

1st PRIZE: DANE SMITH, Bispham High School

DIARY OF A FIRST WORLD WAR SOLDIER

1916 Wednesday September 13th Private P. Jones (Rifleman)

Here I am, 3 months after my 21st birthday, a rifleman in the Queens Westminster Rifles. I've been told I'm in a trench somewhere near 'Somme'. Last night was my first night here; I didn't sleep as the 9.2-inch howitzers were pounding the German lines. My entire body shook every time a shell landed; tearing a hole in no mans land. Thick mud splashed onto my face and an uncontrollable shiver spread across my rigid body. The smell of gunpowder and cordite filled my nostrils and stung my eyes as the clouds of white smoke drifted down and into the trench where we tried to sleep. My day started with the sergeant yelling in my face and kicking me to wake up only an hour after finally dropping off. It was still pitch black. When I asked about breakfast, he laughed at me and told me to collect water from the rear, only then could I have my bread. Me and Rob set off to the rear carrying 2 billy cans each. We struggled through sleeping men propped up against the walls of the trenches, huddling to keep warm. My boots sunk deep into the sludge and held on as I weaved through the maze of identical mud walls zigzagging every 30ft, frantically searching for a signpost to the rear. We walked for what felt like an eternity, the bombing became fainter.

1916 Thursday September 14th Private P. Jones (Rifleman)

No sleep again last night. I hadn't realised the stinging fear that filled every inch of my aching body. I don't think I'll ever get used to that feeling, but the war will be over by Christmas any way. I've been moving bodies all day. I was told that all the new boys have to do this. The stench and sight of the dismembered bodies was more than I thought I could take. But worst of all was the staring eyes of the sons, fathers and brothers once full of hopes and dreams. They looked into my face as I stooped to remove their I.D. disks. The thought that this might be my fate, almost made me vomit.

I never thought it would be like this when I saw Kitchener's poster. I thought this would be an adventure. Having a laugh with my mates, fighting for King George. And to think I volunteered for this hell. I'm beginning to worry about Jimmy: he's starting to show signs of shellshock. , ~

1916 Friday September 15th Private P. Jones (Rifleman)

I was just tucking into my breakfast when I heard a screeching so loud the ground shook. I jumped up and ran to investigate. What I saw was something out of a science fiction book. An enormous metal heap, clumsily stuck in no mans land. This was the secret weapon that had been talked about, the mighty tank. It must have been heading towards Flers-Courcelette. But suddenly it exploded, leaving nothing more than a crater, the victim of a howitzer.

A letter arrived today from dad. He says that Asquith will resign in December. There's no news on when the war will end though. I was shocked to find that Kitchener had died last June.

I just got back from stacking sandbags, my backs aching. I've heard that Asquith's son

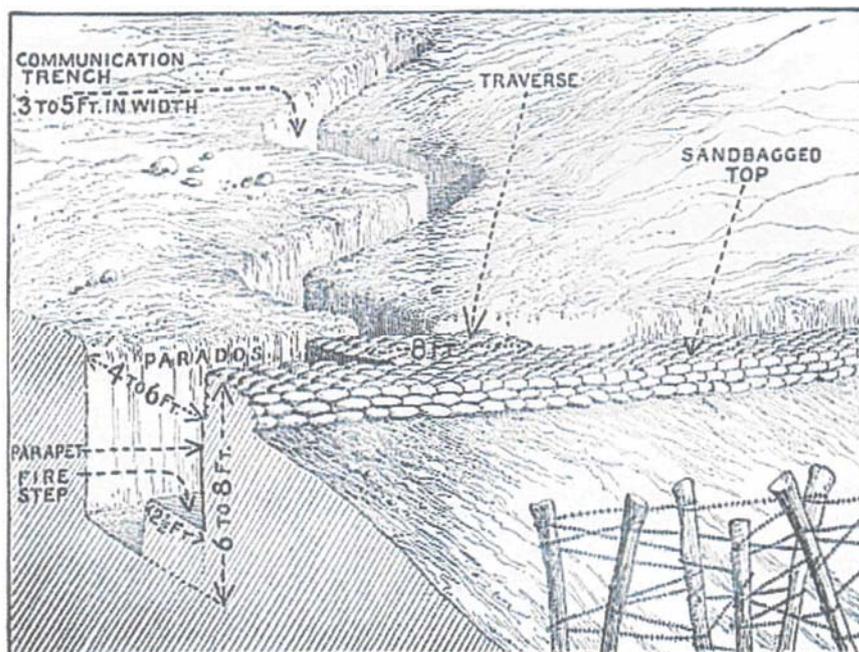
was shot and killed earlier today in Flers. He would still be alive, if his dad hadn't declared war on Germany. I don't know how much longer I can take of this. I hope Kitchener was wrong when he said the war would last 4 four years.

Jimmy finally got his finger shot off today; he's been talking about doing it since Wednesday. I didn't think he'd actually do it! Poor Jimmy.

But we've all got our problems. I can't stop thinking about gas attacks. I never leave my gas mask further than a couple of feet away. Everyone's scared of mustard gas in the night, if it doesn't kill you it, it sends you home as a cripple.

1916 Saturday 16th September Private P. Jones (Rifleman)

I feel like I've been living in the sewers for the past 4 days. I would do anything just to be dry! The rats don't seem to mind the water though. The weather doesn't make things any easier, but sergeant says the fleas don't itch as much when it rains, I'm not too sure. I've still not got used to the vile stink of the trench; it's almost unbearable. I've had to try and sleep on the fire step, it's been hard but it's a skill everyone's got to learn. Sleeping as close to the parapet wall as possible, hoping that if a shell should burst behind the trench, the parados will do its job and protect me from shrapnel. Whilst praying that the barbed wire in no-mans land will stop the German snatch squads from sneaking up on me.



A drawing of my trench

The long nights have left me with a lot of time to think, I know that we are doing the right thing, and that God is on our side in this war. I still don't understand why so many young troops are giving their lives for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. I remember the day so clearly, it was June/6/1914 in Sarajevo. It was a member of the Serbian Black Hand Gang, called Gavrilo Princip. Why didn't the King and Mr Asquith find another way to solve this? Austria and Germany wanted this war or they would have taken up the peace treaty proposed by us on July 26, 1914. I suppose I understand that Mr Asquith had to declare war when Germany marched through Belgium. They were out of order.

I spoke to a soldier today who's been here since the start of the war we were talking about the noise. He says the howitzers are nothing.

`You had to be here the first day of the Somme, there was a mine blown 50 foot below the ground that blew a hole over 70 foot deep and 90 yards across, you could hear it in London!' It's now called the Lochnager Crater.

He took me to see the crater that was left through a periscope.

I noticed some supply trucks today, maybe we're going to go over the top tomorrow. I've been dreading a battle since I arrived, so I managed to sharpen an old shovel I found. It should be more useful than that clumsy bayonet. We're expecting orders from General Haig to arrive soon.

1916 Sunday 17th September Private P. Jones (Rifleman)

It's very early in the morning, I should be asleep. I think we're going to attack today, and this will be the first time I've seen any action the entire time I've been here.

There's a constant burning feeling in my stomach and a migraine has set in. The howitzers have been firing a lot more than usual; they're probably trying to clear the German lines before we attack. I'm using my last bit of candle to write this. I'm not sure when I'll be able to write again.