

TLC Showcase

MIKE WOOD

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Introduction to Timber

In recent years the voices of a generation have fallen silent, just like the guns in 1918. The generation which followed, the veterans of the Second World War, are now few, particularly those who served through the whole terrible conflict. Soon their voices will also fade and only the films or the written histories will help us to understand what they endured and what a remarkable generation they were.

Timber – Smashing Job, is a novel bringing the experiences of a soldier of the Royal Army Service Corps, 50th Northumbrian Division to life in a story of love and conflict, humour and sorrow, and sheer bloody-mindedness. The story begins in May 1939 as a group of raw recruits begin life in the British Army and it ends in April 1946 upon demobilisation. The story of the seven amazing years in between, based on the diaries and recollections of Lance-Corporal Neville Wood, ensures his voice will always be heard.

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In January 2017 I read an article in *The Times* which made reference to The Literary Consultancy and it piqued my interest. I looked up the website and noted the services they offer, filing the link for future reference.

During the summer of 2017, I completed my dad's story and wondered what to do next. He used to reminisce openly about the war, always in an understated way. As I wrote the book and pulled together all the diary transcriptions, anecdotes and original papers the sense that this is a fascinating story became ever more compelling. Once the novel was completed I read it through a number of times and I felt it was a great story, well told. However, this is my first novel and the doubts crept in, particularly when reading the work of established authors, which can make a novice feel inadequate.

I recalled the article I had read in January and decided to send the full manuscript to TLC for assessment. I was impressed with the feedback on the website regarding objectivity, constructive criticism and what aspiring authors learnt in the process. The novel was reviewed by Karl French, and the time, effort and commitment he must have put into critiquing the book and providing the extensive feedback was

immense. It was also invaluable, helping me to improve the manuscript, learn some important lessons, instil self-belief and it has also inspired me to carry on writing. Above all the feedback from Karl included the statement:

"...you can rest assured that you have done your father's story justice in this book."

This was, for me, the Holy Grail and I look forward to working further with TLC to see if it is a story which can be shared and enjoyed by many more people.

Timber by Mike Wood

Neville was scraping the last bit of bully beef he could extract from a tin when Alan sat beside him. He had a glint in his eye. "Fancy something a bit dangerous?" he asked.

"Meaning that driving on that bloody road for two days, being bombed, shelled and strafed wasn't dangerous?" replied Neville incredulously. But his interest was piqued. "Go on," he said eagerly.

"Company is looking for volunteers for some sort of hush hush detail. Six wagons, tomorrow night. I've volunteered and I've told Carton you and Nick are sure to be up for it."

"Oh, that's great!" snorted Neville. His withering look broke into a grin. "I'll go see him," he said springing to his feet.

The detail was to load up with mines and take them to the forward boxes, defended by the South Africans on the road to Derna, right into the jaws of the enemy. Darkness fell and they set off on a clear moonlit night. The rumble of guns was their constant companion, increasing in volume as they headed west. They had approximately fifty miles to travel and halfway into their journey the moonlight was obliterated as if a curtain had been yanked across it. A howling sandstorm engulfed the small convoy in seconds.

"Blast and blazes!" snarled Neville.

"Just keep going," said Nick.

They slowed to barely a crawl and managed to keep Alan's wagon in front in sight. The wind and sand shook and rattled the wagon as they lurched towards their destination. Thirty minutes later they emerged, just as suddenly, into the moonlight. They were one of only two trucks and they were not on any discernible track or road. They stopped and got out.

"I thought you were on the road," said Neville to Alan, frowning.

"I lost Bob in front almost immediately we went into the sand," replied Alan apologetically.

"Well, where the hell are we?" asked Joe who had been travelling with Alan. They all looked around the featureless landscape.

"Lots of smashed-up tanks and wagons by the look of it but I can't tell if they're ours or theirs," said Nick squinting at the moonlit hulks all around.

"Engines," hissed Joe, tilting his head to one side. "Maybe the other lads?"

"I can hear the squeal of tank tracks as well," said Neville nervously.

"Weapons," snapped Alan as they ran back to their trucks. They pulled their rifles from their cabs and dropped to one knee beside the front wheel arches, ready to fire as two leviathans roared over the top of a shallow depression. Two Panzer Mark III tanks lined them up in their gunsights as two armoured troop carriers emerged from the crest and moved towards them.

"Legen Sie ihre Waffen ab," came the shouts from the first carrier. "Put down your weapons," followed in guttural English. Neville, Nick, Joe and Alan dropped their rifles and got up slowly, hands raised.

"Engländer?" A German officer came towards them covered by at least a dozen German infantrymen, the carriers and the tanks. "Der Krieg ist für Sie vorbei."

"What's he saying?" whispered Neville. Another German soldier approached.

"The battle is over for you, Tommy," he grinned. The officer was checking the wagons.

