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Kitchener's Volunteers

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Abstract

The fourth of August 1914 was a day of jubilation throughout Britain. German armies, numbering in the millions, had overrun Belgian border stations the previous day and were advancing unchecked across the frontier. As the morning progressed, a buzz of enthusiasm began to grow. News placards throughout Britain broadcast the news of the German invasion to the eager public from every street corner. Those British in the big cities were first to hear. From London to Birmingham, Manchester to Cardiff, and Edinburgh to Belfast, people gathered to hear the news. By noon, Trafalgar Square was packed end to end with Londoners. The war that Europe had been waiting for had finally arrived. Within hours thousands were gathering outside local recruiting stations. The queues consisted of men young and old, rich and poor, covering the spectrum of Britain's class society. These men were here for many reasons but all wanted in before their chance had passed.

Keywords

World War I, Kitchener's Army, Western Front

KITCHENER'S VOLUNTEERS

PETER BRAUER

The fourth of August 1914 was a day of jubilation throughout Britain. German armies, numbering in the millions, had overrun Belgian border stations the previous day and were advancing unchecked across the frontier. As the morning progressed, a buzz of enthusiasm began to grow. News placards throughout Britain broadcast the news of the German invasion to the eager public from every street corner. Those British in the big cities were first to hear. From London to Birmingham, Manchester to Cardiff, and Edinburgh to Belfast, people gathered to hear the news. By noon, Trafalgar Square was packed end to end with Londoners.¹ The war that Europe had been waiting for had finally arrived. Within hours thousands were gathering outside local recruiting stations. The queues consisted of men young and old, rich and poor, covering the spectrum of Britain's class society. These men were here for many reasons but all wanted in before their chance had passed.²

It had been nearly a century since the Battle of Waterloo ended Britain's last major war. People had become complacent towards war during this period of peace and greeted the renewal of war. The public, and in many ways the Army, were ignorant to the effects of modern warfare. The belief in a romantic and quick war was in the minds of many during those early days of August.³ Within months, however, the world knew that this war would be more devastating than any other before it. The Western Front ground into a stalemate by December 1914 and both sides began to burrow into the soils of northern France and Belgium.⁴ By spring the trenches had been fortified to a point that no offensive could break them; the great trench systems of the Western Front had been born.

Beginning in the spring of 1915 those men who had volunteered in the early days of August found themselves thrown into the underworld of the trenches. No training time had been allotted for the daily dangers of trench warfare.⁵ The men were on their own. In many ways the soldiers not only had to battle the Germans but also the dangers of the elements, vermin, disease, and most of all one's own sanity.

Over the years much has been written about the British soldiers on the Western Front in an attempt to understand how these men survived the constant ordeal of the trenches. To try to define the experiences of these soldiers as a whole is impossible be-

1 John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 81.

2 Donald Hankey, *A Student in Arms* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1917), 25.

3 Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 21.

4 D. E. Schowalter, "Maneuver Warfare: The Eastern and Western Fronts, 1914-1915," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War*, ed. Hew Strachan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 46.

5 Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 39-40; Ian Beckett, "The Nation in Arms, 1914-1918," in *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War*, ed. Ian Beckett and Keith Simpson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 110.

cause the front varied in every way imaginable— from one phase of the war to another, from one part of the line to the next, and also according to changing terrain and climate conditions.⁶ To view the Western Front as a constant fire fight involving thunderous artillery duels and massive infantry attacks across no-man’s land would be inaccurate. Apart from the major battles, Verdun, the Somme, second Ypres and Passchendaele to name a few, the front remained relatively inactive. Denis Winter argues in *Death’s Men* that trench life could often be worse than battle.⁷ The strain that accompanied waiting for an enemy that never came could be overwhelming. There was a demoralizing feeling to being kept confined below ground, living an animal-like existence. Winter writes, “The problem was that in training no one had been prepared for vigilant inaction, for the blinded feeling which followed being confined below the surface, for the demoralizing stooped walk, for the need to take constant care. Men were worn out by all these things.”⁸

In “The British Soldier on the Western Front,” Keith Simpson argues that social historians of the First World War have tended to portray the Western Front as a unique experience common to all soldiers that served there. In response, Simpson believes it necessary to study the combatants individually by nation, rather than as a general European history.⁹ World War One, the first modern European war to directly effect British society, had a profound impact on the hundreds of thousands of men who enlisted in Kitchener’s Army.¹⁰ Accordingly, these men carried much of their civilian lives to France. Simpson argues, in fact, that because of their civilian background, British soldiers were able to adapt through laughter and camaraderie to the horrors of the trenches. Because of this, he believes, there has been too much emphasis by past historians on the horrors faced by British soldiers on the Western Front:

Danger and fear were not necessarily the continuous or universal experience of all British soldiers, and many of them thought at the time, and later, that it had been ‘the great adventure.’ Many of them were young men who were exhilarated by the danger, remembered the laughter and the camaraderie and indeed the love they had experienced as temporary soldiers on the Western Front.¹¹

Aside from the everyday struggles of trench life that the British soldier was forced to cope with, the reality of war dictated that at some point he would be called upon to kill other human beings. It is this, the act of killing, that Joanna Bourke argues cannot be

6 Keith Simpson, “The British Soldier on the Western Front,” in *Home Fires and Foreign Fields: British Social and Military Experience in the First World War*, ed. Peter H. Liddle (New York: Brassey’s Defense Publishers, 1985), 141.

7 Denis Winter, *Death’s Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 89.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Simpson, “British Soldier on the Western Front”, 154-155.

10 Alan Warburton, Lecture on “Britain: The Home Front”, December 8, 2000 (Lancaster University: Lancaster, England)

11 Simpson, “British Soldier on the Western Front”, 155.

ignored when discussing the First World War. She states, in "The Experience of Killing," that it has long been the history of military institutions, when recruiting, to gloss over the fact that in war people are killed. The last question veterans want to hear is "How many people did you kill?" Bourke believes it is this element of warfare that is most paradoxical to times of peace and therefore cannot be cast aside.¹² To better understand the experience of the British soldier on the Western Front it becomes crucial to understand his dealings with death, both the killing of the enemy and of his friends.

It cannot be denied that the act of killing placed a significant burden on the mental toughness of every soldier. These are the memories that stay with veterans forever, but they are not the only memories of war, especially war on the Western Front. The Western Front produced a kind of warfare never before seen on such a grand scale. Conditions were so intolerable and horrific that even today it is hard to comprehend how soldiers survived from one day to the next. Arriving in the early months of 1915, the Kitchener volunteers took on the task of survival in these trenches and it is from their diaries, memories, and letters home that historians form the best impression of life on the Western Front.

While the moments just prior to an attack produced the greatest amount of fear and the preceding experiences of combat that left an indelible picture of violence and destruction in a soldier's mind, these events were not constant; they filled only a fraction of his experiences on the Western Front. It was the struggle for everyday survival between the enemy, the elements, vermin, disease, and one's own mind that dominated the experiences of the Kitchener volunteer on the Western Front. During the war, these soldiers were forbidden to keep diaries and their letters home had to pass through censors which weeded out much of the original prose. It was not until after the war that many veterans had the opportunity to record their experiences of life on the Western Front. These published narratives provide an invaluable glimpse at the struggles that British volunteers faced on a daily basis. By looking at a few of the more notable accounts, including Bruce Bairnsfather's *Bullets and Billets* (1917), George Coppard's *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai* (1969), and Donald Hankey's *A Student in Arms* (1917) it is possible to examine the transformation of Kitchener's Army during the first two years of World War One. The soldiers' narratives offer an insight into daily life on the Western Front, from their arrival on the Continent, through their time in and out of the line, to their departure either through injury, death, or in rare cases peace.

