

# ng, 40 years later

## THE PREMATURE by Geoffrey Jackson Sr.

*This is a passage from the war memoirs of Geoffrey Jackson Sr. The events described in the following excerpt took place in Assendrecht, Holland on October 16, 1944.*

... So Bdr. Andrews and his shift went on pay-parade first, took over from my shift early then stayed on duty. The rest of us went off to leave pay-parade and then came off shift. The three of us went down into our dugout to shave and clean up a bit. While the guns pounded away above us we stripped to the waist, sloshed water over ourselves and tried to relax.

I had my back to the dug-out entrance but right opposite me was Gnr. Johnson who, of course, was facing the entrance. I had finished and was proceeding to dry myself when Johnson suddenly stood still and said, "What was that?" I just looked at him and said the obvious, "What was what?" He replied, "There was a swirl of black smoke out there which covered the entrance." We looked at each other for a long moment and listened.

We could hear the other guns firing down the line but nothing from our own, just above us. It seemed like minutes later but was probably only seconds when I dropped my towel and ran up the dugout steps. The scene there stunned me.

Our whole gun position was burnt bare and blasted black. The point where the explosion had occurred was clearly marked by black lines radiating away from the breech of the gun, like sunrays in the sky at sunset.

Standing there by my dugout I could see the bodies of my three gunners as they lay scattered round the gun, comrades who only minutes before were talking and joking as they served our gun.

The layer, Gnr. Glasspole, lying several feet in front of the gun, had been cut almost in two by the blast. Bdr. Andrews had lost an arm and Gnr. Vitale had lost both an arm

and a leg. They both had been blown backwards and their bodies were now lying some twenty feet behind the gun on the very fringe of the gun position. Most of their clothing had been whipped away by the blast and they lay there in grotesque positions. The gun itself was badly damaged and out of action.

It was obvious what had happened. No enemy shell here. One of our own high-explosive shells had exploded as the boys were placing it in the breech. It had been what is known in gunner circles as "a premature," a round that explodes before it is expected to. Three of my boys lay dead in front of me.

I stood there, in a silence quite foreign to any gun position, trying to appreciate the situation. I felt as though I were in a vacuum, my senses strongly affected by the absence of either sound or movement around my gun. There was nothing left of my position to make either. I looked down the line to No. 3 gun which was still firing and saw most of them looking our way, even as they served their gun. They had noticed the smoke from the explosion. The thunder of their guns only accented the silence at ours.

After surveying the scene for a few minutes, I got myself in hand and walked across the Troop position to inform the GPO at the Command Post.

Things are a bit hazy for awhile after that, but I know that very soon the Regimental 2i/c, the MO, and half of RHQ were on my position, asking a lot of questions which I couldn't answer. How long they stayed I couldn't hazard a guess, but eventually they seemed satisfied.

As he was about to leave, the 2i/c told me to cover the bodies and clean up the area. According to some of my buddies I just shook my head and replied, "Get someone else to do that, Sir," which he evidently did. I had no desire to walk round my gun position picking up what was left of three of my men.

