'When we did read the newspapers it made us angry, especially if you had done a big raid... Then you’d read in the papers ‘No action on the Western Front’. It didn’t seem to warrant, where you’d lost probably fifty men killed and an equal number wounded, a mention. It wasn’t big enough... It used to annoy everybody terribly, ‘Very little action on the Western Front.’

Lieutenant Ulrich Burke (2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment)
All the following accounts were recorded from interviews made with the subjects in the 1970’s. I have grouped them according to theme or content, each showing aspects of the war as seen and experienced by those fighting at ‘the front’. They are not in chronological order.

Choose an excerpt, read it, and be prepared to relate it, and your own feelings about it, to the rest of the class.

Choose one excerpt only; but by all means read the others too.

**Excerpt 1: Joining Up**

*Kitty Eckersley (British), mill worker*

I worked in the mill, I was a ring-spinner, and we worked six days a week, from six o’clock in the morning until half-past five at night, and I got the large sum of fifteen and six a week. Anyway, I had a nice friend, and we used to go out at night - and we met these two young men, and I liked mine very much and he liked me. So eventually we started courting... We eventually made up our minds that we would get married...

And then it came to be that the war started. Well, we had a friend in Canada who had enlisted over there, and when he came back he invited us one night... to the Palace... We didn’t know what was on, of course, but it was a great treat for us. So we went. Vesta Tilley[2] was on stage. She was beautifully dressed in a lovely gown of either silver or gold. But what we didn’t know until we got there was that also on stage were Army officers with tables all set out for recruiting. She introduced those songs, ‘We Don’t Want To Lose You, But We Think You Ought To Go’ and ‘Rule Britannia’, and all those kinds of things. Then she came off the stage and walked all round the audience - up and down, either side, down the middle - and the young men were getting up and following her. When she got to our row she hesitated a bit. I don’t quite know what happened but she put her hand on my husband’s shoulder - he was on the end seat - and as the men were all following her, he got up and followed too.

When we got home that night I was terribly upset. I told him I didn’t want him to go and be a soldier - I didn’t want to lose him. I didn’t want him to go at all. But he said, “We have to go. There has to be men to go.”


Rifleman Norman Demuth (British)
...I was given a white feather\(^3\) when I was sixteen, just after I had left school. I was looking in a shop window and I suddenly felt somebody press something into my hand and I found it was a woman giving me a white feather. I was so astonished I did not know what to do about it. But I had been trying to persuade the doctors and recruiting officers that I was nineteen and I thought, well, this must give me some added bounce because I must look the part, and so I went round to the recruiting offices with renewed zeal.

Private Tom Adlam (British)
Well, a lot of people thought it would be over by Christmas. I was never one of those who thought that at the beginning. But I put it down to about a year. I think most of us thought it would last about a year. We thought it couldn’t go on longer than that.

Captain Philip Neame (British)
15th Field Company, Royal Engineers
I was stationed at Gibraltar when war was declared, and we officers there were afraid that the war would be over quickly, and that we should miss it...

Heinrich Beutow (German)
Of course, we schoolboys were all indoctrinated with great patriotism when war broke out. My father was an active infantry officer and I shall never forget the day when they marched out to the trains. All the soldiers were decorated with flowers, there was no gun which did not show a flower. Even the horses I think were decorated. And of course all the people followed them. Bands playing, flags flying, a terrific sort of overwhelming conviction that Germany would now go into war and win it very quickly.

Lieutenant Charles Carrington (British)
1/5th Battalion, Warwickshire Regiment
When they came to us they were weedy, sallow, skinny, frightened children - the refuse of our industrial system - and they were in very poor condition because of wartime food shortages. But after six months of good food, fresh air and physical exercise they changed so much their mothers wouldn’t have recognised them. We weighed and measured them and they put on an average of one stone in weight and one inch in height. But far more than that, at the end of six months they were handsome, ruddy, upstanding, square-shouldered young men who were afraid of no-one - not even the sergeant-major. When we’d pushed them through this crash programme of military training, out they went to France in batches.

Excerpt 2: Christmas 1914

Private Frank Sumpter (British)
London Rifle Brigade
After the 19th December attack, we were back in the same trenches when Christmas Day came along. It was a terrible winter, everything was covered in snow, everything was white. The devastated landscape looked terrible in its true colours - clay and mud and broken brick - but when it covered in snow it was beautiful. Then we heard the Germans singing ‘Silent night, Holy night’, and they put up a notice saying ‘Merry Christmas’, so we put one up too.

\(^3\) A sign of cowardice.
While they were singing our boys said, “Let’s join in,” so we joined in and when we started singing they stopped. And when we stopped, they started again. So we were easing the way. Then one German took a chance and jumped on top of the trench and shouted out, “Happy Christmas, Tommy!” So of course our boys said, “If he can do it, we can do it,” and we all jumped up. A sergeant-major shouted, “Get down!” But we said, “Shut up Sergeant, it’s Christmas time!” And we all went forward to the barbed wire.

We could barely reach through the wire, because the barbed wire was not just one fence, it was two or three fences together, with a wire in between. And so we just shook hands and I had the experience of talking to one German who said to me, “Do you know where the Essex Road in London is?” I replied, “Yes, my uncle had a shoe repairing shop there.” He said, “That’s funny. There’s a barber shop on the other side where I used to work.”

They could all speak very good English because before the war Britain was invaded by Germans. Every pork butcher was German, every barber’s shop was German, and they were all over here getting the low-down on the country. It’s ironic when you think about it, that he must have shaved my uncle at times and yet my bullet might have found him and his bullet might have found me.

The officers gave this ‘No fraternisation’ order and then they turned their backs on us. But they didn’t try to stop it because they knew they couldn’t. We never said a word about the war to the Germans. We spoke about our families, about how old we were, how long we thought it would last and things like that. I was young and I wasn’t that interested, so I stood there for about half an hour and then I came back. But most of the boys stayed there the whole day and only came back in the evening. There were no shots fired and some people enjoyed the curiosity of walking about in no man’s land. It was good to walk around. As a sign of their friendliness the Germans put up a sign saying ‘Gott mit uns’ which means ‘God is with us’ and so we put a sign up in English saying ‘We got mittens too’. I don’t know if they enjoyed that joke.

Sergeant George Ashurst (British) 2nd Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers

There was still 200 yards between us and the Germans. We did not intermingle until some Jerries came to their wire waving a newspaper. “What’s that, lads?” “Are you going for it?” “I’m not going for it!” Anyway, a corporal in our company went for it. Well, he got halfway then he stopped. I don’t know if he’d changed his mind or not, but the lads shouted, “Go on! Get that paper!” He went right to the wire and the Germans shook hands with him and wished him a merry Christmas and gave him the paper. He came back but we couldn’t read a word of it...

It was heaven. And to kick this sandbag about [playing football], but we did not play with the Germans. Well, we didn’t, but I believe quite a lot did up and down the place. Eventually, we got orders to come back down into the trench, “Get back in your trenches, every man!” The order came round by word of mouth down each trench. Some people took no damn notice.

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4 A nickname for British soldiers.

