

THE DIARIES



OCT – DEC 1914

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 Oct 1914: The month dawns bitterly cold with a penetrating rawness that chills to the marrow adding enormously to the hardships of the unsheltered troops

1st Oct 1914: Freed from the Aisne deadlock, the German military machine is now sweeping across France, slaughtering and ravaging unchecked. Joffre and the French troops moved out of Albert - but then the women, children and nurses, all obvious, were wantonly murdered

2nd Oct 1914: To hold back the German flood, Joffre has increased the 2nd Army to eight corps along a 60 mile front from Amiens to Lille

3rd Oct 1914: The General Staff's Plan 1 to rout the French Army and capture Paris, has failed and a modified Plan 2 is now the German grail. Maud'huy's 10th army has withdrawn from Arras and Lens is now under

threat as Prince Rupprecht's 6th army leads a new attack. Reinforcements from the Royal Marines are at Lier and closing on Antwerp but the Germans have penetrated the outer ring of forts. On the banks of the Somme, the Germans now hold a complete semicircle on the south and west boundaries of the Thiépval plateau.

4th Oct 1914: En route to Bethune, we pass a mass grave of old men, women and children lying heaped in a sunken ditch on the Albert-Arras road. Refugees tell of German commanders ignoring violent abuse, torture, murder and rape, as their troops sweep across France

5th Oct 1914: Attacks by Bavarian reserves along the Arras-Lens line are holding the French 10th army while the German cavalry moves north

6th Oct 1914: A vicious bombardment rages, ruthlessly battering the city of Arras, murdering its citizens, destroying its famous buildings. Twice the enemy poured over the ramparts of Arras, and the streets ran with French and German blood before they were expelled. Above Arras, with their guns on advantageous ridges, the Germans fight their way over the hills and across the road to Lille. The swathe of destruction which marks German warfare is now spreading like prairie fire, obliterating everything in its path

7th Oct 1914: Lille abandoned as XXI Corps move south towards Artois: defence of the city is left to the Territorials and some Algerian troops. Marshall Foch, now in command of French forces north of the Oise, orders 10th Army to end withdrawal and regain the initiative. German cavalry attack between Lens and Lille but are quickly repulsed and forced back by French XXI Corps advancing from Bethune

7th Oct 1914: Reports from the Belgian Field Army that Antwerp is now suffering a devastating bombardment and is likely to fall within hours

8th Oct 1914: Talking with scared refugees scurrying south, the truth dawns - the Arras battle is not the high-water mark of the German flood. Refugees from districts north of Lille report masses of German cavalry and horse artillery, and no forces to cope with them.

8th Oct 1914: Broad, inviting routes are open above Lille direct to the Channel ports, offering the Germans the opportunity to attack England. It all appears to be unravelling around us: we fight inland while they are within a day's march of the French coast, unopposed. Tomorrow, the

German flag could float twenty-one miles from British shores, with siege guns dominating the straits of Dover

9th Oct 1914: Waiting for Antwerp to fall, masses of German cavalry waste time while French troop trains are rushing the Allies to the north. When the Allies realised how the German wave was flowing, the race was against time, and trains came north every twelve minutes. It is hard to believe but, under their very noses, the Germans are allowing us to fill the gap from Maud'huy's left to the coast

10th Oct 1914: The shattered city of Antwerp fell with astonishing suddenness today, after suffering a terrific bombardment of twelve days. Antwerp's capitulation was a severe blow to the Allies and a signal for Von Beseler to start across Belgium - his siege artillery outranged the defending guns, and pulverised the outer line of forts, only to find them deserted. The Belgian army had crossed the Scheldt behind the civil population, and made a detour around the end of the German lines

11th Oct 1914: Still west of Lille, the Bavarian columns, headed by cavalry, do nothing but waste time on ornate plans, strategy and tactics. The Germans hold ground but the retreating forces of the Allies turn on a pitifully thin line to check the sweep across Belgium.

