

LIFE IN AND OUT OF THE TRENCHES

By the end of 1914 the great sweep of battle in the first months of the war had been brought to a halt and both sides had begun the construction of strong defensive lines consisting of trenches, wire defences, mined dugouts and deep bunkers. The building and digging created a more or less continuous line of opposing trenches stretching from the Swiss border to the Belgian coast. This strategy led to a state of siege warfare where attacks were carried out in phases with short distance objectives and success counted in gains of yards rather than miles. The human cost of casualties and dead in such grinding siege warfare regularly reached tens of thousands in the space of a single day and, while both sides made attempts to break the deadlock with major offensives, the characteristics of trench warfare created conditions never witnessed before. The trenches were little more than mud ditches crawling with disease and vermin, filled with stagnant water and all too often the bodies of fallen comrades. Life in the trenches was characterised by long periods of monotony, punctuated with intense episodes of terror, leaving soldiers constantly on edge, as poor sanitation and shoddy living conditions ate away at morale. As ever, though, Tommy's indomitable spirit and humour shone through in the widely used catchphrase summing up the shared hatred of the trenches as the Three Rs; Rations, Rain and Rats



1st Dec 1914: Left Boulogne for the front yesterday with a contingent of volunteers and reserves; we have covered just 16 miles in 24 hours - now a bitter snowstorm, adding greatly to the suffering of every soldier, has halted all movement and trapped us in a bunker

1st Dec 2014: Great excitement as King George visits troops at Merville and confers the honour of Knight Grand Cross on General Joffre

2nd Dec 2014: In a surprise attack on Vermelles, won after a terrific hand-to-hand fight, the French re-take their ground on the way to Lens and in another dash toward the sea the Germans attempt a raft crossing of the Yser south of Dixmude but are robustly defeated

2nd Dec 1914: The snow relents at noon and we are at last able to leave our makeshift igloos, but we make only three meagre miles before dark

3rd Dec 1914: A bitter frost this evening following this afternoon's thaw decimates our sorry band with more than thirty crippled by frostbite. After a freezing night in a barn burrowed like rats in the straw my sleeping companion has been taken for amputation of his toes

4th Dec 1914: Today we are within earshot and walking distance of the front, but in the fog and thick grey mud we lose all sense of direction

5th Dec 1914: Through the fog, we hear the mumble of men talking; we have to slither and crawl closer until we can tell that they are English. Somehow we have found the BEF trenches south of St Eloi; close enough to the German trenches to smell their breakfast cooking

6th Dec 1914: The rush and crash of constant artillery fire forms an appropriate backdrop to our miserable life in the dank, freezing trenches

7th Dec 1914: We receive orders banning fraternisation with the enemy; but it is the mud and snow that will stop this - not a piece of paper

8th Dec 1914: Back from England just a week ago but now I must leave again for New York; a signal from Beveridge that Roosevelt wants me to report to him - and the worrying news that my wife Mary is unwell

9th Dec 1914: The French launch a series of attacks against German positions in the Artois region in the north and Champagne in the south

10th Dec 1914: German troops capture "Hill 60" at Zillebeke from the French, dominating a key area of high ground above the allied trenches

11th Dec 1914: We have now been nine days in these sodden trenches; trapped by artillery, snipers, weather and grey, glutinous mud

12th Dec 1914: The early evening ration delivery now seems to be the signal for a period of peace on both sides; a welcome glimpse of humanity

13th Dec 1914: I have no travel plan but, today, I leave the trench behind because I must make my way back to England and then on to New York

14th Dec 1914: After five hours walking vaguely to the west yesterday, I managed to join a bloody transport of wounded heading for Calais

15th Dec 1914: Sketchy reports are spreading, fuelled as always by rumour, that three North coast towns have been shelled by German warships

17th Dec 1914: As I arrive in Calais, the rumours become fact; Whitby, Scarborough and Hartlepool have been shelled by German warships, personalising the war for many thousands

18th Dec 1914: Calais is swamped with wounded following German retaliation to allied attacks along the front from Neuve Chappelle to Givenchy. I have volunteered to help in any capacity but there is room only for the wounded on the heavily laden ferries for England

19th Dec 1914: To avoid further retaliation following the attacks at Wytschaete and Givenchy, Marshall Joffre closes down the winter offensive

20th Dec 1914: It seems that I will not be able to board any ship from Calais before the end of the year, so I am leaving today for Dieppe

21st Dec 1914: As a disembarkation point for Australian and British forces, Dieppe is relatively quiet and free from the horrors of Calais

21st Dec 1914: News of the first German air raid on England. An unidentified aircraft drops bombs in the sea near Dover.

22nd Dec 1914: After some hours scouring the docks, I am fortunate enough to secure passage on a supply ship returning to Newhaven tomorrow

23rd Dec 1914: It is just half a day away but the bloody slaughter and the cold, miserable fear of the trenches is already like another life

23rd Dec 1914: News of the second air raid on England - the first bombs dropped on English soil, near Dover.

25th Dec 1914: Arrived in Newhaven from Dieppe at 3.00am - a crewman has kindly invited me to his home for the day - not my happiest Christmas

26th Dec 1914: Definitely not my happiest Christmas - all transport has been requisitioned for military service but somehow I have to get to Liverpool

27th Dec 1914: Brightening the post Christmas gloom is news that USS Jason has docked in Portsmouth bringing gifts for the children of England

28th Dec 1914: Prowling the docks, I hear that RFA Growler is due to leave Portsmouth for Birkenhead and that I may be able to work my passage

29th Dec 1914: Captain John Skinner, Master of the Growler, agrees to meet me and, after hearing my request, appoints me as a temporary deckhand. We sail at dawn tomorrow

