

Neither the "beastly" weather nor the death of close friends appeared to dampen his spirits. With his unit pulled out of the line at a time when large portions of the British Army was being bled white during the early stages of the Somme offensive, Cecil was able to enjoy a well-earned rest.

Breakfast was served in a field amid countryside looking "lovely and peaceful", leading him to reflect: "It is ripping getting back here."

The ways of the Norfolk men o' war continued to amuse him. He related the story of the general who turned up unannounced at camp and tried to strike up conversations with the few men dotted about the camp. They, "in their usual Norfolk way would hardly say a word to him", he noted. "So, he formed a bad impression of us, and fairly strafed the colonel for having a rotten battalion and said they all looked very gloomy. Poor man. Of course, no one understands a Norfolk man unless they've lived all their life in Norfolk!"

The following day, while men were dying in their thousands in grim battles to the south, Cecil and a fellow officer were out picking flowers to decorate the mess.

Of course, it couldn't last. Before long it was back to the trenches and sharing dugouts with "heaps" of rats that were "squeaking and gnawing and scampering about all night". But worse, far worse was about to follow.

Following a "rowdy" sojourn in Amiens, where the battalion officers enjoyed a "tophole" dinner before singing "at the tops of our voices" all the way home, the 9th Norfolks were introduced to the gruesome killing fields of the Somme and a war-zone that seemed to Cecil "beyond description".

This was warfare on a scale he had never witnessed before amid trenches that were so "knocked about" that most men slept "as best they could" in shell holes. "Heavens," he added in disbelief, "it is war with a vengeance... The noise is terrific and since we got here there has been absolutely no cessation of our shells screaming over and, of course, quite enough of theirs."

Three days later, the 9th, supported by four tanks making their first appearance on the Western Front, launched their second major attack of the war. It proved even more disastrous than the first with a casualty list stretching to more than 430 names. "It is sickening," observed Cecil. "The poor old 9th got it again in the neck.

They never have the luck."

As assistant adjutant, Cecil had been held back and missed the massacre. But the strain was beginning to tell.

Depressed by what he regarded as the "hopeless failure" of the tanks, or the "new engines of war" as he derisively referred to them, he wrote of a strange incident involving his commanding officer. Having come through the battle unscathed, he had been wounded by a bullet through the ear before being mysteriously bayoneted. "He says by one of our own men, but no one seems to have seen it happen," noted Cecil in a thinly-veiled tone of suspicion, "and we can't make head or tail of it."

With barely enough survivors to scrape together two companies Cecil had his work cut out trying to help reorganise the shattered battalion. It was a difficult time with changes in personnel and styles of leadership.

By October, the usual cheeriness had disappeared and a downcast Cecil told Hilda "we all could do with a bit of leave to get rid of some of our fed-upness". He found the new regime "quite dismal" and complained: "It doesn't seem like the old 9th at all."

Though he didn't know it then, nervous exhaustion was beginning to take a hold, a condition made worse by having been badly shaken by a shell burst a few days earlier.

Cecil made no mention of the episode in his letters home, possibly for fear of upsetting Hilda, but a medical report makes clear he was "blown up" and "concussed" by a shell. He had carried on for a month after, seemingly unaffected, until October 17 when he merely noted: "I didn't get up this morning..."

Five days later the battalion's doctor ordered him to a rest camp from where he wrote: "I just don't seem to want to do anything."

Consigned to bed and fed a diet of "white pills", he retreated into himself. "I'm sure the others in here find me a lively companion as there's nothing to talk about except war and I hate talking about that," he told Hilda. "So, usually don't talk at all."

Within a week he was back in England diagnosed as suffering from "nervous debility and shellshock". It was the beginning of a nightmarish ordeal that would last for months. Stricken by bouts of sleeplessness and haunted by "bad dreams", he slipped into a deep depression.

Recovery came only slowly, helped by Hilda who he had married in the midst of his struggles. The nightmares began to recede and medical boards reported improvements in his health, but his nerves remained "unstable" for months after.

Eventually, Cecil was thought to have recovered sufficiently to take up a training role in a camp in England, but he was never considered fit enough to return to the frontline.

After the war was over, Cecil picked up the pieces of his career as an architect and soldiered on until his death at the ripe old age of 88.

Always an individualist, he gained an enviable reputation for his skill at restoring churches and medieval buildings. Described as a "craftsman-type architect" who believed in having a small staff and doing most of the drawing work himself, he famously saved Pull's Ferry in Norwich from ruin, converted Cley Mill into a private house and designed a new drill hall at Sandringham which was opened by King George V and Queen Mary.

But it was for his work on the Norfolk memorial cottages, a project so close to his heart, that Cecil Upcher would be best remembered and it is there on the edge of Mousehold that his grand designs live on as a lasting monument to the 6,000 men from his regiment who marched off to war and never came home.