12th Oct 1914: Von Beseler to people of Antwerp: "Resistance will cause the destruction of your beautiful city" They left, and he destroyed it. 26,000 Belgian and English soldiers escaped from Antwerp, while the fight left 45,000 German dead

12th Oct 1914: In response to President. Wilson's inaction, Joffre refuses to give US correspondents information or access to any war operations. For now, I will wear my British coat - William Sims and six other American correspondents have been arrested on Joffre's order

13th Oct 1914: Gen Smith-Dorrien digs in and says Bethune can be retaken if his 2nd Corps "join hands" with the French on the Arras-Lens front. Bravery out of order on the thin Allied line: batteries are commanded by subalterns; sections by sergeants; soldiers fight alone. "Formations be damned Get up the road as far as you can and fight!" was one British order, epitomising the Allies new resolve

14th Oct 1914: Every village northward from Lens to Bailleul reveals further German atrocities, prompting calls for international justice. The

mangled heaps that had been a young mother and her pretty tot beg the question: should neutrality silence official protest?

15th Oct 1914: Fighting has been intense for the past 48 hours: with a handful of Red Cross and lost troops I have been holed up at Hazebrouck. French and British cavalry now hold all the towns, villages, and bridges on the Lys up to Armentieres, twelve miles above Lille. In a spectacular raid, Allied troops recapture the railroad at Lille, destroy the flimsy barricades and gallop into the city. Two British squadrons take Warneton but, within hours, they are repulsed by a German regiment attacking from adjacent streets. The pendulum of battle continues its wild swing - first an allied push, then an enemy counter - erratic, un-ordered, pointless

15th Oct 1914: I receive a message from Beveridge via 2nd Corps signaller from Bethune: a colleague will be contacting me with information from Roosevelt

16th Oct 1914: From Arras to Armentieres, we have seen a hundred pretty towns and villages, well behind the firing line, ruthlessly bombarded. As rows of tiny coffins pass by, men tremble with rage at the slaughter of innocents and the gross injustice of the 'neutrals'

17th Oct 1914: British cavalry at Lille close the front with an irregular and thin, but effective line from Vermelles to the Belgian frontier. Now there is not a single unit in reserve along the entire Allied front that stretches precariously across Belgium to the sea

18th Oct 1914: Not only Antwerp but conquered Belgium is now in flight; fear has spread over Flanders and made refugees of these gentle people. On the hills and ridges south of Ypres, the Belgians, the French and the British now have the enemy advancing on three sides. The Germans are now on the march from Antwerp to the coast but the Allies are still holding open a gap between Bruges and Ghent

19th Oct 1914: The entire line from Switzerland to the North Sea is now intact; a thin, curving front of 588 miles - Joffre's greatest triumph. Across Belgium, though, the line was but a thread. "Help is coming - hold on for another 48 hours," commanders asked of their tired men

20th Oct 1914: The battles in Belgium have raged for 6 days; at odds of 4 to 1, and in places 8 to 1, our line had to stand alone but the Germans

are starting to pour along the coast from Ostend, seeking to smash their way through the exhausted Belgian lines.

21st Oct 1914: Walking over the wet sand dunes near Nieuport after dark, every village, hamlet and farm along the front could be seen on fire

22nd Oct 1914: A mysterious thunder crept through the fog from the sea. Heavy guns flashed, signalling the arrival of a British naval flotilla. The naval guns, helped by a captive balloon from a warship, now hurled their shells even to the German positions at Schoore

23rd Oct 1914: Amid reports that Gen Congreve's Sherwood Foresters have been destroyed at Ennetieres with losses of more than 700 killed or MIA, Field Marshall Haig's I Corps reaches the western boundaries of Ypres to face a massive assault from the German IV army

24th Oct 1914: At last reinforcements came to the battered line of three nations and muddy, bloody, haggard spectres crept out of the trenches and then went into the flaming hell of Dixmude, where 3,000 shells an hour were falling

25th Oct 1914: Covered by concentrated artillery fire, the Germans cross the Yser, pushing the Belgians back to the Nieuport-Dixmude railroad. To stem the German advance, the Nieuport sluices are opened and gaps blown in the dykes near the shore, flooding the Yser basin

26th Oct 1914: Every available Belgian joins in a bitter offensive as the man-made floods and a heavy rainstorm swamp the German occupied area

27th Oct 1914: The mass of blue-gray German infantry squirm and flounder through the flood, many of them wounded, many sinking and drowning

