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The Enemy, Mud and Other Troubles: Experiences of the British Junior Officers on the Western Front during the First World War

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Tiedekunta – Faculty **Humanistinen Tiedekunta**	Laitos – Department Historia & Etnologia
Tekijä – Author: Iiro Niiranen	
Työn nimi – Title Enemy, Mud and Other Troubles: Experiences of the British Junior Officers on the Western Front during the First World War	
Oppiaine – Subject Historia	Työn laji – Level Pro Gradu
Aika – Month and year 2018	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 119

Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Vuonna 1914 syttynyt ensimmäinen maailmansota oli ihmiskunnan siihen mennessä kokemista konflikteista tuhoisin. Sen seurauksena miljoonat ihmiset menettivät henkensä, joista suurimman ryhmän muodostivat ne miljoonat sotilaat, jotka Euroopan suurvallat keräsivät armeijoihinsa. Tämä tutkimus keskittyy brittiläisen Imperiumin komppaniatason upseereihin, jotka ovat toistaiseksi jääneet paljolti ilman huomiota eri väestöryhmien sotaan osallistumista tutkittaessa. Tarkoituksenani on tarkastella sitä, miten nämä pääasiallisesti nuoret miehet kokivat sodan, millaisissa oloissa he joutuivat elämään sodan aikana ja miten heidän kokemuksensa vaikuttivat heihin sodan kuluessa. Tämä ryhmä, joka eli sodan aikana hyvin samankaltaisissa oloissa kuin tavalliset sotilaat ja aliupseerit, kokien samat päivittäiset haasteet ja vaarat kuin heidän alaisensakin, on toistaiseksi jäänyt vaille suurempaa huomiota, sillä heidät on usein liitetty osaksi joko upseereita tai juoksuhaudoissa palvelleita joukkoja. Erityisesti näin on ollut Yhdistyneen Kuningaskunnan ulkopuolella tehdyssä tutkimuksessa.

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee edellämainittuja kysymyksiä käyttäen hyväkseen upseerien sodan aikana kirjoittamia henkilökohtaisia päiväkirjoja ja kirjeitä sekä muistelmia, joita he kirjoittivat sodan loputtua. Valtaosa näistä kirjeistä on ja päiväkirjoista on lähtöisin Lontoon Imperial War Museumin arkistista, mutta seassa on myös julkaistuista kirjekokoelmista löytyneitä kirjeitä. Tutkimukseni edustaa lähimmiten sotahistorian tutkimuslinjaa ja on sen vuoksi kiinnostunut yksittäisen ryhmän kokemusten ja maailmankuvan yleiskatsauksesta. Se ei juurikaan tarkastelee ensimmäistä maailmansota kovin suuressa mittakaavassa, vaan keskittyy juuri matalammalle tasolle.

Komppaniatason upseeristo koostui valtaosin nuorista miehistä, jotka olivat lähtöisin Iso-Britannian parempiosaisitta yhdyskuntaluokista. Heidät oli koulittu nuoresta lähtien palvelemaan maataan sodan sytyttyä ja kun se vihdoin tapahtui, nämä usein alle kaksikymmentävuotiaat miehet liittyivät armeijaan joukoin. Sodassa he altistuivat kokemuksille, jotka yllättivät heidät usein täysin ja horjuttivat heidän vanhaa maailmankuvaansa.

Asiasanat – Keywords
Säilytyspaikka – Depository
Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1.0 Introduction

On the 28th of June 1914 the fuse on the powder keg that was Europe at the time was lit when the heir presumptive to the throne of Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated in Sarajevo. Within weeks of this event the continent of Europe plunged into one of the most devastating wars in human history when the myriad web of alliances, political rivalries and spheres of interest between nations in Europe ensured that every great European power was drawn into the fight.

Among the Great Powers of Europe was the United Kingdom, which at the time was arguably the most influential great power in the world. However, despite their influence, the actual British army at the beginning of the war was rather small when compared to the other belligerent nations, as the UK did not utilize conscription. Instead, they relied on the Royal Navy, which at the time was the largest navy in the world, to defend themselves as well as to project their power across the globe. The British Army itself was made up of professional soldiers, often referred to as Regulars, and the Territorial Force that was essentially a volunteer reserve component of the British Army.

Following the outbreak of the war, however, the British Army saw a great increase in men wishing to enlist. This led to the rapid expansion of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), which was the force responsible for British operations on the Western Front, during the second year of the war. The numbers of the BEF continued to swell until its peak in 1917, when it had 1,581,745 men serving with it. [1] Many of these soldiers volunteered in the wave that followed the declaration of war in 1914 but later, after the Military Service Act had been passed by the British Parliament in January of 1916, they could also have been conscripts.

The soldiers of the British Army were led by officers largely drawn from the upper and middle classes of the age. To many of them seeking a commission in one of the regiments (and in case of failing to acquire one, enlisting) was something of an expectation, though one few were completely prepared to fulfil. The culture in which

[1] Gudmundsson 2007, 9

they had been brought up placed a number of patriotic expectations upon their shoulders and made it socially challenging to avoid joining the war effort.

It is my intention to examine how the British officers on the Western Front experienced the war and how they saw themselves and the world around them during the war years. For the purposes of this thesis I have counted as a British officer anyone who served as a commissioned officer in a military unit from the British Isles during the war and originated from some part of the British Empire. As sources I will utilize the personal correspondence, diaries and other personal papers of men who fulfilled the previously mentioned criteria. The majority of the letters and diaries used as sources for this thesis were acquired in person from the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London during a three-day visit. I will also, to some extent, employ the memoirs of such men as sources.

The officers I have examined were all of the company level variety, sometimes referred to as junior officers. This category is generally seen to include ranks from second lieutenant to captain, though occasionally majors are also included in the group. I selected this group because most of its members spent their war alongside the rank and file soldiers in the trenches, experiencing the challenges of trench warfare with them. Most of the research into the officers of the First World War has focused on the higher ranks. Therefore, this research also aims to fill the gap that has been left between regular soldiers and the higher-ranking officers in the field of research.

The diaries and letters I acquired during my visit to the Imperial War Museum provide the best glimpse into the mind of an individual officer during the First World War, but there are a few things to be considered when utilizing them as source material. For one, the wartime censorship forced the hand of the writers in many cases, limiting their ability to inform the person to whom they were writing about their current whereabouts. However, as general references to location, such as 'in France' or similar generalizations are common, this is not a major problem. A more noteworthy problem is, at least in regard to letters, what was left out in a possible effort to spare the recipient of the letter from the horrors of war the writer may have witnessed. The censorship of the Army and the state also imposed restrictions on what could be written down in a letter.

In diaries self-censorship is less likely but still a possibility, especially if the writer assumed that someone other than themselves might read the diary it in the future. Such self-censorship might be nearly impossible to discern from the text directly unless obviously stated by the writer at some point and presents the issue of whether or not the possibility of someone reading the diary in the future has coloured the text to some extent.

There is a similar problem with memoirs but with the added challenge that they are written long after the war and human memory is not perfect. Some details might also be left out for various reasons; the writer might feel that a part of their experience was either too personal or too hard to write about and simply leave it out. Some events might also be coloured by the writers' distance to the events or by the opinions or beliefs they have developed during their lives after the war. It is also entirely possible that in the memoirs the writer might try to present his own actions during the war in the best possible light, though admittedly the same could be said about any of the source types I have already mentioned.

Of course, this all does not mean that the sources cannot be used. Even if the writers have left something out for one reason or another, the texts themselves still reveal plenty about what they went through during the war and how they felt about it. In cases where one can tell that something was omitted, that omission might even help to shed light on the writers' feelings on the matter.

Gathering sources for this research has required travelling distances that I have been led to understand are not very common for this kind of work. However, travelling was necessary. I discovered that Finnish libraries could provide very little material and gaining access to any material via the internet would soon cost more than visiting the location in which the originals were stored. As a result, I spent three days at the Imperial War Museum in London photographing letters and diaries of British officers who had fought in the First World War. In addition to regular travel arrangements, I also had to reserve the documents I wished to examine ahead of time alongside a workstation at the museum's archives. As a result, I visited the museum's archives, photographing the various letters and diaries that appeared to fit my criteria. By the time I returned home to Finland, I had photographed several hundred pages of material.

Will write again shortly with
further news.

August 10th 1914

Dear Basil

I did get your PC
about 10 days ago & your letter has
just arrived by the second post.
Garrett's initials are R. W. B; he
has gone now back to Cambridge.
I have been much too busy to write
as I am at work all day & half
the night at the National Reserve
Offices here. Last Tuesday Col
Symes met Beck & myself in
the town & asked us if we would
do a little work for him at the
N R offices. We said yes, not
knowing what we were going

Image 1: A copy of an original letter by J.H. Butlin

Naturally, not all of it proved to be of value for this work; one of the writers had served on a completely different front, which meant that his experiences were largely irrelevant to the scope of my research while another possessed a handwriting that so far has proved to be largely impenetrable for me. The rest, however, have been quite useful and even forced me to alter my definition of a British officer somewhat: Originally, I had intended to only examine the material written by those men who came from the British Isles and served in a military unit from those isles. However, the discovery of two excellent South African accounts forced me to alter the definition slightly to its current form. Both of these South Africans had British roots, as opposed to being Boers or natives, and served as lieutenants in British regiments during the war. As such, I felt that broadening my classification for a British officer was necessary, and I decided to consider any person originating from the wider Empire but serving in a military unit from the British Isles as a British officer for the purposes of this research.

The letters and diaries I digitized were all an interesting read, offering insights into the minds of the men who wrote them or at least into the part of their mind they wished to show to other people. It is entirely possible that at least some of the more cheerful letters they wrote were written in hopes of alleviating the fears and worries of their friends and family at home. The things they wrote about usually concerned recent events in their lives and rarely touched upon the future beyond the next leave or the next big operation they were expecting. Following the correspondence in which they engaged with their friends and family can be challenging, as none of the collections included any of the letters they had received in the trenches. Of course, such letters are not essential for a study with goals similar to those of this thesis, but they would have offered some additional perspective to the subject that might have at the very least been interesting to read through.

The company level officers of the First World War, or junior officers, as they are also called, have not received as much attention as the high leadership or the regular soldiers, at least as a group. After all, higher-ranking officers, who possessed a good education and the literary skills necessary to write an evocative book, have written

some of the most referenced depictions of the war in which they fought. Individual junior officers, such as Robert Graves or Siegfried Sassoon, have received much attention as narrators of the First World War, but as a whole the company level officers have been overshadowed by other groups. The experiences of the regular soldiers have been often the focus of historians. Books such as Richard Holmes' *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front* or Gordon Corrigan's *Mud, Blood and Poppycock* have focused largely on the experiences of the average soldier.

Much of previously done research, such as Hew Strachan's *The First World War: A New History*, Max Hastings' *Catastrophe: Europe Goes to War* or Richard Holmes' *The Western Front,* focus on the broader subject of the First World War or on the ranks above or below the junior officers. In studies such as these the junior officers are often considered to be either part of the officers in general or are associated with the other ranks because of the similar experiences. A clear distinction between the senior officers, junior officers, NCOs and regular enlisted men is a somewhat rare thing to see in other research. Some of the previous research into the subject of the First World War is also quite fond of arguing whether or not the war was justified and worth fighting. This study does not examine that matter beyond offering some private examples of what various individuals used as sources of morale in the trenches.

During my hunt for research material into the subject, I managed to find only one book that focused solely on junior officers. The book, *Six Weeks* by John Lewis-Stempel, is properly sourced and holds a great deal of information, to an extent that I have found myself referencing it often, but it suffers from a mild case of patriotic bias. [2] The writer seems to be content to assume the best about his subjects and rarely considers issues that might place the British officers in a questionable light. Some questions, such as atrocities possibly committed by the British, are mentioned briefly but quickly swept aside. Issues of desertion or other, non-tragic themes, such as non-war related crimes or abuses of power by their rank, are not discussed in the book at all or only very briefly, whereas shellshock and other similar more perhaps romantic or tragic issues receive considerably more attention.

[2] Lewis-Stempel J., *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War*, Orion Books Ltd., London, 2011

However, on the pages of the book are numerous excellent direct quotations from various sources which have been an excellent addition to this work, and while the language of the writer might at times veer into the unacademic, his sources and historical detail seems to be accurate. In reading *Six Weeks*, I have tried to read the book with the eyes of a person who has no personal connection to the subject beyond the interest of a researcher, which could also be said to have characterized my whole approach to this work.

The British junior officers of the First World War do not appear to have been the subject of many studies outside of the United Kingdom and because of this some the research done might potentially suffer from a patriotic British bias. Lewis-Stempel's book is the only piece of research that I could find that solely focused on this subject. The First World War is still quite strongly interwoven with British national identity. In Finland, especially, the First World War in general does not seem to have managed to capture the interest of researchers, which is understandable. Finland's participation in the conflict was very small. Apart from the Jaeger movement, Finland had very little directly to do with the war. In Finland, the events of the First World War are usually overshadowed by the events of the Finnish Civil War and by the later events of the Second World War, both of which had a far more direct effect on Finland.

In this thesis, I examine a number of questions concerning the British officers who fought in the trenches of the Western Front during the First World War. Who were they, why did they choose to join the Army, and how did they view the enemy? What was their life in the trenches like and what other sources did they find for motivation once they had been exposed to the slow grind of the trench warfare? My approach to examining my sources has been fairly traditional. I have read through the material and done my best to interpret them within their historical context, based on my own understanding and information available in various works of previous research. I have subjected my sources to external and internal source criticism in a qualitative analysis of the material. However, despite my fairly traditional approach, the research itself falls within the camp of new military history and the social history or cultural history of war, to be more exact. This field of study has not yet developed a unified method or set of methods for approaching research and as such can be quite varied. I have done my best to familiarise myself with the works of those scholars

who have been considered forerunners in this field, such as John Keegan and his book *The Face of Battle*, but since none of these works is primarily a book about methodology, it has often been challenging to seek guidance from their pages.[3]

In chapter two of this study I will begin by very briefly examining British society just before the First World War as well as the classes that it consisted of. Since many of the junior officers in the British Army came from the more well-off classes, I will devote more time to examining those classes than others. I will also introduce an institution that was instrumental in shaping the worldviews of the youths from those privileged classes, the public schools. What kind of education they offered and what kind of morals they hoped to instil in their students are among the more important subjects in the chapter. I will also examine the various motivations these young men might have had to join the Army in 1914.

The third chapter of this study will concern itself with Britain's main enemy in WWI. I will examine attitudes towards the Germans in British society before the war and what some of the individual officers might have thought about the Germans. The years leading up to the First World War were especially full of tension between the UK and the German Empire, so this analysis will provide important context for the attitudes of British officers going into the conflict.

In the fourth chapter I will examine the training that the young men embarking on their way to the frontlines received before being sent to battle as well the ways in which one might reach the frontlines as an officer.

The fifth chapter will offer a fairly extensive look at the trenches in which many of the junior officers spent much of their time during the war. I will also provide an examination of the mentality that was prevalent among the military thinkers of Europe in the late 19th century that explains why the war got bogged down to trench warfare. In addition, I will examine the trench structure and the physical environment it provided for the soldiers.

The sixth chapter will continue with the theme of trenches by elaborating on the various aspects of daily life in the trenches. I will concentrate on examining what

[3] Keegan 1976

daily routines and duties the officers had during the war as well as how they spent what little free time they had in the trenches.

In the seventh chapter I will introduce the various dangers and hardships the people living in the trenches were forced to endure while not in combat. The chapter will also examine the ways in which the officers in the trenches tried to relax while in the frontlines.

The eighth chapter will address the morale and mental health of the British junior officers during their service in the trenches of the Western Front. I will endeavour to explore the various sources of morale that helped the men keep fighting despite the demoralizing nature of trench warfare: what these sources were and how they changed over time for those fortunate enough to survive long enough in the trenches. In the same chapter I will also examine the most iconic affliction caused by the First World War, shellshock. What was it, how was it treated and how did both the authorities and the victims themselves view it?

In the final two chapters before the conclusion of this study I will examine the junior officers heading into battle and the various ways in which they spent their free time while out of the trenches.

Finally, I will end with a concluding chapter that shortly summarizes the research. It will also take a surface level look at the post-war development of these men and explore possible future avenues of research.

2.0 Edwardian society

The men that fought in the First World War grew up during the early years of the twentieth century. In Britain, they were the products of a society and a period that have both come to be labelled as 'Edwardian' by researchers on account of them having occurred mostly during King Edward VII's reign. Depending on how one views it, the era is generally considered to have lasted from Queen Victoria's death in 1901 to the first fired shots of the First World War in 1914 or from somewhere in the 1890s, when societal norms and culture had diverged enough from the previous Victorian norms, to the First World War. In many ways, it was a continuation of the preceding Victorian era but at the same time it was an era that quickly sought to move away from the ideals and beliefs of the Victorian times.

It is not my intention to go into a comprehensive study of the Edwardian era and the society in which the young British officers of the First World War grew up. However, I will strive to provide a brief overview of that society, as doing so provides crucial context for the thoughts and beliefs of the British officers during the Great War. Thus, some understanding of this society is required to examine the experiences of the men that it produced.

Edwardian society was still very much built upon the class structure that had developed during the preceding Victorian era. Of course, class divisions had existed before the Victorian era too but during reign of Queen Victoria many of the concepts and terms associated with a class-based society had been developed further and entered into common use, and it was during that same time that many of the British people began to associate themselves more with a class than with an estate, order or some other more ancient social category.[4]

At its core, Edwardian society was built around three main classes; upper, middle and lower or working-classes. Of course, if one were to take into account the various further divisions that are possible within those three basic classes, an argument could be made that there were more classes than just three. However, for the sake of

[4] Briggs 1983, 198 - 199

simplicity I shall keep the division of classes mostly in this abbreviated version and only elaborate further about the sub-divisions of the classes when necessary.

Of the three classes, the working classes were the most under-represented among the officers of the British army during the First World War. Members of the working classes generally lacked the necessary resources to send their children to the right schools and the necessary contacts to secure commissions. Military leadership was still very much concentrated in the hands of the old aristocratic families and the richer members of the middle classes. [5] For a man from the working classes to acquire a commission was a difficult task and often required him to be promoted through the ranks instead of merely being granted a commission after requesting one with a regiment or from the War-Office. Of course, this meant that the members of the working classes who managed to attain a commissioned rank in the army often possessed qualities that caused those deciding about promotions to consider them suitable officer material. The number of men of working class origins serving as officers did grow towards the end of the war as casualties among the officers could not be filled with the sons of the nobility, gentry and other 'good' families alone.[6]

If the working classes were under-represented among the officers of the British military, members of the middle- and upper classes of Britain were quite over-represented in proportion to the rest of the population. At the beginning of the war they made up the overwhelming majority of the officers and from among the ranks of their youth many of the future officers were drawn.

Of these two classes, the members of the upper classes were still quite dominant in the political sphere and also held many of the highest-ranking military positions. The middle classes that managed to make it to this group were generally the sons of the wealthier professional classes, such as doctors and lawyers, but also included a sizable number of the progeny of the newly rich industrialists. The upper classes were mostly composed of the old aristocratic families and the families of those industrialists who had managed to achieve such wealth and influence that they had been ennobled

[5] Bédarida 1979, 131 - 132
[6] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 59 - 58

The old idea that leadership was passed down from father to son as an inheritable quality was not quite dead yet, especially among the military circles.[7] In many regards the right name and connections still counted for much, even if merit was gradually becoming more important.[8] However, to say that Britain was an aristocratic country in the early twentieth century is not particularly accurate.

It is true that the aristocratic members of the upper classes still held considerable power through their easy access to many powerful political offices and military positions, wielding much influence over the way the country was run. However, the old, landed aristocracy was very much in decline during the Edwardian era. This was in part because of the decreased value of land and rents that could be drawn from it, which had affected the fortunes of the landed aristocracy. However, the main reason for this decline was the advancement of the middle classes and the ascendancy of people of middle class origins into to the upper classes and the aristocracy itself.[9]

Although many of the newly created peers during this era were still politicians, military men and other servants of the state whose service to their country was rewarded in the form of a peerage, a good portion of the newly created peers were wealthy businessmen. Of the 200 peers created between 1886 and 1914, a third went to captains of industry, wealthy bankers, merchants and other wealthy businessmen. At the same time, intermarriage between the old aristocracy and the upper middle classes became more commonplace, and the aristocrats were also diversifying into more commercial businesses, like banking, in an effort to improve and maintain their fortunes against the declining revenues from land and agriculture.

This development also meant that the middle classes gradually acquired more power in the political sphere. Their relative numbers in the House of Commons, compared to those of aristocratic origin, had grown during the Victorian era, and by the Edwardian era the landowning aristocrats were in a clear minority in the House.[10] The power of the House of Lords was also curtailed in 1911 when an act of parliament was passed which sharply limited the House's political powers. This was in response to the House of Lords rejecting a proposed budget in 1911, which

[7] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 13 – 15
[8] Bédarida 1979, 125-127, 130-131
[9] Bédarida 1979, 125-132
[10] Bédarida 1979, 129-130

sparked a constitutional crisis. As a result, the House of Lords lost much of its ability to affect the running of the state.[11]

However, although the old (aristocratic) families lost a considerable amount of their old political clout during the years leading up to the Great War, they still retained the advantages of old wealth and family connections. Many of the old aristocratic families still had a strong presence, usually through their younger sons, in many of the more important Departments of the State; the Diplomatic Service and the Royal Navy were the most prestigious, closely followed by the Army and the Church. All these institutions still allowed them to keep some semblance of a hold of power over society and the state, even though their power was no longer what it had been in ages past.

The aristocracy also retained a great deal of respect from the other classes in social situations. They were generally treated with the kind of deference that to an outsider often seemed out of place among the modernizing society of the new century. There remained a belief and an assumption that the members of the aristocracy were somehow superior to others because of the merit of being born into the right family. They were still often treated in a way that suggested that they continued to be as important to society as they had been before, even though their direct power was diminishing as political reforms continued. Therefore, the idea that the members of the aristocracy and gentry were somehow entitled to leadership roles still persisted in British society by 1914 and was not on its way out, at least not with any considerable speed.

One of the defining characters of the Edwardian era was the removal of many of the cultural restraints on society that had existed during the previous Victorian era. During the long reign of Queen Victoria, the existence of the many social inequalities had often been ignored or suppressed among the ruling classes. However, once the Liberals came to power in 1906, they made social reforms one of the central themes of their program. [12] Justifying the necessity of these reforms was

[11] Bédarida 1979, 131
[12] Briggs 1983, 232

quite easily done, as the contrast between the well-off minority and those worse-off was very sharp.

Perhaps in order to make up for the losses it had suffered in the political sphere, the aristocracy had invested heavily in improving its prestige in the social sphere. Social occasions, such as balls or similar events, were commonplace and often quite opulent. The homes of the aristocracy were large and often displayed their wealth to those passing by and usually had quite a large staff of servants. All this demonstrated wealth that allowed the members of aristocracy a life generally free of the everyday strife for survival that members of the lower classes had to worry about.

2.1 Schoolboys at war

A typical subaltern, or a second lieutenant,[13] in the British Army during the First World War was a young man in his very late teens or early twenties. Quite many of them had received an education in one of the fee paying public schools of the nation and thus possessed an education that was more exhaustive and of a better quality than that of an average citizen. Therefore, I will now give a quick description of how the public schools affected the young men and boys who were enrolled in them and how their influence, and the education of these future officers there, might have affected their decision to join the Military at the onset of WW I. I will also consider what other factors might have influenced these young men's decision to go to war.