FORMING KITCHENER'S ARMY

The great German offensive to envelope and annihilate France in the opening

12 Joanna Bourke, "The Experience of Killing," in *The Great World War, 1914-1945*, vol. 1, *Lightning Strikes twice*, ed. Peter Liddle, John Bourne, Ian Whitehead (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2000), 293.

13 Schwalter, "Maneuver Warfare", 46.

weeks of the war died on the banks of the Marne in early September. After flanking maneuvers petered out in the race to the sea, Germany launched a final attack at Ypres. This, too, failed.¹³ The continuous weeks of heavy fighting had, however, severely depleted the ranks of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) positioned in northern France and Belgium. By December only a skeleton of the original 160,000-man army remained. It had been nearly wiped out during the battles of Mons, Le Cateau, and especially Ypres, where 54,000 casualties alone were reported.¹⁴

All along the newly established Western Front soldiers began to dig in for protection against the new weapons of modern warfare. The exhausted men faced not only increased artillery fire, but also the destructiveness of the elements as they burrowed into the earth during the closing weeks of 1914.¹⁵ To further frustrate their efforts six inches of rain fell throughout December, the most for that month since 1876. With little to hold up the muddy walls, collapses increased rapidly. Water collected in the trenches caused the men to be perpetually wet. Frostbite, rheumatism, and trench foot skyrocketed, further depleting the ranks of the BEF.¹⁶ It became clear that more and more men were needed to fill the trenches, and needed quickly. All eyes turned back to Britain for help.

Lord Kitchener, appointed British Minister of War on the fifth of August, moved rapidly to expand the Army's manpower. Before the outbreak of hostilities, Kitchener had argued for the creation of a massed army numbering in the millions. He saw the approaching conflict as long and destructive. Few top officials listened and his concerns were never addressed.¹⁷ Once in office, Kitchener took matters into his own hands. He appealed to Parliament for an immediate enlargement of the Army by 500,000 on August sixth and appealed to the public the following day for volunteers aged nineteen to thirty for "General service for a period of three years, or until the war is concluded."¹⁸ The results were momentous. Approximately 300,000 men volunteered by the end of August with another 450,000 swelling the recruitment offices in September.¹⁹

Those that enlisted in Kitchener's Army, or what came to be known as the New Army, came from every sector of society and for a wide range of reasons. Donald Hankey, who enlisted as a student, remembered that, "All classes were there, struggling for the privilege of enlisting in the new Citizen Army, conscious of their unity, and determined to give effect of it in the common life of service."²⁰ Despite the popular conception of

14 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 100.

15 Hew Strachan, "Economic Mobilization: Money, Munitions, and Machines," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 137-138; Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans, with an introduction by Jay Winter (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1990), 23. Artillery shells had been designed to destroy formations of troops on open ground using shrapnel. New high explosive shells were now required to blow away dug-in fortifications and trench systems. The transformation began to show results in December of 1914, although they continued to plague operations throughout 1915.

16 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 102-103.

17 *Ibid.*, 101.

18 Peter H. Liddle, *The Soldier's War, 1914-1918* (New York: Blandford Press, 1988), 16; Beckett, "Nation in Arms", 12.

19 Winter, *Death's Men*, 27.

20 Hankey, *Student in Arms*, 25.

a “rush to the colors” it was predominantly the men without strong commitments who volunteered first. Many were persuaded by the prospects of a stable economic future that the army offered.²¹ Following these men came the vast number of recruits from the working and middle classes. The majority of the working class saw enlistment as an opportunity for improvement, either through better living conditions, employment, or a break from the dull routine of factory work.²² The middle class saw the war from a different viewpoint.²³ For them the Western Front was the “great adventure” and the “supreme test” of manhood for a generation that had never experienced war.²⁴ One soldier remarked, “My work was not unpleasant but I knew I wouldn’t miss it. My thought of joining was instantaneous. I was terribly keen to go, afraid to miss any of it. I’d had a very happy youth but no doubt looked for adventure.”²⁵ They viewed the war as a pathway to the future, to progress, revolution, and change. For other men the effects of social and family pressures, combined with a sense of patriotism and the wish not to be left out escorted them down the block to the recruiting center. For a boy of sixteen and a half the excitement was overwhelming:

Although I seldom saw a newspaper, I knew about the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand at Sarajevo. News placards screamed out at every street corner, and military bands blared out their martial music in the main streets of Croydon. This was too much for me to resist, and as if drawn by a magnet, I knew I had to enlist straight away.²⁶

Another soldier remembered the pressure to enlist:

My reason was a simple one, at my age and in my circumstances and in the atmosphere of patriotic enthusiasm, I would have been ashamed not to join and my parents would have been ashamed of me if I had not done so. Secondary reasons were that several of my friends were joining the same regiment, also I had decided I did not want to be a Civil Engineer. It seemed likely to be a dull sort of profession.²⁷

One of the greatest virtues of the Kitchener volunteers in the early months of the war was their special spirit of enthusiasm, camaraderie, and belief that they would succeed where the old army had failed.²⁸ This excitement began to diminish as the men exchanged their

21 Beckett, “Nation in Arms”, 103.

22 Liddle, *Soldier’s War*, 16.

23 Simpson, “British Soldier on Western Front”, 143.

24 *Ibid.*

25 Liddle, *Soldier’s War*, 16.

26 George Coppard, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai: The Tale of a Young Tommy in Kitchener’s Army, 1914-1918* (London: Crown, 1969), 1.

27 Liddle, *Soldier’s War*, 16.

28 Simpson, “British Soldier on the Western Front”, 143.

civilian lives for that of the soldier.

The British government was overwhelmed by the 750,000 volunteers during the first two months of war. Training facilities were completely inadequate, lacking clothing, food, housing, and weapons. Nearly all the materials needed to properly train the soldiers had become scarce by October. Even with the wartime mobilization of Britain's economy these problems would not be fixed until early 1915.²⁹ One soldier explained, "As tents were in short supply, the maximum number of recruits were allotted to each one. If I remember correctly, the number was twenty-two . . . As if to complete the picture of utter ineptitude, dummy rifles were issued to us."³⁰ Shortages of weapons, due to the dire need for them at the front, became such a problem that some units did not receive them until the eve of embarkation.³¹ Lacking many of the instruments of war that are so crucial to a soldier's existence, many found it hard to grasp the reality of the situation. With limited exposure to live fire, numerous soldiers still could not comprehend what faced them across the Channel.³²

Compounding the problem of supply shortages was the outdated and insufficient training the volunteers received. One third of training was spent on drill, with the majority of this filled by inspections of every kind: clothing, weapons (if they had them), personal hygiene, and the traditionally dreaded kit inspection.³³ Another soldier explained, "We were plagued by kit inspections every week . . . Deductions from pay for the losses made me realize more than ever that I was in the army."³⁴ Because of the strong need for men at the front, the training of battlefield and combat tactics was often relegated to retired officers. They performed the best they could under the circumstances but the tactics and terminology they used was outdated, mostly developed during the Boer War. To further exacerbate the situation, the teaching of open warfare doctrine was still the policy of the British Army. Very little emphasis was placed on trench warfare with the belief that offensives launched in 1915 would return the Western Front to a war of maneuver.³⁵ As a result, most soldiers received very little of the training they would need for the next three and a half years of war.