28th Oct 1914: When this district of submerged salt meadow is recovered, the final history of the German retreat from the Yser may be written

29th Oct 1914: Through the month, the rival lines have battled, with positions lost, won and consolidated; and the trenches have grown deeper

30th Oct 1914: Realities of War: a German gun booms and a Tommy quips “Chicken for dinner” with the punchline, “well - I just heard von Kluck”

31st Oct 1914: Realities of War: the bloody losses of the previous weeks of fighting at the Marne and the Aisne are now painfully evident. Companies are woefully depleted, junior officers hold critical commands, and there are batteries with but a single officer

1st Nov 1914: Everywhere, the Germans are now being caught and forced to defend, when their ideal military machine is geared for invasion. The French XIV Corps moves north from the 10th Army, while the French IX Corps attacks southwards to Becelaere relieving the BEF

2nd Nov 1914: October has crept out and November dawned in icy drizzle, fog and sleet, set to introduce a winter war of unprecedented severity. Every day, each side grows stronger, each side digs in, and ever greater offensives in either direction are launched ... and lost

3rd Nov 1914: To a series of rapid, unexpected attacks at Ypres, the Germans responded bravely but aimlessly, apparently waiting for orders. The battle continues with great violence and with more than 250 heavy guns, the Germans capture Messines and Gheluvelt

4th Nov 1914: Realities of War: Austria has invaded Serbia in a third attempt to conquer the Serbs in retaliation for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand

4th Nov 1914: Realities of War: Through a mist of tears I read that all hands on the “Monmouth” are lost at Coronel: my nephew Christopher, aged 15 was aboard

4th Nov 1914: Realities of War: We have few effective cryptographic, telegraphic or telephone systems in place and we are reliant on our brave dispatch riders

5th Nov 1914: Thwarted by allied resistance and ten days of failure in a desperate series of attacks, the German advance grinds to a halt. The Teuton armies refuse to bow to the tremendous allied pressure; they believe that they were invincible, and must take Ypres. A cascade of high explosives sweep the British at Messines; trenches cave in; hundreds die in a mass of sand and human debris

5th Nov 1914: The tentacles of war continue to slither across borders and boundaries: France and Britain declare war on the Ottoman Empire

6th Nov 1914: Dazed and stunned by a bombardment of such profusion that the bursting alone sounds like thunder, the British still hold Ypres. Haig's 1 Corps has lost all but 10 percent of its officers, and 15 percent of other ranks but, even on the verge of collapse, they still fight. At Gheluvelt staff officers gather up mixed forces, even from the hospitals, and charge, taking on the Germans with the bayonet

7th Nov 1914: Unable to break through at Gheluvelt, Max von Fabeck attacks Wytschaete held by only a handful of men from the Household Cavalry. Four waves of German troops sweep across the Menin-Ypres road: the first is annihilated; the second lost in a bloody slaughter, the third rips through the Allied barricades and closes with the bayonet; the fourth remains intact and wins 400 yards of mud. A bizarre to-and-fro game is now played daily along the front from Armentieres to Dixmude; neither army moves but thousands die

8th Nov 1914: Today, under the thunderous roar of heavy shelling on Ypres by German artillery, there is little movement and the front is quiet. Generals: your war is now nothing but a siege that will end only upon the death of your men or the exhaustion of your resources

9th Nov 1914: Young poorly trained German troops hurl themselves at our lines but the machine guns and barbed wire are impossible to penetrate. A boy soldier stands and stares across the battlefield through the bloody, gaping bullet-hole that was his eye

10th Nov 1914: A terrific bombardment of the British and French lines, southeast and northeast of Ypres, engaged every sector along the front. A whistle blows at 11am and a huge bolt of Prussian Guards from Arras is launched at the British line, again towards Gheluvelt

11th Nov 1914: The ground was a quagmire from the constant rain, but field guns, pushed and dragged through the mud, met the Prussian Guards. Dismounted Horse Guards and Northampton reservists, mere pygmies against the rampant Prussians, throw themselves into the fray ... and then the supports, including cooks, clerks and the lightly wounded, were loosed, to expel the invaders with the bayonet. Without orders or formation, individual soldiers fought like lions until the bewildered Guards staggered back over the trenches.

