

A SOLDIER'S DIARY, PART 1

By Rob John

Thursday, September 22nd, 1914

Got a slap round the head off Mum today. Went into the kitchen holding me army papers feeling all pleased with meself. She was at the stove making soup and I crept up behind her and said: 'Hey! Mum! Look at this!'

She read the papers really slowly and then she looked up at me. I thought she'd be proud and happy but her face was all cold and she said, 'Oh, Walter! What you gone and done?'

'I joined up, Mum!' I said.

'I can see that you stupid boy!' she said and then she hit me with a wooden soup spoon.

'I'm not a boy,' I said. 'I'm 18 years old and I'm a soldier in the British Army! Least, I will be when I report for training next week.'

Then she started crying and saying that since Dad died I was all she had and now I was going to go off to France to get myself killed.

'I'm not going to get killed,' I said.

But she wasn't listening. I told her the war wouldn't last very long. I told her everyone's saying it'll be over by Christmas.

'I'll be back before you know it, Mum,' I said.

'You won't come back at all,' she said.

That's Mums for you. Always look on the bright side, don't they?

Saturday, November 24th

Training's finished and we've been sent home for a couple of days rest before we set off. Tonight was our last night at home so me and Harry Parker went for a walk. It felt great. We were so excited and Harry couldn't stop laughing.

That's Harry for you. Always smiling. Always having a laugh. An old man shook our hands and said, 'Well done boys. You give them Germans some stick from me.'



The landlord in the pub gave us a free drink and wished us luck. I can't believe this is all happening. I ain't never been anywhere in my life. I ain't never even been out of London and now look at me. Private Walter Bush. Eighteen years old. 8th Battalion, London Regiment. And tomorrow morning I'm going to France. Sounds alright, dunnit? Won't be able to sleep tonight though. Too excited.

Sunday, November 25th

The train to Dover was full of troops from our regiment. Everyone was happy. Harry was bragging about all the Germans he was going to capture. There was singing and laughing and lots of jokes.

But, when we got near the coast everyone went all quiet. Maybe they was all thinking about their Mums. I know I was.

Monday, November 26th

The sea crossing was horrible. I ain't never been on a ship before. To be honest I ain't never even seen the sea before. I stood at the rails on the crowded deck and looked down at the huge grey ocean churning below.

I was scared. I mean really scared. Kept wondering what it'd be like if you fell in. Kept wondering what's it like to drown? Then I was sick. Harry laughed his head off. Then he was sick too.

Friday, 1st December

I'd expected France to be exciting and different. Thought it'd be all wine and sunshine, but it ain't. It's dark and cold like England and full of mud and bad smells and the noise of horses, and marching boots and shouting men and in the distance the rumble of the heavy guns. For three days now we've just marched and every day the rumbling of the guns gets louder and closer.

Today there was an explosion a couple of miles away and we felt the earth shudder under our feet.

Harry said, 'Here we go boys. We've arrived.'

Saturday, 2nd December

Slept last night in a barn. We only got one blanket each and it was freezing. We were about three miles behind the front line and we could hear bursts of heavy machine guns right through the night. I don't know if it was us shooting at the Germans or the Germans shooting at us. Couldn't sleep a wink. So I lay awake thinking about home.

I said to Harry, 'We've only been away a week but it seems like a lifetime, don't it?' But he was fast asleep and snoring like a pig. Nothing seems to bother that bloke. I wish I was more like him. I'm scared.

Sunday, 3rd December

This morning we went up to the front line. First sight of the trenches. I'd heard of trenches but never seen one before. They're like massive long cuts in the ground. They've got miles and miles of them. They're smelly and really deep. You stand in a trench and it's almost like being buried in stinking mud.

Our Sergeant explained how we fight this war. If the Germans decide to attack us, they climb out of their trenches and walk towards us. We wait till they get near enough and then we let them have it. Rifle-fire, machine guns, grenades. The lot. With a bit of luck they turn round and run off back to their trenches. Them that's still alive that is. Then it's our turn to have a crack at them. An officer blows a whistle, we put up ladders and up we go. 'Over the top' they call it.

'So when's the next attack, Sarge?' says Harry, like he can hardly wait to get started. But me, I don't ever want to get started. I look at them ladders and I look at the top of the trench and I go all cold inside. I hope I never have to climb up there and go over the top.