After six months of basic training, the men were deemed fit for combat and awaited their orders to the front.³⁶ When the call came in, units would gather for the short trip across the Channel. Departure usually took place from Folkestone on the southern

29 Winter, *Death's Men*, 37.

30 Coppard, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 3.

31 Beckett, "Nation in Arms", 110.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Winter, *Death's Men*, 39.

34 Coppard, *With a Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 8.

35 Beckett, "Nation in Arms", 110; Winter, *Death's Men*, 39.

36 Beckett, "Nation in Arms", 110. Due to the desperate need for men on the Western Front the training period was reduced to four months in 1915.

coast of England. Carrying full packs weighing up to sixty pounds, they made their way down a narrow, steep path to the edge of the cliffs where their papers were checked and life jackets issued.³⁷ As the gray Channel steamers slowly churned towards France, others passed them in the opposite direction filled with wounded returning to England. These were the first signs of war for the new soldiers and for many, the romantic war they had envisioned was beginning to fade. For others, the adventure continued as one young soldier exclaimed on arrival in France, "I was very excited at being on foreign soil for the first time."³⁸

Upon arrival in France, soldiers marched to a designated base camp to await transfer to the front. The biggest of the camps was Étapes, which could hold 100,000 men, and was visited by most soldiers at one point or another.³⁹ One soldier described that,

It is a vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England but a kind of paddock where the beasts were kept a few days before the shambles. There was a very strange look on all faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look which a man will never see in England nor can it be seen in any battle, only in Étapes. It was not despair or terror. It was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look and without expression, like a dead rabbit's. It will never be painted and no actor will ever seize it.⁴⁰

It was at this staging area that men realized they no longer had the security of England under their shoes. The war was becoming very real to all of them.

Within a few days the new units would be ordered to the front. Amidst chaos and confusion soldiers were packed into freight cars, many times up to forty men per car with little food or water besides their field rations and canteens. The process could take up to five and a half hours to complete and oftentimes the soldiers were not told of their destination or the time it would take.⁴¹ The only thing to do was to sit back and wait. Many men tried to enjoy the scenic trip through the French countryside rather than dwell on the uncertainty that awaited them. As one soldier explained, "I sat on the side of the open doorway [of the train], legs dangling over the edge. The countryside looked beautiful and I felt as if I was taking part in a Sunday school treat."⁴²

The trains disembarked well away from the front to avoid any long range heavy artillery fire. From here, the infantry underwent another prolonged march to their designated sectors. Before entering the trenches, a short announcement was usually given by the commanding officer detailing last minute warnings and instructions:

³⁷ Winter, *Death's Men*, 71. A carefully kept memorial of rosemary now grows along this path in remembrance of all those that made the one way trip to the Western Front.

³⁸ Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 16.

³⁹ Winter, *Death's Men*, 72.

⁴⁰ H. Owen, *Journey from Obscurity* (Oxford, 1965), in Winter, *Death's Men*, 72-73.

⁴¹ Winter, *Death's Men*, 74.

The Colonel addressed us and said that we would be going into the trenches the next day. He reminded us that we were on a war footing and that the severest military laws would apply for any dereliction of duty . . . A conviction by court martial for any such offense would carry the death sentence.⁴³

With these words of encouragement the new soldiers entered the trenches of the Western Front for the first time. Movement through the winding maze of communication trenches was preformed at night to avoid unnecessary aerial observation by the Germans. The newcomers would be accompanied in the support and front line trenches by an experienced unit for a number of days until they could become accustomed to their surroundings.⁴⁴ After this they were on their own.

IN THE LINE

For the early arrivals on the Western Front in the winter and spring of 1915, the trenches were still in their infancy. Many of the newly arriving soldiers remarked on their haphazard design and construction.⁴⁵ Throughout the year, however, trench systems on both sides of no-man's land were quickly transformed into virtual fortresses, impervious to everything but the super heavy mortars and artillery. For many soldiers going into the trenches for the first time the experience was shocking. Finding one's self huddled in the bottom of a six foot hole, soaking wet, covered in mud, disoriented, with rifle shots whizzing overhead or clanging off the parapet could be very sobering. One soldier recalled, "Cold, wet through, and covered with mud. This was the first day . . . Nothing was to be heard except the occasional sniper's shot, the dripping of the rain, and the low murmur of voices from the outer cave."⁴⁶ This was only the first day; things would get far worse for the new volunteers on the Western Front.

While the Western Front was no doubt a dangerous place, it was not the scene of constant fighting and battles. Along the thirty-six miles of front the British held in 1915 only the region around Ypres witnessed fierce fighting on a near regular basis.⁴⁷ Within the inactive front, a daily routine was established to maintain the effectiveness of the soldiers. Little time was allotted for men to contemplate their presence in the trenches.

The day started with "stand-to" a half hour before sunrise. With rifles loaded, soldiers manned the firesteps listening for any movement by the enemy. It was at this

42 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 16-17.

43 *Ibid.*, 19.

44 *Ibid.*; Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 58.

45 Bruce Bairnsfather, *Bullets and Billets* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), 25.

46 *Ibid.*, 29.

47 Simpson, "British Soldier on Western Front", 141; Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914-1918: The Live and Let Live System* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980), 82.

time, just before dawn and just prior to dusk, that infantry attacks were considered most likely. After a tense thirty minutes, "stand-down" was ordered and the men quickly set about preparing breakfast. This meal was regarded as the most enjoyable by the soldiers for it meant they had survived another night.⁴⁸ After breakfast it was time for work, the need for which was never lacking. Just when everything seemed satisfactory an officer would require a kit inspection or order a new construction project:

Breakfast over, there was not long to wait before an officer appeared with details of the duties and fatigues to be performed. Weapon cleaning and inspection, always a prime task, would soon be followed by pick and shovel work. Trench maintenance was constant, a job without end. Owing to the weather or enemy action, trenches required repairing, deepening, widening and strengthening, while new support trenches always seemed to be wanted. The carrying of rations and supplies from the rear went on interminably.⁴⁹

Attempts by the high command to regulate every aspect of the soldiers' lives failed because these men were still civilians at heart. They were not professional soldiers that had undergone years of training, nor had they ever experienced battle before. For many it was their first time away from home and they missed it. In response they tried to make trench life as close to their former lives as possible. The front line soldiers soon realized that constant harassment of the enemy, ordered from above, was a useless and dangerous activity. All it achieved was a retaliatory attack on one's own trenches, causing the need for yet more repairs and hard work, not to mention needless casualties. What developed from this mindset was the system of live-and-let-live.⁵⁰

First occurring in areas of the front where weather conditions and local terrain made any form of hostility nearly impossible, the system of live-and-let-live spread to all sectors of the Western Front, though it was most abundant among the British lines.⁵¹ The system also expanded into an intricate network of local truces which were understood by everyone involved but rarely formally agreed to. Many of the truces were concerned with the dreaded repair work that took up so much of the soldiers time. Nobody on either side of no-man's land enjoyed this work so they saw no reason why they should make it worse by firing upon one another while engaged in it. As one British soldier later explained, "We used to do our repairs at the same time as they did. When we finished we signaled Jerry and he used to signal us with one rifle shot and we then scrambled back

48 Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 85.

49 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 21-22.

