

Forgotten Voices of the Great War

I No running about

Elizabeth Owen, English Schoolgirl, England, 1914

I was seven and I was playing in the garden when I was asked to go and speak to my grandmother. She said, 'Now children, I have got something very serious to tell you.

The Germans are fighting the British, there is a war on and all sorts of people will be killed by these wicked Germans.

And therefore there must be no playing, no singing and no running about.'

And then she took from us all our toys that were made in Germany, amongst them a camel of which I was very fond.

II How Bob Young died

Sergeant Jack Dorgan, 7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers, St. Julien, 26th April 1915

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 hand, he couldn't lift a finger, but he somehow held his wife's photograph on his chest.

And that's how Bob Young died.

III The winter was so cold

Corporal Clifford Lane, 1st Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment, The Somme, 1916

The winter was so cold I felt like crying.

I'd never felt like it before, not even under shellfire.

What I had felt under shellfire, especially during the first two years, was a wish for a wound, a 'Blighty wound' we called them, to get me home.

But there were times, after being shelled for hours on end, that all I wanted was to be blown to bits.

Lieutenant Stefan Westmann, German Medical Officer, The Somme, 1916

For a full week we were under incessant bombardment.

Day and night, the shells came upon us. Our dugouts crumbled.

They would fall on top of us and we'd have to dig ourselves and our comrades out.

Sometimes we'd find them suffocated or smashed to pulp.

Soldiers in the bunkers became hysterical. Even the rats became hysterical.

For seven days and seven nights we had nothing to eat and nothing to drink while shell after shell burst upon us.

The winter was so cold. / Seven days and seven nights.

IV I worked in the mill

Kitty Eckersley, Mill Worker, England, 1914

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.

I had a nice friend and we met these two young men, and I liked mine very much and he liked me.
Eventually I learned that he was all that a young woman would wish to see.

We made our minds up we would get married. We were very happily married.

He thought the world of me and I thought the world of him.

And then it came to be that the war started.

I told him I didn't want him to go and be a soldier – I didn't want to lose him.

But he said, 'We have to go. There has to be men to go.'

V It was a long hour

Ordinary Seaman Joe Murray, Hood Battalion, Royal Naval Division, Gallipoli, 4th June 1915

We stood there, packed like sardines unable to stand up in comfort, and we still had another hour to go
before we went over the top.

It was a long hour.

Some men were fast asleep on their feet, others just stood staring at the sky.

The laddie next to me checked his rifle and ammunition again and again, still not satisfied.

Others just stood and stared, silent as the grave.

Our guns ceased fire just as promptly as they had started.

Many lives had depended on that half-hour bombardment – and we knew it.

Had it destroyed the Turkish machine-gun posts? Had the riflemen been killed or driven to cover?

We didn't know, we only hoped. I'd never dreamt that even borrowed time could go so slowly.

Of course I'd advanced before – many times. I wasn't afraid of advance.

I didn't like it, but I wasn't afraid of Johnny Turk.

I'd met him before and beaten him and I could beat him again.

But I was afraid – I was afraid of myself.

I wondered if I would live long enough to get out of the trench, and if I did,

if I would have enough puff left in me to cover that four hundred yards or so across in one mad rush.

And if not, and I had to bury my head in that burning scrub, would I have enough courage left
to rise again and face that rain of lead?

VI You don't look, you see

Sergeant-Major Richard Tobin, Hood Battalion, Royal Naval Division, The Somme, 1916

An infantryman in the front line feels the coldest, deepest fear.

Five minutes to go – then zero – all hell let loose and over the top we went.

As soon as we got over the top the fear and the terror left us.

You don't look, you see; you don't listen, you hear; your nose is filled with fumes and death
and you taste the top of your mouth.

You are one with your weapon, the veneer of civilization has dropped away
and you see just a line of men and a blur of shells.

VII It was a Monday morning

Kitty Eckersley, Leather Worker, England, 1915

So he went overseas, and I never saw him for about six months.
I'd given up the work at the mill, I'd heard there was a better job at a leatherworks.
He came home unexpectedly in January. It was a Monday morning.
There was a loud knocking on the door and this voice shouted,
'Open the door – the Jerries are here!' and my mother said, 'Oh, it's Percy – I can tell his voice!'
And in he came, all mucky and what have you, straight from France.
We got dressed up and I took him to the leatherworks and how pleased and proud I was to show him off.
He went back on the Thursday night.
It seems he told his friend, 'I'm afraid I shall never come back.'
Anyway he went, and I went back to work.
Afterwards I found out that I was pregnant and wrote and told him.

VIII Green cloud

Private W. Underwood, 1st Canadian Division, Second Battle of Ypres, 22nd April 1915

As we looked we saw this green cloud come slowly across the terrain.
It was the first gas that anybody had seen or heard of.
There were masses of Germans behind this gas cloud,
we could see their grey uniforms as plain as anything, and there we were, helpless,
with these Ross rifles that we couldn't fire because they were always jamming.

Private W.A. Quinton, 2nd Battalion, Beds. Regiment, Second Battle of Ypres, 22nd April 1915

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,
their faces black.

IX I saw the eyes

Sergeant Stefan Westmann, 29th Division, German Army, Aire-La Bassée, 25th January 1915

We got orders to storm the French position.
We got in and I saw my comrades start falling to the right and left of me.
I was confronted by a French corporal with his bayonet 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.
My knees were shaking and they asked me, 'What's the matter with you?'
We had been told that a good soldier kills without thinking of his 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.
But I had the dead French soldier in front of me, and how I would have liked him to have raised his hand!
I would have shaken it and we would have been the best of friends
because he was nothing but a poor boy – like me.
At night, drenched in sweat, I saw the eyes of my fallen adversary.

X I heard the postman come

Kitty Eckersley, Leather Worker, England, 1915

When I found out I was pregnant I went to see them at the leatherworks
and they said they would find me some light work.

So I had a very nice job and worked there until I was seven months pregnant.

I'd given up work on the Friday night when I received the letter on the Monday morning.

I heard the postman come.

I ran down in my nightdress and snatched the letter off him.

I opened the letter and saw it was from his sergeant.

It just said, 'Dear Mrs Morton, I'm very sorry to tell you of the death of your husband.'

XI One summer evening

Captain Herbert Sulzbach, German Artillery, The Somme, 1916

One summer evening soon after the battle of the Somme - just a few kilometres northwards - had started,
the guns were rumbling and there was a terrible noise of battle in our ears.

Yet where we lay, there were mountains and peace.

We could see the French soldiers, and one night a Frenchman started to sing – he was a wonderful tenor.

None of us dared to shoot and suddenly we were all looking out from the trenches and applauding,
and the Frenchman said, '*Merci*'.

XII Waiting for the end

Trooper Stanley Down, North Somerset Yeomanry, Ypres, 12th May 1915

We arrived in our trenches as the first thin streaks of dawn lit the sky.

The first shell came across and the whole earth seemed to tremble.

The bombardment went on from dawn until around midday.

By that time the trenches were just a quagmire, and the earthworks and barbed wire, such as they were,
had been blown to pieces long since.

The whole of the front was a series of holes in which men crouched, waiting for the end.