5 British nickname for German soldiers.
Anyway, the generals behind must have seen it and got a bit suspicious, so they gave orders for a battery of guns behind us to open fire and a machine-gun to open out, and officers to fire their revolvers at the Jerries. That started the war again. We were cursing the generals to hell. You want to get up here in this mud. Never mind you giving orders in your big chateaux\(^6\) and driving about in your big cars. We hated the sight of bloody generals, we always did. We didn’t hate them so much before this, but we never liked them after that.

**Rifleman Henry Williamson**

**London Rifle Brigade**

That evening the Germans sent over a note saying that their Staff was visiting the trenches that night, so the truce must end and they would have to fire their machine guns. They would fire them high but could we in any case keep under cover in case regrettable accidents occurred. At eleven o’clock precisely they opened up... and that was the end of our truce. We did not fire, and they did not fire for a day or two, but then the Prussians came in and relieved the Saxons and then we began to lose more men from sniping and we went out after that.

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**Excerpt 3: Confronting Death**

**Sergeant Stefan Westmann (German)**

**29th Division, German Army**

We got orders to storm the French position. We got in and I saw my comrades falling to the right and left of me. But then I was confronted by a French corporal with his bayonet\(^7\) to the ready, just as I had mine. I felt the fear of death in that fraction of a second when I realised that he was after my life, exactly as I was after his. But I was quicker than he was, I pushed his rifle away and ran my bayonet through his chest. He fell, putting his hand on the place where I had hit him, and then I thrust again. Blood came out of his mouth and he died.

I nearly vomited. My knees were shaking and they asked me, “What’s the matter with you?” I remembered then that we had been told a good soldier kills without thinking of his

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\(^6\) Large, luxurious country house in France belonging to the aristocracy.

\(^7\) Thin iron spear attached to the end of a rifle.
adversary as a human being - the very moment he sees him as a fellow man, he’s no longer a good soldier. My comrades were absolutely undisturbed by what had happened. One of them boasted that he had killed a poilu\(^8\) with the butt of his rifle. Another one had strangled a French captain. A third had hit somebody over the head with his spade. They were ordinary men like me. One was a tram conductor, another a commercial traveller, two were students, the rest farmworkers - ordinary people who never would have thought to harm anybody.

But I had the dead French soldier in front of me, and how I would have liked him to raise his hand! I would have shaken it and we would have been the best of friends because he was nothing but a poor boy - just like me. A boy who had to fight with the cruellest of weapons against a man who had nothing against him personally, who wore the uniform of another nation and spoke another language, but a man who had a father and a mother and a family. So I woke at night sometimes, drenched in sweat, because I saw the eyes of my adversary. I tried to convince myself of that would have happened to me if I hadn’t been quicker than him, if I hadn’t thrust my bayonet into his belly first.

Why was it that we soldiers stabbed each other, strangled each other, went for each other like mad dogs? Why was it that we who had nothing against each other personally fought to the very death? We were civilised people, after all, but I felt that the thin lacquer of civilisation, of which both sides had so much, chipped off immediately. To fire at each other from a distance, to drop bombs, is something impersonal, but to see the whites of a man’s eyes and then to run a bayonet through him - that was against my comprehension.

**Lieutenant Richard Talbot Kelly (British)**

**Royal Artillery**

I think you are chiefly afraid, you know, of how you will behave when you really meet the worst things that war can produce, and I became afraid of seeing my first dead man. I’d never seen a dead man and was very afraid of seeing anybody killed in front of my eyes. Well, now this bit of line had been fought over a few weeks previously in the battle of Festubert, and some of the old German trenches that we had captured were left lying in a derelict mess. Between our trenches we had dug new ones beyond them and I knew that there was an old stretch of German trench between our first and second line where there were a lot of German and Canadian corpses. One afternoon when things were slack - we were only allowed to fire three rounds per gun per day - I thought I would go and have a look at these corpses and see what I felt...

I wondered along this old German trench for a bit and was very interested in the way it was made... Then suddenly round the bend in the trench I came to a great bay which was full of dead Germans, but they weren’t a bit horrible. They had been dead for about six weeks and weather and rats and maggots and everything else had done their stuff. Now they were just shiny skeletons in their uniforms held together by the dry sinews that wound round their bones. They were still wearing their uniforms and still in the attitude in which they had died, possibly from a great shell\(^9\) burst. It was a most weird and extraordinary picture and I was absolutely fascinated. A skull, you know, grins at you in a silly way, it laughs at you and more or less says: “Fancy coming here all terrified of dead men, look how silly we look.”

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\(^8\) Nickname for a French infantryman, literally meaning ‘hairy one’.

\(^9\) General name for any missile shot from a large gun, or battery.
Excerpt 4: Gas

Private Alfred Bromfield (British)
2nd Battalion, Lancashire Regiment

The 22nd April [1915] is a day I will always remember. I was standing in the bottom of the trench cooking my bit of breakfast. It was one of my chief interests in those days and I was very fond of fried bacon and fried cheese...

Anyway, I was getting on with this when one of our chaps on lookout yelled, “Cor, look at the lyddite shells bursting along Jerry’s trench.” Lyddite wasn’t used a great deal so we jumped up out of curiosity to see these shells bursting along the trench. We watched about a dozen puffs of yellow smoke coming up from what we thought was lyddite shells until we lost interest and got down into the bottom of the trench again.

About five or six seconds later the lookout yelled, “Blimey, it’s not lyddite, it’s gas!” So we all jumped up again and the officer came running out and gave the order, “Open immediate rapid fire!” ... Blazing away there into the gas, we didn’t know if we were hitting anybody or whether it was just a blind with the gas coming over.

... By that time the gas had reached us and we had no protection at all beyond our own inventiveness - there was no such things as gas-masks or pads in those days. We’d been tipped off that the only way to protect ourselves was by urinating on either our handkerchiefs or soft caps and covering our mouths with them. So we did that for long enough to get a good, deep breath, then continued firing. That’s how it went on while all the time the gas was still pouring over the top of the trench.

Personally, I wasn’t satisfied with these measures, I didn’t think it sufficient protection. So I went into one of the trench latrines, which was just a bucket stuck in a hole, and put my head in the bucket. I stopped down long enough until I couldn’t hold my breath anymore, then came up, took a good breath of air and went down again...

Anyway, we stopped Jerry. He must have been coming over because when we could see out over the open ground again there was quite a number of them laying out there, some of them wriggling about wounded, and quite a number were dead, but I think the greatest havoc was caused by one of our machine-gunners - Jackie Lynn. He was out to the right of our lines in a position where he could enfilade the whole ground in front of the German trenches, and he’d worked his machine-gun the whole time. He was on his own, because his number two and three had already conked out with the gas. So he was firing it on his own and they had to drag him away from that gun - actually pull him away from it. When they got him back he lasted about three days before he died of poison gas. But he got the Victoria Cross for what he did.