Public schools and universities were not for everyone. Access to these often rather exclusive schools was restrictive, both because the connections needed to gain an entry and because of the very high fees they demanded. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that many of the officers of British Army, both senior and junior, tended to come from the more well-off segments of Edwardian Society. Only families from the upper classes or upper middle classes usually had the necessary resources and connections to ensure access for their sons.[14]

[13] The lowest commissioned rank in the British Army and a typical rank for a platoon leader
[14] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 12 - 15

A quality education was not the only thing these young men received in school: many of them also received what could be considered a basic training in being an officer during their school years. By 1914 many British public schools and universities had their own Officers' Training Corps, or OTCs, which provided the pupils with skills and knowledge seen as necessary for future gentlemen officers. Participating in an OTC was not usually mandatory, at least officially, but unofficially students were generally expected to participate, and in some cases the schools themselves levied some restrictions against students that did not participate in an OTC program. At Uppingham, for example, no student could take part in an inter-house sporting contest or win a school prize without passing the shooting test of the school's OTC.[15]

The skills learned at the various OTCs were the kind that were expected from an officer, including things like marksmanship, tactics, map reading and drill. A student in a public school could earn a Certificate A, a basic qualification in military matters, and a student at a university with an OTC could earn a Certificate B, which qualified him for a platoon leader's commission in the Territorial Force.[16]

While some of these OTCs had roots that reached all the way to the early 19th century, most of them were introduced as a part of a series of army reforms overseen by the then Secretary of State for War R.B Haldane, in office 1905 - 1912. They sprang from the growing fear of a possible war with Germany in the near future, and the decision to establish the OTCs was made to ensure that the British Army would have enough officers in the event of a war. Some grammar schools were also part of Haldane's program, but the great majority of OTCs were in public schools and in universities. The reasoning behind this was at least partially based on the assumption that the pupils in public schools possessed many of the necessary qualities for officers by virtue of their birth. During the Edwardian era it was naturally assumed by many decision-makers that those from the upper classes possessed some innate qualities that made them better-suited for leadership roles within the armed forces.[17]

[15] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 12
[16] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 11 - 17
[17] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 14 - 15

While there is little proof that the boys that came from public schools had a natural talent for leadership not found in their state-educated contemporaries, they did have some advantages. On average, a public-school boy of that time was about five inches taller than the boys that attended state-run schools and considerably healthier; approximately 70% of public school students received a Grade I physical fitness designation while the national average was around 34%. This was the result of multiple factors, among which was the fact that the boys from public schools had families that could provide their children with better food during critical years and the fact that they, while in public school, took part in sports and other physical activity that helped them improve their fitness.[18]

Sports and other athleticisms were held as important qualities for prospective gentlemen and not merely for possible future officers. Various school sports were an important part of the curriculum of any public school and not merely an extension of the OTCs. The people at the time considered physical activity like sports an important factor in building a young gentleman's character and in helping to shape a son of a middle-class family into a gentleman.

Team sports were seen as essential for raising warrior leaders as well. They were thought to help in developing many essential military skills and to build up the physical fitness of the pupils; in the playing fields the boys learned teamwork, as many of the sports preferred at the time were team-based; they took risks and disregarded personal wellbeing to some extent, and the team captains learned leadership. But the games also taught and built loyalty; loyalty to the team, loyalty to the house and loyalty to the school as a whole. This learned loyalty was then later easily transferred to king and country when the war broke out.[19]

Alongside sports, the curricula at public schools did their part in shaping the future officers. Part of the education was the study of various pieces of classical literature that fed into the ideal image of what was expected of an officer. The libraries in schools were also often filled with books concerning military matters of all kinds from which to draw inspiration.

[18] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 14
[19] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 18 - 19

The final great influence in the public schools was the chapel. In many institutions the boys were expected to attend chapel every morning and evening, where they would receive a brief sermon. These sermons, although naturally religious, were often light on doctrine and ritual but rather focused on instilling the pupils with ethics of the Anglican faith.

All these things combined created an environment where certain kinds of ideals were likely to rub off on the pupils. To many of the pupils, answering their country's call when it came was not really something they would, or even could, refuse in good conscience. Thus, when the war broke out in 1914, it was obvious for many of the public school and university educated young men that they should enlist, and a great many, even a majority of them, quickly sought out commissions within the British military. Many of those who failed to secure a commission in one of the regiments or who feared they would not receive one (despite applying for one) would often enlist as regular soldiers in the British Army. Some sought to guarantee their chances of seeing action while serving their country by applying for a commission and then enlisting as a ranker in one of the regiments while waiting for the commission to be granted.[20]

Lt. F.B Wade, a South African man from Pietermaritzburg who had travelled from South Africa to England in an effort to enlist and serve his country, wrote in his diary on a Tuesday in early March in 1915:

> *On Tuesday last, Bird and I went to see a Mr. Flanagan who welcomed us very warmly and took us to the War Office where we entered our names on application forms for Commissions. We were interviewed that afternoon, but unnecessary difficulties seem to be raised so in a fit of pique we went off to Great Scotland Yard and enlisted as full blown privates in King Edward's Horse stationed at Watford.*
>
> *We took the oath on the same day, obtained our first pay, 2/11 and also seven days leave, and here we are seeing as much London as we can before*

[20]IWM: Lt. F. B. Wade, 1915

> *Thursday, St.Patrick's Day, when we must parade on Horse Guards Yard and march off headed by a band to Charing Cross Station en route to Watford.*[21]

As a graduate of Pietermaritzburg College and its College Cadet Corps, Wade already filled several of the unofficial qualifications for an officer. Whether or not Wade was merely unlucky on his day at the War Office or if there were some obstacles a colonial citizen of the Empire had to overcome before gaining a commission in a British Army unit, cannot be ascertained from his diary. He does not elaborate on the undue problems he mentions in his diary and would later go on to receive a commission as a second lieutenant in 7th London Regiment, though only after spending close to nine months as an enlisted recruit and then as a lance-corporal in the King Edward's Horse. Wade continued serving in France until he was hospitalized in late 1917 for the rest of the war because of nephritis. [22]

To many other would-be officers, gaining a commission was an issue of knowing, or sometimes finding, the right person to ask. Sometimes all it took was politely inquiring with a regiment for a commission, provided the young man applying had the right background or connections. Sometimes the young men might find commissions by being approached by someone they knew, who, in turn, had received an inquiry about potential officers. Family, friends and even teachers of one's old school might serve as such connections.

Of course, to claim that the former public school and university students that joined the war as officers were only motivated by high-minded ideals of patriotism, Anglican morals or loyalty to king and country would be an inaccurate oversimplification in most cases and an outright false claim in some. Said ideals, learned in school, were certainly an important factor to many recruits, but there were additional factors that pulled them into the war or pushed them away from home.

As mentioned before, many of the men serving as junior officers, alongside many of the rank and file soldiers of the British Military during the First World War, were young men in their late teens or early twenties. Therefore, for some men the reasons to set out and fight the Germans lay in more common desires. Not many of these

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[21] IWM Lt. F. B. Wade, 1915
[22] IWM: Lt. F. B. Wade, 1917

young men had travelled beyond the British Isles. Joining the army offered many their first chance to travel beyond the borders of their home country and see new places like France or the Middle East. Many were drawn in by the spirit of romantic adventure that still shrouded war at the onset of the war, though this would diminish somewhat as the war progressed.[23]

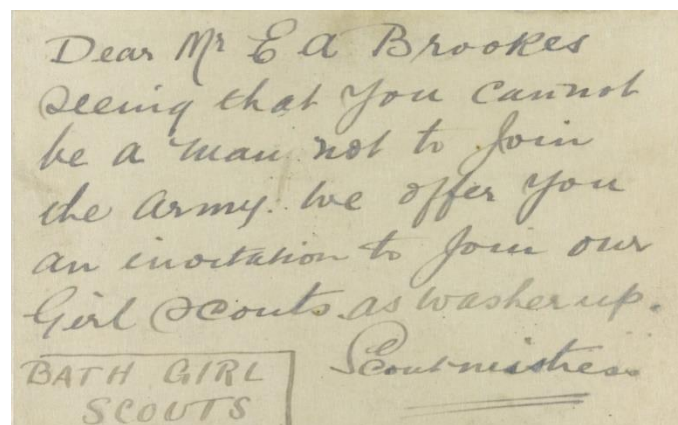
Some were motivated by anger against the Germans; their attack on Belgium, a neutral country guaranteed by Britain, had created no small amount of animosity towards the German Empire among the British people. Before the German attack on Belgium, the public support for a war against Germany had not been overwhelming despite the pre-existing diplomatic and political tensions between the two nations. In fact, there were many who were reluctant to join the war as it would have meant fighting alongside Tsarist Russia, which, with its autocratic regime and hard-line conservative policies, seemed to many a worse nation than Germany. It did not help either that the other would-be ally in the war was Britain's old rival, France. The recent events and diplomatic efforts might have improved the relations between these two age old rivals, but history is often a hard thing to forget, and some bad blood still lingered between the two nations. However, the attack on a small, neutral country whose independence and sovereignty were by international treaties guaranteed by Great Britain angered the British people and helped the British government generate support for the war by positioning the war as not supporting Imperial Russia and France but as protecting Belgium and liberty in Europe.[24]

For young men, going to war was easier than for older men. Since many of the men setting out to fight the Germans in France were in their early twenties, very few had families of their own. Many had girls they fancied and wrote to and fiancées too, but comparatively few had wives and children. As such, they probably had an easier time deciding whether or not they should join the fight in France. Their deaths would hurt their parents, but it is likely that those without wives and children of their own to support were less burdened with the fear that their deaths in the line of duty might cause economic ruin for their families back home and therefore could set out with fewer worries. Many of them also existed in that feeling of false immortality that is

[23] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 30 - 42
[24] Thacker 2014, 34 - 35

quite common among the young and thus did not dwell on the thought that they might die in the war.

Another important factor driving these ex-public schoolboys to war was peer pressure; just because they had been primed to take part in war while in school did not guarantee them joining. However, when all of one's friends joined the Army or the Navy, it became harder and harder for many of the still hesitant men not to join, especially if those friends after joining the military went on to write from the front or training, inquiring why one had not yet answered the call of King and Country. Those young men not in the uniform of the British Army or the Royal Navy and not possessing an obvious disability that kept them from service would also often receive judgmental treatment from the civilian population. Allegedly, one of the more extreme examples were groups of women that could be found traversing the streets and squares in many of the cities, handing out white feathers, symbols of cowardice, to young, apparently able-bodied men still at home. Certainly, letters known as white feather letters were sent to unenlisted healthy men in hopes of shaming them into joining the army, such as the one below. Under such pressure many still hesitating young man joined the Army, sometimes even hiding a disability that might have otherwise allowed them to avoid military service with a good conscience, just to avoid the judgment of others.


Dear Mr E A Brookes
Seeing that you cannot
be a man not to join
the Army. we offer you
an invitation to join our
Girl Scouts as washer up.
Scoutmistress

BATH GIRL
SCOUTS

Image 2: *An example of a White Feather Letter, undated*

Looking at all the factors pushing the young men to join up with the Army, it is no wonder that so many did. Both their upbringing and environment made it extremely challenging to not set out with the Army. The culture in which the young men from the classes that made up the majority of the junior officers ensured that they were mentally primed for the coming war, even if sometimes the enemy of that war was not entirely to their liking.

3.0 The Enemy

Before the outbreak of the First World War, the British attitude towards and relationship with the German Empire and Germans were quite complex. Economic and colonial competition, the naval arms race and the diplomacy of Kaiser Wilhelm caused tensions between the two countries and affected their peoples' views of each other. At the same time, there were old connections between the two countries that fostered a more favourable image of the German people. Prussia, the leading precursor state of the German Empire, had often been Britain's ally in the past, and the current Kaiser was the grandson of the late but still well-remembered Queen Victoria. Both nations were dominantly protestant though of different breeds and the German contributions to science and culture were respected among the British people. Among the upper classes, familial ties to Germany were not uncommon.

During the years leading up to the First World War, the tensions between Germany and Britain grew, but still the attitude towards Germans themselves could vary greatly among the people. In his autobiography, Robert Graves reminisces on how in one of the six preparatory schools he attended during his childhood, The King's College School in Wimbledon, his German ancestry and ability to speak the language were considered a merit for him and in many of the other schools it was not held against him in any particular way.

> *The headmaster who caned me on the hand was a lover of German culture, and impressed this feeling on the school, so that it was to my credit that I could speak German and had been to Germany. At my other preparatory schools this German connection was regarded as something at least excusable and perhaps even interesting.* [25]

However, once Graves arrived at the Charterhouse School in 1909, it quickly became apparent that his German heritage would be a hindrance for him rather than a credit or an interesting factoid. Most of the other students at the school ostracised him because of his familial ties to Germany, which were quite easy for them to discern because Graves' name

[25] Graves 1929, 33

had been written down as 'R. von R. Graves' on the school's list, making his German heritage public knowledge for the entire school.

> *The business class to which most of the boys belonged was strongly feeling at this time the threat and even the necessity of a trade war; 'German' meant 'dirty German'. It meant 'cheap shoddy goods competing with our sterling industries' and it also meant military menace, Prussianism, sabre rattling.*[26]

Most of Graves' fellow students tried to make it clear that a German was not wanted at Charterhouse. The bullying and ostracizing grew to be so bad that during his second year at the school Graves wrote home and pleaded his parents to take him away from Charterhouse. They did not comply with his request and instead contacted the school, which only led to further problems for Graves, as he was now treated as an informer as well. His only recourse was feigning mental health problems, which, while successful in putting an end to the bullying, left him isolated from most of the other students, as none of the other students wished to have any contact with an allegedly insane person. [27]

Graves' experiences during his school years serve as an example of the bias against the German Empire and the German people that existed in Britain's schools during the years before the Great War. The way his German heritage had not been an issue with other students and teachers until his entry to the Charterhouse could suggest that the bias against all things German grew in Britain as the war drew closer. Of course, Charterhouse might have been an isolated case, a bastion of anti-German sentiment, but it is unlikely that a school of six hundred pupils plus staff would not on some level mirror the sentiment of the society, or at least parts of it, regarding the German people.

However, no matter what the public opinion of the British people was before the onset of the war, it changed quickly following its beginning. The way the Germans violated Belgian neutrality with a questionable excuse, claiming that they were merely doing what the French and her allies were planning to do before they had a chance to put their plans in motion, enraged the British public, shifting public opinion firmly into the pro-war camp. The British government wasted no time in exploiting the propaganda value of German actions in Belgium in fanning the anti-German sentiment among their citizens.

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[26] Graves 1929, 42-43

[27] Graves 1929, 45

The German atrocities in Belgium, both real and invented, were quickly spun into propaganda designed to feed the British people's outrage at the enemy. The Germans were spun into Huns, the barbarians that sought to destroy western civilization whose bulwark Britain was as the new benevolent Roman Empire. The sole intention of the Germans in this interpretation was to plunge Europe into a new Dark Age, as their militarism and national character were completely incompatible with the values of Britain and other 'civilised' nations. This interpretation of course demanded that most German achievements, be it in the sciences, arts or the field of philosophy, were largely marginalised or ignored completely. [28]

Soon a wave of anti-German paranoia swept over the nation, and many people who had some connection, whether real or imagined, to Germany were easily branded spies by their neighbours. Very small things could be enough to cause one's neighbour to turn against them in a fit of anti-German paranoia; German ancestry, no matter how distant, or a 'German-sounding' name, to mention a few examples.[29] This suspicion was bad enough for the Royal family to change its last name to Windsor from its original name, Saxe-Coburg and Gotha which it had been since Edward VII took the crown. Some of the worst expressions of this rampant Germanophobia during the war were anti-German riots that often targeted German-owned businesses across the country.

Of course, the fears of the public were not completely unfounded. The Germans made up one of largest foreign minority groups in Britain, with approximately 60 000 living in the Isles. Therefore, in theory at least, there could have been ample ground for the Kaiser from which to recruit spies and saboteurs. However, no large-scale disloyalty among the German population existed, and indeed the government of Great Britain never truly doubted their allegiances. Still, during the war, some 30 000 of the resident Germans were imprisoned for their own 'protection'. The usefulness of this decision was questionable, as many of the people interred had been employed in the production of war materiel. As such, the decision to inter them was little more than a waste of time and resources.[30]

However, the civilian public was not the only group to be affected by propaganda; the troops in the trenches were also affected by it. Of course, the attitudes of the men in the

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[28] Robb 2002, 6 - 8
[29] Robb 2002 , 8 - 10
[30] Robb 2002 , 8-9

trenches were also influenced by the fact that they were fighting the Germans directly and often actively. The men in the trenches could receive regular newspapers to the trenches but they also received information that might affect their opinion of the enemy via rumours and other similar unofficial sources. They also received second-hand propaganda through their correspondence with their families, who at home were faced with the official propaganda of the state on a more regular, even daily, basis and thus arguably were more affected by it than their sons, husbands and brothers in the trenches.

However, despite their exposure to propaganda, in the officers' letters and diaries outbursts of obvious hatred against the Germans are somewhat rare. A certain cold detachment towards the enemy appears to be the more common trend in the sources at my disposal. There are the occasional curses directed at the Germans, but nothing particularly vitriolic.

One common trend in the sources is the fact that few of the writers use the word 'German' often. The foe is almost always either the 'Hun', alluding to the perceived barbarian nature of the German people and their supposed role as the horde that desired to destroy western civilisation and replace it with their own horrible regime, or the slightly rarer 'Boche', a derogatory term for the Germans borrowed from the French.

However, there were also still those who harboured some sympathies towards the German enemy. Ties to Germany were common enough among the officers, be they familial or commercial, and there were those who found Germans to be preferable to their current allies, namely the French, with whom the British had had a traditional rivalry, and the Russians, with whom they had competed in the Orient and who might also be seen as worse authoritarians than the Germans.[31] Race concepts of the time might also have played into these views. At the time, Germans were seen as something of a cousin race by some Brits, as opposed to the Romance and Slavic people of France and Russia, respectively. Therefore, for some it might have felt more natural to ally with the Germans than to go war against them.[32]

Still, some people with somewhat pro-German views found their way into the Army. Perhaps they still felt it their patriotic duty to join the fight against Germany or perhaps the

[31] Thacker 2014, 34 - 35
[32] Sorley 1919

pressure exerted by society upon those seemingly healthy men who had not yet joined up with the Army got to them and they chose to go to war rather than bear the pressure.

However, people with strong sympathies towards the Germans were probably in a very small minority among the officers who were sent to fight them in France and Belgium. In the early stages of the war the general attitudes towards the Germans seem to have fallen into two camps; indifference and dislike. There were naturally degrees of intensity in both camps, depending on the eagerness and the experiences of the person writing the record, but those two categories seem best-suited to describe the general feelings prevailing among the officers whose letters, diaries and memoirs I have read.

As I already mentioned, active malice towards the enemy was not overly common. The most common contact the officers had with the enemy was either through their artillery fire, which was often mentioned in passing, akin to 'the farm were billeted is shelled sometimes and there are holes in the roof. Bang, there goes a big gun!' in an almost off-hand way.[33] This suggests that there might have been a certain detachment towards the enemy that they rarely saw and were then expected to kill if seen through their rifle sights. For those officers who engaged in sniping, killing the enemy was more commonplace than for many others. Some, like Lionel Crouch, a captain in the territorial forces who was quite excited about the war breaking out, took to it as a something of a sport that broke the monotony of trench life and enthusiastically sought to get a shot at the enemy if at all possible.[34]

The Army, of course, did its best to foster a hostile opinion towards the enemy in the people fighting the war. It seemed to find it imperative for the morale of the men that they hate the enemy. As such, the training officers were probably expected to do their best to instil a semblance of nationalistic hatred towards the enemy. Whether or not this came to be is impossible to say, but at least the army changed its training manuals to reflect its attitudes. Robert Graves remarks in his memoirs that:

> *The training principles had recently been revised. Infantry Training, 1914, laid it down politely that the soldier's ultimate aim was to put out of action or render ineffective the armed forces of the enemy. The War office no longer considered this*

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[33] Crouch 1917, 41

[34] Crouch 1917, 43-45

statement direct enough for a war of attrition. Troops learned instead that they must HATE the Germans, and KILL as many of them as possible. In bayonet-practice, the men had to make horrible grimaces and utter blood-curdling yells as they charged. The instructors' faces were set in permanent ghastly grin. 'Hurt him, now! In at the belly! Tear his guts out!' they would scream, as the men charged the dummies. 'Now that upper swing at his privates with the butt. Ruin his chances for life! No more little Fritzes…Naaoh! (sic) Anyone would think you loved the bloody swine, patting and stroking 'em (sic) like that! BITE HIM, I SAY! STICK YOUR TEETH IN HIM AND WORRY HIM! EAT HIS HEART OUT!

Once more I felt glad to be sent up to the trenches.[35]

I do not have a definite date for the above passage, though I assume that it was written based on events that had occurred in mid to late 1916, when the war had already been waged for well over year. At this point the western front had been frozen into the immobile deadlock that saw very little change over the next years. It had also seen the Christmas truce happening in 1914, which the high command of the British Army saw as an alarming event. During Christmas 1914 there had been a number of impromptu truces organized with the Germans on a local level. The following year commanders tried to dissuade similar things from happening with various measures, among them ordering shellings or mounting raids on enemy positions around Christmas of 1915. It is probable that the higher echelons of the British Army command feared that any non-violent contact with the enemy might breed insubordination and mutiny in frontline conditions and thus tried to do their best to make their new soldiers less inclined to communicate with the Germans by encouraging them to hate the enemy.

It is hard to judge how effective the attempt at making the soldiers hate the enemy was. On the one hand, as I already mentioned, none of the letters or memoirs I have had the chance to research for this work betray overtly hostile attitudes towards the Germans. However, at the same time many of the early entries betray some level of national sentiment or outrage towards Germany and its atrocities, both real and invented or exaggerated, in Belgium. Therefore, it is possible that during the early stages of the war and during training the men who joined the military were more likely to accept the attitude of the Army towards the enemy. There are some hints about the indoctrination practiced by the Army being fairly

[35] Graves 1929, 237

strong; Charles Sorley, son of a professor at Aberdeen university, alumnus of Marlborough College and a man who in his letters comes off as something of a German sympathizer[36], wrote that:

> *I have made a sad discovery that I am one of those selfish people who view all problems from a subjective standpoint. While I was in a state of annoyance at not getting a commission, I was a Peace-at-any-Priciest and hated Sir Edward Grey. I still hate Grey (because he has that infernal habit of being really always in the right); but since getting that commission I have become a Terror. Hence the dullness of this letter. My mind is taken up with "affairs of national importance." I hope you, whose mind is still doubtless taken up with far more important things than childish and primitive questions of national honour, are still maintaining your equanimity. Mine has gone. I have succumbed. I am almost convinced that war is right and the tales told of German barbarism are true. I have become nonindividual and British: dream of quarter-columns and am constantly mistaken for------. Ichabod!*[37]

He was nineteen at the breakout of the war and had been visiting the university of Jena before being admitted to Oxford.

This quote was written very early on during Sorley's training, in August of 1914. Therefore, Sorley cannot have been in training for all that long, seeing how the war itself had only begun the month before and Sorley had spent some time returning from his trip to Germany before seeking a commission in the army. If indeed he had come to believe that Germany was the enemy in such a short time, as his words suggest, then the atmosphere in the UK and in the Army must have been quite powerful. Of course, it is possible that Sorley is merely being witty and does not mean what he says, at least not entirely. The biographical information in the beginning of the collection of his letters claims that he met his adventures in 1914 with readiness and humour, though since the passage was written of someone who had died in the war, it too could have been distorted by the writer's desire not to speak ill of the dead.[38] However, even if they may be exaggerations, Sorley's words still probably reflect the atmosphere of the time.

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[36] Sorley 1919, 3 - 12
[37] Sorley 1919, 224 - 225
[38] Sorley 1919, 4: Sorley fell in 1916

It might be that the men who fought in the First World War set out with a negative view, or at least a view leaning towards the negative, of the Germans. However, as the war ground to a halt, the feelings of hate and outrage dwindled, along with the nationalistic fervour of the early war. Especially in the memoirs, there are several examples of the British and Germans shouting greetings, joking insults and even throwing newspapers across the no-man's land if the distance was short enough. For example, Robert Graves records the following experience during his time in the trenches:

> *The Germans opposite of us wanted to be sociable. They sent messages over in undetonated rifle-grenades. One of these was evidently addressed to the Irish battalion we had relieved:*
>
> > We all German korporals wish you English korporals a good day and invite you to a good German dinner tonight with beer (ale) and cakes. Your little dog ran over to us and we keep it safe; it became no food with you so it runs to us. Answer the same way, if you please.
>
> *Another grenade contained a copy of the* Neueste Nachtrichten*, a German Army newspaper printed at Lille, giving sensational details of Russian defeats around Warsaw, with immense capture of prisoners and guns. But what interested us far more was a full account in another column of the destruction of a German submarine by British armed trawlers; no details of the sinking of German submarines had been allowed to appear in any English papers.*[39]

One might think that such non-violent interaction with the enemy built an image that did not conform to the state's propaganda and therefore helped to make it possible to see the enemy soldiers as humans instead of demonized caricatures.

