Mr. McGinley's Primary Source Examples - World War I

Trenches: 'an awfully desolate spot'

French Soldier - R.C.S. Frost, 22 May 1915, France. **Born:** 30 January 1888, **Regiment:** 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders; Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, **Regiment number:** 1998; 300470, **Rank:** Private; Second Lieutenant, **Died:** 1962

Transcript (extracts)

… I am much nearer the front now, and we moved here last Tuesday. It was a long march and of course done at night, and our present billet is a farm (or the remains of one) in a large village about ¾ mile from the trenches, more north than we were before, and nearer the Belgian frontier.

It is an awfully desolate spot and constantly under shell fire. This morning I was trying to get a sleep on the grass, when a shell burst in a tree, not fifty yards away, and sent a shower of leaves to the ground. Fortunately no one was hit, another burst in the same field ten minutes afterwards, then I thought it was time to shift! So went into a barn. There are a number of dugouts around, but they are so cold, and you might get buried inside. The farm is a vile place, with a lot of stagnant water around, and a lot of German soldiers are buried here. The barn where we sleep would be improved if a shell struck the roof, and ventilated it, in our absence! As the smell inside is bad, and makes it nearly necessary to wear a respirator! The rats seem to object to our company as they often have a free fight on top of us.

Last night was my first experience in the trenches, and we returned to billet this morning. The din is simply awful, and just lately the big guns have been giving the enemy 'beans' every night. I am glad to say we had no casualties, although the rifle fire was heard at times, especially on our left, where the Germans made an attack on the Indian troops. The British gun fire was simply terrific, all night, and the Germans did not reply very much. It was fine to watch the flashes of our guns at our backs, although the screaming of the shells overhead is at first rather 'scaring' to say the least of it!

However the news we hear from day to day at this part of the front is very cheerful, and encouraging. Yesterday I came across an Indian soldier who could speak English very well, and he thought another

month would see the war over, also a German officer captured near here, said it could not go on very much longer. I for one hope these remarks will prove correct!

The church here is practically demolished, just some of the walls and tower standing, and the churchyard is in a bad state. Great holes have been made and bones exposed. In these holes is water sufficiently deep to drown anybody. Great stone vaults have been opened, and coffins and bodies can be seen.

Of course the place here is not inhabited except by soldiers. I have been through some of the big houses, and plenty of good carved furniture, pictures, fittings etc. still remain in them. I also have been in some of the gardens, and roses just coming into bloom can be seen in great numbers. I should like to see them at home!

Well I must close now, and hope you are all keeping well. Again thanking you all for our good wishes. Sincerely yours, S. Frost

2. Richard Gilson, 12 May 1915, France. **Born:** 20 September 1887, **Regiment:** 4th Seaforth Highlanders, **Regiment number:** 2076; 200415, **Rank:** Acting Colour Sergeant, **Died:** 1961

Transcript

My dear Mother,

Have just come through a particularly nasty period. We went into the trenches on Wednesday night and on Sunday morning at 5am our Artillery commenced bombarding the German trenches and after 20 minutes had elapsed we went over the parapet. My goodness what a reception the Huns had in store for us, they simply swept the ground with machine gun fire and shrapnel. Poor old 'C' coy. caught it hot and Neuve Chapelle seemed to be a fleabite compared with this. It was found impossible to make any advance in our quarter, so I dug myself in and awaited events. It was horrible suspense, as I seemed to be the only man untouched, all around me, and being personally acquainted with each man made matters worse, in fact, it's all wrong to call them men, as they were mostly mere boys.

About early afternoon I was hailed from the trench as to whether it was possible for me to get back. I replied in the affirmative and decided to run the risk of getting potted on the way. So I commenced crawling on my stomach until about a few yards from the parapet, then made a spring and rushed headlong over the top, nearly spoiling the features of a few who happened to be in the trench and were not expecting me. We were relieved that afternoon, but some of the fellows did not get in until nightfall and these experienced another bombardment… Billy Hastings is quite fit and the only pal left. We have been resting since and getting information about the (illegible) but by all reports we shall be up again soon. No rest for the wicked it is said, and if true we must surely be a bad lot.

What a terrible thing about the Lusitania, and with so many Americans aboard. Should imagine there will be more trouble. Have received box and letter dated 6th and am most thankful for everything you are all doing for me. (censored.)