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10 An older type of shell that fragmented on detonation.
11 Attacking.
12 Fire from the flank, thus able to sight all of the advancing soldiers
13 Literally meaning ‘broken down’, here meaning ‘died’.
14 The highest British medal for bravery in war.
**Private W.Underwood (Canadian)**
**1st Canadian Division**

It was a beautiful day. I was lying in a field writing a letter to my mother, the sun was shining and I remember a lark singing high up in the sky. Then, suddenly, the bombardment started and we got orders to stand to. We went up the line in two columns, one on either side of the road. But as soon as we reached the outskirts of the village of St.Julien the bullets opened up, and when I looked around I counted just 32 men left on their feet out of the whole company of 227. The rest of us managed to jump into ditches, and that saved us from being annihilated.

...Then, as we looked further away we saw this green cloud come slowly across the terrain. It was the first gas that anybody had seen or heard of and one of our boys, evidently a chemist, passed the word along that it was chlorine. And he said, “If you urinate on your handkerchiefs it will save your lungs, anyway.” So most of us did that...

**Private W.A.Quinton (British)**
**2nd Battalion, Bedfordshire Fusiliers**

The men came tumbling from the front line. I’ve never seen men so terror-stricken, they were tearing at their throats and their eyes were glaring out. Blood was streaming from those who were wounded and they were tumbling over one another. Those who fell couldn’t get up because of the panic of the men following them, and eventually they were piled up two or three high in this trench.

**Lieutenant Victor Hawkins (British)**
**2nd Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers**

The effect of the gas was to form a sort of foamy liquid in one’s lungs, which would more or less drown you. A lot of the men died pretty quickly, and others soon came down - they were in fact drowning from this beastly foam. Out of the 250 men we started with at five o’clock we were very soon down to about 40 or 50 men.

**Private W.A.Quinton (British)**
**2nd Battalion, Bedfordshire Fusiliers**

One chap had his hand blown off and his wrist was fumbling around, tearing at his throat. I fact it was the most gruesome sight I’d seen in the war...

When we got relieved we made our way four or five miles back from the line. Going along this country road we were just like a rabble - you know how men are when they’re tired and exhausted. Then we passed by an orchard where there must have been two or three hundred men. They were reeling around tearing at their throats, their faces black, while an RAMC \(^{15}\) sergeant stood by and, well, I’ve never known a man look so despondent. He said, “Look at the poor bastards, and we can’t do a thing for them.”

\(^{15}\) Royal Army Medical Corps.
**Excerpt 5: Attack**

**Sergeant Jack Doran (British)**  
*7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers*

During the attack on St-Julien on the 26th April [1915] a shell dropped right in amongst us, and when I pulled myself together I found myself lying in a shell-hole. There was one other soldier who, like me, was unhurt, but two more were heavily wounded, so we shouted for stretcher-bearers.

Then the other uninjured chap said to me, “We’re not all here, Jack,” so I climbed out of the shell-hole and found two more of our comrades lying just a few yards from the shell-hole.

They had had their legs blown off. All I could see when I got up to them was their thigh bones. I will always remember their white thigh bones, the rest of their legs were gone. Private Jackie Oliver was one of them, and he was unconscious. I shouted back to the fellows behind me, “Tell Reedy Oliver his brother’s been wounded.” So Reedy came along and stood looking at his brother, lying there with no legs, and a few minutes later he watched him die. But the other fellow, Private Bob Young, was conscious right to the last. I lay alongside of him and said, “Can I do anything for you, Bob?” He said, “Straighten my legs, Jack,” but he had no legs. I touched the bones and that satisfied him. Then he said, “Get my wife’s photograph out of my breast pocket.” I took the photograph out and put it in his hands. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t lift a finger, but he somehow held his wife’s photograph on his chest. And that’s how Bob Young died.

**Private Harry Patch (British)**  
*Cornwall’s Light Infantry*

At Pilckem Ridge I can still see the bewilderment and fear on the men’s faces when we went over the top. C and D Company was support, A and B had had to go at the front line. All over the battlefield the wounded were lying down, English and German all asking for help. We weren’t like the Good Samaritan in the Bible, we were the robbers who passed by then left them. You couldn’t help them. I came across a Cornishman, ripped from shoulder to waist with shrapnel, his stomach on the ground beside him in a pool of blood. As I got to him he said, “Shoot me,” he was beyond all human aid. Before we could even draw a revolver he had died. He just said “Mother”. I will never forget it.

**Corporal Clifford Lane (British)**  
*1st Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment*

We went over the top. It was all quite nice, we didn’t have anyone firing at us, not for the first quarter of an hour or so anyway. We were getting strung out in what we call open formation, a couple of yards between each man, and eventually we came under long-distance machine-gun fire. As we were going along the man on the right of me was hit in the heart and died. He probably died, but we weren’t allowed to stop anyway. It missed me altogether, and that was just the luck of war...

We hadn’t had too many casualties at that time, and then we saw a pillbox\(^{16}\) not far away, about a couple of hundred yards. We were told to make for that. We got up and got about fifty yards towards it, then were told to get down again. Then we were told to get up. As we got up we came under very heavy machine-gun fire from quite a distance away and

\(^{16}\) Concrete gun position.
practically the whole of our platoon was wiped out. It got most of the men in the heart. The one that hit me caught me in the shoulder-joint.

**Excerpt 6: Advance and Retreat**

**Captain W. Bunning (Australia)**

**24th Australian Division**

The attack on Broodseinde happened on the morning of October 4th [1917]. We were in the leading wave for the attack on the ridge and beyond. We moved into position at midnight and zero hour - going over the top - was at 6am...

We waited till six o’clock, and that moment the Germans’ barrage lifted and ours came down... to our surprise... we could see Germans running about in our barrage. We also met in no man’s land, and it transpired that they were attacking at the precise moment that we were too. They were soon devastated by our barrage. We went on and took what was called the red line, forty yards below the actual top of Broodseinde Ridge.

There we were dug in and consolidated. Then some smoke shells came over which indicated that we were to move forward. The 24th went through on to their objective, which was the blue line. The casualties in my company were not too heavy, not as heavy as one might have expected from the earlier shelling. After consolidating one would move forward carefully, checking to see the field of fire was suitable for the men and siting their positions.

What was really surprising was to look across in front and see the green fields of Belgium. To see actual trees and grass... as far as we were concerned it was open country. But then to look back to where we’d come from, Ypres - there was total devastation.

**Ordinary Seaman Joe Murray (Australia)**

**Royal Marine Light Infantry**

I thought to myself, “I don’t like stealing away like this after all this bloody trouble.” I was really distressed in my own mind... I remember when I came to Backhouse Post, I thought to myself, “Oh dear me! Poor old Yates and Parsons, all killed and buried here.” When we first went to Backhouse Post I remember how happy and anxious we were to get stuck in to the Turks. And now here we were, only a handful left.

As we got further from the line near Backhouse Post, I remembered the advance we had on May 6th [1915], when more of my pals died such as Petty Officer Warren and young Yates. I could still hear young Horton crying for his mother as he died. And I remembered Colonel Quilter, a great, big chap, a straight-as-a-poker ex-Guards Officer. I remembered him leading the advance and going to his death armed with a huge walking stick. He told us when we were on the boat, just before we landed, that the eyes of the world would be

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17 An intense firing of heavy artillery (long-range guns) to soften up the enemy lines before an infantry attack.

