

The First World War (1914 ~ 1918)

Background

In 1914 the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir-presumptive to the Austrian and Hungarian thrones, by a Serb nationalist brought on the outbreak of war between England, France, and Russia on one side, and Germany, Austria and Turkey on the other.

England had not engaged in a major war for one hundred years, despite subduing several defenseless groups in its conquest of an Empire. At the beginning of the war there was enormous patriotism and optimism that it would be won within a few months. It lasted, however, four long years. During this time approximately a million English soldiers were killed and two million soldiers were wounded. In total there were thirteen million deaths. After this the concept of war permanently changed.

The First World War was completely different from what earlier wars had been due to the development of weapons. Barbed wire, grenades and machine-guns, introduced trench warfare. A row of trenches of opposing armies stretched a thousand kilometers south from the north of France to the

Swiss frontier. The war front weaved back and forth over small distances in an agony of machine-guns, barbed wire, shells and mud causing an unforeseen number of casualties to both sides. 60,000 British men were killed on the first day of the Battle of Somme alone, and 400,000 men died before the offensive was called off. The only result of the attack was an advance of 10 kilometers along a battle front of 50 kilometers. Stupid decisions by obsessed military commanders were directly responsible for a great number of the British losses.

The feelings of patriotism soon faded away in the face of these hideous events. At the beginning of the battles war literature told of the glories of war and of dying for one's country. But by the end of the war, they had become painfully critical and cynical.

The war had been particularly tragic for the development of literature because practically every great writer (as well as potential writers) had been killed. The flow of development was brutally interrupted and British literature suffered a long decline, from which it has never quite recovered.

Robert von Ranke Graves (1895 ~1985)

Graves was one of the few writers who did survive the war and one of the best known English poets of the 20th Century. He is also well known as a historical novelist.

In his autobiography, *Goodbye to all That*, Graves includes his experiences in the First World War. He writes in simple lucid prose and his book is considered a work of literary merit as well as being a valuable source for war historians. Besides writing an honest portrait of himself, Graves has been able to maintain a lucid and objective view of the war. He seldom draws a moral conclusion but leaves it to the reader to do so without ever relinquishing humanity or sensitivity. The following extracts describe some incidents from life in the trenches.



Goodbye to all That

My orders for this patrol were to see whether a German trench was occupied by night or not. I went out with Sergeant Townsend at about ten O'clock. We both had revolvers. We pulled socks, with the toes cut off, over our bare knees, to prevent them showing up in the dark and to make crawling easier. We went ten yards at a time, slowly, not on all fours, but wriggling flat along the ground. After each movement we lay and watched for about ten minutes. We crawled through our own wire entanglements and along a dry ditch, ripping our clothes on more barbed wire, glaring into the darkness till it began turning round and round (once I snatched my fingers in horror from where I had planted them on the slimy body of an old corpse), nudging each other with

rapidly beating hearts at the slightest noise or suspicion, crawling, watching, crawling, shamming dead under the blinding light of enemy flares and again crawling, watching, crawling. (An officer who revisited these trenches after the war was over, told me of the ridiculously small area of 'No Man's Land' compared with the size it seemed on the long, painful journeys that he had made over it. "It was like the real size of a hollow in a tooth compared with the size, it feels to the tongue.")

We found a gap in the German wire and came at last to within five yards of the trench that was our objective. We waited quiet twenty minutes listening for any signs of its occupation. Then I nudged Sergeant Townsend and, revolvers in hand, we

wriggled quickly forward and into it. It was about three feet deep and unoccupied. On the floor were a few empty cartridges and a wicker basket containing something large and smooth and round, twice as large as any football. Very, very carefully I groped and felt all around it in the dark. I couldn't guess what it was. I was afraid it was some sort of infernal machine. Eventually I dared to lift it out and carry it back. I had a suspicion that it might be one of the German gas-cylinders that we had heard so much about. We got back after making the journey of perhaps two hundred yards in rather more than two hours. The sentries passed along the word that we were in again. Our prize turned out to be a large liquid container quarter-filled with some pale yellow liquid. This was sent down to headquarters and from there sent along to the divisional intelligence office. Everybody was very interested in it. The theory was that the vessel contained a chemical for re-damping gas masks. I now believe it was the dregs of country wine mixed with rainwater. I never heard the official report.

After this I went out fairly often, I had worked it out like this. The best way of lasting the war out was to get wounded. The best time to get wounded was at night and in the open, because a wound in a vital spot was less likely. Fire was more or less unaimed at night and the whole body was exposed. It was also convenient to be wounded when there was no rush on the dressing-room services and when the back areas were not being heavily shelled. It was most convenient to be wounded, therefore, on a night patrol in a quiet sector.

No order came at dawn and no more attacks were promised us after this. From the morning of September 24th to the night of October 3rd, I had in all eight hours of sleep. I kept myself awake and alive by drinking about a bottle of whiskey a day. I had never drunk it before, and have seldom drunk it since, it certainly helped me then. We had no blankets, greatcoats or waterproof sheets, nor any time or material to build new shelters. The rain poured down.

DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the night patrol?
2. What made 'No Man's Land' seem like a 'hollow in a tooth'?
3. How is Graves able to convey tension in the selection above?
4. How would you justify why Graves offers his own theory about the mysterious flask?
5. Under what conditions does Graves consider it most convenient to be wounded and why?
6. What were some of the inconveniences Graves points out for trench warfare?
7. Rewrite the Germans' letter correcting the grammar mistakes.
8. How do the soldiers' see the war?

Every night we went out to fetch in the dead of the other battalions. The Germans continued indulgent and we had few casualties. After the first day or two the corpses swelled and stank. I vomited more than once while superintending the carrying. Those we could not get in from the German wire continued to swell until the wall of the stomach collapsed, either naturally or when punctured by a bullet; a disgusting smell would float across. The colour of the dead faces changed from white to yellow-grey, to red, to purple, to green, to black, to Slimy.

... The Germans opposite wished to be sociable. They sent messages over to us in undetonated rifle-grenades. One of these messages was evidently addressed to the Irish battalion we had relieved,

"We all German corporals wish you English corporals a good day and invite you to a good German dinner tonight with beer and cakes. Your little dog ran over to us and we keep it safe; it became no food with you so it run to us. Answer in the same way if you please."

Another message was a copy of the 'Neueste Nachrichten', a German army newspaper. It gave sensational details of Russian defeats around Warsaw and immense captures of prisoners and guns. But we were more interested in a full account 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. The battalion cared no more about the successes or reverses of our allies than it did about the origins of the war. It never allowed itself to have any political feelings about the Germans. A professional soldier's job was to fight whomsoever the King ordered him to fight; it was as simple as that. The Christmas 1914 fraternization¹, in which the battalion was among the first to participate, was of the same professional simplicity; it was not an emotional hiatus but a commonplace of military tradition - an exchange of courtesies between officers of opposing armies.

Did you know that Robert Graves passed away on December 7, 1985 after a long and slow mental and physical disintegration, that he is buried in Deya and that his marker is a simple concrete slate with the inscription: "Robert Graves. Poeta, 1895-1985"?

¹ On Christmas day the opposite armies stopped fighting and played football, sang Christmas carols and shared their food. The next day they resumed fighting.