50 Alan Warburton, Lecture on "The Trench Experience", November 28, 2000 (Lancaster University: Lancaster, England)

51 Simpson, "British Soldier on the Western Front", 149.

to our trenches.”⁵² As other soldiers confessed, a code of behavior was strictly adhered to by both sides: “We go out at night in front of the trenches . . . the German working parties are also out, so it is not considered etiquette to fire.”⁵³ Another discomfort for which the troops devised their own rules of action were night patrols through no-man’s land. Soldiers believed the primary goal of these patrols to be the reconnoitering of enemy defenses, not the engagement of them. If contact with the enemy was made, it was better to look the other way than to disrupt the established peace.⁵⁴ One soldier told of this practice by saying,

During the night a little excitement is provided by patrolling the enemy’s wire. Our chief enemy is nettles and mosquitoes. All patrol—English and German—are much averse to the death and glory principle; so, on running up against one another . . . both pretend that they are Levites and the other is a good Samaritan—and pass by on the other side, no word spoken. For either side to bomb the other would be a useless violation of the unwritten laws that govern the relations of combatants permanently within a hundred yards of distance to each other, who have found out that to provide discomfort for the other is but a roundabout way of providing it for themselves.⁵⁵

Aside from established practices concerning contact with the enemy, truces also brought a sense of benevolence to the trenches. Mealtimes were traditionally the quietest point of the day. Food was such an integral part of the soldiers’ lives that any harassment while eating would guarantee a harsh retaliation. Temporary cease-fires were sometimes called to allow for the removal of wounded from no-man’s land. All of these practices were frowned upon by general officers who insisted on maintaining an “offensive spirit.”⁵⁶ Often there was the recognition that men on both sides of no-man’s land were not much different. They faced the miserable conditions of the Western Front together. There was no controlling the weather, vermin, and disease, but if the needless barraging of the opponents trenches could be curtailed even by the slightest then maybe the same would be done for you: “Across no-man’s land there were men sharing trouble with us, fighting the same losing battle against water [coming into the trenches], powerless before the sudden storm of bursting metal, and longing to be home again with their children. Were they the enemy?”⁵⁷

52 Liddle, *Soldier’s War*, 61.

53 G. H. Greenwell, *An Infant in Arms* (London: Allen Lane, 1972), 16-17, in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 149.

54 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 105.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*, 104; Warburton, “The Trench Experience”; Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 135.

57 Lt. Wyn Griffiths, *Up to Mametz* (London: Faber, 1931), 130, in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 142.

No-man's land was reduced to as little as fifty yards in some places, and the proximity of the trenches allowed for the communication between sides. This helped to further the belief in live-and-let-live by seeing the enemy not as a crazed killer, but as a fellow human being not unlike the men in one's own trench:

hatred of the enemy, so strenuously fostered in training days, largely faded away in the line. We somehow realized that individually they were very like ourselves, just as fed up and as anxious to be done with it all. For the most part, the killing that was done and attempted was quite impersonal.⁵⁸

Communication usually occurred in one of two ways—through either music or conversation whenever a German soldier who had picked up some English along the way was positioned in the opposite trench.⁵⁹ The dialogues of these conversations were rarely in depth. One soldier stationed on the Western Front described the typical exchange:

They shout to us every morning asking us over to dinner. One day they held up a bit of blackboard, and on it was written in big letters, 'When are you Englishmen going home and let us have peace.' They shout across at us that they want peace.⁶⁰

In another sector of the front, a German would greet his British counterparts with "It is I Fritz the bunmaker of London. What is the football news?"⁶¹ Conversing with the Germans was seen as more of a humorous activity, while music was one of the rare pleasures to be found in the trenches and was much appreciated by both sides. One soldier remembered a German violinist, "In the summer evenings when a slight breeze was blowing towards us we could distinguish every note. We always gave him a clap and shouted for an encore."⁶² The musical instruments brought into the trenches were usually small and handmade but in rare situations larger pieces could be found. One soldier remembered, "In one trench there was a piano actually in the front line, and the men had many good sing songs. The Germans did not object to this as a general rule."⁶³

However, as much as the soldiers swore to the live-and-let-live code of trench life, it was always in jeopardy of being destroyed by the high commands insistence on

58 Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 134.

59 Many Germans learned English before the war while studying or working in Britain. When war broke out they were allowed to return to Germany. These procedures would not be repeated in future wars.

60 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 105-106.

61 *The War History of the Sixth Battalion The South Staffordshire Regiment* (London: Heinemann, 1924), 32, in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 138.

62 F. Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (London: Faber & Faber, 1933), 103, in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 140.

63 A. L. Raimes, *The Fifth Battalion The Durham Light Infantry, 1914-1918* (London, 1931), 34-35, in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 132.

maintaining an “offensive attitude.” The trench raid, first used by the Canadians, and quickly adopted by all armies on the Western Front, was the primary tool for keeping the offensive spirit alive among the front line soldiers. It was the view of the general officers that these raids were necessary, not only to keep the men on their toes, but also to gather important intelligence of the enemy’s strength and numbers.⁶⁴

On the whole, trench raids increased the level of aggression displayed by both sides, but not by the ways high command had intended. Trench raiding destroyed the system of live-and-let-live, setting off a domino effect of retaliatory attacks that lasted days after the initial raid. The side that had raided expected retaliation, unable to predict where, when, or how. The raided became nervous, not knowing whether the attack was an isolated event or an indication of the arrival of an élite unit who would surely carry out subsequent attacks.⁶⁵ T. Lloyd explains, “Generally a raid had the same effect as stirring the muddy bed of a stream, where the water remains discolored long after the discoloration. Ever expectant of another visitation, the subsequent period found both sides harassing one another.”⁶⁶

Apart from the side effects of raiding, the raid in itself was almost always a disaster. Ranging in size from around a hundred men to a few thousand accompanied by artillery support, the raiders always had to mount a frontal assault against a well dug-in defender who could bring an enormous amount of firepower upon their approaches.⁶⁷ The resulting casualties were grievous in number. Soldiers could not rationalize the raids, but the orders kept coming down, further disconnecting them from the outside world.

While trench raids brought death to the front lines in large numbers, the ever present sniper incessantly tested the soldiers’ nerves. Sniper struck unannounced and often with deadly consequences. The only means of protection was to keep one’s head down, but it only took one lapse of concentration for the sniper to find his mark. Even in inactive fronts sniping provided a steady stream of casualties: “During the ten-day spell in that quiet sector, the battalion lost two or three men every day by Jerry sniping, none surviving.”⁶⁸ The high command was well aware of the dangers of snipers, but was reluctant to remove tall men from the front line trenches. For soldiers over six feet the dangers became magnified because they continually had to duck down to avoid exposing themselves.⁶⁹

Soldiers feared the enemy on the Western Front because they could strike without warning. This form of death was quick compared to that brought on from the effects of climate and disease. In this sense, soldiers struggled much more to survive against the elements than against the Germans. The BEF operated the northern component of the

64 Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 185-186.

65 *Ibid.*, 191, 194.

66 T. Lloyd, *The Blazing Trail of Flanders* (London: Heath Cranton, 1933), 126, in Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 194-195.

67 Winter, *Death’s Men*, 94; Liddle, *Soldier’s War*, 63.

68 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 26.