11th Nov 1914: Two more German assaults are launched against the woods held by Smith-Dorrien's exhausted 2 Corps, now comprising just 9000 men. The last force seemed close to breaking through, but the fire of the famous "75s" broke their formation and their morale

12th Nov 1914: I receive the latest casualty reports for October and early November: British 58,155, French 86,237, Belgian 21,562, and German 91,664 - for what?

13th Nov 1914: Rumours that Ypres fell last night are first confirmed, then refuted as a handful of terrified German boy soldiers are rounded up. Situation reports confirm that the Germans have been pushed back all along the Yser - but overall positions have hardly changed - and 8th Division, under Maj-Gen Francis Davies, have arrived at Brielen, bringing much needed reinforcement against further attacks

13th Nov 1914: Germans now hold much of the line from the Menin road to the woods but a heavy snowfall brings a welcome pause to the slaughter. Winter is now upon us and life on the lines is fast becoming a nightmare with every trench a deathly ditch of half-frozen water

14th Nov 1914: Recent reports informed us that Lord Roberts had fallen ill while travelling from St Omer to visit his East Indian regiments at the front. Today, we learned that the lion of South Africa has succumbed to pneumonia and passed away at St Omer; the lines are eerily quiet now

15th Nov 1914: Nights of bitter frost suspend the killing but bring hundreds of frostbite victims to hospitals already busy with amputations

16th Nov 1914: The British line now runs from Wytschaete to Givenchy; the Belgians hold 15 miles north, while the French defend some 430 miles. The diminishing level of German action along the front trigger wild rumours and fresh calls that it will be "over by Christmas."

17th Nov 1914: The battle of Ypres is done: Albrecht orders his Army to stop fighting and dig in, an order immediately confirmed by Falkenhayn. As Albrecht's troops pull out, the 400 yards of mud that they won are retaken with great joy by the 2nd Buckinghamshires. While the fighting at Ypres and south has ceased in a state of deadlock, the Ypres roll has now claimed Prince Maurice of Battenberg whose father died as we left Kumassi after the 1895/6 Ashanti expedition

18th Nov 1914: Intelligence reports claim that, after Ypres, Falkenhayn doubts whether Germany will have another opportunity to win the war

19th Nov 1914: Still recovering from the intense fighting, the troops at Ypres stare in awe as Haig and French arrive to assess the situation.

20th Nov 1914: Germany has gained no advantage from their superiority of men or artillery; their attempt to seek a decisive victory has failed. Blocked in their advance across central Belgium, the Germans consolidate their positions to attempt a breakthrough to the north. To the south of Ypres, German troops are again massing at Lille, La Bassée and Lens, likely to become the next battlegrounds.

21st Nov 1914: The German withdrawal from the front south of Ypres gives me a long overdue opportunity to leave for a visit home to Folkestone. I manage to find a seat on a transport returning to the coast via Poperinghe and Hondschoote; we should reach Calais tomorrow

22nd Nov 1914: With a growing register of bodies and the smashed and bloody wounded lying in every inch of space, Calais is a vision from Hell

24th Nov 1914: Now helping on a hospital ship from Calais but Folkestone crammed with troops leaving for France so we are re-routed to Dover. With a constant stream of traffic on the coast road, it is a simple enough task to find transport to Folkestone

25th Nov 1914: Folkestone is crammed with young, excited men leaving for war: I once knew that excitement ... now I also know the horror

26th Nov 1914: I meet my brother William and sister Louisa at our family home and realise, with some sadness, that I know nothing of their lives. We talk of the young men of Folkestone leaving for France and I learn that William's son Reginald, my nephew, is among them.

27th Nov 1914: William insists that I accompany him for a tour around the family drapery business premises and proudly shows me a new machine that he has patented; in truth, though, my thoughts are elsewhere

28th Nov 1914: After three frustrating days of talks about our family business (of which I care little) I know that I should be back in France

29th Nov 1914: I have no authority or press commission, but I manage to join the troop ship SS Invicta for Boulogne

30th Nov 1914: Latest intelligence reports that, after defeats at Ypres and the Channel ports, the Germans are re-grouping to attack at Arras

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