18 Stopped and dug shallow trenches for temporary cover.

19 An ancient market town near the French border that was fought over three times during the war and totally destroyed in the process.

20 The Ottoman Empire had joined the war on the German side, and the Allied forces had attempted to invade Turkey at Gallipoli.
upon us. Well, the eyes of the Turks certainly were, and so were their rifles, but the rest of the world seemed to have forgotten us.

The tears were streaming down my cheeks, I just couldn’t restrain them... nobody gave a tinker’s cuss whether we lived or died.

**Major Hartwig Pohlmann (German)**  
36th Prussian Division  
On the 19th March [1918] we got our orders to go into the preparation positions... That night, about 3am, I got out of my dugout to look round. The night was silent, nothing to be heard, and there was a clear sky, the stars were shining and glittering. I thought these are the same stars that my family at home will look at.

At 9am I stood up and had a little breakfast. I could see nothing. It was thick fog. I thought how can we attack in this? Nevertheless we had to attack. I told my soldiers to hang on with one hand to the belt of the man in front, but they could not do that for long because the ground was very rough and we had to creep through barbed wire. Soon there was a pell-mell, but everyone knew that we had to go straight on. The soldiers that lost their own companies made contact with other companies and followed them. Soon I had soldiers of several companies of my regiment together and they followed me. As we advanced through the fog we suddenly heard guns firing behind us. We realised that we had come out behind a British battery which was firing barrage fire. They didn’t know that we had broken through. One of my men laid a hand on the shoulder of the British officer and said, “Cease fire!” They were stunned.

**Captain Reginald Thomas (British)**  
Royal Artillery  
It was a magnificent sight as the French cavalry came out of the forest at Soissons [1918, two years after the first use of tanks]. Their uniforms were all new, bright blue, every bit and spur-chain was burnished and polished; their lances were gleaming in the sun; and as the bugler blew the charge the horses went into the gallop in a fan attack - two regiments of French cavalry. They went along beautifully, magnificently, through the wheat field in the afternoon sun, until they hit the German machine guns that had just come up and unlimbered. The machine-guns, they opened on them at close range and aimed high enough to knock the riders off their horses. Riderless horses went all over the field for two or three hours. At the end of that time there was practically nothing left of those two cavalry regiments.

**Captain Maberly Esler (British)**  
Royal Army Medical Corps  
When the battle of Villers-Bretonneux, near Amiens, started [1918], first of all we were gassed heavily. We were down the valley when it got so full of gas we had to clear out... The only place I could find as a first-aid post was a large quarry, and we took up our position there. We found a cave at one end of the quarry. In a much bigger cave at the other end I put all the stretcher-bearers, the stretchers, and all the drugs. Unfortunately a shell fell short [possibly a British shell] and hit the top of the quarry and buried all these fellows and killed them. So we finished at night without any stretcher-bearers at all.

Captain Toye, who was awarded a Victoria Cross later on, came round to my shelter in the quarry and said, “Where are all your stretcher-bearers?” I said, “Under that lot,” pointing to the pile of rubble. He said, “You’ve got to get out of this as quick as you can. You’re going
to have a hell of a walk because they’re putting down a tremendous barrage between here and Villers-Bretonneaux.”

And we did do that. We started a hundred and eighty strong and we finished with twenty-one. People ask me if I was frightened. Of course I was frightened, but it was so like a nightmare I thought it must be a nightmare. That such a thing couldn’t be happening. That I would wake suddenly and it would all be a dream.

I had a sergeant beside me. Suddenly a shell went up, and as the smoke cleared I saw him sitting with his two stumps waving in the air, his legs completely shot off. I said, “Well, we’ll take you to the side of this road.” He said, “You’re not going to leave me here?” I said, “I’m afraid we can’t do anything about it, we’ve got no stretcher-bearers, we’ve got nothing to carry you with, we’ve got nothing to give you, but we’ll put you out of the way of the tanks and I hope you’ll be picked up.”

It was an awfully painful decision to make. People who could walk helped them along. I had about five people clinging to me, one with a jaw blown away, bleeding all over me, and that’s how we ended our march. It was a nightmare. Getting through that was a miracle, really, a miracle.

**Sergeant-Major Richard Tobin (British)**
**Hood Battalion, Royal Naval Division**
On March 26th [1918] we dropped into a trench. It was a trench we knew of old. We had started to retreat on 21st March, 1918, and here we were back in the trench we had started to attack from on November 13th, 1916.

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**Excerpt 7: Life at the Front**

**Private Henry Barnes (Australia)**
**4th Australian Brigade**
We were co close to the Turkish front line that we were regularly on good terms with them, even though we were officially fighting them. We regularly exchanged bully beef and biscuits for strings of figs and oranges. You see, instead of throwing a bomb you could throw a tin of bully beef over, and when they discovered that, you got a string of figs back.

The Turks were firing bombs as well as rifle fire and it was very difficult to avoid the occasional one that came over. There was one man fell right in front of me - he came over bawling some Muslim phrase and me and the fellow next to me shot him at the same time... He was a very big man and came down right on top of me and none of us could lift
him out, he was too heavy. So I literally sat on that Turk for two days - we ate our lunch of bully beef and biscuits sitting on him.

**Lieutenant Charles Carrington (British)**  
1/5th Battalion, Warwickshire Regiment

When you came out of the line you were mentally and physically tired and hoped you were going to get a rest. But you didn’t get much of a physical rest because every night you had to go on working parties up to the front line. The worst part was that for the last mile or two everything had to be carried by hand - somehow or other you had to get up all the food, drinking water and necessary equipment.

One has to remember too that the men who did it were physically tired out when they started. But it had to be done. The ammunition had to get there, the barbed wire had to reach the front to protect the soldiers who were fighting, and if you were going to have any comfort at all you had to have the planks and trench boards. So you’d go cursing and stumbling along in the dark, slipping into holes and tripping over wires. Worst of all was the traffic problem, because there would be several parties of this kind going through the labyrinth of trenches and you could have a jam as bad as a London traffic jam.

Then somebody would have to get out on top, and if it was you you’d stand there, exposed, feeling the whole German army was looking at you. Then you’d struggle down again and perhaps get your stuff to the front line and hand it over without disaster. But then it was two or three miles back again, stumbling through the trenches, then perhaps five or six miles back to your billet, where you’d finally arrive at dawn.

**Private Ernest Todd**  
Regiment unknown

The day would start about half an hour before daybreak. We would stand right up to the parapet looking over, waiting for Jerry to come if he was going to come, then when it was light enough we’d stand down. The sentries detailed would stand at their posts while the rest of us would get down to sandbags or trenchwork, whatever work there was to be done. The sentries would be relieved every two hours.

On a nice summer’s day you could think there wasn’t a war on really. Looking through the periscope out to no man’s land you would see the sandbags of the Germans’ front line; you would see the flowers and the grass out front; the birds might start singing if the sun was up on a nice day. Early in the morning you would have the first planes coming over and a general sense of balminess and ease. Breakfast would come up, if there was going to be any, and you would settle down to a day of laziness in the sun if you could.