69 *Ibid.*

Western Front, including the area from Nieuport, near the Belgium coast, to Armentières, in France. It was here that the trenches stretched across the flat and often flooded fields of Flanders.⁷⁰ Even without the heavy rain that plagued these areas, the water table remained high. The result was that the trenches underwent continuous flooding problems. Nearly every veteran of this theatre mentioned the perpetual wetness and incessant mud as one of his worst experiences of the war. One veteran told of how,

The trenches were full of liquid mud, which reached up to our knees. With the absence of proper dugouts and no dry place to sleep, we were soon in a wretched state. It rained cats and dogs, and the nights were pitch dark and bitterly cold. On gun duty the hours dragged by with excruciating tedium and hunger.⁷¹

The same man goes on to remark, "I always think of my time there [Festubert] as one of the worst of my experiences, not so much because of enemy action, but because of the miserable conditions."⁷²

The weather also had a demoralizing effect upon the soldiers as there was no way to escape it. Frontline dugouts and living quarters capable of warding off some of the elements were mostly reserved for officers, leaving the infantry to scarp together primitive shelters using discarded war materials. No matter how much soldiers tried, they could never get completely dry or remove all the mud from themselves while in the front line and support trenches. Being constantly wet also caused a soldier to be perpetually cold. Trying to get warm was another major problem. Fuel was rationed and other burning materials were scarce or used to reinforce the trenches. Fires, in general, were regulated because they attracted artillery fire.⁷³ The weather alone was enough to reduce even the newest arrivals at the front into a miserable array of ruffians. One observer described a passing group of British soldiers as, "tattered, worn, straggling, footsore, weary and looking generally broken to pieces. Hairy, unshaved, dirty-faced, and dressed in every possible variety of head-dress, the men looked like so many prehistoric savages rather than a crack regiment of the British Army."⁷⁴ Mud was not only a problem for the men but also rendered vast amounts of equipment useless. Rifles were especially vulnerable to the effects of mud, repeatedly jamming if not washed and cleaned on a daily basis.⁷⁵

As depressing as the weather were the vermin that called the Western Front home

70 Simpson, "British Soldier on the Western Front", 141.

71 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 52.

72 *Ibid.*, 58.

73 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 65.

74 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 103.

75 H. E. Harvey, *Battle-Line Narratives, 1915-1918* (London: Brentano's LTD, 1928), 28.

and were equally despised. This group consisted primarily of two villains, rats being the visible threat and lice the invisible. With rotting food and thousands of corpses scattered across the battlefield, rats multiplied by the tens of thousands.⁷⁶ Seeking the warmth and safety of the trenches they tormented the soldiers: "These rats are the limit! The dugout swarms with them. Last night they ate half my biscuits and a good part of Timothy's clean socks, and whenever I began to get to sleep one of them would run across my face."⁷⁷ Rats did, however, provide a certain degree of entertainment to the men. Rat hunting became a popular sport among the trenches with soldiers competing as to who could kill the most in a single day. The liquidation of the rat population provided another way to pass the monotonous routine of trench life. As one ingenious soldier explained, "One night, with a big moon rising behind Jerry's line, I put a piece of cheese on the parapet, a black mountain against the moon's face. I cocked a revolver close to the bait and stood motionless. Rat after rat came in quick succession, took one sniff and died."⁷⁸

Hand in hand with the rats were the lice. With no hope of exterminating all of them, soldiers took on the never-ending task of killing as many as possible. The favored methods for lice hunting, known as "chatting" by the soldiers, were either roasting them with a match or crushing them between the forefinger and thumb nails.⁷⁹ One soldier later told of how,

A full day's rest allowed us to clean up a bit, and to launch a full scale attack on lice. I sat in a quiet corner of a barn for two hours delousing myself as best I could. We were all at it, for none of us escaped their vile attentions. The things lay in the seams of trousers, in the deep furrows of long thick woolly pants, and seemed impregnable in their deep entrenchments. A lighted candle applied where they were thickest made them pop like Chinese crackers.⁸⁰

The combined force of enemy action, weather-related discomforts, and the presence of vermin had a debilitating effect on the British soldiers, both mentally and physically. Among the diseases that racked the trenches, trench foot was the most common. Developing from unrelieved duty or poorly drained trenches it could rapidly result in amputation if not properly treated.⁸¹ Chronic lack of sleep combined with a lack of sense of purpose added to the physical sluggishness of the front. Little mentioned in memoirs, but well documented after the war, was the prominence of mental depression among soldiers involved in front line experiences.⁸² Liddle explains,

76 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 47.

77 Donald Hankey, *A Student in Arms*, 2nd series (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1917), 82.

78 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 47.

79 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 65-67; Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 43.

80 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 43.

81 Liddle, *Soldier's war*, 65.

82 Winter, *Death's Men*, 100-101.

Prolonged exposure to siege warfare conditions . . . seriously affected the morale and nervous systems of men not physically capable of endurance. If any poor devil's nerves got the better of him and he was found wandering behind the lines, a not infrequent occurrence, it was *prima facie* a cowardice or desertion case. There was no psychiatric defense available to help save him from a firing squad.⁸³

With death lurking around every corner, the pressures of the front lines were enormous. One of the most popular methods soldiers used to temporarily escape the miseries of the trenches was letter writing. This was one of the few leisure activities permitted in the lines and allowed men a connection to the outside world. It was also the easiest way to communicate with loved ones back in Britain.⁸⁴ The Army allowed soldiers to write two letters a week. An uncensored letter, sealed in special green envelopes, were permitted once a month, provided men promised not to give away tactical information.⁸⁵

Soldiers writing home often struggled to find the right words to describe their experiences on the Continent. Many glossed over the horror of the trenches in an attempt to reassure family members, while others used the pages to record their feelings towards the war. Written in the early months of the war one soldier still displayed the patriotism with which he enlisted:

We are just at the beginning of the struggle I'm afraid, and every hour we should remind ourselves that it is our great privilege to save the traditions of all centuries behind us. It's a grand opportunity, and we must spare no effort to use it, for if we fail we shall curse ourselves in bitterness every year that we live, and our children will despise our memory.⁸⁶

As the war dragged on, feelings became increasingly pessimistic:

Oh this is awful, no one can imagine war till they are at it, every living thing suffers by it . . . The Kaiser may be accursed forever, may he never sleep peacefully again, the mad fiend, may he never find rest even after death . . . We must finish him, for if not, we shall never be safe.⁸⁷

83 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 41.

84 Winter, *Death's Men*, 164.

85 *Ibid.*

86 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 119.

87 *Ibid.*

Donald Hankey, who left school in the early days of August 1914 to join the Army found the conditions of the Western Front to be far different than he had expected:

When one sees the dead, their limbs crushed and mangled, their features distorted and blackened, one can only have repulsion for war. It is easy to talk of glory and heroism when one is away from it, when memory has softened the gruesome details. But here, in the presence of the mutilated and tortured dead, one can only feel the horror and wickedness of war.⁸⁸

Letter writing was an important part of the soldiers' time in the trenches, but the receiving of mail provided an even greater joy. Letters provided personalized news from home, including how family members were doing, reports on the year's harvest, and crucial football scores.⁸⁹ Parcels were also received, often from volunteer groups trying to brighten the spirits of the fighting men. Items from these groups could be the most touching of all. A note attached to one box read,

We are sorry that you are cold at night so we are sending you a blanket. We mean to send one every week because you are so brave and taking care of us and our dear country. We send you our love and pray to God to end the war soon and bring you safe home.
Your loving little friends, Garden Fields School (girls)
P.S. We are not going to buy sweets till the war is over but save our money for blankets and tobacco.⁹⁰

The writing and receiving of letters was always done in close contact with the other soldiers in one's trench. It was these men that soldiers relied upon to keep them alive, and out of this grew a special camaraderie unique to no other. These friendships became so close that a type of trench household was created: "men are welded into a closer comradeship by dangers and discomforts shared. They learn to trust each other, and to look for the essential qualities rather than for the accidental graces."⁹¹ Rations would be cooked and consumed collectively and care packages would be distributed evenly among the members. Practical jokes were always prevalent in the trench households, as

88 Hankey, *Student in Arms*, 2nd series, 88-89.

89 Winter, *Death's Men*, 164.

90 *Ibid.*, 165.