Many of the young men joining the fight did so with a negative view of the Germans, brought about by the long period of growing tensions between the United Kingdom and the German Empire. Some had connections to the enemy country that likely made them more sympathetic towards the Germans but ultimately all that made it to the front were more or less prepared to fight them. However, as the war ground to a halt and became an attritional dredge, those feelings of hate waned, especially in places where the things

[39] Graves 1929, 137

between the opposing sides were calm enough for communication. In more active sectors, however, that hate might merely grow.

4.0 The Route to the Trenches

Many of the young men who joined the army at the onset of the war hoped to make it to the frontlines quickly. The general consensus was that the war with Germany would be over in a few months. People that actually believed that the war would last longer than that were in the minority. Therefore, many of the newly enlisted feared that the war would be over before they had a chance to fight the enemy. It is quite likely that this belief significantly increased the number of men who sought to join the British military during the wave of enlisting that followed the declaration of the war.

However, enlisting close to the beginning of the war did not guarantee that one would reach the frontlines anytime soon. After all, many of the new recruits were civilians with very limited experience with many of the skills that were necessary for a soldier and therefore needed to be trained before deployment against the Germans. Many of the public schoolboys had an advantage in that regard; as many of them had been in one of the OTCs, the majority of them had some familiarity with military matters and probably had an easier time than others in adjusting to military life and acquiring new skills related to the field. In the earliest stages of the war, it was entirely possible for a recently enlisted subaltern to be in the trenches quite soon after joining up with a regiment, merely on the merit of having taken part in an OTC during his schooldays. However, as the war progressed, additional training for the officers became necessary as the war changed and casualties mounted up.

The quality and actual usefulness of the training the officer recruits received could vary significantly, and there was no unified approach to it until slightly later into the war. The young would-be officers looking to make a career in the military would quite often seek to receive their training at one of the nation's military colleges. Those that could not gain an entry to one or simply sought to serve for the duration of the war with no strong inclination to make a career out of it would either look to the Special Reserve, which offered permanent commissions that were active only during times of war, or to a temporary commission in one of the regiments which were valid only for the duration of the hostilities. It is probable that the training provided at one of the colleges was less likely to suffer from the problems that afflicted the young men receiving their training *in situ* at their regimental battalions.

With many of the regular soldiers and officers already deployed in France and Belgium, the recruits were left to be trained by the few remaining regulars and the half-professional soldiers and officers of the Territorial Forces. There was a shortage of resources and of experienced instructors, which could be quite hazardous for the recruits' training. There were cases where the inexperience of the instructors could cause serious harm or injury and even death to the people they were supposed to be training. In one such case, observed by the subsequent Prime Minister Anthony Eden, the instructor failed to estimate the safe distance between a TNT charge he had set up and the observers. This unfortunate miscalculation resulted in a piece of shrapnel from the explosion killing one of the observers. [40]

There was also a chance that the would-be-officers would be trained for the wrong war; at Aldershot training camp for a New Army battalion the recruits received a training that was designed to defeat the Boers, with an emphasis on fighting enemies in the open environment similar to that in the South African region. It was a training that was severely out of date and one which failed to take into account the news arriving from the front that suggested that trenches were there to stay for now. Even the training material that was said to come from the fronts struggled to keep up; reading *the Notes from the Front,* Guy Chapman, one of the more famed biographers of the First World War, considered it 'out of date before it was published'.[41]

From January 1915 onwards, the majority of the would-be officers went through a month-long course that was organized by senior OTC units. This course provided them with the necessary skills and knowledge to acquire a commission after which they were sent to a Young Officers' Company (YOC) for additional training that prepared them for the war.[42]

A typical schedule for a day at the YOC would consist of things like parade, physical training, lectures in tactics, military law and military history. There could be some additional exercises, such as training for night operations or horseback riding, which early in the war was considered to be an essential skill for an officer.

The physical aspects of the training were often quite demanding. The training was not only meant to instruct the young officers in military matters and martial arts but also make them

[40] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 48-50
[41] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 48-50
[42] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 42 - 55

fit enough to withstand the physical demands war would place upon them if and when they would make it to the frontlines and trenches. As a result, long route marches were common, and they were designed to be taxing to push the trainees to their limits. Although they were rarely popular among the trainees, they produced results. By the end of the training, many of the officers who had gone through it were in better shape than they had been upon entering the training. [43]

Part of the training was also acclimatizing to the way one was expected to behave within the strong hierarchy of the British Army, with its rules and regulations and varying customs. To some entering this military culture came as something of a shock, and for people who were used to the relatively relaxed civilian society, the demands of the military could feel quite constraining, suffocating and even de-humanizing.

One such person was second lieutenant Charles Sorley, who soon after receiving his temporary commission with the Suffolk Regiment[44] expressed his feeling that to the military he was largely just an invisible part of the 'unit'.

> *Well, here am I (as Samuel put it) with my "unit" on the South Coast. You notice the word "unit." It is supremely characteristic. For the battalion is the unit. The component parts of it are merely quarters and fractions of it and are allowed no individuality at all.*
> *I am a decimal. Not only that. If (as I on the whole hope) they allow me abroad in three months' time, I may die a decimal. Think of that. With an identification disc stamped with a mythical number and "Church of England" round one's neck. I've resigned all claims to my person, I no longer am my own property. I am not a living creature, but a temporary second lieutenant (but don't put the temporary on the envelope or " this correspondence shall cease "): i.e., in the eyes of those with whom I am doomed to live for the next few months, I am a kind of extemporized being called into life a month ago and fading at the end of the war.*[45]

Worst for him was the way his fellow officers in training received him upon his arrival. He was given the cold shoulder by his new comrades, who expected Sorley to figure everything out by himself or ask the adjutant about it. However, once Sorley got a hold of

[43] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 55 - 54
[44] He was commissioned into one of the New Battalions formed for the War
[45] Sorley 1919, 226

the adjutant, his reaction was largely similar to that given Sorley by the others at the camp.[46]

Stephen Hewitt, a 2nd lieutenant, had thoughts similar to Sorley about the Army, though he did not seem to hold it against the military. In a letter written in 1915, he described the army as a 'system squashing individuality'. However, he did not consider this to be a particular problem for the Army, as in his words the recruits knew what they were in for when they joined up.[47] His experience with his fellow officers in training was also quite unlike that of Sorley's. Upon returning from Oxford, Hewitt found his fellow officers missing him genuinely.[48] Of course, Hewitt's experience is from a date when he had spent some time already in training, whereas Sorley's poor experience was upon arrival and of the few first days in training, so it is within the realm of possibility that Sorley's relationship with his fellow officers in training improved over time. However, beyond that first experience, he rarely mentions his fellow officers except in rather general terms.

Of course, generalizing about the attitudes of the officers in training to go to the frontlines is hard, even impossible. After all, each regimental battalion was unique, with distinct traditions, customs and expectations. The men in training for war also had their own attitudes, beliefs and expectations on how things in the Army and in the war would be. Perhaps some common lines can be drawn, but it is impossible to say exactly how the training affected the men. There were those who enjoyed the military lifestyle while others chafed under the strict rules and regulations that they were expected to conform to while wearing the Army's khaki.

At the end of the training the cadets were usually subjected to an examination that tested their understanding and knowledge in the various subjects the military deemed necessary for an officer of the British Army serving in the field. The test demanded that an officer had to possess a good knowledge in the following categories: discipline, drill, musketry, tactics and field warfare, topography, billeting, machine guns, interior economy and military law, physical drill, signalling and trench warfare. This is by no means an exhaustive list; each of the categories came with a number of sub-categories.[49] A great deal to know for someone who had gone through only a few months of training. However, it is

[46] Sorley 1919, 226 - 227
[47] Hewitt 1918, 7
[48] Hewitt 1918, 1-2
[49] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 64 - 65

likely that because of the great need for officers in the front to fill in the gaps in the ranks, the standards for acquiring a passing grade were not the strictest, and many of the would-be officers did have a flying start to the training, thanks to their time in one of the OTCs.

Of course, passing one's training or joining up with a regimental battalion might not be enough for a young man to be sent to the front. Some might be, often to their dismay, attached to units that were unlikely to see any action. Some might be denied a deployment in the trenches for petty reasons; Robert Graves was for a while denied a pass to France by the adjutant of his unit because of his sub-standard appearance, a result of him using the wrong tailor to make his uniform. He managed to overcome this problem by boxing against a regimental champion, which earned him enough goodwill to gain a pass to the front.[50]

Some officers could be fairly certain they would be sent away from Great Britain but to where was not always certain. Especially in the early days, when the patriotic fervour was at its highest, the thought of being sent somewhere else than across the Channel to France or Belgium to fight the Germans might cause worry for an officer. Lionel Crouch, a captain in the territorials before the war, was worried over rumours he had heard about being deployed to Malta just before his unit was sent to the Western Front.

> *Also there is a rumour, which may or may not be true, that we are to be sent to Malta. I hope to goodness it isn't true. We all want to go to Belgium. I shall feel very much inclined to volunteer into another unit if we go to some rotten foreign garrison, but I suppose I must stick to the Battalion.* [51]

Crouch, a relatively old company level officer at 28 years, had been enthusiastically looking for a chance to get sent to the front to fight against the Germans since the United Kingdom had declared war on Germany. He had lamented the fact that not enough men of his unit had volunteered for Foreign Service some time earlier.

Despite the questionable quality of the training the received, majority of the young officers eventually made it to the front, often to their delight. There the war quickly put everything they had learned back in the training camps to a lethal test. Since most of the training had been designed with outdated ideas of warfare the officers had to learn quickly, either from

[50] Graves 1929, 72 - 73
[51] Crouch 1917, 25

experience or from their more experienced comrades in the trenches. In the hostile environment of the trenches adaptation was necessary for survival and those that failed to do so often did not last long in the front.

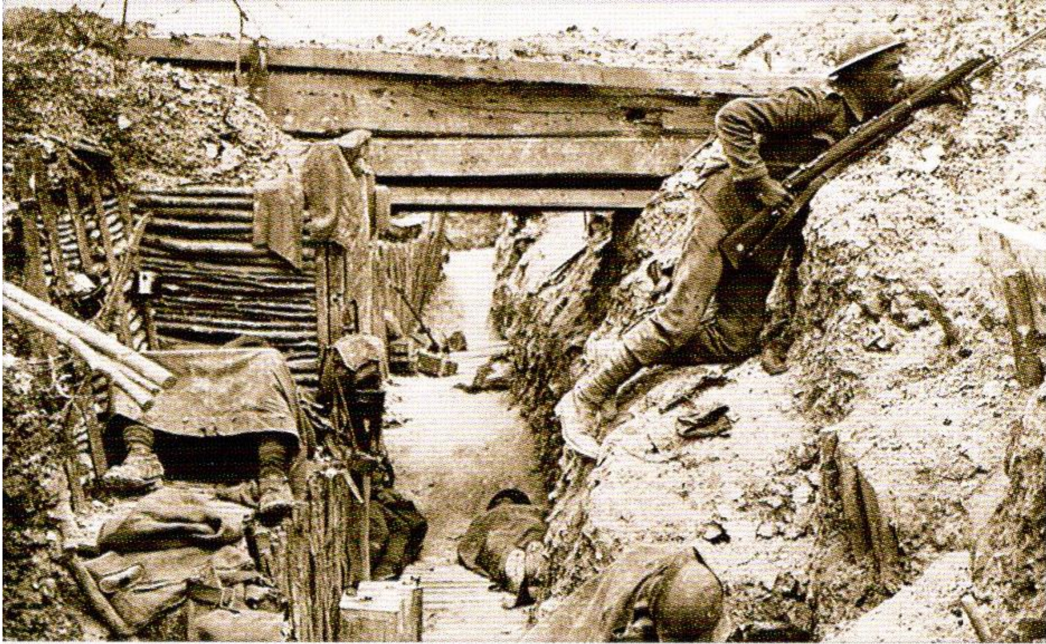

Image 3*: A British front-line trench at Ovilliers, undated. Men in the picture are from 11th Cheshires, 25th division*

5.0 Trenches of the First World War

Of all the sights and scenes associated with the First World War, the trench is the most iconic. A picture of a narrow yet deep ditch dug into the farmlands of France or Flanders, filled with young men in filthy uniforms standing ankle deep in mud and separated from the enemy's positions by the no-man's land, a desolate wasteland filled with more mud, barbed wire and the decaying corpses of the fallen, has been thoroughly carved into the collective memory of humankind. The picture I just painted might have been something of an exaggeration and dramatization of the truth, but it is not too far off the reality.

There were thousands of miles of trenches dug into the French and Belgian soil, running all the way from the coast of the North Sea to the Swiss border. This being the case, the conditions in the trenches could vary significantly from sector to sector. Things like geology and climate varied significantly in different parts of the front and naturally affected the conditions in the trenches as well as their design. A trench dug into the Flanders' fields, where the oceanic climate made sure that rain was common, could be drastically different from a trench dug somewhere in Lorraine, for instance.

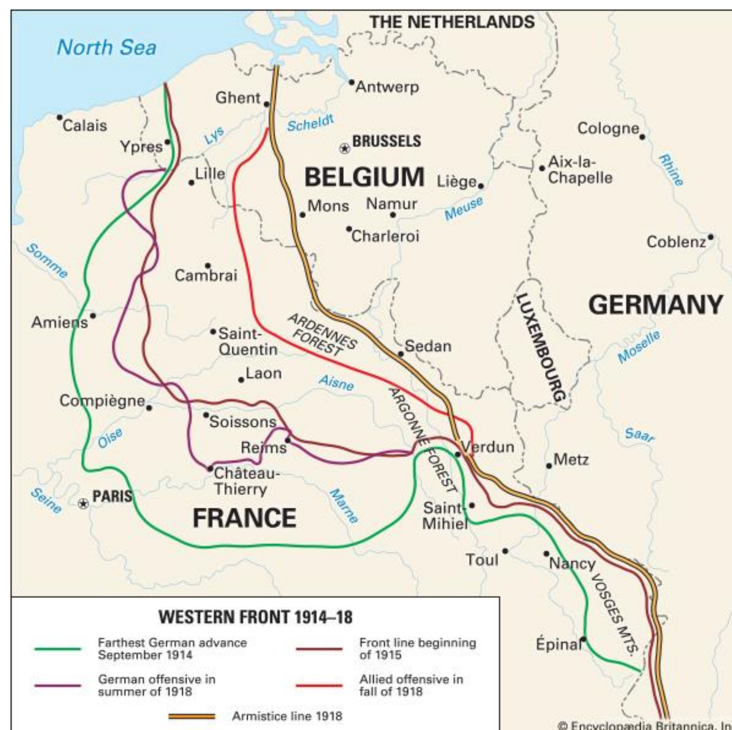

Image 4: *The Western Front at different stages of the war*

Another significant influence on the conditions of a trench was the enemy activity. While one section might be a hotspot of action where the enemy was fired at if so much as a glimpse of them was seen and where being shelled by the enemy was common, another section of the line not too far away might have been relatively quiet, leaving more time and better opportunities to improve the fortifications.

None of the Great Powers of Europe expected the First World War to be as it was. The idea that their great armies would spend the next four years burrowed in the ground fighting the slow grind of a war of attrition was inconceivable to many of the military leaders of Europe at the time.[52] The long-planned and awaited war was expected to be bloody yet short, as none of the great powers was believed to be able to fight a prolonged war. It was thought that no nation possessed the necessary economic capacity to bear the strain of a great war for a prolonged period of time. This was largely due to the fact that none of the great powers at the time was completely self-reliant; everyone needed some resources exported from abroad, and a great war would make it more challenging to acquire those resources.[53]

A belief such as this based a great importance on a powerful offence in military strategy, largely ignoring defence in favour of a more aggressive approach. The ideal was a war which, thanks to determined and effective offensive action, would be over before Christmas. The war would be about swift manoeuvres and counter-manoeuvres, not digging in to positions and holding ground. The very concept of defensive warfare was held in very low regard by a great many military leaders of the time.

Within the British Army the enlisted personnel alongside the officers were taught to believe that defensive warfare was an unmanly way of waging war and was thus to be avoided whenever possible. The sentiment cultivated in Great Britain was not too far off from those on the mainland. For all belligerent parties, the aim was a short war that would be won with the help of modern technology. An overemphasis on offence like this, however, had disastrous results on how the war progressed[54], mostly because technology necessary for the kind of war the leaders of the Great Powers had envisioned did not yet exist and the technology available at the time, such as the machine gun, gave the defending side significant advantages.

[52] De Groot 2000, 23-28
[53] Sheffield 2001, 113-114
[54] De Groot 2000, 27-28

Efficient offensive warfare requires first and foremost mobility and manoeuvrability. However, the mass armies in use during the First World War were unable to achieve the level of mobility necessary to fight as planned before the war. The only modern transports on land with a significant impact on the course of the war were the railroads, which tended to favour defensive warfare. The trains could bring troops to the front relatively quickly, allowing a more efficient redeployment of troops when necessary, but attacking with a train was impossible. In active engagement with the enemy the most common form of transport throughout the war was one's own two feet. Only twenty or so years later would technology reach a point where a mass army comprised of millions of soldiers could wage mobile warfare on a larger scale.

By and large, the future Great War had been designed by studying the wars fought in Europe during the nineteenth century. The eighteen-hundreds had been an exceptional century in the sense that it had seen far fewer wars on European soil than most others before it, and during all those wars the attacker had possessed a clear advantage over the defender. To many it appeared natural that new weaponry, like machine guns, modern heavy artillery and modern rifles, would continue to support the offensive side of an armed conflict. However, when all sides had access to a great many of these new kinds of weapons, they ceased to provide any form of advantage to the attacker. Instead, it soon became apparent that the new weapons provided a great advantage for the dug-in and fortified defender. In addition to this, many of the machines of war that would break the war of attrition with speed and power during the Second World War, such as airplanes and armoured tanks, were in their infancy for most of the war.

The first trenches of the Great War were not dug with a deliberate plan in mind. Instead, they were born when soldiers burrowed into the ground to protect themselves from the enemy's fire and then, when the circumstances permitted, began to expand their foxholes into rudimentary trenches.[55] These ad hoc trenches began to expand quickly until they finally created the vast network of trenches that covered the length and breadth of the Western Front, with great variance in design as well as in purpose. For the most part, the trenches can be separated into four different categories, according to the purpose they served: frontline trenches, which were the part most under fire by the enemy and thus usually rather lightly manned outside of planned action, support trenches where the soldiers of the

[55] De Groot 2000, 161-162

frontlines could retreat if needed, reserve trenches where the majority of the soldiers were kept most of the time[56] and finally the communication trenches that ran between the other types of trenches, connecting them to each other.

5.1 A short history of trenches

It would be easy to think that trenches were something of a new invention at the beginning of the First World War, since before it they had not played as major a part as in any other war between the Great Powers. This could not be further from the truth; trenches have been a common construction to soldiers since Antiquity although before the 19th century they were a rare sight on the actual battlefields.[57]

Before the development firearms saw during the 19th century, trenches were primarily utilized during sieges. The besieging party would often dig trenches to protect themselves from the defenders' fire and to mask their movements and intentions from the defenders. However, as long as battlefields were dominated by melee combat or highly inaccurate muskets, trenches were not dug on battlefields. This was because before modern weaponry the defender in a trench was at a significant disadvantage; the attacker was now attacking from above them during a melee and effective counter-attacks were significantly harder to execute from trenches. Also, while the effective range of firearms remained around one hundred meters and the average rate of fire around three to four shots per minute, the need for field fortifications in battlefields was relatively marginal. Even during the few times when field fortifications like trenches were actually utilized on battlefields, their primary purpose was often to hamper the enemy's movements, not to offer protection to the soldiers from enemy fire.[58]

As the firearms available evolved, field fortifications like trenches began to grow in importance, albeit gradually. As rifles replaced muskets and evolved, killing the enemy from further away became easier. Evolving methods of loading one's weapon saw the rate of fire grow rapidly. A skilled soldier could now fire his gun several times faster than with

[56] Historia 11/2014, 59
[57] Murray 2013, 3-4
[58] Murray 2013, 2-4

an old-fashioned breech-loader, which had before been the soldier's best friend during European wars.[59]

Now that it was possible for the enemy to kill their opponent's soldiers from further away, the need for the other side to protect their men from fire grew considerably. Field fortifications were an answer to this increased need for protection. The 19th century saw experimentation and development in field fortifications, but by 1914 trenches had become the go-to type of field fortification for the majority of the industrialized world. There were several reasons for this choice. Since soldiers in the trenches were nearly completely underground, they were far better covered than if they were kneeling or laying behind a parapet, which only provided protection from one direction. The low profile of the trenches also made them much easier to hide into the scenery and thus harder for the enemy to hit or locate.[60]

The discovery of these qualities was based on observation, as trenches had served in a major role in several wars waged in the latter half of the 19th century and thus proved their worth in the battlefield. However, their spread to Europe was held back by the fact that the largest conflict in which trenches and other field fortifications had played a significant part outside of sieges was the American Civil War between 1861 and 1865. Both Union and Confederate troops had employed field fortifications widely, especially during the last two years of the war. The American Civil War also foreshadowed the power of modern weapons against traditional tactics, with modern rifles and machine guns causing high casualties against units fighting in traditional formations, but as it was not a European war, and so any developments made in the field of military tactics and strategies were largely ignored among the military thinkers on the old continent. [61]

Wars that shaped the European view on the usefulness of field fortifications were the several smaller wars fought between 1870 and 1914. These wars were fought all over the world, but each had one thing in common; one of the belligerent parties was a European Great Power. Many of these smaller wars also helped to give birth to the tense political landscape that would explode into the First World War in 1914.

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[59] Murray 2013, 7-17
[60] Murray 2013, 7-20
[61] Murray 2013, 4

The Russo-Turkish war, fought from 1877 to 1878, all but ended Ottoman rule over the Balkans and laid the foundations for what would be known as the Balkan powder keg in the years to come. This situation in the Balkans would, of course, later lead to the First World War. The Russo-Turkish War was significant in that it was the final war between two Great Powers fought mainly on European soil before the First World War and utilized much of the most modern technology available at the time. The Boer Wars from 1899 to 1902 between the Boer states in South-Africa and the Great Britain saw the annexation of Orange Free State and the South-African Republic, also known as Transvaal, to the British Empire. The two states had enjoyed independence since the mid-1800s. Although the effects of the war for the world at large were relatively small, it marked one of the first wars where modern rifles were used by both sides regularly. The Russo-Japanese war of 1905 showed the weakness of the Russian military, as it was defeated by the supposedly inferior Japanese, paving the way for the Central Powers to believe it might be possible to defeat the Russians before they were fully mobilized. The Balkan Wars, fought in 1912-13, finalized the powder keg of the Balkans.[62]

All of these wars saw an increased importance for field fortifications. Despite this, the people in charge of designing the war plans for their nations in Europe largely ignored the idea of defence. They concluded that the trench was the right structure for defensive warfare but dismissed the idea of defence in favour of offensive doctrine[63], as in all the wars previously mentioned the attacking side still seemed to possess a significant advantage. Also, the most significant war fought on European soil during the latter part of the 19th century, the Franco-Prussian war which ended in the unification of Germany, had been rather quick and heavily weighted in favour of the attacker. Therefore, the tactics of the various militaries were not prepared to meet the challenges of trench warfare at the beginning of WW I.