Then there was the man we used to call ‘Cornet Joe’ over in the German front line. He used to blow his cornet and play British songs to us. When he played we would shout out, “Damn good, Jerry!” and “Give us another one, Joe!” As the lines weren’t too far he would ask us what we wanted to hear and we would say, “Give us ‘The Old Bull and Bush’.” So he would play that and we would sing it, and sometimes that session would last half an hour. We would have mouth organs, of course, and well, there nothing else to do but talk, reminisce and sing.

Yes, during those summer months of 1915 you could forget that there was a war on, you really could. It did happen, sometimes - people would forget and get careless, and before you knew where you were they would put a bullet through their head while sitting on the latrine or something.
Excerpt 8: Soldiers Against The War

Sergeant C. Lippett (British)
1/8th Battalion, Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment
The men in the line tended to despise conscientious objectors\(^{21}\), but it was not until I was appointed military policeman that I came in contact with them.

There were, of course, different varieties of conscientious objectors - there were the political ones, the religious ones, and those who just didn’t want to bother. But it was not until I had contact with them that I could see that there was something at the back of this thing, that neither I nor anyone else had realised.

One morning it was my job to go into the cell where these people were put prior to their appearance before the commanding officer, and this fellow had scrawled across his cell wall, which was whitewashed, a slogan which I now know well: ‘Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains.’ I wondered what it meant and I asked the fellow all about it. He proceeded to explain, and I think that was the start of my political education.

Well, we were instructed to remedy this state of affairs, which included taking him to the baths, stripping him, and forcing a suit of khaki on him. We took him to the open compound, and as it was very cold at night we thought he would be forced to wear this khaki to keep himself warm, but he had other ideas. During the night he stripped himself of this khaki and shredded the whole of the suit and hung it around the barbed wire, and that man walked about all night long without a shred of clothing on him. That was the type of treatment we meted out, and I am bitterly ashamed that I was forced to take part in it...

But ever since then I’ve admired these men intensely. I would take my hat off to them any time, because I realise that what they did in defying British military might - and they defied it in every way possible - they had far more guts than we did who were doing these things to them.

\(^{21}\) A person who refused to fight because of personal beliefs or convictions.
Howard Marten (British)  
Conscientious objector  
The ranks of the Non-Conscription Fellowship were made up of men from every conceivable walk of life. You had all sorts of religious groups, from the Salvation Army to Seventh-Day Adventists, Church of England and Roman Catholics. Then you had the more politically motivated: the Independent Labour Party and different degrees of Socialists. Then a very curious group that I used to call the artistically-minded - artists, musicians, all that. They had a terrific repugnance of war...

We were forever being threatened with the death sentence... Finally we had the second court martial, which took a whole day... Eventually we were all taken out to the parade ground. There was a big concourse of men all lined up in an immense square. Under escort, we were taken out, one by one, to the middle of the square. I was the first of them, and until my verdict was known nobody knew exactly what was going to happen. Then the officer in charge of the proceedings read out the various crimes and misdemeanours - refusing to obey a lawful command, disobedience... and so forth. Then: “The sentence of the court is to suffer death by being shot.”

There was a suitable pause, and I thought, “Well, that’s that.” Then he said, “Confirmed by the Commander-in-Chief,” which double-sealed it. There was another long pause - “But subsequently commuted to penal servitude for 10 years.” And that was that...

It was all very strange. You had a feeling of being outside yourself, as if it wasn’t affecting you personally, that you were just looking on at the proceedings. It was very curious.

Captain Maberly Esler (British)  
Royal Army Medical Corps  
When we were having our fortnight’s rest out of the line... it was during one of these rest periods that the colonel sent for me and said, “I have a very unpleasant duty for you to perform which I won’t like anymore than you do,” and then he told me what it was all about.

Apparently one of our men, our own men, had absented himself from the front line on two occasions when a battle started, and after the battle was over he came back and made some excuse that he’d lost the way... They court-martialled him and sentenced him to death by firing squad, and the unpleasant task the colonel had set me was to attend the shooting and to pin on his heart a piece of coloured flannel so that they’d give the marksmen something to fire at.

The following morning he was to be shot at dawn and I lay awake thinking about it all night and I thought, “Well, I’ll try to help this fellow a bit,” so I took down a cupful of brandy and presented it to him and I said, “Drink this and you won’t know very much about it.” He said, “What is it?” “It’s brandy,” I said. He said, “Well, I’ve never drunk spirits in my life, there’s no point in starting now.”

That to me was a sort of spurious sort of courage in a way. Two men came and led him out of the hut where he’d been guarded all night. As he left the hut his legs gave way, then one could see the fear entering his heart. Rather than marched to the firing spot he was dragged along. When we got there he had his hands tied behind his back, he was put up against a wall, his eyes were bandaged and the firing squad were given the order to fire.

22 Cotton material.
The firing squad consisted of eight men, only two of whom had their rifles loaded. The other six carried blank ammunition - that was so that they wouldn't actually know who had fired the fatal shot. I wondered at the time, "What on earth will happen if they miss him, and they don't kill him completely?" and I was very anxious about that, but when they fired he fell to the ground writhing as all people do - even if they've been killed they have this reflex action of writhing about which goes on for some minutes.

I didn't know whether he was dead or not but at that moment the sergeant in charge stepped forward, put a revolver to his head and blew his brains out, and that was the coup de grace which I understood afterwards - I learned afterwards - was always carried out in these cases of shooting.

Excerpt 9: Celebrity Visits

Corporal Edward Glendinning (British)
12th Battalion, Notts and Derby Regiment (Sherwood Foresters)
In the autumn of 1915... we had orders to clean up as we were going to be inspected by someone very high up. We didn’t know who it was. We made ourselves fairly presentable and in the morning set off and marched away. We did about fifteen miles then came to a little valley with a road running along the bottom of it, where we found a lot of other units had already assembled. We took our allotted places and waited for three or four hours before anything happened. Then along came a contingent of staff cars. These high-ups got out of their cars and proceeded to mount their charges. I believe there was an orderly flying a royal standard behind the King [George V]. The King rode along the first three or four ranks, then crossed the road to the three or four ranks on the other side of the road, speaking to an officer here and there. Our instructions had been that at the conclusion of the parade we were to put our caps on the points of our fixed bayonets and wave and cheer. So that’s what we did - “Hip, hip, hooray!” Well, the King’s horse reared and he fell off. He just seemed to slide off, so the second “Hip, hip” fizzled out. It was quite a fiasco and you should have seen the confusion as these other high-ranking officers rushed to dismount and go to the King’s assistance. They got him up and the last we saw of him was being hurriedly driven away!

Lieutenant Graham Greenwell (British)
4th Battalion, Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry
While we were there watching the cricket, chatting away and having a drink, up came a young chap on a bicycle who looked about fourteen. This was the Prince of Wales [the future King Edward VIII]. The poor chap was always trying to sneak up to the front line but was never allowed to... He went and bearded Kitchener - who everyone was terrified of - at the beginning of the war and said, “What does it matter if I do get killed? I've got four brothers.” And Kitchener said, “I’m not in the slightest worried about you being killed, Sir; what we can’t afford is to have you taken prisoner.”
Major Jock McDavid (British)
6th Battalion, Royal Scots Fusiliers
Out of this first car came this well-known figure dressed in a long, fine-textured waterproof. He was wearing a poilu helmet and a Sam Browne belt holster with a revolver stuck well into it. He was followed by his staff, and I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the second car, which was piled high with luggage of every description. To my horrified amazement, on the very top of all this clutter was a full-length tin bath. What the hell he was going to do with all this I couldn’t think. This very well-known figure came forward, gave a warm handshake, and introduced himself as Lieutenant Colonel Winston Churchill.