"Mitkommen," he snapped gesturing to the four British soldiers, "und uns folgen."

"You will follow us in your wagons," translated the soldier. "And I will ride with *you*." He pointed his pistol threateningly. Neville felt strangely calm. His first reaction had been one of panic and fear at the array of weaponry pointing at him. He had heard the stories of German atrocities, gunning down prisoners mercilessly, booby-trapping corpses. But, not on this occasion, at least not yet. *So, this is the enemy*, he thought as he stared into the eyes of the German soldier. *Arrogant bastards*. The German soldier smiled at him thinly and nodded his head towards the wagon. *Bide your time*, thought Neville, *my chance may come*. He was followed to his cab and watched intently as he got in, the gun pointing at his back. The German came round the front of the vehicle and climbed in beside him.

"So, let us drive," he said, leaning against the inside of the passenger door, his gun resting in his lap. Neville breathed deeply to maintain his calm and started the engine. The two British trucks were sandwiched between the German carriers and tanks and they drove across the desert for twenty minutes. As they crested a slight rise the moonlight revealed a mass of men and machines, of German infantry and armour. They came to a halt and were ordered to dismount. Hands behind their heads they were marched away from the trucks at gunpoint to a clearing in the middle of a corral of vehicles. A German soldier gestured with his rifle.

"Hinsetzen und bewegen Sie sich nicht."

"I think he wants us to sit down," said Neville watching the German warily. He glanced across at his three comrades. Each of them looked resolute, watchful. They sat in a line, the one German soldier hovering nearby. Guns rumbled in the distance and flashes lit the horizon. Gradually the darkness receded to a grey dawn. Their bodies ached from the cold and sitting in one position. They had been given no food and water and Joe's "What time's breakfast, Fritzzy?" had been met with a stony stare down the barrel of a German rifle. The sound of aircraft grew in volume, increasingly menacing.

"Look," hissed Neville. "Over there. He nodded his head towards a staff car where three German officers had stopped to scrutinise a map placed on the bonnet. The middle of the three removed his cap and ran his hand over his pate. He turned slightly showing the black iron cross around his neck. The four British soldiers looked at each other incredulously. They were barely twenty yards from the legend of the German Army, Erwin Rommel, the Desert Fox.

"Is that who I think it is?" gasped Alan. The other three nodded

"Almost makes it worthwhile being captured," commented Nick. It was a surreal situation. There they were, captives of the enemy, held at gunpoint, in mortal danger in the middle of a battle, and they sat there, awestruck to see the man many considered to be unbeatable in battle.

"Oh, for my rifle now," snarled Neville.

An ambulance pulled over to their right and two German Medical Orderlies jumped from the front, heading to the rear to help out half a dozen men, bloodied and bandaged. The engine ticked over as they helped the wounded to a tent dressing

station. The earth shook as the bombs from the R.A.F. began to hurtle to earth. German anti-aircraft guns responded and the noise was deafening. The explosions came closer and closer. The air was thick with choking sand and dust. Wounded men stumbled, crying in pain, others ran for cover. Rommel quickly mounted his staff car and was driven away.

"Quick," hissed Neville, "The ambulance." They'd all been thinking the same thing and moved as one. Despite the stiffness they ran, semi-crouched, towards the vehicle bearing the large insignia of the Red Cross and jumped in, two in the front and two in the back. Neville took the wheel.

"Christ, where to?" he gasped.

"Just drive and keep your head down," snapped Nick.

Neville released the brake and eased down on the accelerator. He turned the ambulance round and moved away. Nick was beside him and the tension was extreme as they watched intently for any sign of an alarm being raised or pursuit.

"They'll notice it's gone any minute," gasped Nick.

"Yes, but in this mayhem they won't know who's taken it and we won't need to go far before they can't see us," responded Neville, sounding far more reassuring than he felt.

Tanks, wagons, armoured cars, troop carriers were all on the move as the bombs continued to rain down. A group of Germans near an overturned armoured car tried to wave them down, but they just drove on.

"You're going west," said Nick incredulously, panic in his voice. "You need to go east, east towards our lines."

"For God's sake, Nick, shut up, I know what I'm doing.

"No," shouted Nick, "Turn around." Neville said nothing, he just gripped the wheel and focused all his attention through the grimy windshield. Nick grabbed his arm and the steering-wheel. Neville looked across at him fiercely.

"Bloody calm down," he snarled, his eyes blazing. "Listen, I'm banking on Jerry thinking we're just running wounded to the rear. At some point we'll be in the open

and *then* we turn towards the coast and east from there. I need you watching and helping me, not getting into a flap and pulling my bloody arm."

They moved cautiously through the German army more pre-occupied with the ongoing battle. Tanks were on the move, troops mounting wagons, artillery firing, ach ach guns peppering the grey sky with explosions of flak. As they headed further west, so the concentration of men and materials lessened. Neville looked out of the corner of his eye and saw Nick beginning to relax.

