

Letter from the
trenches by sammie
whyte essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Dear Elizabeth, Dearest. I know this shall never reach you but I had to write this for my own reasons and myself, as much as for you. Even if you were to read this you wouldn't understand. No one who has not witnessed the horror will understand. Where to begin to give you even just a glimpse at this life here among the decomposing corpses and stench of slaughter? To begin at the very beginning is said to be a good start, you saw me leave, and on that day do you remember how I looked? I do, I looked so healthy, proud and handsome.

Now? Now I look like a filthy stinking hag. My fine woollen uniform is no more than a mud and flea infested rag. The journey here was long and harsh, many were travelsick and the small cramped compartments allocated to groups of us stank of sweat and vomit. On arrival in France, I was sent to the reserve with a group of fellow disillusioned men.

The reserve came as a shock owed to the stories circulating about the front and the wounded men lying, rotting in the makeshift hospital tents. However this was nothing compared to the true terror of the front where I was posted only a few weeks later. Time passed slowly. Summer was no escape as the heat bathed unwashed bodies in sweat.

Rotting corpses began to decompose faster, hastened by the thrashing sun- the stench was repulsive and there was no escape. It was not long after I went out there that I befriended a collection of the most unique men one is likely to ever meet. We had many stories to swap, indeed so many that on occasion we talked all night. We talked about our past, our future, the weather, the news and frequently what we had left behind. It made me feel

comforted to know that I was not the only one grieving for the company of loved ones.

David had left behind his wife who he loved deeply and missed like a deaf man misses sound. Then there was Andrew. He'd left his wife behind who has since had a baby girl, who he will probably never see. The youngest of the four of us was little Josh. He did not talk much, the quiet type, but you always got the impression he was more than he seemed. I'll never know.

Being with them let me remember and talk about you, without tears. I do hope that the boys are taking good care of you, David will be eight soon, won't he? Has Adam said anymore than Dada yet? I do miss them so, it feels like an eternity and if I return, I fear, they will not know me. How soul destroying that will be. After only a week at the front, I began to vomit a lot and had terrible diarrhoea. It was thought, at first, to be trench sickness, everyone has had it at some point.

That was until I fainted on the third day. A nurse was called from the reserve and I was rushed to the nearest medical tent. I was diagnosed with cholera. I thought I was going to die, so did everyone else, I could see it in their eyes. I began to think about never seeing you again, smelling you or holding you. I cried bitter tears.

At one point lying in the squalid medical tent I thought I saw you. Standing before me in your Sunday best looking as beautiful as ever. For a moment I thought I was dead and you were an angel come to take me to heaven. Yet as I blinked the sleep and tears from my eyes, I saw that it was not you but a

new nurse just arriving in this hell, not an angel come to take me from it. I sat and stared, tears creeping down my cheeks for what seemed like days.

Finally after two weeks, I was given the all clear and was sent back into duty at the front. On arrival I noticed two major differences; firstly part of the Eastern wall, of the trench, had collapsed due to the mud and a direct shell hit. Secondly none of the men I mentioned earlier are still stationed here. I later discovered David had put a bullet in his brain; could not cope. I felt distraught.

On arrival David had been the joyful one but now he was dead, not even by a German gun but by his own hand. No one I am here with now remembers him and even if they did they would never speak of him. Suicide is disgrace, cowardice; the soldiers I am here with now do not want to discuss cowardice. So I pay tribute solely to his memory; Lord, may he be at peace. All the others moved to the reserve, a break from the constant shelling and death. So I am here alone but with so many strangers.

I miss you so much my mind is playing cruel tricks on me. Last night, while I huddled in my lice and rat infested bundle, I swear, I could hear your slow, steady breathing. I dared not open my eyes, and so lay entrapped by the sweet sound. I dared not look in case it was just a cruel illusion and I would be forced to acknowledge the hell I'm in. I prayed that the last year had been an upsetting nightmare, a nightmare that over time would fade and be forgotten, and this was truly you beside me.

I prayed that if I was to open my eyes, I would see your beautiful face and I would be able to kiss you and whisper how much I love you. What seemed

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like hours passed with me lying there listening, praying, until I dared to open my eyes. When I did I saw not you but a large rat staring at me with hungry little eyes. I screamed so loud the Germans must have heard me. I then began to vomit, over and over, into a stinking bucket.

I vomited until my stomach was stripped bare and then I sobbed. Winter is creeping steadily onward. It is as cold as summer was hot. Summer burns your bones, winter freezes them. In summer flesh rots from the heat, in winter it rots from the cold.

I do not know which is worse- both are hell. Let me tell you again how much I love you and I will try to be home soon. Tell the boys I miss them and remind them who I am. Wait for me.

I will return. I could write on, telling you how much I love and miss you, but something is going on. I must go find out what the commotion is all about.