5.2 Trench Structure

Militaries have a habit of producing manuals with carefully and thoroughly designed examples for just about everything possible, and the British Army of the early 20th century was no different in this regard. According to the *Manual of Field Engineering* of 1911, a

[62] Murray 2013, 45-211
[63] Murray 2013, 211-225

trench should be five feet (approximately 1, 5 meters) deep, excluding a step on the side facing the enemy. Ideally, according to the *Manual,* this step would be around eighteen inches (approximately 45cm) wide and two feet tall (approximately 60cm). The purpose of this step was to help soldiers shoot over the edge of the trench. The full width of the trench should, according to the example laid out in the *Manual of Field Engineering*, be about 4 and a half feet (approximately 1,2 m). [64]

The manual goes on to suggest that, depending on the surrounding terrain and the location of the trench in relation to it, a parapet, a low wall made of dirt, ought to be built on the side facing the enemy for additional protection and concealment against enemy gunfire. However, it also mentions that if the vantage from the trenches is sufficient, setting up a parapet is not strictly necessary. [65]

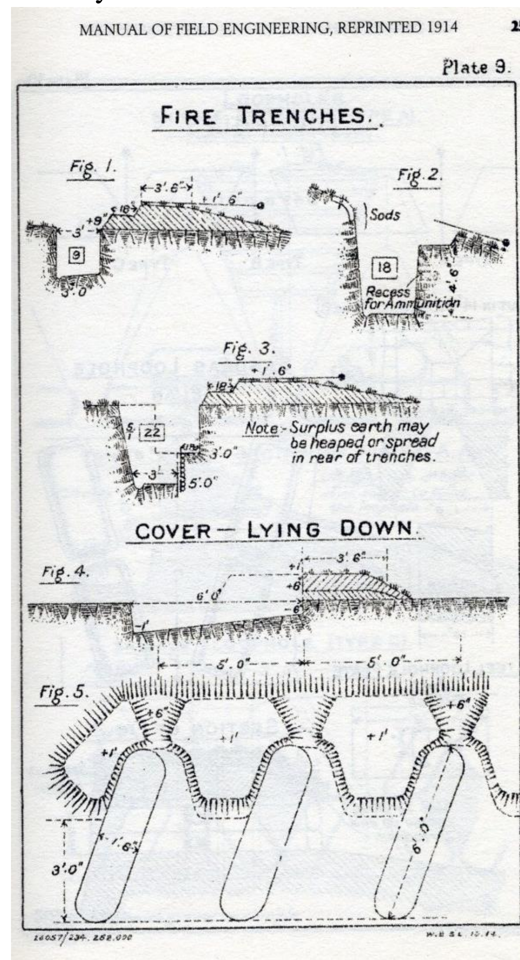

Image 5: *A diagram for a proper trench from a manual of field engineering*

[64] Murray 2013, 14 fig 1.6
[65] Murray 2013, 14, fig 1.6

Of course, the template provided in the *Manual of Field Engineering* was only an ideal guideline for a trench built in optimal conditions, with ample time and all the necessary resources. In the field, things rarely were optimal, and time was more often than not a precious commodity. Innumerable things could influence how a trench was built under the threat of enemy operations, and there was bound to be a great deal of variety in how trenches were constructed outside of practice conditions. The soil itself in which a trench was dug could drastically affect how it shaped up in the end. When the lay of the land and enemy activity in the immediate area are added to this equation, it is rather safe to assume that very few trenches conformed to the one presented in the manual in the end.[66]

As the war progressed, the trenches developed their structure, often improving their design to better counter the realities of the attritional nature of the Great War. [67] They expanded across the front in a zigzagging pattern, forming a network, or several networks, as there was no single continuous network that covered the vast area between the coast of North Sea and the Swiss border**.** The idea behind the zigzagging layout of the trenches was extremely simple: it improved the soldiers' chance of survival against enemy artillery fire and against enemy assaults that managed to cross the no-man's land and reach the trenches. Had the trenches been dug in straight lines, shrapnel and fragments from artillery shells could have travelled long distances down the line until they hit something or, more likely, someone. By avoiding straight lines and adding twists and turns, the shrapnel and fragments could not spread as far if a shell hit a trench directly.

The pattern in which the trenches were dug also provided defensive advantages against an enemy assault. With the proper placement of machine guns, multiple, overlapping fields of fire could be created between two salient points of a trench. This guaranteed a high ratio of casualties for enemies trying to assault the trench between two salients, effectively restricting the range of options for enemy offensives. Should the enemy still reach the front line and enter the trenches, the zigzagging pattern prevented the enemy from just shooting down the whole trench, thus offering the friendly troops there more cover.

British trenches, however, had one significant problem that plagued them, especially in the earlier parts of the war; they were on French soil. This meant that they were fighting on friendly terrain, trying to drive the invading Germans out of France and Belgium as quickly

[66] Murray 2013, 20-22
[67] Historia 11/2014, 59

as possible. Since the doctrinal thought of the time demanded offensive action, the military leadership believed that victory could not be achieved without pushing into Germany. The Entente Powers in France were also restricted in the sense that as long as any French territory was occupied by German troops, any retreats were politically unacceptable. With these two issues in mind, the British and French trenches, for the most part, were meant as temporary structures, intended to provide a launching point for offensive actions and to be abandoned as soon as the enemy was forced to retreat from their positions. After such action, the troops were either to repurpose the enemy fortifications against their previous owners or dig new ones in the land acquired during the offensive.

Because of these reasons, concrete and other industrially produced building materials were relatively underutilized for reinforcing the structure of the trenches by the British, especially when compared to the Germans. Local dirt and timber were the two most common building materials of British trenches. Rocks might be used too, although they possessed certain qualities that made them undesirable for trench construction and reinforcement, at least if they were expected to receive hits from enemy gunfire. A rock would probably stop a bullet from a rifle but was also likely to fracture on impact, creating small pieces of rock that would fly off and could cause harm to people standing nearby.

5.3 Dugouts

While away from the trenches, the soldiers and officers of the British Army were usually billeted among the local population if no barracks or other similar large buildings were available. Officers could usually count on receiving better accommodation than their men, generally in the form of better sleeping arrangements and increased privacy. Things worked quite similarly in the trenches; an officer would almost always be guaranteed a chance to be housed in a dug-out, a structure that is either at least partially or completely underground and meant to accommodate soldiers or equipment.

Building materials used in the construction of a dugout were generally whatever could be procured locally; dirt, gravel, rocks and wood were the most common materials found in a dugout. While they appear to be quite similar at first glance, a dugout should not be confused with its much sturdier cousin, a bunker. They share many similarities; both provide cover for men and equipment and both are usually underground, although bunkers can be above

ground too. However, whereas a bunker is a permanent building and designed to withstand and be used in actual combat, a dugout is generally meant as a temporary shelter, designed to offer a safe place to store equipment or for men to sleep in where the worst of the weather cannot reach them. The building materials are also quite different; a bunker is generally built with heavy, industrially produced materials, such as concrete and metal, whereas a dug-out is made of materials readily available in field conditions.

During the First World War, dug-outs were a common sight on the western front. They were dug both as shelters against enemy fire and as places for sleep and rest. As a general rule, they were more commonly meant for officers when not under shelling by the enemy. The dug-outs built for accommodation were primarily meant for the officers as well; an ordinary soldier might often have to settle for a quiet trench corner or, if he was lucky, for a specifically dug sleeping platform in the side of a trench where the worst edge of the weather was blunted and where he was offered some cover against enemy artillery fire, no matter how feeble. [68]

There was a lot of variance in the shape, size and design of dug-outs, at least as much as in those of the trenches of which they were a part. It is rather likely that, as with trenches, some sort of official guideline in one instructional manual or another existed somewhere. It is also likely that, as with trenches, following the said guidelines was not very common. After all, unlike with trenches, for dug-outs the type and quality of the surrounding soil as well as the number of the intended occupants impacted greatly on the necessary design, along with the enemy activity and strength. Close to a particularly active enemy sector, dug-outs would have to be dug considerably deeper than elsewhere to offer any protection against enemy artillery.

Of course, a dug-out was a far from perfect cover when it came to being protected from enemy artillery. Dirt, rocks and wood were not always enough to stop artillery shells; they might offer protection against shrapnel and bullets but dug-outs that could withstand a direct hit from an artillery shell were rare.[69] The dug-outs became even more vulnerable to artillery fire during the later parts of the war, as artillery shells developed and became heavier and more powerful. Sometimes even the weather might get the better of a dug-out, especially a shoddily or hastily built one. For example, heavy rain could cause the dirt of a dug-out to

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[68] De Groot 2000, 164
[69] Crouch 1917, 62

dissolve and move, compromising the structure. Under such conditions, an improperly built or badly maintained dug-out could easily collapse and endanger the people inside.[70]

Dug-outs were not merely shelters against the weather and enemy fire to the men whom lived in them. To many, they became homes away from home. Therefore, it was not uncommon for the inhabitants of the dug-outs to try to improve the ambiance of the dug-outs whenever possible. This could be achieved through many means; flowers, either in pots or in a tiny garden nearby if there was sufficient room, pictures and decorative fabrics, to name a few methods.[71] There were multiple likely reasons for such endeavours. For one, they helped to alleviate the grimness of a bare dugout and thereby improved their comfortability and provided some semblance of home. Decorations also provided a distraction from the life in the trenches and the surrounding conditions, probably helping the men to feel some sense of normalcy that helped to maintain morale and mental health.

Although the men living in the dug-outs often came to regard them as home, they did not often have the chance to remain in them for the whole duration of the war. They would often have to change dug-outs as the units to which they belonged were moved around the front

Image 6: *12/East Yorkshire Regiment officers' dug-out near Rolincourt, undated*

[70] Crouch 1917, 76- 78
[71] Crouch 1917, 47

from sector to sector according to the needs of the war effort and rotated in and out of combat. This meant that the quality of the dug-out they would inhabit could improve or deteriorate, depending on their luck. Going from a good and comfortable dug-out to a worse one could be something of a hit to morale, especially if the drop in quality was significant. Captain Lionel Crouch, while serving somewhere in France, described the difference between the previous dug-out he had inhabited and a new one. The comparison was not favourable. He called his previous dug-out 'palatial', and his tone was quite disappointed as he described the look and condition of the new one. [72] The old dug-out had received the following praise from him in one of his letters home and could be treated as an example of what an officer hoped for in a dug-out.

> *I have a fine dug-out right in the earth. I will endeavour to describe it. You must first scrape our boots, then you go down four steps. The dug-out is quite large and roofed with large timbers (bits of trees). The roof is supported with a large bit of tree and large cross-beams. I forgot to say that I have a door and a fanlight over it. Inside is a good -sized table, five chairs, a little table (what an auctioneer calls a "what-not," I think), a tapestry cloth, a large bed with spring mattress, two pictures, and various little china ornaments, a large curtain. The dug-out is walled and roofed with some sort of leather.*[73]

The passage serves as an example that dug-outs were more than a simple shelter or a place to sleep in for the officers who inhabited them during the war. Objects that had no obvious military meaning were common inside. In Captain Crouch's case, there were a number of small porcelain decorations and a tapestry. None of those items did anything to increase the protection a dug-out offered against shelling by the enemy, but they went a long way to make the dug-out a more pleasant place to inhabit. Small touches like that probably helped to create a more homelike feel to the people inside and allowed them to adapt to the surrounding conditions at least somewhat better.

There is also another level to this decoration of dug-outs that should be considered. The British Army of that time had strict rules regulating one's appearance, and despite the state of war, the military still adhered to a rigid and formal hierarchy and strict discipline. The

[72] Crouch 1917, 64
[73] Crouch 1917, 60

purpose of these rules was to force the soldiers into the norm and to turn them into a part of the war machine, perhaps improving unity among the soldiers, but at the same time it is possible that to the men subjected to the system it could feel like a dehumanizing process that turned them into a nameless face, a part of the mass. The reasons for such a system were not petty in themselves, though enforcing the rules could naturally take on petty forms, but were backed by the argument that through uniformity and discipline the combat efficiency of troops would improve.[74]

The regulations demanding uniformity may have come as a burden to many, especially during the later years of the war when conscription was introduced in the UK to alleviate the shortage of manpower the army was suffering. A system based on volunteering simply could not keep up with the casualties suffered, and the holes in the ranks had to be filled. Therefore, those sent to the front during the later part of the war were less likely to be volunteers and may not have been prepared for the discipline the military demanded of them.

Since altering one’s appearance for self-expressional purposes was all but impossible under the Army’s regulations, customizing one's surroundings was probably more widely tolerated by the higher-ups of the military hierarchy as way for the troops in the trenches to feel at home. Not all dug-outs were as comfortable as the one described by captain Crouch in his letter home. Of course, this dug-out was not the only one he inhabited during the war, far from it. Captain Crouch had previously spent time in a dug-out that was not as much to his liking as the one he would later mention in his letters home. His tone suggests that the dug-out he resided in at the time of writing his letter was not the best the captain had seen during his time at the front.

> *My dug-out is not exactly commodious. I can’t stand or sit up straight, and the bed is too short. Couldn't get my sleep this morning and only got cramp in my legs. But one thing, this dug-out is very cool.*[75]

There was much variance when it came to the comfortability of a dug-out. While it is unlikely that any of them could really be described as truly comfortable, except perhaps in relation to the surrounding conditions, many at least could fill the basic needs of comfort.

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[74] De Groot 2000, 160-163.
[75] Crouch 1917, 50 - 51

On the other hand, many of the dug-outs might have been little better than holes in the ground, but in the end having them was usually better than being without one.

The trenches of the Western Front were a hard place to live in, but they were an absolute necessity for survival. Without the protection they offered, the soldiers would have been decimated by modern rifles and machine gun fire or annihilated by the artillery of the time. By burrowing into the soil of France and Belgium they could shield themselves from the worst of what the enemy had to offer. Thus, the trenches became a shelter for the soldiers at the front and a place they had to live in, even if that life was not particularly comfortable. Discomfort, after all, was preferable to death.

6.0 Life in the Trenches

The basic characteristic of trench warfare was tense waiting for action. The men could wait for long boring periods of time for something to happen and then that waiting would be broken by a sudden burst of action. That break in monotony might be the result of several different things, though the most common reasons for sudden breaks were enemy shelling, surprise assaults and raids. Sniper activity, too, could break the waiting, although its effects tended to be far more localized than the other common reasons for the tension suddenly breaking into action.

The waiting could turn into action because of the soldiers' own actions, although those, by necessity, tended to be far less surprising for the soldiers themselves. Many of the actions they took against the enemy required preparation and planning and therefore when it came time for a 'show', as action was often informally called, most of the men were mentally prepared and forewarned of its imminent beginning. However, this does not mean that going over the top was any less stressful than being suddenly shelled by the enemy, only that generally speaking the soldiers knew that they were about to do so soon.

Of course, an argument could be made that the waiting for the action to begin was as stressful as waiting for the enemy to do something; all one had to do when the enemy made a move was to react and counter it the best they could whereas to act upon the enemy required forethought and planning. As such, the men would always know that the moment they were supposed to climb out of the trenches and charge at the enemy was constantly ticking closer. The trepidation must have been tremendous for many a man.

A typical day in the trenches often followed similar patterns. There was a schedule that was being followed as closely as possible, and the basic design of that schedule did not vary greatly between locations and regiments. Some variation might appear, and enemy activity might force alterations, but the basic structure usually remained in place.

The day began with the stand-to; the men would stand to arms twice a day, first in the morning during the hour before dawn, and once in the evening, during dusk. This was part of standing orders for the British Army during wartime. During the stand-to, the platoon commanders were to perform a light inspection of the men in their platoon, making sure that the bolts of their rifles were operating properly and moving without problems. Generally, each NCO inspected the rifles of their section and then reported the results to

the platoon commander. A more thorough inspection of the men's weapons was generally held later in the day when there was lighter available for the inspection.[76] [77]

Once the hour of the stand-to had passed, it was generally time for breakfast although in some instances it was possible that there was some time for the men to sleep between the end of the stand-to and breakfast. After breakfast it was usually time for various fatigues and other labour for the men not currently manning the parapets. The men would improve or build fortifications where needed, drain trenches, carry equipment and in general keep the trench in a shape that allowed it to stay operational. Whether or not the officers would take part in the physical work itself depended on the regimental customs. In some regiments the officers might be expected to work alongside the men, whereas in others it might have been considered inappropriate for an officer to participate in any other capacity beyond overseeing and directing.[78]

Often officers of infantry companies had other duties that needed to be performed, such as read or write reports, inspect various parts of the trench or censor letters, to name a few. Often the duties an officer would perform outside of combat were less physical than those in which the rank and-file soldiers were engaged but could often be as time-consuming if not more so. [79] Also, once the men had finished their tasks they were generally free to use their time as they pleased[80] unless summoned, whereas the duties officers had to perform rarely left them as much time for themselves.

Many of the duties that were necessary to ensure the continued ability of a trench to fight had to be carried out at night, when the enemy's ability to observe them being performed was minimal. Especially the installation of barbed wire and other defences that were to be placed in front of the trenches had to be performed at night, lest the enemy have an easy time killing the men doing the work. Another important night time task was the carrying of fresh supplies and water from the rear lines. Some of the men would also be doing sentry duty at the fire step. An average time spent at this duty was usually only two hours or so to ensure that no one fell asleep while at guard, which was a capital offence.[81]

[76] Bull 2008, 70-71
[77] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 97 - 98
[78] Graves 1929, 100
[79] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 94 - 95
[80] Firstworldwar.com
[81] Firstworldwar.com

The officers in the trenches would often take part in these activities in some form or another, but they were also expected to lead patrols into the no-man's land and raiding parties into the enemy lines. The British Army operated on a model that saw officers leading these small units in their work, while in other belligerent armies it was generally an NCO that led such a party. It has been suggested that sending officers to lead operations like these was a contributing factor to the high casualty rate the British officers suffered during the war.[82]

In theory it might have been possible for many of the young officers to excuse themselves from taking part in a raiding party into the German lines but in actuality few probably ever did so without an exceptionally good reason. To refuse to lead such a party or a patrol into the no-man's land would have probably resulted in being branded a coward by the company, which would have earned the officer in question the disdain and ostracization of the other officers of the company, if not the whole regiment, and the men serving under him. The reputation of cowardice was a hard one to shake, so for most it was better not to acquire one.

The amount of non-trench maintenance related activity in the no-man's land at night that a regiment undertook varied greatly from regiment to regiment. Where one regiment might be content to let the no-man's land remain silent or let the Germans dominate it, another might follow the orders given by Sir John French in early 1915 that called for constant activity in the no-man's land.[83] For example, during his time with the Welsh Regiment, Robert Graves did not go out on a patrol once, but as soon as he was transferred to the Royal Welch Fusiliers, he was sent off on a patrol. The regiment had made it a 'point of pride to dominate the No-Man's Land from dusk to dawn' and sent out patrols every night. It was also a regimental custom to test newly arrived officers, called 'warts' by the more senior officers of the regiment, by sending them out on a patrol as soon as possible. According to Graves, 'none dared to excuse themselves' upon being asked if they would like to go out on a patrol. Afterwards he found out that the only thing the regiment would respect in a young officer was personal courage, and he resolved to go on a patrol as often as possible. [84]

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[82] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 111 - 112
[83] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 110 - 111
[84] Graves 1929, 129, 131

This decision of his was not solely out of desire to fit in with the Royal Welch. By this time Graves was beginning to have reservations about fighting in the war and believed that his best chances of receiving a non-fatal wound that would see him through the war alive was during a night time patrol. As he put it:

> *My best way of lasting through the War would be to get wounded. The best time to get wounded would be at night and in the open, with rifle-fire more or less unaimed and whole body exposed. Best, also, to get wounded when there was no on the dressing-station services, and while the back areas were not being heavily shelled. Best to get wounded, therefore, on a night patrol in a quieter sector. One could usually manage to crawl into a shell-hole until help arrived.*[85]

For someone looking to get out of the trenches, a lucky wound was likely the best solution. Of course, there was the chance that one might recover before the war ended and be sent back to the front to fight, but many a wound could take a man out of the war permanently without killing them or maiming them for life. Recovery from such wounds happened in a military hospital, some of which were in France and others in the British Isles.

In addition to patrolling the No-Man's Land, an officer might be called upon to lead a raiding party to the enemy trench at night. The purpose of these raids was rarely to actually gain any ground but rather to gain intelligence on the enemy, capture enemy soldiers for interrogation or simply combat lethargy that might set in if a company did not undertake any offensive action against the enemy for a while. Trench raids against the enemy were certainly popular among the higher echelons of the British Army, as they were seen as providing a multitude of beneficial results, such as keeping the enemy on guard, providing experience for the troops that might otherwise have to wait for a major battle or enemy activity to gain any. They also helped to pacify the French allies who were not always pleased with British operations. [86]

However, among the junior officers, the attitude towards trench raiding was not as clear cut. After all, it is quite understandable that the men expected to actually lead such groups would not all be enthusiastic about them. Some felt that going raiding amounted to little more than wasting their men on a questionable 'minor enterprise'.[87] Later in the war the

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[85] Graves 1929, 131
[86] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 114 -115
[87] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 114 - 115

British would take to raiding during the day as well as during the night, under the cover of smoke and gas, both of which could blow away with the wind and leave the raiding party exposed. However, despite the inherent dangers of taking part in a raiding party, volunteers were generally easy to find.[88] This might have been because it brought some variety to the boredom of the trench life or perhaps because it provided a chance to strike at the enemy with a lesser chance of being killed by enemy artillery or machine gun fire because of the stealthy nature of such operations. It is also possible that many joined such parties in hopes of receiving the kind of wound that would send them home to recover.

One of the most important pieces of information a patrol or a raiding party might bring back, at least according to Robert Graves, was which enemy unit the regiment was currently facing. Therefore, it was sometimes enough just to cut the insignia off a corpse or a wounded German soldier before returning home.[89]

As much of the important work required the cover of darkness, the officers in a unit serving in the trenches rarely had the luxury of an uninterrupted sleep. There were always things such as watches, work parties and patrols that made sure that the junior officers often received only a handful of hours of sleep in a day. Sometimes even less than that; enemy activity all too often robbed them of their rest and sometimes one's comrades might prove impossible to wake up upon the hour of their watch, forcing the previous watch officer to continue through the next watch as well. Watches had to be manned always, no matter what.

Like the other ranks, officers too had to bear the monotonous existence that was life in the trenches. However, arguments could be made for both that for them life in the trenches was either more boring or less boring than for the lower ranks. The officers had less free time while in the trenches; unlike the regular soldiers, their duties for the day rarely concluded after they had finished whatever task was at hand. There were usually more things to do. Reports had to be compiled, letters had to be censored, watches had to be overseen, patrols led and more senior officers entertained. What little time they managed to take for themselves was often used to catch an eyeful of sleep. After all, the lack of sleep could cause a catastrophe at a later date. If one was not careful, one might find

[88] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 118
[89] Graves 1929, 131 - 132

himself falling asleep while on watch, which could lead to court martial and execution at worst.

The estimates officers have given for their amount of sleep while in trenches can sometimes be quite astonishing. Edwin Venning, who served as a captain in the Royal Sussex Regiment, estimated in 1915 that during a week in the trenches ‘my average of sleep has been 2 ½ hours in twenty-four’.[90] A lieutenant of the Royal West Kent Regiment, Arthur Heath, calculated that of the 112 hours in the trenches he had spent only twelve sleeping, all of them in daytime.[91] The lack of sleep must have been a burden for the men, many of whom were quite young and probably not very used to having to go without a regular sleep schedule. It is possible that the lack of sleep exacerbated the effects of the monotonousness of the trench life, especially when much of the work an officer in the trenches had to do was paperwork. For someone suffering from a lack of sleep, paperwork must have often been quite the chore, especially when much of it was probably done in the dim and confined environment of a dug-out.

Typical paperwork an officer would engage in when not performing other duties fell into a number of categories; there were casualty reports, supply requests for the Royal Engineers, work reports, intelligence reports, and other important messages that had to be sent to the headquarters (HQ) for evaluation and inspection. In addition to the regular reports, the HQ might, quite often in fact, make requests for special reports. Not all of these reports were as relevant for the war effort as one might assume. Some of them were merely requests for gathering information for the purpose of compiling statistics that, at least to the officers and soldiers in the trenches, could appear quite inconsequential and not worth their time. For example, during a German shelling on the Somme, Captain Brian Lawrence was requested by the people behind the lines to ‘Please state the number of expert rat-catchers you have in your company. This return to be in before 12 noon on Friday.’ [92]

Another part of the paperwork that ate a great deal of an officer’s time, especially for the platoon commanders, was censoring the letters written by the men under their command. It was a time-consuming task, especially for an officer who had not quite yet developed the skill to find the compromising words by glancing at the letter he was currently reading and was thus forced to read it through in its entirety (in order to locate the words that were in

[90] Housman, p. 46 via Lewis-Stempel 2010, 118
[91] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 119
[92] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 96 - 97

need of censoring). There was also a great number of letters to censor; all put together, the British Army produced over eight million letters during the course of the war.[93]

The attitude towards this task with seemingly no end varied greatly between officers who had to partake in it. Some found it a boring task, as the men whose letters they had to go through with the censoring pen were rarely skilled wordsmiths but rather ordinary working-class men who often had ordinary worries, wrote in a crude manner that some of the officers found displeasing, or lacked the proficiency in grammar that an officer might have come to see as a standard. However, it was still an important task which had to be done carefully, as correspondence with home and friends on the front was important for the men's morale.[94]

However, for other officers it was a good chance to get to know the men in their platoon or company better. Censoring the letters of the men opened a window into their private lives that an officer might not have otherwise been able to see because of the rigidness of the British Army's structure. Informal interaction was discouraged by the Army and could even be punished. It was believed that overt familiarity between the rank-and-file soldiers and the officers and the NCOs would result in insubordination and decreased discipline.