"Think we're out of the woods yet?" Nick ventured. Neville smiled and glanced across at his passenger.

"I'll say no more than I'm hopeful."

They had talked it up. On the road ahead a wagon was on its side. Two German soldiers were on the ground, being treated for injuries. Several others were languishing by the roadside, smoking. A lone German stood in the middle of the dusty track, feet apart, facing the oncoming ambulance. He began waving his arms to flag it down. Neville and Nick looked aghast as they slowed the ambulance down. Quickly, Neville banged on the partition behind him.

"Trouble," he shouted for the benefit of Alan and Joe.

"What do we do?" muttered Nick, eyes wide with fear. Neville did not respond, quickly weighing his options. He was twenty yards from the enemy. Whether they could see his uniform he would never know, but the German in the middle of the road began to lift his rifle.

"Decision made," grunted Neville, and he slammed his foot down hard on the accelerator. The ambulance surged forward and ate the yards of track. The German tried to take evasive action, but took a glancing blow off the side of the bonnet, spinning him into the dust. Other Germans looked up bewildered.

"We haven't got long," said Neville, through gritted teeth. Moments later bullets started to hit the ambulance. Neville hoped Alan and Joe had hit the floor, but his main concern was to put distance between them and the enemy as quickly as possible. They pushed on for two miles and came across a track to the right. Neville made an instant decision to turn and head north towards the sea. The primary battle action was taking place around the British defensive boxes inland, so they were untroubled

as they crossed the barren landscape. When the sea was in sight, he turned right again and headed east. He glanced at Nick.

"You ok?" he asked. Nick was motionless, pale and drawn. Neville frowned. "You haven't been hit have you?" Nick shook his head. "Well, we're going east now," smiled Neville encouragingly. Nick nodded, almost imperceptibly, but said nothing.

The coast road was quiet for almost forty minutes.

"Tanks," said Neville, suddenly, nodding ahead and slowing the ambulance down.

"Theirs or ours?" asked Nick, morosely. "I can only stand so much excitement in one day." He managed a smile.

"Not sure," replied Neville. "But we're running out of options. We can't go back, we can't go into the sea, into the minefields, so we go ahead and take our chance." They drove slowly, and the tanks loomed larger. Gun turrets swivelled in their direction.

"They're Valentines," exclaimed Nick joyously, springing up in his seat and coming alive.

Fifty yards short of the tanks Neville pulled over. They sat for a few moments and looked at the six-pounder guns pointing at them directly.

"On foot from here," shouted Neville, as he banged on the partition behind him. They dismounted from the ambulance slowly and Alan and Joe joined them.

"Nerves could be shredded, so nothing to provoke them in case they're trigger happy," said Alan quietly.

"Hands up and slowly towards them," said Neville, and the four of them moved forward. Nothing stirred, just the breeze and the Valentine's guns bristling with menace. They were fifteen yards away and stopped, unsure what to do next.

The turret top of the lead tank flipped open with a clang and a head and torso appeared. In heavily accented English a voice said, "You can come through now. We just wanted to scare the shit out of you." Soldiers of the 3rd South African Division emerged from behind the Valentine's. They had bayonets fixed but appeared relaxed.

"Who are you?" demanded a sergeant.

"R.A.S.C. 50th Division, Sergeant," responded Neville.

"Bloody hell, rooineks, and what are you doing coming from that direction?" He used the Afrikaans expression for an Englishman from the days of the Boer War, when the British soldiers invariably had red necks from the sun.

"Escaped from captivity, Sergeant," explained Neville.

"In that thing?"

"What else, Sergeant?" smiled Neville, and the South African smiled back.

"Come on, bloody English. Let's get you fed and watered and back to your unit."

About the Writer

Mike Wood was born in Hull in 1958, the youngest of three brothers. From a very early age he remembers spending a great deal of time with his dad, who was always happy to talk about his time in the army during the Second World War. It may have been that which helped Mike develop a passion for history.



At the age of nine, Mike wrote his first short story, published in the East Riding Bystander.

The urge to write was put on hold as his career began, initially and latterly in the Civil Service, and in between for twenty-eight years with Norwich Union Insurance. His career took him to Preston, Burnley, Liverpool, Manchester and finally to Norwich where he has lived for twenty-four years and met his wife, Anita.

On one of his visits back to Yorkshire, Mike's dad passed him his war medals, a collection of papers and photographs and several small pocket diaries written during his army service. In 2005 Mike had the opportunity to transcribe the diaries and record the many anecdotes his dad shared with him. He presented his dad with the printed transcript for Fathers' Day 2006.

Mike retired from work in 2013 with the determination to bring his love for history and writing together in a book telling his dad's wonderful and remarkable story.