

Letter from the trenches



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

To My Dearest Elsie, I know this is my 5th letter in 3 days but I need to tell the truth. I joined the army for adventure and the chance to see new places but instead I am living in a mud hole, freezing under constant fear of death. You may laugh and say that I am but whingeing and that I am probably the only scared man here but it's not true. All 5, 000 of us are terrified of what may come if we so much as lift our heads into the view of the enemy. Every day I have spent in this trench, we have had shells fired at us.

The noise is horrific and the despair in the eyes of many a soldier is evident as another comes over. If and when the shelling stops, many drink or smoke to try relax but you can tell that a few are on the brink of breaking down. Some men have shot themselves in the arm or leg just to have an injury serious enough to get them out of the trenches but not bad enough to kill them. Apart from the threat of having your head blown off, the Germans are now trying to gas us to death. These gas attacks are few and far between but when one is launched the new recruits drop like flies mainly because they do not know anything.

One called Jenkins lost his gas mask and when the Germans launched a chlorine gas shell, well, that was it for him really. The vile stuff burns your lungs out. The newbies can do nothing but choke up their burnt out lungs. The other gas they use is mustard gas which is truly evil. It blisters the skin, blinding men who then roll around in agony, clutching their red raw flesh. Forgive me if I am scaring you but I need to talk about this. Our daily food is bully beef. When you first start the army and you are eating this you think it's bland but edible.

After 3 months of bully beef and little else, you wonder whether you would actually feel better hungry or with a tin of bully beef inside you. Everyone is given some rum to start the day off which is rather uplifting for most of us. Smoking is allowed in the daytime which takes away the taste of bully beef but at night we aren't allowed as the cigarette light makes us an easy target for a German spy. Tea is freely available but the trouble is that it often freezes in your cup as it is so cold. We aren't allowed coats as our superiors say that we won't be able to walk properly in them so frostbite is common.

We wear as many layers of clothing as possible which means that our clothes are dirty and sweaty. Men in the front line can't wash until we are sent back to support or reserve. It's made doubly worse by the mud. The mud is probably the worst aspect or rather what comes with it. The mud is often knee deep. We have to eat, sleep and fight in piles of the stuff. Puttees are no use (that's slang for material wrapped around your shins). Do you remember little Billy Rawlson? He drowned in the mud. He was sleeping and his head went under.

By the time we noticed he wasn't perched up where he normally was, he was dead. Send Betty my commiseration's and apologies. The mud brings trench foot with it. Trench foot is where your feet swell up to sometimes double their original size. To start off with, you lose all feeling in your feet. Someone who had trench foot stuck his bayonet into the afflicted foot and didn't even flinch! After a few days of having numb feet, the sensitivity comes back - with vengeance. Men will often have the foot amputated rather than endure the terrific pain that ensues.

Trench foot isn't the only illness that is rife amongst soldiers but Dysentery (stomach pains and diarrhoea), Nephritis (kidney inflammation) and VD are very common and, due to the nature of the illness, it makes life here even more difficult even if you yourself don't suffer from the illness. Every single man in this trench has lice of some variety. This may sound disgusting but hunting out lice becomes almost a social pastime. We search for each other's lice and crush them between our fingernails or burn them with our candles but somehow I doubt "chatting" will catch on back home.

Tabby would be happy here. Since there are no cats here, rats run rife. We call them "corpse rats" because these rats will eat the bodies of the dead on the battlefield. Even injured soldiers have found these infernal creatures nibbling his wounds. There have been reports of rats as big as cats about 3 miles up the trench. That would be a great trophy for the soldier that killed it. Part of what annoys me about the army is how men lose their minds to the generals after a few weeks of training but then how they almost reawake once they're in the thick of it all. To be quite frank, it all disgusts me.

The battlefield is nearly as muddy as the trenches but with double the horrors. Masses of bodies are piled up out of the way whilst the rats feed upon the corpses. To step onto that field is death and every night this week that is what we have been sentenced to. The commander sounds his whistle, always at night, and we climb over. We run over the field and then you notice your mates falling to the ground around you. The first time it happened, I thought that the commander had shouted an order and I'd missed it so I lay down too but then I realised that their eyes were shut and they weren't breathing anymore.

I haven't been shot yet but surely it'll happen to me and then who knows if I'll be alive to tell the tale. After we attack, the Germans will attack us, with their bayonets attached to their guns just as ours had been and like us they will fall. Everyone hates that old butcher Haig. I tell you Elsie, I'd like to see his face if he saw what hell he puts innocent men through. Please, show this letter to everyone you know who is considering joining the army. Let them know what it's really like. Love, as always Jim