The letters provided a window past this divide and could reveal if the soldiers were having trouble at home, how they were actually feeling or thinking, or if they were having issues

Image 7*: A wiring party setting out to lay new wire. Location and date unknown*

[93] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 98
[94] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 98-99

with some other members of the unit. Many of these pieces of personal information could prove useful for an officer hoping to keep his platoon or company or similar unit in fighting order and high morale. They could deal with or limit the spread of a problem by treating the source of it rather than be forced to seek the source of it before they could do anything about it. Of course, it was not always easy to act upon the information they might have gained through censoring letters; after all, if a soldier's troubles were at home, there was very little an officer in the frontlines could do about it, except perhaps offer a few encouraging words.

Censoring the letters also provided the officers, many of whom possessed an upper class background and upbringing, a kind of contact with the lower classes that they would not have been able to have back home and during peace time or simply by talking to the men. By reading the letters of the other ranks, predominantly made up of members of the working classes, they received a chance to look through the barriers that under normal circumstances separated the various classes into almost different worlds. For some, this was a surprisingly profound experience that made them consider the poorer classes in a different, perhaps more informed, way.

One person who, at least during the war, was affected by the things he had read while censoring the soldier's letters was the future prime minister Harold Macmillan. On 30 August 1915 he wrote the following:

> *Indeed, of all the war, I think the most interesting (and humbling too) experience is the one gets of the poorer classes. They have big hearts these soldiers, and it is a very pathetic task to have to read all their letters home. Some of the older men, with wives and families, who write every day, have in their style a wonderful simplicity which is almost great literature. And the comic intermixture of official or journalistic phrases – the kisses for baby or little Anne; or the 'tell Georgie from his daddy to be good boy and not forget him' – it is all very touching. They love to buy little things to send home – postcards, or little pieces of silk, or ornamental sewing work – And then there comes occasionally a grim sentence or two, which reveals in a flash a sordid family drama. 'Mother, are you going ever to write me. I have written you quite ten times and had no answer. Are you on the drink again, that Uncle George writes me*

he children are in shocking state?' . . . There is much to be learnt from soldiers' letters.[95]

As previously stated, the letters of the officers were generally supposed to be censored by their commanding officer. However, often the letters were sent to an anonymous base censor. Therefore the company commanders rarely had as good a window into the minds of the officers under their command as the said officers had into their men's.[96]

Writing letters was one of the few ways of passing time in the trenches that was easily available to all. If there was paper and a pen available, it took very little time to begin writing a letter home. Then, if something sudden interrupted the writing process, all one had to do was to roll up the equipment, put them somewhere they could be transported or retrieved safely from and where they hopefully remained dry and continue the process later when there was a better opportunity for it. However, as important as writing letters was for the men, receiving them from home or from friends and family also at the front was far more important. News from home was essential in keeping up morale, although bad news from home might have had a devastating effect on the recipient.

Almost as important as news, and sometimes even more important because they could provide actual physical comfort for a man in the trenches, were the parcels one might receive alongside a letter from home. In this regard officers were at an obvious advantage compared with the other ranks. After all, they usually came from more well-to-do backgrounds and had friends and family with similar backgrounds. Therefore, the parcels they might receive often were more substantial, regular and of a better quality than those the rank and file soldiers and NCOs might receive from home. Many a letter written by an officer to home began with a sincere 'thank you' for a letter previously received and for the parcel that had arrived with it. These were quite often, though not perhaps regularly, followed by a request for some specific item the writer felt they were in need of and instructions on how to deliver it.

Food, especially various delicacies not easily available in the trenches, and consumable luxury items like cigarettes were among the more popular items one might receive from home. However, they would not always be consumed alone by the recipient, as sharing items was a common custom among the officers. Sharing one's treats from home and other

[95] Macmillan Via Lewis-Stempel 2010, 100
[96] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 99 - 101

items that might realistically be shared with one's mess mates was quite a regular custom in the trenches, if not an actual unwritten rule.

Other popular items were pieces of equipment. Officers were largely expected to acquire their own kits, so any help from home was probably highly appreciated. The officers did usually receive some financial assistance from their regiments in the form of allowances to buy their uniforms and equipment, but it was not always sufficient to acquire more than the very basic components of what was needed for field service. If one wished to have top-quality equipment, one generally had to spend his own money or ask for help from home. Items requested ranged from new overcoats to shoes and socks, items that were under heavy duty in the trenches and needed replacement often.

As I mentioned earlier, officers often had less free time than the other ranks. So how did they spend what little time they had for themselves? A very common pastime was sleeping. The lack of sleep was a very common problem for the junior officers, and the only remedy for it was more sleep. Thus many officers caught sleep when they could. However, that was not the only way they might pass the time when their duties allowed them some time off. Writing was certainly a possibility, but often challenging in a close proximity to the enemy, as it could easily be interrupted (by enemy activity). Reading was popular, though getting books to the trenches and then keeping them in good shape might have been a challenge at times, when one considers the wet and dirty conditions that often prevailed there.

As many of the best known first-hand accounts of the First World War were penned by people with a higher education and an inclination towards writing poetry, it can sometimes seem as if the only thing young officers read in the trenches was poetry or high literature. Such works of literature were common enough among the officers to whom they likely brought certain familiarity, but other, less profound works were also circulated among them. Writers like Kipling, H.G Wells and Anthony Hope were popular names among those inclined towards reading and provided escapist experiences for the men trapped in the trenches.[97] Sharing books was also quite common between comrades. After all, there were only so many times one could read the same book within a short time span and by sharing and swapping books it was possible to refresh one's scope of entertainment.

[97] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 140 - 141

The life in the trenches was not easy nor one that allotted a lot of time for rest or relaxation, especially for the officers leading the men. There was always something that had to be done and more often than not as soon as one task had been completed a new one appeared. Sleep was something of a luxury and something the officers had to catch every time the chance was offered, even if it was for few short minutes. The officers in the trenches were also tasked with duties that could seem quite impossible in the hostile environment of the trenches: keeping their men alive and as safe as possible under the constant threat of death.

7.0 Dangers of the Trench World

Comfort had not been the primary concern of the soldiers digging the trenches as they burrowed deep into the soil of Western Europe. The primary purpose of the trenches was to keep their occupants alive and capable of repelling any enemy assaults, not ensuring that they would be comfortable while under enemy artillery fire. Therefore, trenches generally were not comfortable places. The reason for their uncomfortableness was nuanced and not explainable simply by them being military structures built under combat conditions.

As mentioned earlier, contemporary European military thinking was dominated by a military doctrine that over-emphasized the importance and advantages of offensive military actions. This school of thought considered trenches largely as launching points for offensive operations and therefore as temporary fortifications. This meant that little thought and effort was put into their construction during the early parts of the war by the Entente powers. Their supposedly temporary nature was enhanced by the need for the French and British to be on the offence, as they were currently dug in French (and Belgian) soil, which meant that defensiveness and inactivity were politically challenging concepts to execute. After all, initially the plan was to drive the Germans off French soil and to reach Berlin by Christmas. Thus, not as much effort was put into digging in by the Entente forces as might have been the case if the fighting had taken place in Germany.

Of course, military doctrine and combat conditions alone did not make the trenches as unhealthy and uncomfortable as they commonly were. Many other factors contributed to the conditions in trenches as well. One of the greatest contributing factors was mud, which was one of the greatest problems faced by the militaries on the Western Front as well as the cause for a host of other problems. Outside of trenches, many of these problems directly affected the militaries' ability to fight. For example, mud decreased the armies' already low mobility, rendered some manoeuvres impossible to execute efficiently and made transporting supplies harder and slower. However, mud inside the trenches caused discomfort and health issues.

There were two possible reasons for why the mud formed inside the trenches: the weather and groundwater. Many of the early trenches lacked sufficient drainage, which meant that when it rained at the front, much of the water stayed at the bottom of the trench. There it would mix in with the soil and create a layer of mud that ensured that keeping one's feet

dry was a nigh impossible task for the soldiers in the trench. On the other hand, in some parts of the front a high enough ground water could achieve very similar results. Likewise, with the mud created by rains, the drainage systems of the trenches were ill-equipped to deal with the groundwater mud problem. In the course of the war, developments in trench construction and the sheer time the soldiers had to work on their trenches helped to alleviate the problem of mud forming in the trenches, but it never went away completely.[98]

Lieutenant James H. Butlin described the effects of rain turning the ground to mud in a letter to a friend thus:

> *How come it rained coldly for 24 hours, on off for the remainder of the time. The trenches fell in, dug outs collapsed. The mud slosh was anything from knee- to waist-deep. From the weather point of view they were the worst days I have ever spent. When I came out my clothes were solid with liquid mud and weighted about a ton.* [99]

As Butlin's words suggest, mud was not only a discomfort that kept one constantly wet; it was also a significant hindrance on personal level. The mud would stick to nearly anything one might wear and getting one's leg stuck in it was all too easy. This all made staying clean and dry an even more impossible task than it already was because of the limitations trench life placed on personal hygiene. For an officer in the trenches the mud could be a truly intolerable obstacle. As the officers who served in the trenches would often have to make rounds along the lines, inspecting various sections of the trench and the various posts that were manned to see that everything was in order, mud could make this relatively

Image 8*: A British artillery piece stuck in mud near Zillebeke in 1917.*

[98] Historia 11/2014, Sota jumittui, 59
[99]IWM: Lt. J. H. Butlin, 4.12.1915

simple procedure an exhausting task, especially so, if the officers were supposed to do their rounds more than once in a day. In a deep enough mud, a short distance of few hundred meters might take hours to traverse.[100]

There often was no escaping the mud, as it could usually get everywhere. At worst it could make living in a dug-out impossible.

The mud posed many challenges when it came to the soldiers' health, and one of the most common issues it created was the so called 'trench foot', which belongs to the immersion foot syndrome group of diseases.[101] It was first encountered in the late 1914, but initially it was thought to be an unusual form of frostbite and treated as such. However, as the number of cases grew and the condition became common, it was classified as its own condition, separate from the regular frost bite, in the process creating the immersion foot syndrome group of diseases.[102]

Trench foot is caused when a foot is exposed to cold water for a prolonged period of time without actually freezing at any point.[103] The conditions and environment necessary for trench foot to occur were common across the Western Front, and the duties the men in the trenches had to perform often left them quite susceptible to this particular issue. Standing on guard in or patrolling through muddy ground and puddles provided multiple opportunities to encounter this particular syndrome.

The most common symptoms which the people suffering from a case of trench foot exhibit are swelling of the inflicted limb, as well as pain or numbness. In more serious cases large blisters filled with a clear, foul-smelling liquid form. Toes and foot are the most commonly affected areas of the body, but in many cases the limb might swell as far up as the knee. At its worst trench foot might develop into a full necrosis in the afflicted limb, which could result in either death or amputation. [104]

Although trench foot was a painful affliction capable of incapacitating anyone suffering from it, it was not a particularly deadly condition, especially when compared with the numerous other diseases and conditions one might develop at the frontlines. Only 75 men in the British Army were killed by trench foot directly, which is a fairly good achievement

[100] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 122
[101] www.icd9data.com
[102] Atenstaedt 2006
[103] www.icd9data.com
[104] Atenstaedt 2006

when compared to some other armies that fought in the war. For example, during the time the Americans were part of the First World War, 2000 of their men perished because of trench foot.[105]

The reason for such an excellent record for treating this condition stemmed from a speedy and proper reaction to its discovery. The cause of the disease was connected to the circulatory system rather than to a bacterial infection, which allowed the development of a number of effective treatments, although no uniform treatment was created during the war. The men suffering from trench foot were also diagnosed swiftly and often received appropriate care.[106]

The trenches dug into the soil of France and Belgium suffered from a multitude of problems besides mud. They were cramped, narrow, confusing, often wet and almost always dirty, and there was very little that could be done to change this. The only direction in which a trench might be safely expanded was downwards, as otherwise the diggers risked making the trench too wide and thus more vulnerable to enemy artillery fire. Some of the problems might have been mitigated by a constant maintenance of the trenches, but there was not always enough time to perform such duties, especially if the enemy was being particularly active on the day certain maintenance was planned.

For the officers, especially for the younger ones who had joined the Army after Britain had declared war on Germany, the life in the trenches might have been somewhat more taxing than for the regular soldiers. After all, most of them were probably accustomed to regular bathing and being able to change their dirty clothes for clean ones daily. However, such luxuries were rarely possible while at the frontlines, whereas in the trenches further back, there might be a chance for a change of clothes or for a shower or a bath, although that probably required a stroke of luck or a particularly quiet sector, if not both. Generally speaking, proper hygiene had to wait until one was out of the trenches, as enemy activity, especially artillery, rarely bothered people well behind the frontlines.

The results of this unhygienic atmosphere were manifold as the squalor of the trenches worked to produce problems which caused discomfort and potential health risks for the men inhabiting them. In these closely packed conditions one creature spread quickly to a

[105] Atenstaedt 2006
[106] Atenstaedt 2006

point where it was nearly impossible to find a man in the trenches that had not suffered from their bite and was not suffering from them at the very moment: lice.

The conditions in the trenches were perfect for lice to spread. They need warm conditions which were easily provided by the clothes and bodies of the men in the trenches. The men were forced to spend time in close proximity to each other, allowing lice to spread easily from soldier to soldier with an alarming speed. Once infected, the lice would proceed to bite the men carrying them, causing small and irritating bites all across the body. There was very little that could be done to combat the lice, especially in the trenches. Delousing would be done to the vast majority of men when they were away from the frontlines, but the efficiency of this practice was questionable, as most of them were generally infected again as soon as they returned to the trenches. However, combating the lice was an important endeavour nonetheless, as the lice carried several diseases that could easily eat their way through the ranks and severely damage the Army's ability to operate, if left completely unchecked.[107]

Of the diseases the lice spread, so-called Trench Fever was among the most common. The disease spread when the lice bites were scratched. This broke the skin and rubbed in the lice faeces, which in turn spread the disease into the system.[108] It was rarely fatal all by itself, but it caused extreme discomfort for the men who had the common misfortune of contracting it and it spread quite easily. Its symptoms included headaches, high fever, aching muscles and various sores, and it often incapacitated the victim quite efficiently. Recovering from the disease could take months, and even if he recovered, a soldier could contract the disease again later. It was one of the most debilitating illnesses affecting all the soldiers fighting on the western front, as although it did not take the lives of its victim, it would take them out of the fight for several weeks, leaving gaps in the ranks without actually killing anyone.[109]

For an officer their first contact with lice was often met with embarrassment. Many of them after all came from more well-off classes, and having lice was something quite foreign to them. Probably they considered them something that was not supposed to happen to men of their background. However, after the first shock wore off, most realised that the lice were an indiscriminate force that infected anyone with whom they could come

[107] www.firstworldwar.com
[108] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 127 - 128
[109] Cox 2014

into contact. Personal attempts could be made in the trenches to remove louse eggs, but it is unlikely that any of these efforts resulted in anything else than very temporary relief. Getting rid of all the lice, even with help of equipment which was supposedly designed to help kill them, was largely impossible, and the survivors would repopulate quickly. For most men, the shame and embarrassment of being the victim of body lice infestation would eventually wear off and be replaced with resignation.[110]

Lice were not the only vermin that thrived in the trenches. All manner of unpleasant animals and insects would cause annoyance and discomfort there. Mosquitoes could often find excellent places to breed in the puddles of the No Man's Land and plenty of food in the men living on either side of it. Unburied bodies served as breeding grounds for swarms of flies that would then harass the men who probably drew them in more than usually because of the unhygienic conditions in which they had to live. Insects of all kind could be found crawling in the bottoms of the trenches and inside the dug-outs, getting in places where they were not wanted or needed. However, there was one creature in particular that could be as troublesome as the body lice, namely the rat. [111]

Rats were a common nuisance on the Western Front. The trenches there provided them with an excellent place to live, with ample shelter and food. Like lice, rats could spread diseases, but they also caused material damage by gnawing on equipment and eating food meant for the soldiers, and they could even attack a sleeping man if they were particularly bold. A rat infestation could potentially get so bad that it made it impossible for some to sleep in the dug-out suffering from their presence. Captain Lionel Crouch mentions in one of his letters home that 'I can't sleep in mine as it is over-run with rats. Pullman slept here one morning and woke up to find one sitting on his face. I can't face that.' Captain Crouch's solution was to sleep in a different dug-out rather than risk rats running over him while he slept.[112]

It was not the natural world alone that sought to do harm to those in the trenches. The enemy, while rarely visible, was always relatively close and often ready to harm one if one was not careful. For the British that enemy was the Germans on the Western Front. The British Empire might have fought against Germany's allies on other fronts, such as the Turks in the Middle East, but in France and Belgium the enemy was always the Germans,

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[110] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 127-128
[111] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 126-128
[112] Crouch 1917, 64

as they were the ones occupying most of Belgium and parts of France and as such were the foes across the no-man's land there.

Under day-to-day circumstances the Germans posed a danger to the British and French in three different ways: snipers, shelling and raids. Machine gun fire might also be included in that list, but as it was largely ineffective against men staying in the trenches, it does not have appear to have been particularly dangerous to anyone else than the men out on patrol.

Of those three dangers mentioned, sniping was the most likely to end one's life, provided that an enemy sniper managed to get one in their sights for long enough to get a shot out. The Germans held an advantage in this regard over the British. Their optics industry was considerably more advanced than that of their enemies, one of the most advanced in Europe, and as a result their snipers were more likely to be equipped with telescopic sights on their rifles. This naturally gave their snipers a significant advantage in their work.[113]

The enemy snipers were especially dangerous for officers in the trenches, as they were by far their preferred targets, and recognizing an officer from the other ranks was not at all hard. The officers' uniforms were full of easily recognizable details that set them apart from the rank and-file soldiers without having to see rank insignia. Things like Sam Browne belts, long tunics and riding breeches were but a few parts of officers' uniform that might be used to instantly recognize an officer, should one make himself seen.[114] Whether or not this changed as the war progressed, I cannot say with certainty. The British Army certainly ordered that the officers dress similarly to their men during battles, but whether or not they gave similar orders in regard to the attire officers wore in the trenches has not come up in my research.

Like the British, the Germans too would engage in trench raiding, with many of the same goals as their enemies, namely to keep their enemy on their toes, to maintain morale among their own ranks, and to gather intelligence on the enemy they were facing. Their basic approach to raiding was fairly similar as well, though the Germans were faster to adopt and develop infiltration tactics than their opponents.

Curiously enough, none of the material I have managed to gather includes a description of an enemy trench raid from the defender's perspective. There are multiple recounts of a

[113] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 104
[114] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 104

trench raid on the German positions, but so far any mentions of German trench raids on the British positions have been in a second-hand form. They have also been fairly rare, and as such I cannot attest to how regularly the Germans would raid British trenches. However, considering that Germany was the first belligerent country to develop and train specialised troops for the purposes of these kinds of operations, it does seem unlikely that the Germans were less enthusiastic about conducting raids on enemy positions than the British.

The final way the enemy posed a danger on a more day-to-day basis was through shelling. Although bombarding an enemy in a fortified position with artillery was not by any means a new invention, the power of the artillery had never before been as great as it was during the First World War. As the war ground to a halt on the Western Front, many generals looked to the artillery to break the deadlock of trench warfare. Enemy positions would be barraged with artillery often and especially hard before an assault on their positions. The dream was that after the shelling was through, there would be no enemies left alive in the targeted trenches, but this dream rarely, if ever, came to be. The trenches and dug-outs simply provided too good of a protection against artillery fire for it to completely destroy enemy units with any level of reliability. There would usually be defenders left standing to meet any attackers after the barrage had ended.

This is not to say that shelling had no effect or that the effect it had was insignificant. If the artillery shells hit a trench directly, they could cause devastating damage. A direct hit to the roof of a dug-out could cause the structure to collapse and bury all those seeking shelter inside, and a well-planned and executed shelling would help one’s comrades in getting close to the trenches during an assault. An enemy that was busy taking cover was less likely to shoot at anything approaching their trench than an unsuppressed one. One factor that limited the effectiveness of the artillery shells somewhat in outright killing enemies was that they were not as accurate as bullets. One can estimate the general area in which a shell fired from an artillery piece will land with reasonable accuracy, but some luck is still required for it to hit exactly the spot the crew is targeting. This is partly why artillery fired as many shells as it did during the war, to increase the odds of hitting something important. If the shells fell short or shot over without hitting any trenches directly, the damage they would cause to the men sheltering in the trenches would be relatively small.

The effects of a shelling could sometimes be more damaging psychologically than physically, and artillery was often employed to that end before an attack in an effort to soften up the enemy. Being shelled by the enemy was a fairly common occurrence across the front. To say that almost half of all the letters and diary entries I have read for this research mention being shelled by the Germans would only be a mild exaggeration. Mentions of German artillery firing at the author's position or at some nearby section of the trench are very common across the source material, which suggests that the Germans at least were prone to shelling their enemies' positions and the British usually either retaliated or prompted retaliation by shelling the Germans first. However, most of these mentions concern short shellings that do not seem to have lasted very long. Of course, unless the shelling went on considerably longer than usual, many of the writers do not seem to have felt the need to mention how long the bombardment lasted or to estimate how many shells the enemy had fired at them. Some of the letters suggest that one could grow accustomed to these daily shellings, or even find the way they broke the monotony of the trench life somewhat entertaining as long as they were not landing near one's own location. Captain Lionel Crouch wrote the following to his mother:

> *This morning the Germans started shelling some trenches and points behind us; then our guns replied and the Boches got the worst of it, part of their trench going up. It is quite good fun listening to the whizz of the shells going over us and looking for the explosion.*[115]

Of course, since this passage is from a letter written home to his mother, one should at least partially question whether or not Crouch actually felt or thought as he claims to have. It is entirely possible that he was merely putting on a brave face for his mother, hoping to alleviate the worry she was probably feeling over her son. There are some passages in his letters that suggest that this might have been the case, at least partially. Despite his nonchalant attitude, he mentions the danger the shells pose[116] and in a later letter goes on to mention how he has begun to jump at the sound of a shell bursting.

[115] Crouch 1917, 43
[116] Crouch 1917, 50

> *I also feel so beastly "nervy" now I have taken to ducking at bullets, which I never used to do, and shells make me jump like blazes. We are all getting like that. It is absurd keeping us in the trenches so long six months continuously now.* [117]

Being on the receiving end of a short shelling regularly could gradually wear on one's nerves. However, being subjected to a long shelling could often stretch the nerves to the breaking point and sometimes past it. The longest shellings could take days. Under heavy bombardment there was little a soldier in the trenches could do other than to take shelter and to hope or pray for the best as the shells burst across the trench line. The complete helplessness of the situation must have been immense, and for officers this feeling was probably compounded by the fact that once again they were the ones who were supposed to remain calm and collected while probably feeling quite similar to the men around them.

The dangers in the trenches were numerous and quite often lethal. Some of the dangers hanging above the men living there, such as enemy artillery barrages, could strike quickly and kill or maim very suddenly. Diseases, on the other hand, could be a slow killer or merely something that took a soldier out of the fight for a while. All of these dangers and discomforts could, however, eat at one's psyche, inflicting wounds that while devastating to the person suffering from them, were not always obvious to the naked eye of an outside observer.

Image 9: *A wounded soldier being carried on a stretcher during the 3rd Battle of Ypres, near Boesinghe, 1st of August, 1917.*

[117] Crouch 1917, 89

8.0 Morale and Mental Health

8.1 The point of it all; what kept the officers fighting

The First World War was the first wholly industrial war. It saw the Great Powers of Europe mobilize the whole of their people for warfare in a way not seen before. It also managed to harness the nationalistic zeal that had developed over the previous century and turn it into a fuel that drove the armies forward and encouraged people to volunteer or (at least) not to avoid conscription to fill the gaps in the ranks. How long this lasted, though, can be debated.

In those participant countries where conscription was the norm, filling the gaps in the ranks might have been challenging, but at least they already had a system in place to draw the necessary manpower into the military. However, in the UK a system based on volunteering failed to keep up with the casualties and had to be replaced with a system of conscription to ensure that the military could cope with the losses efficiently enough to stay in the fight.