[A] brigadier came up late one afternoon and spotted a gap in the parapet that had just been made that day. It had only been repaired the night before, and the little brigadier turned to the CO [commanding officer] and said, “Look here, Colonel Churchill. This is a very dangerous thing, to leave this gap unprotected.” And the colonel, turning and fixing him with his penetrating eyes, said, “But you know, sir, this is a very dangerous war.”

Excerpt 10: More Life at the Front
Gunner H. Doggett (British)
Royal Artillery
Our ammunition wagon had only been there a second or two when a shell killed the horse under the driver. We went over to him and tried to unharness the horse and cut the traces away. He just kneeled and watched this horse. A brigadier then came along, a brass hat, and tapped this boy on the shoulder and said, “Never mind, sonny.” The driver looked up at him for a second and all of a sudden he said, “Bloody Germans!” Then he pointed his finger and he stood there like stone, as if he was transfixed. The Brass Hat said to his captain, “Alright, take the boy down the line and see he has two or three days rest.” Then he turned to our captain and said, “If everyone was like that who loved animals then we’d be alright.”

Corporal Charles Quinnell (British)
9th Battalion, Royal Fusiliers
The one thing we used to look forward to at night was our issue of rum. That was very, very acceptable. It used to come up with the rations in a two-gallon stone jar, and that was
given to the company sergeant-major, who used to issue out four lots, four mess tins, to each platoon sergeant - there were four platoons in the company - and the platoon sergeant would come along the trench of a night-time with a big table-spoon and this mess tin full of rum. The cry was “Open up!” and you’d open your mouth up and he’d pour this table-spoon of rum down your throat.

**Corporal Ivor Watkins (British)**
**6th Battalion, Welch Regiment**
There was always the fellow who wanted to flog something or scrounge something. I remember one chappie who had a broken pocket watch which he tried to flog to the Chinese Labour Corps. He was telling us about it. “What did they say, Taff?” “Oh,” he said, “No bloody bonny-la, no bloody good-la.” He got so fed up he threw the watch up into the air. He said there was one big damn rugby scrum to try to get it. They wouldn’t buy it off him, but once he threw it up in the air they all wanted it.

**Lieutenant Ulrich Burke (British)**
**2nd Battalion, Devonshire Regiment**
It had rained and rained and rained. We even had to cease the battle for a few days before continuing on, while the ground we went over became more and more broken up... And there were no trenches at all at Passchendaele. There were just a series of shell-holes that had been reinforced with sandbags so that you could hide inside them. If, for instance, you wanted to urinate and otherwise, there was an empty bully beef tin kept on the side of the hole, so you had to do it in front of all your men then chuck the contents, but not the tin, over the back...

But the conditions were miserable. You lived cave-like. You can imagine a man after being in one of those shell-holes for a week, where he couldn’t even wash. Each day he got a two-gallon petrol tin of tea given him... Well, those tins were baked, boiled - everything was done to them - but whenever you put a hot substance in them you still got petrol oozing out, and that gave the men violent diarrhoea. But they had to drink it because it was the only hot drink they had...

Oh, the conditions were terrible! You can imagine the agony of a fellow standing for twenty-four hours, sometimes up to his waist in mud, with just a couple of bully beef tins or his mess tin trying to get the water out of his shell-hole. And he had to stay there all day and all night for six days, that was his existence. And when he got a hot drink it was tainted with petrol, so he knew that for the next four or five hours he’d be filling a bully beef tin.

**Ordinary Seaman Joe Murray (Australian)**
**Hood Battalion, Royal Naval Division**
Dysentery was a truly awful disease that could rob a man of his last vestiges of dignity before it finally killed him. A couple of weeks before getting it my old pal was as smart and upright as a guardsman. Yet after about ten days it was dreadful to see him crawling about, his trousers round his feet, his backside hanging out, his shirt all soiled - everything was soiled, he couldn’t even walk.

So I took him by one arm and a pal took the other and we walked him to the latrine. It was degrading when you remembered how he was just a little while ago. Neither I nor my other pal were very good - but we weren’t like that. We tried to keep the flies off him and to turn him round - put his backside towards the trench. But he simply rolled into this foot-wide trench, half-sideways, head first in the slime. We couldn’t pull him out, we didn’t have
enough strength, and he couldn’t help himself at all. We did eventually get him out but he was dead, he’d drowned in his own excrement.

**Sergeant Alfred West (British)**
**Monmouthshire Regiment**
One of my boys was about the ugliest man I’ve ever seen. He was short, stumpy, and most uninteresting to look at. Well, one time I was down for a rest with my machine-gun team when I realised old Sam was missing. We watched out for him, then suddenly we saw him walking up to a cottage on top of a hill. We found that he had a little agreement with a lady - and that when she started to hang out clothes on the line, that meant her old man had gone out. When the signal came you couldn’t hold Sam back - he was up the field.

Out of the line the boys were all wanting women. And the women, knowing this, used to put a sign in the window saying ‘Washing done for soldiers.’ I’ve seen up to twenty men waiting in one room...

**Private Clifford Lane (British)**
**12th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment**
Fleas, yes! Every man in the front line was in a state of - every man in the front line had fleas after about two or three weeks. Fleas used to get into the seams of your underclothes, and the only way to get rid of them was to get a candle and go along the seams with the candle and you could hear the eggs cracking. And the extraordinary thing is that these lice were so bad in places that I’ve seen men taking their shirts off and their backs absolutely raw with the scratching. And there was no way of getting rid of them at all... Lice were a curse, were a real menace to us. For one thing, you had very few chances of getting a good sleep anyway, and when you had the lice with you there to irritate you, drive you into a sort of frenzy almost - the whole thing was that the lice were in the dugouts.

**Private Thomas McIndoe (British)**
**12th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment**
Rats! Oh crikey! If they were put in a harness they could have done a milk round, they were that big, yes, honest! Nearly every morning a bloody great thing would come up and stand up on its hind legs and gnaw at something. I used to line the sights up and give them one round of ball. Bang! And blow them to nothing.
Private S.T. Sherwood
regiment unknown

As I slipped to the bottom of the shell-hole I took my torch out, flashed it around as I slipped and to my horror found I had a [long-dead] German companion - that was where the terrific stink came from. I thought, “Heavens, am I going to have to spend the night with you?” I knew that without help it was impossible to get out, so I shouted, screamed and did everything possible to make someone hear me. I shone my torch up in the air in the hope that someone might see the light, but nothing happened.