91 Hankey, *Student in Arms*, 33.

was swearing, the long renowned art of soldiers. One soldier explained, "A pent-up bloke felt good after delivering a particularly foul and original sentence, and his face would beam at the cheers which acclaimed his efforts."⁹² When a soldier was killed, another would write a personalized account to accompany the official notice to the next of kin.⁹³

British soldiers did the best they could to relate their experiences on the Western Front to their prior civilian lives, but it became increasingly difficult with each passing day in the trenches.⁹⁴ They were soldiers and, in turn, were expected to kill. While positioned within an inactive sector, soldiers could influence their safety to some degree, as the system of live-and-let-live has shown, but soldiers knew that offensives would be needed to win the war and that meant they could be thrown into battle at any time. It was the great battle, although infrequent and relatively short lived, that put a shiver down the soldier's spine.⁹⁵

The high command did its best to keep news of coming offensives quiet but rarely succeeded. The amounts of supplies needed for an offensive were enormous, requiring thousands of artillery pieces, shells, and men. The men could sense the coming battle weeks in advance. They would be pulled out of the line for extra rest and training, often moved to different locations along the front. As the event drew closer they received additional rations of food and cigarettes.⁹⁶ With each day that passed soldiers became more tense, not knowing if tomorrow would be the day or the next or the next. One soldier remembered waiting for news, explaining, "You just waited in a day-to-day kind of existence until things happened. It did not do you any good to know that you were going to be in a great battle next Wednesday. I preferred not to have too much time to work myself into a state of wind-up."⁹⁷

Finally word would come through that the battle was approaching. The soldiers had been surrounded by death their entire time at the front but the knowledge that many of their friends, and perhaps even themselves, would not survive the attack was emotionally draining. Anticipating a push, one man wrote, "We are waiting to go up and do the charge. I imagine we will be a lot weaker coming home if we ever see billets again. I think this anticipation is almost worse for the men who have been through a show before."⁹⁸ Another soldier later confessed,

The momentary peace was tinged with apprehension. As time went past, it crept into my mind and became acute as I weighed my chances of surviving the attack. No. I could not so easily give up life, so alluring and precious at that moment .

92 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 46.

93 Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, 155.

94 Winter, *Death's Men*, 133.

95 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 48-52.

96 Winter, *Death's Men*, 174-175.

97 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 30.

98 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 52.

.. The grip of life on me was tightening and more than ever I wanted to live.⁹⁹

As night fell the tension grew worse. Men geared up, joining the long lines of infantry slowly making their way through the communication trenches to their jumping-off positions. After midnight orders usually came through for a few hours of rest but most could not sleep: "All through that night I never slept a wink of sleep. My stomach would insist on rising to my throat to choke me each time I thought of some lurid possibility. I would find myself calculating the chances for survival."¹⁰⁰

In the final hours before an attack, hundreds even thousands of guns would open up on the German lines, causing the ground to shake uncontrollably. The men had been used to artillery but few had experienced such an intense barrage. Waiting to go into battle one soldier later described the bombardment, saying, "Their deafening thunder threatened the ear drums. It was inspiring, though uncomfortable, for soon eighteen-pounder shells were screaming just over our heads, an experience to which we were not yet accustomed from our own artillery."¹⁰¹ The artillery barrage continued to increase until reaching its climax during the final hour prior to the attack. By this time soldiers could no longer hear themselves think.¹⁰² One soldier described his thoughts in the final minutes before going into battle explained, "One indulges in regrets about the home one may never see again. One is rather sorry for oneself . . . one feels mildly heroic."¹⁰³ At ten minutes to H-hour officers would distribute rum rations down the line with orders to fix bayonets. There was usually time for one last equipment check before the artillery stopped abruptly. Men, with ears still ringing from hours of shell explosions, would then hear the shrill of the whistle and pour over the top of their trenches into the inferno of combat.¹⁰⁴

Struggling over the trench parapet the soldiers, weighed down with equipment, began their life and death dash across no-man's land. It was here where they were at their most vulnerable, being exposed to the full fury of enemy fire. One witness recalled, "They seemed so toy-like, so trivial and ineffective when opposed to that overwhelming wrath of shells and yet they moved forward mechanically as though they were hypnotized by some superior will."¹⁰⁵ Deafening noise continued to tear at the soldiers' ears while their eyes became choked with smoke and dirt was blown into their faces. The ground was littered with shell holes and all forms of war debris. Throughout the action, the enemy's machine guns strafed the terrain with deadly accuracy while artillery laid down a wall of steel on the advancing troops.¹⁰⁶ It did not take long for the infantry lines to begin to

99 P. Maze, *A Frenchman in Khaki* (Heinemann, 1934), in *Winter, Death's Men*, 175.

100 F. Ball, quoted in *Winter, Death's Men*, 173.

101 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 30.

102 *Winter, Death's Men*, 175.

103 Hankey, *A Student in Arms*, 2nd series, 117.

104 *Ibid.*, 116-118; *Winter, Death's Men*, 176-177.

105 F. Manning, *Her Privates We* (Murray, 1930), in *Winter, Death's Men*, 177.

106 *Winter, Death's Men*, 179.

break apart. One soldier explained, "It was a terrible thing to watch line after line crumple up. Meanwhile, the trenches were absolutely blocked with the dead, dying and wounded. If people at home really knew what a show like Sunday's was like."¹⁰⁷

The soldiers continued to advance. Their emotions had been numbed by the adrenaline of battle. Their body chemistry was now so upset that they fought in a semi-drugged state, often unable to recall their actions after the battle.¹⁰⁸ The soldiers' thoughts focused around death, their own and that of the enemy. As one man confessed, "I knew that at any moment my life might be blotted out by a bullet crashing through my head, or by flying shell fragments rending me apart."¹⁰⁹ It was the site of others dying that affected the soldiers the most:

I came across Flannery lying close to a barbed wire support, one arm round it as if in embrace . . . I knelt down beside him and cut his tunic with my scissors where a burnt hole clotted with blood showed under the kidney. A splinter of shell had torn part of his side away. All hope was lost for the poor soul . . . I placed the morphia under his tongue and he closed his eyes as if going to sleep. Then with an effort he tried to get up and gripped the wire. His legs shot out from under him and, muttering something about rations being fit for pigs and not for men, he fell back and died.¹¹⁰

The anguish was intensified when one's friend lay dying before them: "I felt the passing of Bill acutely, as it was the first time a pal had been struck down beside me. It was a shock to realize that death could come from nowhere."¹¹¹

With combat inevitably came the need to kill. Soldiers attempted to rationalize this act in many ways but when performed in the intimacy of the trenches it had a shattering effect. As one soldier explained,

When we got to the German trench I fell on top of a young fellow, and my bayonet went right through him. It was a crime to get him, at that. He was as delicate as a pencil. When I returned to our trenches after my first charge I could not sleep for a long time afterwards for remembering what that fellow looked like and how my bayonet slipped into him and how he screamed when he fell. He had his legs and his neck

107 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 49.