However, despite the high number of casualties that the British forces on the Western Front suffered, the British Army never faced similar mutinies as, for example, the French Army did in 1917 but kept on fighting. It is not my intention to launch into a comparative examination of the matter, nor am I going to burrow into what kept the average British soldier fighting in the dreadful conditions of the trenches. I will rather endeavour to examine what it was among the officers who served in the trenches that kept them in the fight and what they considered to be the point of the war or how they hoped it would end.

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, the majority of the officers who led the British soldiers in the trenches were drawn from the more well-off segments of the British society. Therefore, they were products of the Edwardian school system that assumed that leadership was an inherent ability of theirs and that therefore it was the duty of every young gentleman to seek a commission in the military upon the state of war being declared. A great many heeded the country’s call, for a variety of reasons. Patriotism, peer pressure and a desire for adventure, alongside hundreds of other reasons, probably all played an important part in motivating these young men to apply for a commission within the Army’s many regiments.

However, whatever the motivation one had upon joining the fight against the Central Powers, it would have to be able to carry the man through the war or, if it failed, he would have to find another reason to fight. This was quite often necessary, as few men survived through the experience that was trench warfare without changing somehow. For them to remain effective they would have to find something to fight for if the reason they set out with failed to survive the war of attrition and its horrors.

I shall begin by examining patriotism and how it held up once an officer had been in the fight for a while. After examining that, I will endeavour to investigate what other factors might have helped to keep the officers in the fight; both what they themselves believed to be the case and what the Army assumed would be the key factors in building and maintaining morale among the men fighting the war.

Patriotism, and by extensions nationalism, is a somewhat challenging thing to examine in the personal papers of the men who fought in the First World War, as it is a very subjective and often a non-obvious concept. Many of the letters written home do not indicate the writer's opinion or thoughts on this matter, and even when they do, one has to consider how truthful the writer was being at the time of writing the letter; after all, one might not desire to worry or anger the people to whom he was writing with thoughts that might have been considered defeatist or unpatriotic. Censorship also limited what could be said in a letter. In diaries and memoirs one can trust the writer to be more truthful regarding this subject, as diaries are more commonly a personal thing and memoirs are quite often written well after the events they cover and as such generally freer from any war time restrictions, both from official and self-imposed, though they could include changes reflecting the developed and changed views of the writer.

That being said, patriotism was certainly a powerful force at the very beginning of the First World War. After the declaration of war on Germany, the British recruitment centres were often overwhelmed with men looking to join up with one of the regiments that made up the British Army.[118] The would-be officers, of course, generally did not have to go through a similar rush to the recruitment centres to gain a commission, but even among them quick thinking and fast acting made it more likely that one would receive a commission with one of the regiments or within the Territorial Forces. The fastest way in was often through connections, but applying through the War Office was also likely to provide the desired

[118] Gudmundsson 2007, 12 - 13

commission if an applicant possessed the right kind of background and applied fast enough.[119]

The upbringing and education of the majority of the young men who served as combat officers in the trenches of the First World War, which I have already examined in more detail in an earlier chapter, made the sentiment of patriotic duty a likely candidate for the propelling force that saw these men apply for a spot among the officers of the Army. For some, the feeling of patriotic duty was strong enough to summon them from across the seas. A South-African, F. B. Wade, who went on to serve as a 2nd lieutenant, felt it his patriotic duty to travel to England and apply for a commission in a unit from the old mother country.[120]

Similarly, many of the letters and diaries that cover the early parts of the war, usually written somewhere between or during 1914 and 1916, seem to have a considerably more eager tone than those from later stages of the conflict. At this point of the war, the young men had not yet been worn down by their experiences and patriotism and the allure of adventure that war provided could still provide the source of morale one needed to fight.

If the memoirs of the officers are to be believed, patriotism did not survive throughout the war in the trenches. According to Robert Graves' famed memoirs, patriotism was too distant a concept to draw strength from after a while in the trenches. Men still dreamed of home, and Great Britain remained a pleasant place to spend a leave or a period of convalesce from battle wounds or other injuries. According to him, however, it no longer provided the impetus that kept people fighting in the trenches. In his words:

> *Patriotism, in the trenches, was too remote a sentiment, and at once rejected as fit only for civilians, or prisoners. A new arrival who talked patriotism would soon be told to cut it out. As 'Blighty', a geographical concept, Great Britain was a quiet, easy place for getting back to out of the present foreign misery...*

Graves continues on that as a country Great Britain also included too many of the groups the men in the trenches found detestable in some form or another and was therefore unsuited as a source of morale. Among these detestable groups were people like politicians, journalists and war profiteers. [121] He does not offer much of an explanation why these

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[119] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 36 - 39
[120] IWM: F.B Wade, 1914
[121] Graves 1929,188-189

specific groups were disliked by the officers, other than the journalists, and even then somewhat indirectly. It would appear that the journalists were seen by the men in the trenches as distorting the information they delivered home. For the politicians and the profiteers Graves does not offer an explanation, although one can easily guess why it was they were disliked in the trenches. Politicians kept the war going and the profiteers made money out of it. To men who did the fighting and dying out in the field, this must have seemed quite unbecoming, even offensive.

A part of Lieutenant W.B St. Leger's diary expresses similar sentiments, as he offers an angry passage which is partially directed at the enemy, covers the fears he has about the results of the war and is partially aimed at the politicians he fears will betray the men fighting at the front and accept an easy peace out of the war. He is of the opinion that the war should be continued until the enemy is wholly defeated, although it becomes apparent that he fears doing so will weaken the 'White Races' against the inevitable coming of the 'Yellow Peril'.[122]

So do Graves' observations and St. Leger's sentiments reflect the sentiments of their fellow combat officers or are their more isolated opinions? I cannot know for certain, but I am inclined to agree with the declining amount of patriotism, at least partially. The number of sentences and expressions that could be considered to have patriotic undertones seemed to go down the longer the writer had been in the Army and the more he had seen the trenches. With time, there were fewer suggestions of introducing conscription in the United Kingdom[123], and the writers seemed to be less inclined to urge their male friends at home to take up arms, although occasional anger or annoyance towards anyone who had not joined the Army of their free still sometimes flared up[124]. This latter sentiment could possibly be interpreted as a certain bitter patriotism directed at those the writers saw as failing in their duty to their country; after all, the vast majority of the British officers that served in the First World War had been volunteers themselves. To them, seeing people avoid joining the army without a good reason must have felt quite disconcerting, even infuriating. [125] Therefore, it is possible that while the intensity of patriotic feeling waned

[122] IWM: W. B. St. Leger, 31.11.1916

[123] It should be noted, though, that after the Military Service Act of 1916 these calls for conscription became at least partially obsolete. Draft dodgers are not mentioned in any of the letters, at least not explicitly.

[124] IWM: J. H. Butlin, 1.11.1915

[125] IWM: W. B. St. Leger, 4.12.1916

over time, it did not entirely disappear but continued to contribute to the morale as it had before, but in a more diminished capacity, which many might be ready to deny by the end of the war.

During the war, many of the officers visiting home on leave or while recovering from wounds received in action noted that the atmosphere and attitude towards the war at home was quite different from what it was at the front. The intense patriotism, which in the eyes of the writers had dried up at the front, was still quite alive and well at home. A number of them noted how it was somewhat like visiting a foreign country, as the language of the civilians was that of the newspapers and as such felt foreign to a visiting officer who found newspapers largely inaccurate in how they described the war. For someone who had spent the past several months, if not years, in France or Flanders fighting a very draining war of trench warfare and was already feeling at least partially disillusioned with the war, this must have been quite trying. A certain feeling of isolation from the civilian population was bound to be an issue; after all, how could one relate to people who one probably felt could not properly relate to one.[126]

So what did keep the morale up in the trenches? Graves believed that it was regimental pride that kept the fighting spirit up in the face of trench warfare. While there may be some truth to that, I am not entirely convinced it was the sole reason, as Graves seems to believe in his memoirs. However, Graves had the advantage of serving in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, an old regiment with a prestigious record in historic wars of Great Britain. The British Army agreed with his belief that the regimental spirit and pride in its history were chief components of morale, but those theories were built upon the Old Army that had existed before the war. The regular regiments and territorial units all had old, prestigious histories that could be used to build up regimental pride among the men and officers standing in their ranks, but what about all the new units needed for the war effort, filled with citizen soldiers rather than regulars who had enlisted for career rather than for the duration of the war? Could they be relied to incorporate themselves into the military culture sufficiently to find strength from these old traditions which their units might not even possess? For the most part the Army seemed to believe so, but by 1917 and 1918 they were beginning to admit that perhaps their old attitudes required some reformation.[127]

[126] Graves 1929, 228 - 232
[127] Englander 1997, 126-127

Other components for keeping the Army fighting, according to the Army itself, were stern discipline, the cultivation of an offensive spirit and the building up of the character of its soldiers. These components were perhaps aimed more at the enlisted ranks than at the officers, as the latter were generally in charge of enforcing them rather than subjected to them. However, the officers serving in the trenches were generally in the lower ranks of commissioned officers and therefore had plenty of higher-ranking officers above them in the chain of command who saw to it that they too were subjected to the Army's standards. They were also being expected to set an example for the men to follow and consequently could not allow themselves to get lax with the standards expected of them.

Let us examine these components in practice. Stern discipline is a relatively simple one to approach and define. The command structure of the British Army venerated hierarchy and held obedience as one of the chief virtues a man could possess. The troops were to be obedient to their NCOs and officers, and these, in turn, were supposed to be obedient to their commanding officers. Fostering this obedience was not always an easy task. Although in theory an officer held unquestionable authority over his men, the officers were usually instructed that relying on the authority of the rank alone would not yield desirable results. They were generally expected to develop sufficient personnel management skills to keep the men in line without having to resort to the harsh military punishment system of the British Army and to lead through example, which must have placed some quite heavy expectations on an officer.[128] Statistics for the number of court-martials for the 5th Army in 1918 suggest that the officers had developed some skill in this area by then, at least, as the number of cases was quite small when compared to earlier years. However, it should be noted that most of the cases that made their way to a full court martial ended in a conviction. The frequency of various offences per month per 1000 men remained generally between 0.5 and 2.[129]

The officers' management skills were, at least in part, expected to be displayed through benevolent paternalism; officers had to be attentive to their men's needs and speak up on their behalf without becoming too familiar with them. Despite this distance they were supposed to keep, they were instructed to get to know their men. Guy Chapman, a second lieutenant, was told the following during his time in an OTC; "Know your men and they'll follow you anywhere." With expectations like these and considering how much time the

[128] Englander 1997, 128 - 131
[129] Englander 1997, 131 - 137

officers, especially the platoon commanders, in the trenches could find themselves spending with their men, this must have been something of a challenge. Then again, seeing how the society at the time came in-built with class distinctions, there might have been some models of behaviour they could draw on to help them maintain a certain distance without appearing aloof and unapproachable to their men. The example was to be set by personal conduct and sufficient skill in arms, alongside a number of skills that the war had largely rendered useless on a regular basis but were still expected from an officer simply because of tradition, such as riding a horse.[130]

Any deficiencies could be spotted by the men and would often diminish the officer’s standing among them. The men, who spent a lot of time under the scrutiny of the officers but in turn also scrutinized their officers back, could become quite skilled at determining the ability of an officer, and hiding ineptitude or inefficiencies from the men became harder and harder as time went on.[131]

For some officers, enforcing and conforming to the strict rules and regulations of the Army during wartime could be frustrating. The people making decisions in the Army for the most part believed that the discipline and high morale would manifest themselves in smart-looking soldiers who maintained peacetime standards of grooming and behaviour, therefore assuming that the said standards would be maintained even in times of war. For some younger officers, who were not used to the mentality of the army, adhering to these rules might have been frustrating, especially when the demands perhaps varied from regiment to regiment, seemingly without much consistency. For Example, Robert Graves received few sharp words from a colonel for wearing his stars on the shoulders instead of his sleeves. He had been just recently transferred to the Royal Welch from the Welsh Regiment and was wearing his uniform in the latter’s style.[132]

Offensive spirit, that doctrinal thought upon which much of the Army’s planning had been built before the war and which remained powerful in military thinking even through the war, was a key component in the Army’s self-image. It stemmed from pre-war beliefs that were based on the results of the wars of the 1800s in which it seemed that the attacker had always prevailed in the end. An offensive attitude also fostered an image of activity, of strength and of the ability to project force. Defence, despite its many advantages in the

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[130] Englander 1997, 128 - 131
[131] Englander 1997, 129 - 131
[132] Graves 1929, 128 - 129

face of modern military technology, was seen as passive and unbecoming, even un-masculine. Thus, the Army sought to instil an offensive spirit among all ranks of the Army. However, as the war settled down to the near immobile drudgery of trench warfare, offensive spirit came under attack by the relative passivity of it all, and the power of the offensive spirit waned. To fight this threatening apathy, the British Army sought to re-ignite that offensive spirit by issuing orders that required regular trench raids to be conducted against the enemy. The tactical and strategic significance of these raids can be questioned, and neither of those seems to have been the chief reason for the orders to conduct them. Their primary purpose appears to have been to stop the men from falling into a state of apathy between larger operations.[133]

In the end, the responsibility for fostering this offensive spirit among the men fell largely on the frontline officers, as they were in charge of leading the day-to-day life in the trenches. The people higher up in the command chain could give as many orders as they wished, but the commanding officers out in the field had to enforce them for them to have any effect, and there seems to have been variation between regiments in how eagerly they fulfilled the orders to constantly engage the enemy. Where one regiment or a battalion might have been willing to forego constantly provoking the enemy, another might have made it a matter of pride to keep up constant activity and to 'dominate' the No-Man's-land.[134]

Finally, character building, for officers, was largely based upon ingraining upon them the manners of a gentleman, as it was believed that an officer should also be a gentleman. These skills and manners of a gentleman were believed to foster in the man a certain nobleness of spirit that would then help him develop better leadership skills.

Determining how these beliefs of the Army translated into practice is hard. However, the British Army never suffered a widespread mutiny among its ranks during the war, unlike some of its contemporaries. The only mutinous incident in which more than just a few men took part was the Étaples mutiny 1917 in which the men at the Étaples base turned riotous following a controversial arrest of a soldier. Whether or not this incident contributed to the reforms the British Army sought to make in 1917 and 1918 to combat the spreading depression of the Army is impossible to say with certainty. However, in those two last

[133] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 114 - 118
[134] Graves 1929, 129 - 130

years of the war the British Army tried its best to find new methods of inspiring men to fight.

What did the officers fighting in the war think was the reason they kept on fighting then? For some the 'romance' of the war carried them onwards, as they affirmed in their letters that they genuinely enjoyed the war and the fighting that was taking place around them. Lionel Crouch in his letters home often remarked how much he enjoyed the war and how he in fact preferred to be in the trenches over being behind the lines. His gripes with trench warfare seemed to revolve around the weather rather than the dangers the everyday life in the trenches posed to his physical health. Of course, Crouch was someone who had by his own words waited for the war to begin for eight years[135] and also someone who died before the peace, on 21st of July 1916. He had survived in the front for a little under 19 months.[136] As such, it is possible that he failed to be part of the war for long enough for it to fully get to him. However, he was hardly the only one to whom the war continued to hold some allure through it all. There were others that found the fighting thrilling and exciting.[137] Captain Claude Templar, who had been a prisoner in Germany for most of the war, wrote the following in 1917 in a letter after his escape and return to the fight:

> *When I was locked up in Germany I used to pray for this moment; I used to dream of the romance of war, its wild strange poetry crept into my soul; I used to think that the glory of going back to the beautiful adventure was worth any price. And now it's all come true, just like things happen in fairly tales. I go into my dream country like a baby, eyes wide with wonder, ears strained to catch every note of the magic music I hear there.*[138]

Even some who claimed that they hated the war admitted that there was something anticipatory in a coming fight. In his partially fictionalized auto-biography, Siegfried Sassoon remarks that there was a certain feeling of excitement before a 'show' that was exhilarating. Despite having declared his hate and dislike of the war on multiple occasions before, Sassoon still admits the following:

> *For some obscure reason I felt confident and serene. My thoughts assured me that I wouldn't go to England to-morrow if I were offered an improbable*

[135] Crouch 1917, 31
[136] Crouch 1917, 125
[137] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 221 - 223
[138] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 221

> *choice of between that and the battle. Why should I feel elated at the prospect of the battle, I wondered. It couldn't be only the coffee and eggs which had caused me to feel so acquiescent. Last year, before the Somme, I hadn't known what I was in for. I knew now, and the idea was giving me enormous satisfaction! I had often read those farewell letters from second-lieutenants to their relatives which the newspapers were so fond of printing. 'Never has the life brought me such an abundance of noble feelings,' and so on. I had always found it difficult to believe that these young men had really felt happy with death staring them in the face, and I resented any sentimentalizing of infantry attacks. But here was I, working myself up into a similar mental condition, as though going over the top were a species of religious experience. Was it some suicidal self-deceiving escape from the limitless malevolence of the Front Line?* [139]

However, for Sassoon this feeling was more of a passing epiphany than a reason to keep on fighting. Very soon afterwards in the book he proceeds to consider his own reasons for continuing on with fighting. To him the chief source of motivation and morale lay in the 'battalion spirit', and as such his sentiments seem to mirror those of Graves, with whom Sassoon served during the war and whom he considered a friend. However, to Sassoon this spirit seems to have had more to do with comradeship with the other officers, NCOs and the men than with pride in one's regiment, its history and the desire not to let it down, as was the case with Graves.

Comradeship in general seems to have been a fairly strong source of motivation and morale in the trenches. In memoirs the other people the writers served with are often mentioned in relatively affectionate ways and receive plenty of attention, though in letters the people one served with received comparatively less attention. The death of a comrade was often noted to have caused a great deal of sorrow. However, mourning in the trenches might not always have been the most prudent thing to do. Sassoon notes in his memoirs that there was rarely time for personal mourning in the battalion when it was on the move, and his battalion at the time was not even on its way to battle but rather out of it.[140] One can only wonder how bad news akin to a close friend dying affected those in the front lines where the enemy activity possessed a greater risk for one's well-being. In his memoirs

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[139] Sassoon 1930, 201 - 202
[140] Sassoon 1930, 119 - 120

Graves mentions that bad news had two ways it might affect a man in the trenches; either it did not have an effect at all or it could break a man.[141]

Of course, there could be times when hearing that a friend had been wounded in action and was bound for home or a hospital behind the lines could be good news for an officer. For some, it meant that their friend now had a chance of getting out of the war for good without dying. Many officers, too, found themselves hoping for a non-lethal wound that might take them out of the fight for as long as possible, perhaps even for good.[142] For others receiving such a wound or some other condition that forced them out of the war could be a bitter pill to swallow, perhaps even so if it was disease that forced them to leave rather than a bullet or a piece of shrapnel.[143] This feeling was probably a mixture of feeling that being taken out of the fight was somehow the same as abandoning their comrades and disappointment at not being able to continue the fight.

One's comrades were not only a source of sorrow at their passing but could also serve as a source of joy and entertainment in the middle of the war. For an officer the other officers of his company and battalion were generally the people with whom he interacted most for social purposes, as fraternization with the other ranks was frowned upon, possibly even banned, by the Army. It was believed that too much familiarity was bad for discipline and bred insubordination in the men, even if the officers were at the same time expected to show paternalistic care towards their men. As such, there was a number of what could be perhaps called social units for an officer where most of one's social interaction happened. There was the dug-out where one slept while in the trenches, the mess where one ate, and billets where one slept when not in the front lines. This is, of course, only a rough categorization but one that serves to illustrate the basic groups in which the officers were in close proximity to each other.

Of these groups, the dug-out was perhaps the one offering the closest interaction between the officers sharing it. They were generally small spaces with almost no privacy, which probably forced their inhabitants to find ways to get along and to bury any possible differences in favour of maintaining peace. If free time presented itself, communal activities offered a fine way to pass it. These could include various card games, but things

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[141] Graves 1929, 121 - 122
[142] IWM: St. Leger, 14.7.1917
[143] IWM: F. B. Wade, 1917 - 1918

like conversations and singing could also be used to spend time with fellow officers.[144] Dug-outs were also generally shared by officers who belonged to the same unit, generally the same company or in some cases the same battalion and who were also expected to work together when out of the dug-out. Therefore it is likely that forming some sort of bond with one's dug-out mates was necessary on more than just one level. Doing so provided friendships or at least chances for social interaction that might help to alleviate the stress caused by the war, but it also probably helped to develop professional relationships between the various officers, helping them improve their ability to work together both in and out of battle.

As units, and I use the term here in quite a general sense, a mess and a billet were perhaps more important when the officers were out of the trenches. While in some cases the officers might mess together in the trenches, chances for a proper mess in the trenches were more limited than when the battalion was out of them. During the time an officer's unit was in the reserves, the mess was an important social unit in the sense that it often brought many of the battalion's officers together for the duration of a meal. Billets were where soldiers often were quartered while not at the front lines. Often they were civilian homes or other structures that had been converted as shelters for the military personnel. Officers would quite often be billeted among the civilian population whenever possible. Many of the letters and memoirs mention a French host, quite often an older woman, although occasional mentions of a Frenchman as host exist as well in the letters.

In general, unit cohesion seems to have been a strong force in keeping the officers fighting. There are many mentions of how one dared not to think of oneself as an individual while in the Army and in the war.[145]This was probably the result of the Army training that promoted conformity and obedience to one's superiors, but it might have also helped one to share the burden of the war. By reducing oneself into a piece of a larger whole, it was perhaps easier to accommodate to the horrors and discomforts of the war. When one was just a part of the whole, the horrors and discomforts of war might have seemed less personal, more evenly spread around. It might have also helped one to cope with the possibility of losing one's life, as one could think that it would not hinder the greater whole by much.

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[144] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 145, IWM: Butlin 13.6.1915

[145] Chapman 1965, 13

Another source of motivation to carry on for the officers fighting in the trenches alongside the other ranks might have been the expectations placed upon them by society at large. As I have already mentioned a few times, a disproportionate number of the officers serving in the British Army during the First World War came from the more influential and well-off parts of British society. The officers with such a background had been brought up in an environment and educational system that often considered that it was in their nature to possess leadership and command as well as other attributes that made them well-suited for leadership roles in wartime. Therefore the social pressure to live up to these expectations must have been quite demanding at times but also a source of motivation to keep on fighting. In many letters one gets the feeling that the writer did not wish to let anyone down. For example, Lieutenant James Butlin on several occasions asked his friend to whom he was writing not to mention any troubles or worries he had written about to his 'people', by which I assume he meant his family. This was presumably largely out of a desire not to add to their worries, but at the same time it suggested that it mattered to Butlin what his family was thinking about him and that he wished to project a different image to his family than to his friend.[146] Then there were also the expectations that were directed towards the officers by the Army, the men serving under their command, their peers in the Army and their direct superiors.

Finally, there was religion. Historically speaking, religion has often been a powerful force in wars, whether as a cause, source of justification or simply as a source of morale. The First World War was not a war of religion; the main participants represented different branches of Christianity and had all gone through at least some secularization in the past decades, though there were considerable differences in this regard between the belligerents. Claiming that religious differences were the cause of the war would be an error, although it may have contributed on some level, but that is not particularly relevant for this work. For the First World War the most important influences religions held were in propaganda and as a source of personal strength for those fighting the war.

Fully exploring the influence of religious faith in the trenches is quite challenging. For most part the personal papers I have had at my disposal have not ventured into the religious in their content. Most references to Christianity have been in the form of common phrases such as 'by God' or 'Pray to God' etc. that do not necessarily indicate deep

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[146] IWM: J. H Butlin, 31.7.1915

religious belief or faith of any kind. The memoirs that I have utilized have offered perhaps a slightly more in-depth look into their writers' religious preference or lack of thereof, but even they, for the most part, do not venture into the subject directly.