As regards the pads, (masks of cotton pads which served as gas masks), all we were served out with were made ‘on the spot’ and consisted of a piece of gauze and tape and were steeped in a solution of bicarbonate of soda, prior to this charge. I lost all my belongings except the Gillette (razor) so should be glad of a few toilet requisites when next you are sending a parcel. Do not trouble about towel and perhaps Frank would get me a shaving brush. Must now close. Much love to all. From your affectionate son,

Dick

Jonathan George Symons, 10 November 1915, France. **Born:** 22 August 1875, **Joined GWR:** 28 October 1889, **Regiment:** 13 County of London Regiment (King's Royal Rifles Corps), **Regiment number:** 6389, **Died:** 1941

Dear Bert,

Just a few lines to let you know I am alright, hoping you are the same… At the present time we are in dugouts. The weather is simply awful, raining day after day and especially night after night…To tell you the truth, while writing this letter I am wet through to the skin and not a dry thing for a change. We have got our winter fur coats and gum boots, but the latter cause more curses than you can imagine, for instance last night I was sent off to select dugouts for our platoon, which is number 37. It was pitch dark, no light allowed and in a strange place, well honestly I fell over at least 20 times got smothered in mud from head to feet and on the top of that wet though for it rained in torrents. On a round of inspection this morning to see if all were 'comfortable' I was 'blinded' up hill and down dale, 'Sergeant this' and 'Sergeant that'.

How can you expect men to live in this, and then to put a dampener on the lot, was the language from the occupiers who unfortunately were in a residence that fell in during the night. They took shelter under a tree from 2am after looking for me for half an hour or so, but they could not find me, for the only thing that would shift me, after settling down, if I may call it that, would be a 'Jack Johnson' and then I would have no option.

While in the trenches last week John and I were up to our knees in water and got our gum boots half full. The line is a bit quiet lately and only now and again do we get a shelling, but one gets used to it. That, to give you an idea, is like sitting at Paddington and hearing the engines screech.

After our stretch this time I shall be looking forward for a short leave for I have been here nearly three months now and we stand a good chance. Well I must now conclude…Yours sincerely

Jack Symons

Harold William Cronin, 3 October 1915, Dardanelles. **Born:** 9 May 1880, **Regiment:** 4th Seaforth Highlanders. **Rank**: Promoted to Lieutenant in 5th Bedfordshire Regiment on 20 May 1915, **Died:** 2 December 1917 in Palestine, leaving £268 19s to his widow MurielTranscript

Dear Mr Welsh,

We were only out here a matter of a few hours before we went into the trenches; we were there for eight days and then came on to what is called a Rest Camp. I suppose it is called that to distinguish it from the trenches because the men are at work all day road and trench making and it comes under both rifle and artillery fire. We got here at 7 o'clock yesterday morning and were shelled at 9 o'clock.

In the trenches it was fairly bad, they are so narrow and smelly and one is being potted at and shelled all the time. A turn of eight days was really quite long enough because it is strenuous work and even when you do turn in for a rest you have to be ready to turn out at once on an alarm.

The country is really quite pretty and just like the hills and valleys of South Wales, but there are no brooks or rivers. It rains hard for a month each year usually about this time and then there is no more until the next rainy season. But although it is so gloriously sunny something is wrong with the place and it really isn't as healthy as it looks. I think the flies have something to do with it as well as the heat and the still unburied dead bodies about. There are millions and millions of flies here and they are all over everything. Put a cup of tea down without a cover and it is immediately covered with dead ones, they are all round your mouth and directly you open it to speak or to eat in they pop. It is a game. We have all got nets of course, we should have been worried, no medicine by now if we hadn't.

Letter from Alfred Robinson USA (16th Infantry Regiment) to his mother, dated November 14, 1918, sent from Base Hospital 114, Bordeaux, France to Crandull, Tennessee

…the Allies are the victors, and the world is a garden of joy, but what has been the cost. Besides the towers that are nicely injured, a thousand of them in France and Belgium are in desolation and ruins, some of them merely the cornerstones standing, worse than any ancient ruins in existence. Thousands and thousands homeless, orphans, penniless. Many and many a time as I have passed through these places I have said to myself "Poor, poor France, may her day of victory be near. I hope that after this war no man will dare to call himself a German with pride. England, France, Belgium, Italy, the Central Powers, America, and many others have lost the flower of their youth, for what?

The Argonne will always live in the memory of our boys, these many a poor sammie lies mouldering away. I have heard that all American dead are to be taken home in the course of time. I hope it's true. I will close, Ans soon,

From your loving son,

Alfred