108 Winter, *Death's Men*, 181.

109 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 38.

110 P. MacGill, *The Great Push* (Jenkins, 1928), in Winter, *Death's Men*, 181-182.

111 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 26.

twisted under him after he got it. I thought about it a lot, and it grew to be almost a habit that whenever I was going to sleep I would think about him, and then all hope of sleeping was gone.¹¹²

Many soldiers approached killing with a “them or me” mentality. The Western Front was not governed by outside laws. A soldier had to do whatever he could to survive. One man wrote,

You can't talk of fighting cleanly. There is no cleanliness in warfare. It isn't clean to live in the earth. It isn't clean to batter men's heads in . . . You have no idea how ridiculous this war is. You sit in a trench and wait, and fire, and send bombs over, and shell, and wait again, and bury a few men, and wait again, and fire, sleep-possibly-and wake, and wait and shell and wait, and that's all! It is not warfare; to use an impossible expression, it's civilized savagery and barbarous civilization.¹¹³

No matter the manner of thinking, soldiers could not escape the experiences of killing unscathed. With each additional day of combat or miserable day among the front line trenches, the men grew more weary. All they could hope for was to survive their current tour of duty until they were pulled out of the line for a few days rest.¹¹⁴

OUT OF THE LINE

The last day prior to moving out of the line could often be the most nerve racking as men took extra precautions to avoid being a victim of German sniping. Soldiers could quite quickly vacate their trenches once their relief unit had arrived. With the hike back through the communication trenches, the men began to awaken from the dulled mental state of trench life. It was not long before real grass grew along the road, trees contained all their branches and leaves, and even the birds could be heard again.¹¹⁵

Once out of the line, the soldiers' top priority was a bath. Some headed to the army bathing houses with, “twenty or thirty big tubs with hot shower bath above. Each man was allowed four minutes in the tub and was given a clean set of underclothing, his dirty ones were collected to be washed and used for future battalions.”¹¹⁶ The houses operated from seven in the morning to seven at night, sometimes servicing a thousand men daily. However, the house were plagued by breakdowns. Boilers often broke, produc-

112 Albert N. Depew, *Gunner Depew* (London: Cassell & Co., 1918), 61, in Bourke, “Experience of Killing”, 294-295.

113 Anonymous letter quoted in James J. Fisher, “The Immortal Deeds of Our Irish Regiments in Flanders and the Dardanelles”, No. 1, unpaginated (Dublin: Irish Regiments, 1916), in Bourke, “Experience of Killing”, 295.

114 Winter, *Death's Men*, 133.

115 *Ibid.*, 142.

116 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 78.

ing cold baths, or the houses ran out of water all together when too many men arrived suddenly. New underwear was irritating to the skin, and usually the wrong size; clean shirts were issued with dirty pants or vice versa.¹¹⁷ Others improvised in a nearby river or pond. One soldier describe how, "A bathing parade was organized . . . In the warm summer evening we sported in the water like kids without a care. The war seemed far off, yet the line was but a mile away."¹¹⁸ Whichever option was chosen, the soldiers enjoyed themselves. Unfortunately, with the return of their clothes, returned the lice. The only answer was a new set, which rarely came.

Once clean, soldiers queued to receive their billeting assignments. Everyone prayed for a town billet where sexual indulgence and drinking were more likely to occur. Resting in a village for a few days also had the effect of reminding the men of their civilian days. The results were positive for the most part.¹¹⁹ Those not fortunate enough to find a civilian residence were relegated to the army's designated rest camps. Here they were packed into bell tents, holding up to twelve men, or Nissen huts, which could hold twenty-four. Both were tightly packed, dirty, and wet. Still, the men were above ground, freed from the torments of the rats and nobody was shooting at them.¹²⁰

Once housing was established, the soldiers received their pay. While useless in the trenches, opportunities for spending money out of the line were widespread. The first stop for a soldier with a pocket full of money was usually the army canteens where he could replenish his much cherished supply of cigarettes. Tobacco use had increased more than fourfold in Britain since the turn of the century and was one of the few pleasures allotted to the men while in the trenches.¹²¹ Specifically, "Cigarettes were as important as ammunition. A Tommy would ask for a fag when near death."¹²² Great panic would ensue if a soldier's tobacco supply dwindled. After attempting to smoke dried tea leaves rolled in brown paper, one soldier vowed never to run out of tobacco again.¹²³

Apart from tobacco, the Army canteens offered books, newspapers, candles, tinned goods, biscuits, and chocolates to the men. These were also supplemented by YMCA canteens.¹²⁴ Soldiers could get hot meals here, which was a welcome relief after the dribble of the trenches. For a few extra Francs men turned to the homely atmosphere of the French Estaminets. Here the men received fried food and crisp bread rolls to help restore their self-respect and digestive tracks. Also offered was the famous egg and chips, remembered by all who served on the Western Front. All this was, in turn, washed down with a pint or two of French beer.¹²⁵ The Estaminets were remembered for their ability to bring a little bit of England to France, helping the soldiers to relax in a social setting not

117 Winter, *Death's Men*, 146-147.

118 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 24.

119 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 75.

120 Winter, *Death's Men*, 146.

121 J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies, 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 82; Winter, *Death's Men*, 149.

122 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 44.

123 *Ibid.*

unlike the pubs of Britain. One soldier explained,

We entered the estaminet. Soldiers were standing round the walls waiting for vacant seats . . . In the middle there was a long table and soldiers were seated around it, squeezed tightly together, eating eggs and chips and drinking wine and coffee . . . The conversation was boisterous and vulgar, much of it at the expense of the women, who laughed frequently and pretended to be shocked and called the soldiers 'naughty boys.'¹²⁶

With a full stomach soldiers could truly begin to relax. After the tribulations of the trenches men wanted to be comforted. The answer was, naturally, women:

In the shuddering revulsion from death, one turns instinctively to love as an act which seems to affirm the completeness of being . . . in the actual agony of battle, these cupidities have no place at all and women cease to exist so completely that they are not even irrelevant. Afterwards, yes.¹²⁷

There were a number of reasons why soldiers flocked to the droves of village girls, refugees, and prostitutes that loitered in the towns and around the base camps. The largely middle and working class infantry believed that good health required regular sex and they had to make up for lost time in the trenches. This attitude had its effects as venereal disease infection skyrocketed throughout the war, accounting for nearly a third of all reported diseases.¹²⁸ Other soldiers, after the strain of the front, simply wanted to be in the company of women as a way of bringing them back to the civilian world they had left behind in Britain.¹²⁹ Finally, there were those that just enjoyed the humor of the situation: "I have never seen such an unattractive collection of females in my life. I would have thought it enough to put anyone off completely even if he had gone on with the usual intention. We hurriedly left to a torrent of abuse in both English and French."¹³⁰

In attempts to quell the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and ease the men's minds in other ways, the Army offered a wide range of entertainment to the soldiers, the most substantial of which was the Army concert party. Established and run by British musicians, its performances matched those of the professional music halls.¹³¹ A small fee was sometimes required, causing soldiers to create ad hoc performances of their

124 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 82.

125 *Ibid.*, 74; Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 75.

126 F. Voigt, quoted in Winter, *Death's Men*, 152.

127 F. Manning, *Her Privates We* (Murray: 1930), in Winter, *Death's Men*, 150.

128 Winter, *Death's Men*, 150.

129 *Ibid.*, 142.

130 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 77.

