

My experiences of the war by thomas cooke



I am lying here in hospital with the memories of the trenches and the attack that made me end up here still too painfully fresh in my mind.

I wake up every night in the early hours screaming, as the pictures of Pure Hell that have made up the past years of my life run through my frightened mind.. You might say I was lucky to be injured. Better end up here, then dead I suppose, but I know as soon as I recover I'll be back on the front line before you can shout " For King and Country. " Back to the lice, the rats, the mud and fighting.

Back to the killing. Sorry I'm getting ahead of myself. You see the doctors say the way to help me to conquer my nightmares is to write down my experiences and the best place to start a story is at the beginning. My name is Thomas Cooke and yes I am a " real life" Tommie. I was born on the 8th November 1894 and at the age of 20, my best friend Samuel Carpel and I signed up for the British army to help with the war with Germany.

We were told we could stay together; fight together and win together. This however wasn't the case; we were separated and on the 22nd of September last year I lost him, my best friend. A letter informing me, that's all I got and no let up on my duties to mourn, there was too much to do and too many deaths to do that. Being a religious man I believed and still believe that the church ought to have been against the war but I was also a proud man, desperate not to be thought weak, so I was to fight more for dignity rather than belief. Anyway it was all going to be over by Christmas.

Well that was what we thought. It was soon clear that we would have to dig in to win the War and dig in we did. As soldiers we had to dig our own

trenches and fix them daily as they were regularly damaged by shell fire.

The later on we got into the War the worst this job got.

As we dug, our shovels would find the decaying bodies of our friends.

Blackened legs and Eyeless heads. You remember them then. Their laugh or their nicknames and truly realise they are gone. The conditions of the trenches were living hell.

Our trench would flood with the smallest amount of rain because of its bad positioning and the mud it left behind was tortuous. Duckboards were placed over the mud to try and help conditions but if you or a horse fell off them you would certainly die. It was too dangerous to try and rescue anyone. This mud also caused trench foot when your feet decay inside your rotting boots. It is meant to be ever so painful so I am glad I have never had it. Not only us soldiers lived in the trenches.

Swarms of Rats, lice and nits were all too common. Lice and nits worked like a double act making us very itchy. I shaved my head to rid myself of the nits but I was still a seething mass of lice. We were ordered to change our socks often and I was glad to as when I took mine of and dropped them they would move! The rats were huge as they ate the bodies of dead or wounded soldiers to weak to fight back and also stole the small amount of rations we had. When I slept I was commonly woken by the feeling of a rat on me.

I played a little game then. I would lie very still and then suddenly flick my body upwards to get the rat to fly of. Then I'd listen to the grunts of the poor man it landed on. We would also kill the rats in return for eating our food. It allowed us to have something different to do and meant something other

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than " Bully. " Barbed wire surrounded the trench and if soldiers got tangled in it they becoming easy targets for enemy bullets.

You see death was never far away in the trenches. In my time in the trenches I have seen a good many men killed on their first day in the trench for ignoring the first rule which is to never stick your head out of the trench. Going over the top was even worse. The things I saw there will scar me for the rest of my life.

. I survived going over 5 times and this was 5 times too many. The worst time was at the Battle of the Somme 1916. It was a massacre. I hardly have the words to describe the horror, the dreadful, ghastly, gruesome scenes.

I saw men twirling in peculiar shapes as they were hit and their last breaths were screams of pain. I came across men wanting me to shoot them and ones calling for their mothers like the boys they were. They met such terrible deaths. What a waste of lives; they were lads who had never lived.

And O the noise; the screams and the firing of guns. They are sounds I have heard so often but yet have not and will not get used to. However the worst sound is the silence. The silence before we go over the top. It is then that every man is ruled by fear that the next sniper bullet would have his name on it.

I lost my faith so many times in No Mans Land. I kept a bible in my breast pocket with me to help conquer my fear and to remind me that God was on my side but there were times when I wondered why I was really fighting this War and why God was allowing this mass loss of life. Even when my lack of

faith was at its worst I kept my bible. It was a present from my mother who seems so far away and it became a lucky charm to get me back safe. I always prayed before going over the top so that God would hopefully keep me safe.

I said the same prayer every time. " Dear God, I am about to go into grave danger. Please help me to act like a man and come back safe. Amen.

" And when I saw men dying on the battlefield British or German I would offer up a silent prayer for them. It helped me believe that death was not the end. Our daily routine was always the same. Get up early after no or little sleep and stand to on the " fire step" ready to attack. Then we would clean our rifles and have breakfast.

This consists of " Bully" beef and rock hard biscuits and water which we collected from anywhere dirty or clean. This meant men regularly got constipation and we used engine oil to help us go. After this if we weren't going over the top we would do jobs in the trench. The worst job was definitely cleaning the latrine.

I call them latrines but they were nothing more than a bucket. I'd always try and hold on as long as possible and only go if I really had to. The thought of it makes me gag as it smelt so bad. But saying this, the whole place stank. If it wasn't the latrines it was the smell of dried sweat, mud, and rotten bodies.

Another job us soldiers had to do was fill in the massive holes left by the shell fire with sandbags and wood. It was in this ordinary every day action that our trench was badly hit by a shell and I was injured. I and some other

soldiers were trying to fill in the holes in the trench. We had run out of sand so were packing the sacks with mud instead.

Well there was plenty of that around. It was as I had just placed a sack over the hole when we heard a loud sinister whistling sound. A shell. Someone shouted " Duck" and I fell to the ground covered my head with my hands. The power of the shell sent mud flying everywhere and although I did not realise it then I was struck in the lower leg with shrapnel. I couldn't stand up and was rather shaken so I looked around to try and find the men I had been working with.

The sight I saw will never leave me. Bodies were lying everywhere. One man had been completely blown apart and others had lost limbs and were quietly moaning. Only I and one other survived that shell attack. The others died a painful slow death which we could do nothing about.

I was sent to the reserve trenches and then to hospital. Even though I am away from the War my mind plays over the fighting like a broken record. For every soldier here it is the same. The nights are loud with screams and moans and the days of painful slow recovery.

Some men have gone crazy through fear of shells and death. They shake and rock at the slightest of noise and have regular fits. Not long ago these men would have been called cowards or even mad but people know now that is what War does. It is the work of the Devil. There are some men that are labelled N Y D which is meant to mean Not Yet Diagnosed but some of them are in such a bad way that it has to be Not Yet Dead Unless you have experienced War you never truly know what it is like.

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I went thinking it was glorify but it isn't that at all. I learnt to shoot and got my cross guns badge to increase my wages. To be honest I was blissfully unaware that I was learning to kill. Lice, rats, barbed wire, fleas, shells, bombs, corpses, blood, filth, bullets, fire, mud, that is what war is.

There was only one good moment that occurred in those long years of service. On Christmas Eve 1914 the guns fell silent. It was an unarranged truce and a moment of great joy for us soldiers. Some generals were not too happy but that made it even sweeter. We sang carols and swapped presents and showed photographs. I shared cigars with a lovely young man who had a wife and a new born baby at home.

I don't know whether he is still alive or not. Then we played football. The Germans were winning 3-2 when the ball burst on barbed wire. That brought us back to reality and before long we were killing each other again. It showed me that the men fighting for Germany were not unlike us and made me wish more and more for peace.

When that happens and only when that happens, I believe the men who fought and died and those like me who are still living we be able to rest in peace.