I wasn’t one to panic, I was always one to keep cool if possible, but for the next half-hour I struggled as hard as I could to climb up the sides, and in the process my trench boots were left at the bottom. But every time I would get within a yard of the top I would slide back down into the filth again. I reviewed my position and realised I’d have to keep myself going until the morning. First I decided to sing, and sang all the songs I could possibly think of. I sang, I cursed, I raved and eventually I prayed. I prayed that help would come before morning.

I was sweating from head to foot with all the exertion. Then as I lay back in the trench I remembered my old pipe and tobacco and smoked pipe after pipe. Gradually I found I was sinking further and further into this mire - the water had gone above my waist, and no matter how I struggled it was impossible to get out. I know that struggling further wasn’t going to help me so I continued smoking and singing and shouting as best I could until my voice had almost gone...

I was still sinking further into the mire. I filled my pipe again and put my hand into my tunic pocket for my matches and found they were wet through. It was then I began to despair. I thought, “I’d sooner be killed with a shell or a bullet than die in a bloody filthy shell-hole.” From then on I can remember no more until I thought, “Can I be dreaming? There are footsteps somewhere.” Feebly, I tried to shout until I heard a voice say, “Where are you?” I shouted, “I’m here, in a shell-hole.” The footsteps went round again for a few minutes then looking up I saw a head appear over the top. “Oh my God,” he said, “Hang on, chum.” I remembered no more from that “Hang on” until I found myself in hospital between clean white sheets.

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23 Wounds that meant the end of front line service and a return to the home country - escape from the war.
**Gunner William Towers (British)**  
**Royal Field Artillery**

I was one of fifteen drivers taking thirty horses to try and get ammunition through to our battery’s guns... The Germans were watching for anybody who tried to come through and the first few times we were shelled and had to come back. Sergeant Emsley said, “Towers, want you to come up front about six yards behind me and when I give the signal we gallop.”

So I was following the sergeant, but just after we set off the Germans dropped a shell right by us and that was it. I remember going up in the air and landing on the floor. I wasn’t in any pain but I could see that shrapnel had gone into my kneecap. It was a joy, actually, because I thought that it wasn’t too bad and therefore I’d soon be home and out of it all. Two men from RAMC came over and one of them got a bottle of iodine and tipped it into the hole in my knee. Oh! The pain was terrific. They put some bandages on it and put me on a stretcher.

I couldn’t see where we were going because all around was barren land, but all of a sudden they stopped and put the stretcher down... and went to a trap door. They lifted it up and put the stretcher on a slide and lowered it down. There was a proper hospital underneath. It had been a German hospital. There was a full staff of hospital people there. They took me down to the theatre and a sister pressed a white mask over my face, the anaesthetic hit me and the next thing I knew I was waking up on a train... They took us to a hospital at Etaples.

...The pain from my knee was getting terrible, so when I saw an officer coming up with his arm around two sisters and laughing I said, “Excuse me, sir, could you have a look at my knee? The pain is driving me crazy.” He came over and he stank of whisky. When the nurses took the bandages off he said, “Oh, there’s fluid above the knee, we’ll tap that tonight.”

So they came for me to go to the theatre and I thought, “Thank God for that.” But when I woke up in the early hours of the morning I thought, “Oh my God! My leg’s gone!” They’d guillotined it off without saying a word. There had been no hint at all I was going to lose my leg. They hadn’t even looked at it until I asked the doctor.

That day I prayed to die. All I could think of were the men who stood begging on street corners with a tin can. And I was a footballer and that was finished. It was terrible...

After that I was put on a boat and I was taken to Stockport General Hospital. A civilian doctor named Mr.Fenwick came to see me and when he took the bandages off the smell was awful. The flesh had receded and two inches of bone stuck out and it had gone black. He said, “Send a telegram for his mother and father to come straight away.” He thought I was going to die. He told a sister to get a bowl of sterilised water with peroxide in it and that my leg had to be syringed with this solution every four hours. And then it started to get better. The wound became beautiful, clean red flesh. Mr.Fenwick said, “We’re going to win, Willie.”

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24 Red-hot, flying pieces of broken shell casing.
Excerpt 12: The Luck of War

Lieutenant Colonel Alan Hanbury-Sparrow (British)
2nd Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment

The crucial attack of the division on the right had failed and we were in rather a precarious position. The brigadier came up, and whilst he was there there was a sudden stampede of our men as they were driven off the hill and they fell back. We fell back from where my temporary headquarters were and took refuge behind an old parapet that I think had been built in 1914 - it was not thick enough really to be bullet-proof. But, providentially, it was facing the right direction, and about fifty of us took refuge there. An attack started forming against us...

Then suddenly a shell fell into the trench. I thought to myself, “Now our time has come, you’ve had a long run for your money and I wonder what it’ll feel like to be dead.” At that moment I realised that whatever happened I wasn’t going to be killed. It’s impossible to describe this consciousness. It’s not like ordinary consciousness at all, it’s like a prophet of old when the Lord spoke, something quite overwhelmingly clear and convincing. I wasn’t very proud of myself because I didn’t care what happened to the others - I was going to survive. I took a rifle and started shooting. I hit two Germans at six hundred yards and made another skip for his life. The extraordinary part was that the machine-gun never fired again, that was the last shell that it fired, yet there was no reason why it should have stopped. It was as though for a moment I had a glimpse of time coming towards me.

Lieutenant Charles Carrington (British)
1/5th Battalion, Warwickshire Regiment

The noise would grow into a great crescendo and at a certain point your nerve would break. In a flash of time, in a fifth of a second, you’d decide that this was the one. You’d throw yourself down into the mud and cringe at the bottom of a shell-hole. All the other people around you would be doing the same.

Sometimes you miscalculated and this wasn’t a shell for you, and it would go sailing busily on and plonk down on someone else four hundred yards away. When a shell arrived it would drop into the mud and burst with a shattering shock. The killing splinters flew off and might fly fifty yards away from the point of impact. You could find a fragment of red-hot, jagged iron weighing half a pound landing in your shell-hole.
They’d take another second or two before they would all settle down in the mud. Then you’d get up and roar with laughter, and the others would laugh at you for having been the first one to throw yourself down. This, of course, was hysterics! It becomes a kind of game in which you cling on and try not to let the tension break. The first person in a group who shows a sign of fear by giving away and taking cover - he’d lose a point and it counted against him. The one who held out longest had gained a point - but in what game? What was this for?

After eighteen months in France I was still trying to be brave and not succeeding very well, and so were we all. All the time one was saying to oneself, “If they can take it - I can take it too!” The awful thing being that this was not an isolated experience but one which went on continuously, minute after minute, even hour after hour.

**Corporal J.W. Palmer (British) Royal Artillery**

I realised that I wasn’t dead, I was alive. I realised that if these wounds didn’t prove fatal, I should get back to my parents, to my sister, to the girl I was going to marry - the girl that had sent me a letter practically every day since the beginning of the war. I was taken to a dressing station and given morphia, and then I must have had that sleep I so badly needed, for I didn’t recollect any more until I found myself in a bed with white sheets and I could hear the voices of the nurses with their English, Scotch and Irish accents. And I think then I completely broke down, for next thing the padre was sitting by my bedside. He was trying to comfort me. He said I’d had an operation, and he told me he had some relatives out there who had been out there right from the very beginning, and by God’s grace they hadn’t had a scratch. He said, “They’ve been lucky, haven’t they?” I thought to myself, “Lucky? Poor devils!”