131 L. J. Collins, *Theatre at War, 1914-1918* (New York: Macmillan, 1998), 149-150; Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 94, 100.

132 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 99.

own.¹³² Old English folk dancing was also introduced to the troops with some degree of success.¹³³ Gambling was also common among the troops, especially when a soldier's money began to run out. The emphasis was on a wide range of card and dice games, the rules of which have long since disappeared.¹³⁴ Most popular of all remained sport, specifically football. From the misty day of the Christmas Truce men had used football as an escape from the war, playing it whenever and wherever they could.¹³⁵ F.C. Grimwade explains, "Sport allowed above all a brief mental escape from the stress and horror . . . on coming out of the trenches, weary, muddy, possibly hungry, and almost certainly wet through, the men's first moments of freedom were spent in a game of football."¹³⁶

Through these activities the soldiers hoped to distance themselves from the war. Still, they knew in a week or so they would be heading back down the road toward the sound of the guns. Even while out of the line, these men remained soldiers. The only real escape from the war zone was through injury, death, or a leave pass. The opportunity for leave was so rare in the first two years of the war that many men never expected it to come, and when it did, the mixed emotions it brought were almost too much to bear.¹³⁷ An instinctive joy came to a man knowing in a few hours he would be out of the cauldron of death that was the Western Front and back across the Channel with family and friends. At the same time, he was deeply saddened to leave his mates behind, not knowing who would be left alive when he returned. Camaraderie had grown so intense in the trenches that some refused to leave their friends.¹³⁸

Transport back to Britain brought with it the abruptness of civilian life. Soldiers found themselves suddenly thrown back into a society that knew none of his hardships. For most, it was impossible to talk of their experiences with family and friends. Where once great conversation had reined, a void now separated the men from their loved ones. Any hopes that a return to Britain would restore their role as civilians were dashed, the prewar life was gone forever.¹³⁹ Also, the men knew leave was only temporary. Inevitably, they would have to return to the front, a world encompassed by death, but now less alien than the streets they grew up on. One man who had received leave during the war later wrote, "The wrench came when I had to say goodbye and return to France. Heart-breaking scenes occurred when the troop trains departed. I was in tears."¹⁴⁰

Back in camp the repression of emotions began anew. Clothes had been cleaned, the affliction of lice abated, and stomachs filled; it was time to re-enter the trenches:

It is surprising how one's tautened nerves relax as a result of a few days rest and quiet-and how, once more in the danger zone, the strain on

132 Collins, *Theatre at War*, 151.

134 Winter, *Death's Men*, 153.

135 Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 123, 125.

136 F. C. Grimwade, *War History of the Fourth Battalion The London Regiment, 1914-1919* (1922), 293, in Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 91.

137 Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 72-73.

138 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 83.

139 *Ibid.*; Fuller, *Troop Morale*, 72-73.

sorely tried nerves begins again after the painful process which makes one feel conditions more acutely and which take time to acclimatize one to the previous level one had attained. Do not believe that soldiers get used to war and danger. They never do.¹⁴¹

And so they went, the men of Kitchener's Army, citizen soldiers, down the mud slicked roads, past bombed and abandoned buildings, through the communication and support trenches, to the front, always carrying with them the emotional malaise of the Western Front.

This is how the British soldiers lived their lives on the Western Front day after day, week after week, month after month. With each passing day the experiences of war became harder to bear. This was not the war men had signed up for back in August of 1914. At that time the war seemed so temporary, so far away. The hundreds of thousands of men who volunteered in those early days saw the war as employment, a chance to start over in life, an adventure, or just simply something to do. Few could have realized what was in store for them on the plains of northern France and Belgium.

Men had their grievances concerning the new rules the Army imposed on them in basic training, but still the reality of being soldiers was lacking. A deficiency in supplies and training left the new soldiers further unprepared for life among the trenches. Before long the volunteers found themselves thrown into the trenches of the Western Front. Following a brief orientation by veteran units, the men were alone. Instantly, emotions took a reversal of fortunes. Men who had never traveled much beyond their town, much less beyond England, now found themselves crouching in muddy, water soaked trenches. Men whose only experiences with violence and aggression were at the local pub were now exposed to the fury and evils of modern warfare. The great adventure had become the great nightmare.

Humans are made to adapt, and that is just what the British soldiers did. They replaced as many aspects of military life as they could with reminders of home. Time was almost always allotted for the English Breakfast, with tea breaks occurring at regular intervals, and sport continued to be practiced. To diminish the unnecessary killing and destruction of war the live-and-let-live system of truces was established.

Even with these attempts at civilianizing the war, the men were already beginning to change. They could not escape the death that enveloped them. It was everywhere, in no-man's land, in the trenches, in the rear, and even in the eyes of the living. The only hope was to somehow push it to the back of the mind. The resulting mental impact of day after day in the trenches ravaged the soldiers to the point that emotions became so

140 Coppard, *Machine Gun to Cambrai*, 65.

141 A. Worden, *Yes, Daddy* (MacMillan, 1961), in *Winter, Death's Men*, 161.

142 Liddle, *Soldier's War*, 21.

143 Warburton, "Britain: The Home Front".

144 Keegan, *First World War*, 310-324, 393-394.

145 *Ibid.*, 426.

dulled one could not tell if a man was alive or dead.

Adding to the mental drain of the front was the physical abuse the British soldiers endured on a daily basis. Being perpetually cold and wet, it took great efforts to fight off the attacks of rats, lice, and enemy assaults. Still, the men came to accept this form of torture as long as they were spared the experiences of the great battle. It was here that soldiers witnessed and engaged in the act of killing on a scale so grand it is hard to conceive. The experiences of slaying the enemy, along with the death of one's friends and comrades, left the soldiers with memories and personal anguish of untold proportions.

Rest periods out of the line offered time away from the front for soldiers to recuperate as best as possible, but were never fully successful. They were too short and the men knew eventually they would have to return. While out of the line, soldiers were able to escape the experiences of the trenches for a few days at least. They received baths and improved food, had the opportunities to associate with women again, and play a few games of football. To some, leave back to Britain was granted, forcing a soldier to undergo the full spectrum of emotions in a matter of days. These events could not purge the soldiers of their front line experiences; in many ways, they added to them. Men were by and large left alone to deal with their emotions and the experiences of the Western Front.

The war did not stop for individual soldiers. It kept on going, day after day, requiring more and more men to feed its appetite. With volunteer enlistment declining steadily throughout 1915, Britain instituted its first Military Conscription Act in January of 1916.¹⁴² By 1916, Britain had also become fully mobilized towards the war and was now able to pour vast amounts of war material into France.¹⁴³

With each year, the Great War became greater. Each year brought increased destruction and higher casualty figures. For the British, 1916 brought the great attrition battle of the Somme, to be followed in 1917 by Passchendaele.¹⁴⁴ Through all of this the British soldier continued to man his trenches, enduring all the horrors of the Western Front. Not until the Spring Offensives of the Germans failed in 1918 did the war revert back to one of maneuver, freeing the soldiers from their subterranean chambers for the first time in three and a half years.¹⁴⁵

The eleventh of November 1918 was a day of jubilation throughout Britain. Germany had signed an armistice that morning ending hostilities in all its theatres, including along the Western Front. The war Europe had been so anxious for was finally over. The crowds that gathered in the streets of Britain that day were forever distanced from those who had gathered in August of 1914. The world had changed in that time. There is no better example of this than the British volunteer soldiers who entered the trenches of the Western Front naive and innocent, to emerge four years later hardened by their experiences.