The United Kingdom had gone through a period of decreasing church attendance during the previous century, and the number of non-conformist churches had increased dramatically. In general, the people were less religious than they had been at any previous point in history, but that did not mean that religion no longer held sway over their lives.[147] Whether or not the person liked it, they were shaped by Christian beliefs during their upbringing and education. This was especially true for the children of the upper classes, as many of the public schools they attended considered instilling Christian values into their students a crucial part of the education.[148] How well they managed to instil the dogma and the faith into their pupils is a matter of debate as well as of personal preference on the pupils' part, but it stayed with some of them for the duration of the war. Robert Graves suggests in his memoirs that perhaps one in hundred men were motivated by religion in the trenches, but his estimation of this fact can at least partially be challenged on two counts. For one, his view on the matter were restricted to the two regiments with which he served and by the fact that he generally seems to have had a somewhat negative attitude towards religion in general or perhaps just towards the Church of England, as to him it seemed that the Anglican chaplains were largely out of touch with the reality of the war.[149] However, this was not entirely the fault of the Anglican chaplains, as initially they were ordered not to go into the front lines, which made them a rare sight for the soldiers and officers in the trenches. At the same time, they were considered officers of the Army and messed with the secular officers, which created a slight divide, as they were often seen by the secular officers as them against the regulars' us.[150] The catholic chaplains were not similarly bound by orders and were a more common sight in the trenches as well as more admired than their Anglican counterparts.

However, for many, religion could offer an escape from the reality of the war. Through faith they could find solace that might elude them from secular sources and help them deal with the losses with which they were confronted in the trenches. Belief in some higher power could perhaps also offer a way for them to make some sense of the seemingly

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147 Bédarida 1979, 109 - 113

148 Lewis-Stempel 2010, 15 – 16, 20 - 22

149 Graves 1929, 189 - 190

150 Lewis-Stempel 2010, 178 - 179

random nature of death in the trenches. A resignation to the belief that an enemy shell falling on them was part of God's plan rather than just a case of lethally bad luck might have been helpful in keeping the world a somewhat sensible place in their minds and giving them a feeling that there was some order left in the world. Religion could also help to alleviate the fear of death with the promise of life everlasting and help to heal spiritual wounds after battle.

How, then, did religious belief survive a prolonged exposure to life in the trenches of the Western Front? It is hard to generalize, as religion was quite a personal experience. Where one man might find his faith bolstered amidst war, another might begin to doubt at the sight of all the horrors of war. The latter view has certainly been the interpretation that has gained more traction among researchers after the war.[151] The First World War was certainly an event that probably put many of the men who experienced it through some thoughts about their religious beliefs and perhaps changed them in one way or another. Robert Graves, for example, claims that he went to the church for the last time during a leave in England, and although he does not state it explicitly anywhere in his memoirs, it can be seen that the war had a significant effect on his religious beliefs.[152]

Taking part in the battles and the trench warfare of the First World War was usually a transformative experience for the men involved. It is unlikely that any man who survived the trenches came home exactly as they had left. At the very least they returned with a baggage of new, often quite traumatic, experiences that coloured the way they saw the world. Many returned with wounds of all kinds, some with wounds that one could see with one's bare eyes and others with wounds that one could not see.

8.2 Breaking Points: Shellshock, treatment and attitudes

Another iconic image of the First World War, alongside the muddy trenches, is the image of a shell-shocked veteran with a thousand-yard stare on his tired face. The condition came as a great surprise for the public and captured its attention to the point that the term 'shellshock' is still a fairly common in the English language when referring to a reaction to an event that takes one completely by surprise and is to some degree traumatizing or at

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[151] Bédarida 1979, 170 - 174
[152] Graves 1929

least quite shocking. Shellshock was in many ways one of the most tragic fates a man fighting in the First World War might suffer, to become in many ways disabled without being physically wounded and as a result often being branded a coward and a malingerer by those who refused to acknowledge the existence of the condition. There were also no guarantees that a man suffering from shellshock would ever truly recover, although many did eventually do so, at least to some degree, and many issues caused by the condition persisted among its victims long past the end of the war.

Shellshock is often considered a form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although it is not classified as such in every study that examines it. This is because although the condition shares several similarities with PTSD, shellshock's symptoms are different enough from the modern definition of PTSD to make possible an argument for the two not being the same. The modern symptoms of PTSD are generally considered to be the following: Re-living the event via nightmares or flashbacks, avoiding places or situations that remind one of the event that triggered the trauma, having negative feelings and thoughts and hyperarousal, the feeling of constantly being on alert and looking for danger. In addition to these symptoms, the people who suffer from PTSD can also exhibit a number of other symptoms or develop additional mental health problems, which under normal circumstances are considered to be distinct mental illnesses. The symptoms include depression, anxiety and sometimes chronic pain without any clear physical injury. People suffering from PTSD are also more likely to develop social and substance abuse problems.[153]

Men suffering from shellshock exhibited many similar symptoms, but they were not limited to those already listed and varied greatly both in type and intensity. Symptoms which are not always listed among PTSD symptoms today but were widely reported during the First World War among men suffering from shellshock include paralysis, sudden blindness or deafness without obvious physical damage, nervous tics and diarrhoea, to name a few.[154]

The oldest references to what could be interpreted as a case of PTSD can be found in as far back as antiquity, with Greek and Roman writers describing warriors suffering from problems that could be seen as a result of traumatic events suffered in battle.[155] However,

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[153] www.ptsd.va.gov
[154] Grogan 2014, 2-3, 5
[155] Grogan 2014, 13

the first scientific mentions of a disorder and its symptoms that could be seen as the precursor of what today is called PTSD can be found in the 17th century. At that time, Swiss physicians described an ailment they called 'nostalgia', which exhibited many of the symptoms associated with PTSD today. [156]

However, it would take more than a century before the medical world would begin to give more serious thought to the matter of how soldiers facing battle were influenced by their experiences. Often those suffering from what we today would call PTSD were treated as cowards or malingerers or otherwise seen as weak for having been broken by the war. Therefore, very little was done to develop treatments for this issue. Those suffering from the disorder were often stigmatized by the rest of society, and some would profess to be ashamed for being treated for what at the mid-twentieth century in America at least was called 'homesickness'.[157] Other names for the various symptoms that some soldiers exhibited after engaging in battle around the same time were Da Costa's Syndrome, named after an American doctor who recorded soldiers in the American Civil War suffering from symptoms like chest pains, palpitations, breathlessness and fatigue, and Soldier's Heart or irritable heart, owing to the physical symptoms often revolving around the chest area. Those doctors sympathetic towards the soldiers suffering from these symptoms were more likely to attribute them to physiological reasons, such as over-exertion, lack of proper food or young age. The less sympathetic ones continued to brand such soldiers as weak or cowardly.[158]

The physiological explanation for Da Costa's Syndrome remained dominant until the start of World War One, perhaps because it offered to those suffering from it a seemingly honourable way of explaining the problems they were suffering. If the causes were physiological, then the character of the soldiers who were suffering from the aforementioned symptoms could hardly be called to question. At worst they were merely physically unfit for service, which too might not have been their fault. After all, someone had inspected their health and cleared them for service when they had first joined the Army; otherwise they would not have been allowed to enlist. Physiological explanations also allowed the British Army to avoid explaining why previously supposedly brave soldiers were suddenly suffering from cowardice; nor did it have to start to attribute these

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[156] www.historyofptsd.wordpress.com
[157] www.historyofptsd.wordpress.com
[158] Grogan 2014, 14

problems to any failing of its own, such as a lack of discipline, poor leadership or lack of morale. A popular explanation for the physical ailments at the time was the weight of the soldiers' equipment.[159]

By blaming the symptoms of Da Costa's syndrome on physical causes, the men suffering from them were also protected from the stigma that was associated with mental illness during the mid-to late 19th century and early 20th century. Various mental illnesses were not well understood yet and were often considered to be dangerous to others and the patients themselves regardless whether or not this was actually the case. It was not unheard of that people would be disowned by their family, should they exhibit any form of mental disorder. The poor suffering from serious enough mental health problems would probably end up in an asylum whereas more affluent people could hide their mentally ill family members in expensive private treatment facilities. Then there was also the fact that many of the symptoms associated with the Da Costa's Syndrome were similar to those associated with Hysteria, which at the time was considered to be very much a women's issue, often seen as relating to the menstrual cycle and childbearing.[160] In the patriarchal society of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, it must have been considered shameful for any man to be suffering from a mental issue so associated with the opposite sex. Therefore, it was no wonder that, come the First World War and the growing number of men suffering from symptoms like those of Da Costa's Syndrome, the first instinct of the Army and its doctors, along with the civilian medical community, was to look for a cause in the physiological rather than in the psychological.

The type of warfare waged during the First World War on the Western Front was unlike anything that had been seen before. After a brief period of relative mobility during 1914, the so-called race to the sea and the German offensives that nearly saw the fall of Paris, the war froze up and developed into trench warfare. This type of warfare placed the soldiers in confined spaces where death could come suddenly and without warning (or without giving them a chance to fight it). Whether or not one survived the trenches was more up to chance than to anything else. One might hope to avoid enemy snipers by being careful and not exposing oneself unnecessarily, but beyond that there was no fighting the other common causes of death. If an artillery shell fell nearby and burst, it was up to chance whether or not one lived to tell the tale.

[159] Grogan 2014, 17
[160] Grogan 2014, 15 - 17

It was indeed the modern artillery and its destructive power that was first thought to be the cause of shell shock. The cause for the condition was at first attributed to things like some kind of poisoning, concussion, or the blast of a shell creating a vacuum in the victim's head and damaging the brain.[161] Even the possibility of microscopic pieces of shrapnel penetrating the skull and damaging the brain without leaving any external damage was considered as a potential cause of shell shock by some.[162] Whatever the physiological cause was believed to be by the person diagnosing the case, it was for the longest time attributed to a shell bursting near the victim.[163] The problem with this explanation arose when soldiers who most certainly had not been exposed to an exploding shell recently or at all exhibited symptoms of shell shock and claimed they were unable to continue fighting. Since the Army for the most part refused to admit, at least publicly, that a psychological reason might cause a soldier to become permanently incapacitated, many of these soldiers were treated as cowards and malingerers.[164] At the same time, starting in early 1915, the Army did recognize shell shock as a potential threat to its manpower and took steps to counter it. However, the steps taken were often insufficient and designed under the assumption that the soldiers would return to battle quickly.[165] For most regular soldiers, fortunate enough to actually receive treatment for shell shock, the treatment was very brief, after which they were generally sent back to the front lines. The army considered these treatments a success since around 65% of the men treated ultimately returned to the fighting.[166]

Gradually towards the end of the war, the explosion of a shell came to be considered as the trigger of a case of shell shock and not the actual cause of it. Rather the cause was the immense stress that was placed upon the men fighting in the trenches. However, despite this realization, those that were broken under this strain continued being considered weak in some way, as so many others had come back from the war almost unaffected or with considerably lesser changes to their psyche. Therefore, the shame that had already been attributed to the condition during the war persisted into peacetime.[167]

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[161] Grogan 2014, 22
[162] Leese 2014, 1
[163] Grogan 2014, 3
[164] Leese 2014, 32 - 47
[165] Leese 2014, 60 - 62
[166] www.historyofptsd.wordpress.com
[167] www.historyofptsd.wordpress.com, Leese 2014, 27

The officers were at the same time more and less fortunate than the men serving under their command. They were more fortunate in the sense that their shell shock cases were often given more credence than those of their subordinates and treated as legitimate mental health problems, with symptoms often described as less stigmatizing forms of mental illness. Contrast this with the other ranks that often had trouble getting diagnosed with shell shock at all and even when they were diagnosed as having the said condition would have their symptoms described less sympathetically. Where officers would get classified as neurasthenic and send home to recover in a calm environment, a regular soldier was more likely to be classified as hysterical and sent to a hospital that was ill-prepared to treat shell shocked patients.[168]

The officers in the front lines were less fortunate than the soldiers in the sense that they were more susceptible to shell shock, statistically speaking at least.[169] However, whether this was merely a result of the fact that an officer could get diagnosed more easily than the men serving in the other ranks I cannot say with any certainty, although it is certainly possible and worth considering as an explanation for the disproportionate statistic of officers suffering from shell shock. There is, of course, the possibility that the stress involved in an officer’s work was greater than that of an average soldier. As an officer of the British Army was expected to lead by example, showing any form of fear or hesitation when it came to doing one’s duty was heavily frowned upon and looked down upon by one’s peers. Therefore, an officer feeling afraid would have to bottle up his feelings and try to carry on as if he were completely fine. At the same time, officers were expected to look after the men under their command in an environment where doing so was often quite challenging, if not altogether impossible. Their duties saw them getting very little sleep, but they were expected to remain awake while on duty. All this while a single errant German shell could land near them at any moment and end their life.

The officers could often be diagnosed with shellshock, although the term ‘battle fatigue’ was also often used, probably in an effort to lend more credence to the officer’s condition. They could also more easily than rank-and-file soldiers receive rest at home or at a specialized treatment facility, which was more prepared to receive patients suffering from shellshock and had put more effort into the treatment than an army hospital would have. It might be said that the difference in the treatment was that the officers were usually treated

[168] Grogan 2014, 23 - 24
[169] Leese 2014, 43, Six Weeks, 291 - 293

to cure the condition while the other ranks were treated to get rid of the symptoms. Of course, this is a simplification, and the actual situation was considerably more nuanced. However, the British Army was throughout the war lukewarm at best towards the idea of treating shellshock as an actual mental condition, which affected the care that was afforded to those listed as suffering from it.[170]

Being taken away from the front on account of suffering from a case of shellshock was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the affected soldiers were about to get out of the place in which they no longer could bear to be, but at the same time they were leaving their fellow soldiers behind without a clear physical injury. The relief created by being allowed to leave the front was thus mixed with guilt and probably a good amount of self-doubt. As shellshock was not yet fully agreed upon or completely respected as a mental health issue, it is not inconceivable that the men suffering from it doubted their own courage and character when confronted with the symptoms rather than recognizing them as a mental health issue over which they had no control.

Once bound for treatment, the shell-shocked officers had a number of options as to where they might end up. In the first years of the war, there had been no clear approach to combat the then completely unrecognized condition, and as a result the treatment centres were haphazardly assembled in a hasty response to the influx of people suffering from ‘speech and limb paralysis’ arriving from the front. However, soon specialist and separate treatment centres for officers were created across the United Kingdom, from England all the way up to Scotland. [171]

Among the British medical community, two general approaches towards treating those suffering from shell shock existed, roughly categorizable as disciplinary and analytical. The disciplinary approach was generally reserved for enlisted ranks and NCOs. This approach was built around strict discipline, and the treatment centres run under its guidance were generally run as military facilities. The treatments devised under the disciplinary approach were often physical in nature and administered with the assumption that the patient would soon return to the frontlines and active service. Among the treatment methods were electrical shocks, shouted commands and isolation.[172]

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[170] Leese 2014, 32 – 47, 53 - 57
[171] Leese 2014, 68-69
[172] Leese 2014, 75-74

The analytical approach was based more on the psychoanalytical theory of psychology that had been introduced to Britain before the war. The treatment methods included such techniques as hypnotherapy and dream analysis as well as other methods that were in line with the psychoanalytical approach. The analytical approach to treating shell shock generally attributed the cause of the mental issues from which the patients were suffering not to repressed sexuality or repressed early childhood memories but to the repressed emotions that developed in the battlefield. Fear in particular had to be repressed and as such was one of the main causes of shell shock, according to the proponents of the analytical approach, at least when they were willing to acknowledge the existence of shell shock.[173]

The officers sent home for treatment were generally subjected to treatment that was more in line with the analytical approach although there was hardly a uniform treatment that was agreed upon. In some of the treatment centres reserved solely for officers, the treatment might be more akin to leisurely activity than actual treatment. One treatment facility utilized such methods for treatment as photography, model yacht building and gardening. The idea behind these activities was to re-establish the officers' confidence through work and hobbies. Alongside them physical therapy, musical and theatrical entertainment and a general therapeutic atmosphere were utilized to help the patients to recover. However, while officers on average were allowed more time to recover at these facilities than regular soldiers, they too were expected to return to service as soon as possible, and many of the officers' treatment centres were under constant pressure from the Army to handle any cases as quickly as possible. Sometimes the staff might also be subjected to requests from the officers themselves to be allowed to return back to active duty despite them not being yet fully recovered, according to the medical opinion.[174]

Shell shock is a hard subject to research if one's scope is aimed at the personal level. Letters and diaries rarely reveal whether or not a person was suffering from shellshock, at least not in an easily diagnosable way. There might be a mention or two by the writer about feeling jittery or otherwise 'useless', but those were not obvious signs of shell shock. They might be but it is completely reasonable to assume that a person who had been subjected to frontline conditions might be feeling tired and continuously on alert without necessary suffering from shell shock. During my research, only one passage among the

[173] Leese 2014, 81-84
[174] Leese 2014, 114 - 115

source material struck me as something that comes close to being a symptom of a man suffering from shell shock. However, since he otherwise does not mention any feelings or issues that would suggest that he was suffering from shell shock, I cannot be completely certain, nor will I claim that the following is necessarily an example of a nightmare brought about by a shell-shocked mind.

> *Last night I dreamt that Henry Felding and I were ina (sic) post made of poles and sacking in a line of similar Hun posts. Somehow you could not shoot through them although they were only made of sacking. Not knowing how to eject us, the Huns sent some ladies to come and talk to us! who (sic), while carrying on an interesting conversation, took the sacking off the poles of the post. We saw the danger too late, and, rudely ignoring our fair callers, who retreated, began to put the sacking up again. The two neighbouring Hun posts were only five yards away on each side but we remembered to our joy that a kind of truce arrangement existed and the Hun did not shoot. Then the Huns began to throw bombs over. We searched our post and found to our dismay that we hadn't a single bomb or any amm. at all in it. We decided to hang on rather than evacuate the place, which thought occurred to us for a moment. Eventually we managed to get an artillery barrage from our guns on each side of the post. We lay on the ground, vainly longing for a Mills bomb to silence the Huns, when I woke up.*[175]

The writer of this passage, Lieutenant St. Leger, was a South-African man, though English by birth, who had been involved in the war from the very beginning, first taking part in the British campaign in German South-West Africa as an enlisted soldier and a NCO. After the campaign there was over, he travelled to England where he obtained a commission in the Coldstream Guards. Therefore, by the time of writing this passage, it could be said that he had served in two wars: the one in Africa and the one he was fighting in at the time of writing.[176]

As mentioned, the passage above is not necessarily a sign of a man suffering from shell shock. It might as easily be just a strange dream borrowing from the dreamer's everyday life and brought about by regular stress. And considering that St. Leger never mentions being sent away from the front to receive treatment for shell shock or something similar, nor are there any large enough holes in his diaries for this to have been the case, he either

[175] IWM: W.B St. Leger, 17.2.1917

[176] IWM: W.B St. Leger, Foreword of Part II of transcribed Private Diary

suffered from a very mild case of the condition, did not suffer from it at all or suffered but went undiagnosed.

The stress that fighting the war placed on the men was tremendous in scope and officers suffered from the added responsibilities of their rank. Many might have lost their patriotic spirit over time in the trenches, but sources of strength could still be found from bonds one made with the men he was serving with. However, no matter how strong one's will to fight was or how steady one might appear they might still fall prey to the mental damages of the war. The wounds that the war could inflict on one's psyche could be almost as devastating to the sufferer as a physical wound but harder to bear as there was no obvious sign of trauma that could explain their troubles. Those suffering from shellshock also had to fend off the stigma of cowardice that was all too easily associated with the condition and with the limited treatment options at the time, the issues cause by it could prevail with minimal treatment to the civilian life after the war.

9.0 Into Battle

Battle took up only a very small portion of time during the First World War, and this work is primarily interested in the experience of the war and the conditions in the trenches. However, taking part in a battle was often a life-changing experience and regularly fatally so. Therefore it deserves some more attention than a mere few paragraphs (in another chapter), not least because it was also often the thing the men fighting the war spent their time preparing for; either they prepared to go over the top to attack the enemy and to bring the battle to them or else they prepared for the enemy to bring the battle to them. In this section I will briefly endeavour to examine how the battles of the First World War might have been seen and experienced by the officers who fought in them. I shall do so in relatively broad terms, without venturing too deeply into the specifics of individual battles.

What exactly then is a battle? That is something I believe should be examined in some depth before venturing further into the subject of the British officers in battle during the First World War. The term ‘battle’ is interwoven with ‘combat’ and ‘fighting’ but distinct of the two, in that the latter two may occur without the first or without each other but the first cannot truly occur without the latter two. Skirmishes in the no-man’s land and raiding enemy trenches certainly involved combat but one would not call them battles due to their limited scale and scope. Fighting is more of an abstract or generalized term. One fights a war and one fights a battle. Therefore, fighting is spread quite far and wide and engulfs many of the things done during a war as long as the objective of these actions is the defeat of the enemy. Not everything about fighting includes combat; as much as firing at an enemy or barraging them with artillery is fighting, so too is preparing one’s positions or carrying wounded soldiers to the back of the lines. An argument could be made, quite easily in fact, that working in a factory during a war also constitutes fighting, alongside many other activities at the Homefront.

Battle, on the other hand, was spread over a geographically wider area than skirmishes or raids but still had certain restraints as to how large of an area it covered. The whole of the Western Front was never in battle at the same time, although there could be several battles raging across it simultaneously. A battle also cannot happen without combat and fighting, at least not in the original sense of the word. Battles tend to be fairly planned affairs, with one or both sides of the battle preparing for it in one way or another, whereas combat can occur quite spontaneously and fighting can be seen as more of a process than a single

instance of violence. Battles could also drag over several days by the time of the First World War. In his book *The Face of Battle*, John Keegan remarks that ‘a battle must obey the dramatic unities of time, place and action’, which to me is a quite fair assessment.[177] Battles occur when one side of the conflict takes action at a certain place, or area as the case might be for more modern conflicts, at a certain time. The battle continues until the objective is achieved by one side and until the other side either withdraws from its position or is forced to surrender. Thus, a battle is indeed restricted by location and time and requires someone to take action.

For the men in the trenches, battles were not uncommon but neither were they particularly common events. The impression one gets from reading the letters and diaries of the officers of the First World War is that the battles were quite rare on the whole, although they were often prepared for before they actually took place. In letters, the battles do not often get a very detailed description. This might be a result of several things, such as wartime censorship, available space or merely the writers not wishing to talk about the battles they had been in detail in a letter or at all. However, I should at this point note that it is possible that the sources at my disposal have by mere chance seemed to conform to this image. After all, considering the number of letters that must have been written but that I have not managed to examine, it is possible that the truth is entirely different. Memoirs, on the other hand, often elaborate on at least a few battles at a length usually not found in letters, although they too tend to be just a little unclear. The most likely explanation for this certain vagueness is the time between the event taking place and the memoir being written.

One of the more detailed descriptions of a battle’s course I have had at my disposal for this research can be found in the personal diaries of Lieutenant St. Leger. The second part of the transcribed version of his wartime diaries has very detailed description of an attack in which he took part on the 25th of September 1916. The description itself is too long to quote here in its entirety, though it encompasses his actions for the whole day in great detail. Beyond that it is quite a mechanical description; over six pages St. Leger merely explains what he did during the day and why he did it. There is no mention of his emotions

[177] Keegan 1976, 16

at the time or thoughts on his job in the battle. He merely describes what he did, nothing more.[178]

An interesting contrast for a report such as St. Leger's can be found in Robert Graves' memoirs. Graves recounts his participation in a number of battles, among which is the First Battle of Somme in 1916. The description of this battle is cut somewhat short as Graves was wounded by a German shell exploding near him and sent off to recover, first to a hospital behind the lines and then to England.[179] There is another description of an attack on a German position on the book's pages that is considerably longer and more detailed than the one Graves gives of the Somme, but I do not know which battle it was nor exactly when it took place, save that it was on the 25th of some month, most likely August as it is the most recent month mentioned by Graves, in 1915.[180] Both of these descriptions are in sharp contrast to St. Leger's quite dry and mechanical style as they are far more narrative in nature. Of course, that is to be expected from memoirs written by a professional writer long after the fact when compared to a diary written soon after the events by someone who might not have been as literarily talented as Robert Graves.

Going to a battle probably placed a distinct kind of stress on an officer. Being in the trenches consisted mainly of waiting for things to happen and keeping one's head down. Going over the top, as attacking enemy positions was called, required one to go against the instincts of trench warfare. One had to climb over the side and parapet of the trench and expose oneself completely to the enemy fire in broad daylight, hoping that the support provided by one's artillery and machine gun teams would be enough to keep the enemy from shooting one immediately. After that initial part was over, one would have to proceed over the No Man's Land, which might not be an easy thing to do, filled as it was with all kinds of obstacles, some purposefully made, like lines of razor wire spread in front of the trenches, and some born from the artillery bombardment, like craters and mud-filled fields where nothing grew.

