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.

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ought 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 coming 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 a debt of gratitude to the soldiers of the Norfolk Regiment who gave their lives for their country.

“...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 Harrow, 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 characterised by a deal of humour and high spirits that filled the architect-cum-soldier with a mixture of hope and pride.

Typical of his jaunty letters home was one written on September 9, 1915. “Usual work in the morning by companies – fire control and fire order – foot inspection, also boots and socks. Then I made a plat of 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 men.”

All too soon, however, the peaceful pastoral landscape, with its “gorgeous views, gentle valleys and tranquil villages” that featured a “rippling 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 to myriad New Army units pitched ill-prepared into battle.

“We marched till about 4am 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...
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 fleas” or, rather he observed loudly to Hilda, “as fit as a flea can feel without its kindred fleas”.

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 what he termed “surrrealism” with constant 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 cackles and 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 “beasty” 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 all they looked very gloomy. Poor men. 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. 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 who had been working 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 as much as he could himself, he famously saved Pull’s Ferry in Norwich from ruin, converted Cley Mill into 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 the regiment who marched off to war and never came home.