**Excerpt 13: Leave**

**Lieutenant Charles Carrington (British) 1/5th Battalion, Warwickshire Regiment**

This world of the trenches, which had built up for so long and which seemed to be going on forever, seemed to be the real world, and it was entirely a man’s world. Women had no part in it, and when one went on leave one escaped out of the man’s world and into the woman’s world. But one found that however pleased one was to see one’s girlfriend, one could never somehow quite get through, however nice they were. If the girl didn’t quite say the right thing one was curiously upset. One got annoyed by the attempts of well-meaning people to sympathise, which only reflected the fact that they didn’t understand at all. So there was almost a sense of relief when one went back to the man’s world, which seemed the realest thing that could be imagined.
Private Norman Demuth (British)
1/5th Battalion, London Regiment
One thing I found when I got home was that my mother and father didn’t seem remotely interested in what had happened. They hadn’t any conception of what it was like, and on occasions when I did talk about it my father would argue points of fact that he couldn’t possibly have known about because he wasn’t there. I think his was the approach of the public at large. They didn’t know - how could they? They knew that people came back on leave covered in mud and lice, but they had no idea of what kind of danger we were in. I think they felt the war was one continual sort of cavalry charge; that one spent all day and all night chasing Germans, or them chasing us. Had they realised the strain of sitting in a trench and waiting for something to drop on one’s head, I don’t think they would have considered it was just play. And of course the general idea was that England couldn’t possibly lose.

Herbert Sulzbach (German, rank unknown)
9th Division, German Army
In October [1918] I had leave to go back to my hometown, to Frankfurt, to see my parents. I was very much looking forward to this leave after the terrific battles we had been through. I went through the streets of Frankfurt. I was not saluted. I was a commissioned officer, and yet I was not saluted. Everything was rationed and there was hardly anything to buy. Dance halls were closed, the streets were dull, and the mood of the people was really bad. We hadn’t realised at the front how bad it was at home. People were fed up with the war. They wanted the war to be ended, victory or no victory. After a fortnight I went back to the front line, to my comrades, to my guns, and I felt at home amongst the mud, the dirt and the lice.

Private Hubert Trotman (British)
Royal Marine Light Infantry
It was time for leave... We were lousy as cuckoos. When we got to Calais we had to head for the fumigator. But there we saw a queue a mile long. We were told the boat sailed in an hour and if we didn’t make it we would lose a day’s leave. So those of us at the tail end of the queue broke off, went down to the docks and, damn me, just walked on to the boat. We hid down below until it had sailed. So we disembarked unfumigated...

When I got home, just to take it in and breathe the familiar smell of the bakery again, I stood outside the shop for a while. Then I opened the door and shouted, “Mother! I’m home! I’m outside.” What a sight I must have been. I hadn’t changed my clothes for months. I had a beard and I was in a hell of a state. She took one look at me and tears rolled down her face. She said, “I’ll clean you up,” “No,” I said, “You can’t do that yet.” I put my hand in my armpit and took out a handful of lice. “Look,” I said. “Lice. Hordes of them. I can’t come in like this.”

Private Norman Demuth (British) (see Excerpt 1)
1/5th Battalion, London Regiment
Almost the last feather I received was on a bus. I was sitting near the door when I became aware of two women on the other side talking at me, and I thought to myself, “Oh Lord, here we go again.” I didn’t pay much attention. However, I suppose I must have caught their eye in some way because one leant forward and produced a feather and said, “Here’s a gift for a brave soldier.” I took it and said, “Thank you very much - I wanted one of those.” Then I took my pipe out of my pocket and put this feather down the stem and everything and worked it in a way I’ve never worked a pipe cleaner before. When it was filthy I pulled it out and said, “You know, we didn’t get these in the trenches,” and handed it
back to her. She instinctively put her hand out and took it, so there she was holding this filthy feather in her hand and all the people on the bus started to get indignant. Then she dropped it and got up to get out, but we were nowhere near a stopping place and the bus went on quite a long way while she got well and truly barracked by the rest of the people on the bus. I sat back and laughed like mad.

Excerpt 14: Armistice 1918

Herbert Sulzbach (German) (rank unknown)
9th Division, German Army
On November 1st we were at Etreaux, near St.Quentin, where we had started our big offensive on March 21st. Then we were full of hope and broke through the British 5th Army. Now it seems a million guns of the Americans, French and British were bombing us. The war was entirely lost. As adjutant, I had to give the order of the day. On 11th November it was: ‘From noon onwards our guns will be silent.’ Four years before, full of optimism; now, a beaten army.

Major Keith Officer (Australian)
Australian Corps
At 11 o’clock on 11th November... I was sitting at a table with a major in the Scots Greys who had a large, old-fashioned hunting watch which he put on the table and watched the minutes going round. When 11 o’clock came he shut his watch up and said, “I wonder what we are all going to do next.” That was very much the feeling of everyone. What was one going to do next? To some of us it was the end of four years, to some three years, to some less. For many of us it was practically the only life we had known. We had started so young.

Corporal Reginald Leonard Haine (British)
1st Battalion, Honourable Artillery Company
It wasn’t like in London, where they all got drunk, of course. No, it wasn’t like that, it was all very quiet. You were so dazed you didn’t realise that you could stand up straight and not be shot.

25 The formal signing of peace that ended the war.
Corporal Clifford Lane (British)
1st Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment
As far as the Armistice itself was concerned, it was kind of an anti-climax. We were too far gone, too exhausted really, to enjoy it. All we wanted to do was go back to our billets\textsuperscript{26}, there was no cheering, no singing. That day we had no alcohol at all. We simply celebrated the Armistice in silence and thankfulness that it was all over. And I believe that happened quite a lot in France. It was such a sense of anti-climax. We were drained of all emotion. That was what it amounted to.

Sergeant-Major Richard Tobin (British)
Hood Battalion, Royal Naval Division
The Armistice came. The day we had dreamed of. The guns stopped. The fighting stopped. Four years of noise and bangs ended in silence. The killings had stopped. We were stunned. I had been out since 1914. I should have been happy. I was sad. I thought of the slaughter, the hardships, the waste and the friends I had lost.

Private Hubert Trotman (British)
Royal Marine Light Infantry
We were still fighting hard and losing men. We knew nothing of the proposed Armistice, we didn't know until a quarter to ten on that day. As we advanced on the village of Guiry a runner came up and told us that the Armistice would be signed at 11 o'clock that day, the 11th November. That was the first we knew of it.

We were lined up on a railway bank nearby, the same railway bank that the Manchesters\textsuperscript{27} had lined up on in 1914. They had fought at the Battle of Mons in the August of that year\textsuperscript{28}. Some of us went down to a wood in a little valley and found the skeletons of some of the Manchesters still lying there. Lying there with their boots on, very still, no helmets, no rusty rifles or equipment, just their boots.

\textsuperscript{26} Sleeping place.
\textsuperscript{27} The Manchester Regiment.
\textsuperscript{28} The first battle of the Great War.