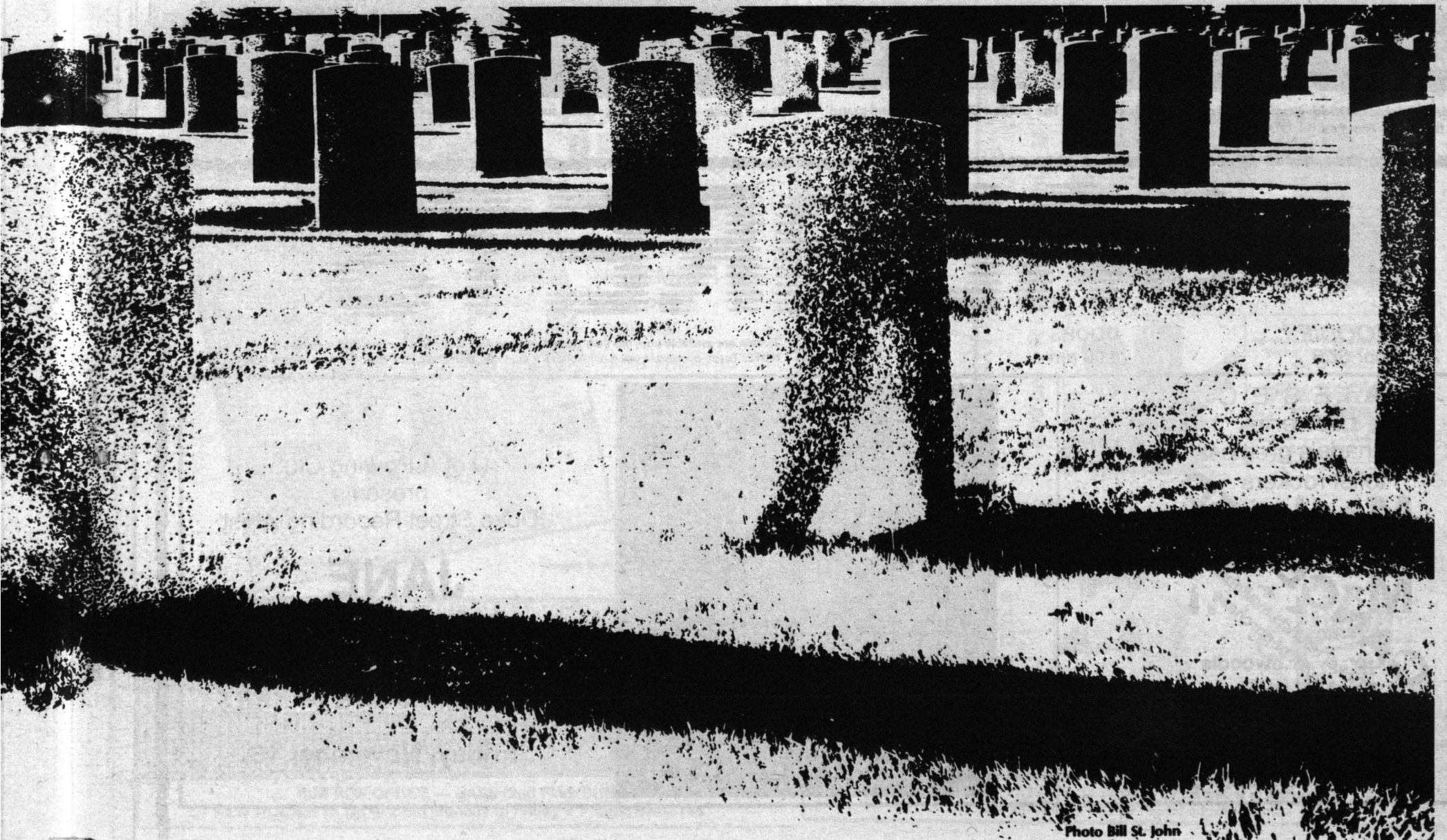
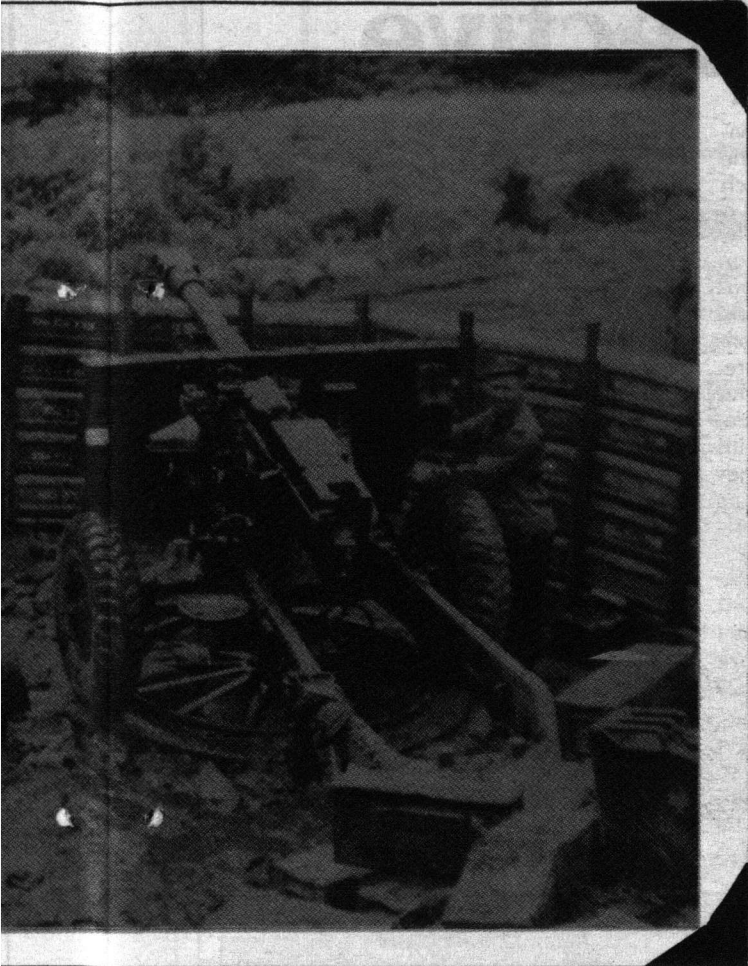


Photo Bill St. John