The lieutenants and subalterns leading their platoons were generally expected to be the first ones to go over and lead the assault from the front. As such it would not do for them to hesitate when the time came to begin an attack, as it was their job to get the men in the right state for the upcoming battle. If an officer showed too many signs of fear, hesitation

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[178] IWM: W. B St. Leger, 25.9.1916
[179] Graves 1929, 239 - 255
[180] Graves 1929, 141 - 165

or nervousness, that feeling could spread among the men and hurt the unit's ability to operate properly in the coming battle. The officers were therefore constantly subjected to very high expectations when it came to controlling their emotions, which must have been quite taxing for their mental health.[181]

A Brigadier in the British Army remarked once that an officer needed a three second head start over the men so he could say 'come on' instead of 'go on'.[182] If there was any truth to this saying, it would then mean that there was a short period of time when the officers were the only target and easy pickings for enemies not sufficiently suppressed by artillery or machine gun fire. The enemy soldiers across the No-Man's Land considered officers to be a priority target and would often concentrate on killing them first if given the chance. The death of a commanding officer can be devastating for any military unit, but for the British companies and platoons of the early First World War it could be almost paralyzing.

The structure of a British platoon was very much centred around the officers. It was designed to be tightly under the control of a subaltern. As such, the NCOs were not generally expected to show initiative in the field as their job was ensuring that the officer's orders were followed and keeping the men in line. Therefore, if the officers of the company were to die, which was a realistic threat during the War, the whole unit could be rendered incapable of functioning as intended.[183]

The exposedness of an officer leading his platoon or company into an attack towards the enemy trenches was one of the most important reasons why officers had a higher mortality rate than the other ranks, statistically speaking. The army tried to remedy this later by changing the platoon structure to be more flexible and less reliant on the officer leading from the front and by insisting that officers dress up similarly to the other ranks when going to battle. Both of these reforms probably contributed to keeping the officers alive, although the officers still continued to have a higher chance of death when compared with the other ranks.[184]

Despite the danger that was inherent to taking part in a battle, being left out of it was widely resented by the officers. A portion of any battalion was generally left behind so that the unit could be built back up around it in the event that the losses suffered in the battle

[181] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 182 - 230
[182] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 201
[183] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 201 - 202
[184] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 182 - 230

were catastrophic. This reserve was an important system for preserving some of the experience the unit had accumulated over the battles and (often) being assigned to it meant that one's chances of survival increased significantly. However, it is likely that the culture in which the young officers had been brought up and the mentality fostered by their training and the culture of the military made them eager not to be left out from an oncoming battle. Additionally, the selection method for the Left Out Of Battle (LOOB) reserve was up to the commanding officer of the battalion, so being selected to be part of it must have felt like a vote of no-confidence for the officers in question.[185]

Anthony Eden was left in the LOOB reserve at the Somme and had the following to say about it later:

> *The following afternoon our company commander sent for me and told me that new order had just come down from division limiting the number of officers and N.C.O.s we were to take into action. As a consequence, each company had to leave behind two officers and a senior sergeant as well as a percentage of junior N.C.O.s. In our last weeks at Plugstreet and since, one or two junior officers had joined us and I imagined that these would be left out of the battle. So I asked casually who was to stay behind. He said, 'You, Boy,' and mentioned another comparatively senior officer. I was outraged and exclaimed that he could not possibly leave me behind. I had been with the battalion since its early days, I had helped to recruit my platoon, I could not desert them in their first major action.*
>
> *Joe Pitt said he knew this would be my reaction, but the decision was not his. Which officers to take and which to leave behind had been carefully considered decision of the colonel's in conclave with Foljambe and the adjutant. I was not appeased and asked to see the colonel.*

The colonel kept to his decision and Eden was left in the LOOB when it came the time to take the battalion to battle.[186] This segment by Eden shows one of the additional reasons an officer might not like the idea of being left out of the battle despite it almost ensuring his survival for the time being; not wishing to desert his unit during their time of need. This concern probably included both the desire to look after one's own men in the battle to come, after all, the officers had been trained to lead them in the somewhat paternalistic

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[185] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 186 - 187
[186] Eden, p. 95 via Lewis-Stempel 2010, 186 - 187

style of the British Army -- and the desire to not be seen as a coward. An officer that gained a reputation for cowardice was in trouble with his men and fellow officers and something like being left behind, even against his own wishes, might be enough to cause some cracks in an officer's reputation.

Battles usually took plenty of preparations, the duration of which depended much on the scale and importance of the battle to come. A battle of relatively little importance could perhaps take only days to prepare but for large, important operations intended to break the enemy's lines no amount of preparation was enough. Most of these preparations would take place out of the trenches, in the back lines where the men and officers would practise assaults at mock-up trenches, study maps, inspect reconnaissance reports and so forth.[187] Therefore an important battle, known as a 'push' among other names by the contemporary British soldiers, would loom in the not so distant future, slowly drawing nearer. It is hard to say whether or not knowing that a battle was close was worse or better, as one can find evidence to support either argument; on the one hand, one was not surprised to leave the trench and had some semblance of what he was expected to accomplish with his platoon. Then again, one had a very high chance of dying in an assault on the enemy positions, and it was therefore possible that the coming battle might weigh on one's nerves like an impending doom. After all there was very little one could do to avoid going to battle without being looked down by one's fellow officers.

Battles might have taken a relatively small time out of the years that the men fighting spent in the war but they often had profound effect on their participants. Casualties during battles were as a rule higher than at other times and required one to keep going despite possible seeing a comrade falling near them. All the while the enemy was firing upon at the attacking side, who were vulnerable in the open field. After a battle the things would often return to the normal order of things, to the regular monotony of trench life. However, the men did not spend the entire war in the trenches.

[187] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 185 - 186

10.0 Out of the trenches: rest and leave

Although it might be possible to imagine that the men that fought in the First World War spent most of their time in the trenches, this was hardly the case. True, they spent much of their time in the fighting in the trenches, but they also spent a considerable amount of time out of them during the war. The various units rotated between trench duty and staying behind the lines as part of the reserves. It was during this latter time that most of the men received their chance for rest and relaxation, although the unit could still generally be called back to the trenches at a moment's notice if the situation called for reinforcements. This usually did not sit too well with the men, especially if they had just been relieved and sent to the reserves.

Although being behind the friendly lines did not mean that the men were out of duty, it was comparatively lighter duty than that in the trenches. It was also considerably safer, as enemy artillery fire was less often directed at or even capable of reaching the reserves than they were the trench lines. As a result, the reserves allowed a level of relaxation that was unavailable at the frontlines, barring perhaps the most silent of front sectors with unofficial truce arrangements. There was also more sleep to be had in the reserves since fewer men were needed for guard duty and the chances of being woken up by enemy activity were considerably smaller than at the frontlines.

Another benefit was the possibility for evening leave to a nearby town. Although the numbers of men allowed to be away from the camp or base might have been limited, the fact that it was often possible to visit a civilian town and take part in entertainment not available or allowed in a military environment, such as drinking or gambling, was probably a major upside to being out of the trenches. There might be some limitations on how many men were allowed to be away from the camp at any given time, probably for reasons of readiness. For example, only a certain percentage of officers might be allowed to be on evening leave while the rest had to remain in the camp or base. Generally, however, officers had an easier time acquiring a permission to visit a nearby town or city than the other ranks.[188]

The accommodation in the reserves tended to be better than in the trenches too. The other ranks would generally be billeted in larger buildings that could accommodate them as

[188] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 249

groups if at all possible. In the countryside of France or Flanders this usually meant stables or storehouses, which, while hardly luxurious, were almost certainly an improvement over the often cold and wet trenches. Officers would generally be billeted among the civilian population, which generally meant they had access to an amount of privacy not available to the other ranks as well as other luxuries to which their subordinates might not have had access. It seems that most of the time the officers were received quite warmly by their French (and Belgian) hosts, although since I only have the observations of the writers themselves to go on I cannot say this with absolute confidence. However, officers were desirable guests, as they were worth five francs a night for the family providing the accommodation. The other ranks, too, could be billeted among civilians, but they were behind officers in importance when searching for accommodation.[189] As the war progressed, however, the billets were gradually moved away from civilians to purpose-built camps closer to the front, which somewhat decreased the safety and comfort of the reserve. Being closer to the front meant that the enemy guns could better reach them and being moved away from civilian settlements meant that the form of accommodation was generally a tent, a far cry from a warm house.[190]

Although being in the reserves was not as dangerous or straining as being in the trenches, it was by no means just free time for the soldiers. There might have been more free time available but there were still plenty of duties to keep them occupied during days. There was much work to do, and when there was no work, there was usually an exercise, an inspection or a parade to fill in the schedule. Guy Chapman described time in the reserves in his book *A Passionate Prodigality* as follows

> *Reserve did not spell rest. We were overwhelmed with working parties. One day was spent in the support lines at Hannescamps or Bienvillers, eight hours' digging, ten miles marching; the next on a strong-point four miles westward. Once when through a mistake in orders the battalion paraded at 5.30 instead of 6.30 a.m., the four companies fixed themselves beneath the adjutant's window, and for an hour by the clock sang him Michigan. In the intervals there were the inevitable kit inspections (these always afflicted me with sense of trespass on the liberty of the individual) foot*

[189] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 233
[190] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 237

inspections, gas-mask inspections, guards, minor fatigues – 'subaltern and 40 o.r. to unload lorries at railhead.' [191]

The billets and reserve came with one additional chance which for many a man returning from the front must have been quite important; the chance to thoroughly clean oneself of the dirt and filth of the trenches, not to mention getting rid of all the lice in the process. For officers this might have been even more important than to the other ranks, considering their backgrounds. As the upper parts of the Edwardian society were unaccustomed to being perpetually dirty and full of lice, the chance to rid oneself of them, even for a while, and to wear clean clothes must have been something of a restorative experience that allowed them to feel a bit more like the person they had been before the war.[192] In an almost direct continuation to the previous passage I have quoted from him, Guy Chapman provides a quick description of the divisional baths at Pas.[193]

At Pas, too, were the Divisional baths; once a week we were sent in fatigue dress to the brasserie, where men pranced in enormous vats and the officers lowered themselves cautiously into narrow tanks filled with a boiling fluid of suspicious colouring.

Although Chapman's description seems to hint at some personal dislike towards the baths provided by the Army, many other officers were quite thankful of the chance to clean themselves. Chapman's description of the men being made to bathe in communal vats while the officers received their own, private baths seems to have been the way things were organized at the Army's bathhouses.[194]

When there was free time available in the reserves, the ways of passing it largely overlapped with pastimes available in the trenches. Reading and writing were very common ways of killing time in reserve, and it tended to be easier to do both there than at the front line. For one, even if there was not much free time available, what little one might have was probably more concentrated than in the trenches and during it one did not have to fear it suddenly ending, which made it possible to concentrate properly on reading or writing.[195]

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[191] Chapman 1965, 46
[192] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 238 -239
[193] Likely Pas-de-Calais but I have not been able to fully confirm this.
[194] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 238-239
[195] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 231 - 270

Much of the free time the officers had was spent in the Company or Battalion mess with their fellow officers. Which system was in use depended largely on how close to each other the various parts of the battalion were geographically and how intently the commanding officer of the battalion wished to have a battalion mess. Many of the colonels preferred to have their officers in a battalion mess, as it allowed them a chance to keep an eye on their behaviour and appearance. Younger officers on the other hand often might have preferred a Company mess, as they were less monitored and filled only with people they knew well. Of course, company messes could be quite disheartening after a costly battle, vulnerable as they were to depletion.[196]

However, no matter which type of mess was in use, much of the social life of the officers revolved around it during their time in the reserves. Their meals there were often of a better quality than those of other ranks, though they also paid more for them. Drinks were more easily available there, and any chance to throw a party was generally seized. Award ceremonies for various medals were the most common excuse, but probably national holidays or other significant dates like birthdays and alike would suffice if no other excuse could be found.[197] Other sources of entertainment for the soldiers stationed in the reserves were plays and concerts they themselves might set up.

So, despite its relative comfortability when compared to the trenches, the most important chance for relaxation and rest was not the reserve but the leave that lasted longer than a few hours in the evening and which could be cancelled at a moment's notice. I cannot say this for certain as I have not found any official record to confirm my suspicion, but I am assuming that there were two kinds of leave available; one which did not permit the recipient to leave the country and one that allowed him to travel to Britain, which was often a visit to home if they originated from there. However, it might be the case that it was the duration of the leave which dictated whether or not the person would be allowed to travel out of the country and not any official order that said that the leave was to be spent in a certain geographical location.

An upcoming leave was always an enormously anticipated event which often shows up in letters and seems to lift the writer's spirit. The leave being postponed or cancelled then, for any reason, seems to have been quite a bitter experience. One of the most disliked reasons

[196] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 240 - 243
[197] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 242 - 243

was losing one's leave because of army bureaucracy or a change in regimental custom. After all, leave being cancelled because of something the enemy did was understandable; the Army had to respond and needed as many men in their posts as possible. However, having one's leave denied because of bureaucracy or regimental customs was something that was caused by the inflexibility of one's own side and therefore must have been quite hard to accept, especially if one felt like one had already been promised leave, only to have it taken away because of a reason that did not seem important or a valid to someone in the trenches. As an example, James Butlin, a subaltern in a regiment he refers to as 'Yorks', was transferred to the 1st Dorset Regiment, as he was only temporally attached to the Yorks. As a result, his leave went from being three weeks or less away to being at least two months away. He does not appear to have been too pleased about this development, although the fact that he had been quite well settled into the Yorks was also a factor. In his letters, he seems to detest the fact that the way he was used to doing things was not acceptable in the Dorset Regiment.[198]

Technically speaking, the officers received leave on a rota system, in which their name went up a list until it was time for their leave. However, this rotation was fairly easily disrupted by operations and transfers. On average, though, an officer could look forward to having home leave every six to eight months. Members of the other ranks were lucky if they were given leave every fourteen months.[199]

Although leave was quite important for the men fighting in the First World War, for officers and other ranks alike, it cannot be said that there was any uniform way to spend it. It is also one of the subject matters that are relatively hard to research through letters, as the persons who were receiving the letters were often those the writers had seen during their previous leave, which meant that the letters would make only very brief references to the time on the leave. When leave is mentioned in either diaries or letters, the text is directed towards a reader who was not there when the events in the text took place, and in the case of a diary it might also be meant as a personal aid for remembering what happened. Memoirs, like diaries, are more likely to offer more detailed descriptions of leave times, as they were written precisely for people that were not there when the things described on their pages occurred. Therefore, details of a leave are usually more prominent in diaries and memoirs, although in some cases the writer may have considered the events

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[198] IWM: J.H Butlin 2.9.2925

[199] Lewis-Stempel 2010, 263-264

taking place during the leave to be either inconsequential or irrelevant for what he wished to write about. Another reason a writer might have omitted the details of a leave may be that what happened during the leave was too personal in nature to divulge in a work that might be read by someone else.

There was not, of course, a uniform way to spend one's leave among the soldiers of the First World War. Each man would use it as they pleased, and their choices were based on a multitude of factors, such as age, wealth, social standing, family, education, personality and so on. The length of the leave affected one's choices too. For example, if travel to home would take up the majority of one's leave, one might not be as inclined to do so as if the travel only took up a fraction of the leave. However, even if there was no uniform way to spend a leave, some common threads existed that were often shared between individuals.

Friends and family were often at the top of the priority list for the officers on leave to Britain. If at all possible, many would make their way to see them and some, such as Lieutenant Butlin whom I already mentioned in this chapter, spent several letters trying to arrange his upcoming leave by making sure that his friend in England was ready to meet him as soon as Butlin's leave would be granted, even if the leave in question was not even particularly immediate.

Another important aspect of leave was entertainment, although this meant different things for different people. Where some might spend the leave in an urban environment and among society circles, others might search their fun in the countryside. After all, many of the officers were from the upper segments of society, and hunting was not at all uncommon hobby for many of them. To some the countryside offered simply a better place to relax. Robert Graves, for example, spent some of his leave walking in the hills somewhere near Harlech, Wales. On his return to France an older regular officer inquired how he had enjoyed his leave, leading to the following exchange:

When I got back to France, 'The Actor', a regular officer in 'A' Company, asked me:
'Had a good time on leave?'
'Yes''
Go to many dances?'
'Not one.'
'What shows did you go to?'

'I didn't go to any shows.'

'Hunt?'

'No'.

'Sleep with any nice girls?'

'No, I didn't. Sorry to disappoint you.'

'What the hell did *you do, then?'*

'Oh, I Just walked about some hills'.

'Good God.' he said, 'chaps like you don't deserve leave.'[200]

This exchange might be an indicative of some expectations of what young officers might do during their leave, as it certainly conveys the other officer's dismay at Graves' choice of how to spend his leave. I certainly suspect that choosing to spend one's leave walking around the hills of Wales was not usual among the officers on leave from the trenches of the Western Front. Most of these officers were young men and as such likely intended to spend their leave like young men when they had it.

[200] Graves 1929, 142 - 143

11.0 Conclusion

In 1914 thousands of young men set forth to seek commissions in the British Army, many even from beyond the British Isles proper. Most of them had grown up as members of the more well-off classes of British society and were guided in their choice to join up with the expectations both their upbringing and society had placed on them as young gentlemen. They were driven to join the Army for a variety of reasons of which peer pressure and patriotism were but a few. Many of those that managed to secure a commission with the British Army would then go to experience the Great War alongside the regular soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front.

They shared many of the hardships of the war equally with their men. Weather and disease did not discriminate based on class, and the enemy snipers were always more than happy to specifically target the officers. Good breeding was no guarantee of ability to resist the strains that the war placed upon the officer’s psyche, and their duties subjected them to even more mental stress than a regular soldier. Their ranks and personal resources offered them some respite not available to the lower ranks but there was little they could do to drastically improve their living conditions in the trenches.

Through all the dangers and miseries of the trenches the junior officers were expected to set an example for their men: they were expected to remain calm and reassuring when German guns hammered the dug-out to help their men avoid panicking, to lead their men into patrols and assault under great personal risk and to hide any personal doubts or fears they might have to keep up their men’s morale and discipline. This suppression of personal feelings might have been a significant contributing factor in the higher than average rate of shellshock among the British junior officers when compared to other ranks, proportionally speaking of course. But while the officers in the trenches might have been more likely to be affected by shellshock, they were also quite likely to receive better treatment for it.

The hardships of the war could erode one’s motivation gradually over time but still most of the officers found things from which to find the strength to carry on. There were as many reasons to keep fighting as there were individual men but often unit cohesion was a powerful force in keeping up the morale.

When the peace came in 1918, a junior officer that had survived in the trenches from the onset of the war in late 1914 to the very end was a rare breed. Most had either fallen in the

line of duty, given the fact that the officer corps suffered disproportionate casualties compared with other sections of the British Army, or had been taken out of the fight by physical or mental wounds which had not, or often could not, be healed before the end of the war. Those that had survived through the war had endured the many horrors the battlefields and trenches of the Western Front had to offer, serving alongside the men they led through it all.

While the peace certainly came as a relief for most, the peace terms imposed on the Central Powers also stirred additional feelings among the officers who had fought for their country. There were those to whom the peace was a disappointment, although their reasons varied from one extreme to the other. There were those disappointed that the Germany was not subjected to harsher peace terms; there was to be no military occupation, and Germany's territorial losses were ultimately relatively small, at least in Europe. The peace did not even come as the result of a crushing victory over the German Army. At the other end of the spectrum were those who felt that the peace terms were too harsh and designed to humiliate the German people in an unnecessarily heavy-handed way.

However, no matter what their feelings about the peace and its term might have been, junior officers would now begin the process of returning home, alongside the other ranks. They returned with the experiences that fighting in the Great War had given them, and none returned home from the front the same man as they had left. The changes might have varied greatly between individuals, but it is quite hard to imagine that any of the people who participated in the fighting in the trenches could have climbed out of them without having changed in some way or another as a person.

They had spent much of the past four years several feet below the ground, dug in the trenches and in regular mortal danger. Each time they had been expected to climb out of their trenches to assault the enemy positions, they had done so knowing that they might be the first to fall; after all, the officers were expected to lead their men over the top and into the battle. They had lived through multiple shellings and night-time patrols across the no-man's land, both stressful situations in their own ways.

The First World War did not only affect the men personally, in a way it also killed the old world where aristocrats and monarchs held power for good. The old monarchies of Europe, the ones where the ruler still held any real power, that had existed before the war were swept away and disintegrated. In their place several smaller states emerged, many of which

did not have a monarch as a head of state. Great Britain, as one of the victors of the war, was not subjected to such a fate, although it had to give up most of Ireland soon after the war. However, her society was affected with the post-war trend towards democracy quite strongly.

In 1918 Parliament had passed an act which extended the right to vote to all men over the age of 21, although those serving in the army during the First World war were allowed to vote if they had turned 19 in the service. The bill abolished most of the property requirements for voting and also enfranchised a significant number of women, although their age limit for voting was 30 rather than 21.

The generation that fought in the trenches of France and Flanders during the First World War would go on to produce a number of influential people. Many of these influential people had served as junior officers during the war, which no doubt would go on to influence their political views. A few examples were the future prime ministers of the United Kingdom Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan. One should think that having lived through world wars would have had a great effect on people like them.

Studying the junior British officers of the First World War opened up a number of interesting subjects which I found intriguing but could not venture into because of time constraints, lack of material or the subject falling outside of the focus of this study. The two most relevant to the subject of this study are comparing the experiences of regular soldiers and those of officers on a larger and longer scale than I have done in this study very briefly when relevant. In fact, performing such a study was my original plan for my graduate thesis but a lack of material kept me from engaging with it. However, after this study I believe that with more time and better understanding of where to look, more material could be found without difficulty, enabling such a study. A study like that would naturally require a deeper look into the society of the time as well as an examination of the differences between rural and urban populations.

The second potential subject for further study which relates to the subject of this work quite closely would be the officers' readjustment to peace and civilian life. I did not examine the subject further than what little could be found while researching the shell shock portion of this thesis, but the subject could offer many potential avenues of research that are quite interesting. The war was, after all, a tremendously transformative experience for the men that lived through its horrors, and it is unlikely that even those men that

returned uninjured physically did so unchanged and unaffected by their experiences. One could study how the returning officers readjusted to the lack of discipline and constant danger or how their personal relationships developed after their return.

Their political leanings after the peace would also be quite an interesting thing to study, as the following decades were full of ideological politics unlike anything the world had experienced before. Had the officers, most of whom were young men from the upper classes of society who had probably rarely been in regular contact with their social inferiors before joining the army, developed sympathy for the plight of the common worker while sharing the hardships of the trenches? Had seeing the Great War break out because of the autocratic and militaristic societies of Germany and Austria-Hungary make them believe in democracy? Or had the war and the gradual decline of the aristocratic families hardened their beliefs and made them yearn for a glorious past and a strong leadership? All of these are interesting questions, and the proposed answers seem almost equally likely.

Finally, there is the option of continuing to build on this research and expanding the scope to include the officers of Germany and France as well, to see if there are any commonalities that can be found and what are the most striking differences. To place such a comparative effort in the proper context, such a research would require more focus on the societies of the time as well as a general assessment of which classes filled the ranks of junior officers in each army. How did the differences in both army structure and society affect this? Of course, there are a number of difficulties with pursuing such a study, not least of which is the fact that my French is fairly rudimentary and my German is non-existent. Those difficulties can of course be combated by dictionaries and additional language courses, but the fact that one would likely have to travel to several countries to gather the necessary material cannot be. Locating and accessing these materials might take some time and resources.

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Images:

Image 1: A copy of a letter by Butlin J. H., 10.7.1914, Imperial War Museum

Image 2: A White Feather Letter, Undated, Imperial War Museum

Image 3: Sheffield G., *1914 – 1918: The Western Front Experience*, Carlton 2011, page 27

Image 4: www.britannica.com

Image 5: Bull S.: *An Officer's Manual of the Western Front 1914 – 1918, Conway Bloomsbury*, London, 2008, Page 15

Image 6: Lewis-Stempel J.: *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War*, Orion Books Ltd., London, 2011, unnumbered centre pages

Image 7: Lewis-Stempel J.: *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War*, Orion Books Ltd., London, 2011, unnumbered centre pages

Image 8: Sheffield G.: *1914 – 1918: The Western Front Experience*, Carlton 2011, page 39

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