

**LIFE ON THE WESTERN FRONT (Extract from the Diary of Private Charles Blackmore, January 1917)**  
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*'My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory;  
The old Lie: Dulce et Decorum est  
Pro patria mori'*

*From Dulce et Decorum est, Wilfred Owen.*

16<sup>th</sup> January 1917

We are on our way to the Western front. After attending an exhausting training and a demanding preparation course, I am quite excited at what lays ahead of me. For once, I can finally do something courageous, instead of ploughing the fields all day! It will be good to experience a change in life, and finally take on a role in this war that is different to the Home Front. That was always what mother thought as well. I think I am all prepared – I have my haversack at hand with all my personal equipment, including my mug, knife and shaving kit. Attached to my belt are my tools and pockets for ammunition and my water bottle (which I hope does not leak; the lid is a little wobbly!). At times I find them a nightmare to carry and always wonder how I am meant to fight with all this kit weighing me down! The best thing is, I actually have my own rifle now! I have always dreamed of using one, let alone having one of my own! Ever since I was a small boy I remember seeing my father's rifle in his study, hanging on the wall. He forbade me from ever going anywhere near it.

I must be careful not to reveal that I am an underage soldier, or I will risk being sent home and having to face father. I met a very jolly lad today on the train and a very kind fellow he was too! His name is George Milton and he is around two years older than me. We exchanged conversations between ourselves to keep us occupied, as the time seemed to move very slowly. He showed me an old photograph which had become slightly tainted yellow over the passage of time. It was obvious his family was from a wealthy background as his mother was dressed in fine taffeta with a silk scarf. I began to feel a sense of sorrow, as I pulled out the only existing photograph of my parents, who looked no more than in their thirties. When I went into my mother's bedroom to take Charles' passport, I came across this photograph hidden away amongst the other documents and letters. It is so expensive taking photographs nowadays it would be most difficult to replace it. This will be a very precious object to my heart as it will be my only link to my parents; I must take extra care and look after it. I wonder whether I might see my friend at the Western Front because it would be comforting to see a familiar face!

19<sup>th</sup> January 1917

I have only just arrived at the Western Front three days ago and already I feel like I have been here for a month! My bones and muscles are aching all over my body and I think I have caught a chill as well! I am absolutely flabbergasted! Everything about the Western Front is not what I expected, and I am sure I am not the only one who thinks so. When the soldiers first witnessed the trenches with their own eyes, they were aghast and truly petrified, just as I was. The conditions of the trenches are unbearable. There are decaying corpses of poor soldiers scattered all over the place; it is practically a blood bath. It is daunting when I think about what could happen to me. Will I end up being like them in a couple of months?

There are lots of soldiers filling the trenches and so there is barely enough space to move without bumping into them. There are even rats scurrying around and some of them look as

if they are as big as cats. They are right old pests, these rats, because they chew through our haversacks and probably spread diseases of all sorts. George and I managed to skewer six of them with our bayonets, but one or two more were right crafty devils who dodged the skewers, so we resorted to using the ammunition and shoot them. They are just so quick for the eye, they look like a blur as they scurry across the trench floor. Every now and then you can hear the sound of blaring gun shots from other soldiers piercing through the air – they must be as frustrated as I am with the rats. The gunshots can be quite deafening, especially if one is shot right next to you! While shooting the rats, I disturbed quite a few soldiers around me, who did not take it very well. One shouted, “Oi! I am trying to get some sleep here and I think you should too! Beside, don’t you think it would be nice to have some time without having to hear those dreaded gun shots?”

I hardly get a wink of sleep at night; the only time when we are allowed to sleep is during the day, but only after our duties are complete. We can never sleep during the night because it is more likely that surprise attacks will happen then. I suppose the darkness hides the enemy more than daylight. It also keeps our actions unknown and that is how it is liked. I have never admitted it to anyone, but I hate the dark and always fear that a German soldier might suddenly leap out of the blue. Our duties are very hard work and some can be extremely unpleasant. The trenches are dug-out tunnels and are meant to provide us with some protection from the Germans on the other side of no man’s land. However there is still no escape from the rodent rats and lice (which I spend most of my time picking from my clothes)

#### 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1917

An enemy fire was shot at us by the Germans last night. Over 50 soldiers were killed, their bodies strewn all over the place! Luckily the sandbags suffered the impact rather than me. But we couldn’t spend too much time mourning for our dead comrades as we had to replace these sandbags because they got damaged, and it was pretty hard work too! George and another soldier had to make new ones by filling the sand bags with earth and then stacking them up next to each other, making sure to leave a small gap so we could keep an eye out for any sign of attack. George ended up suffering back pains for the rest of the day. I have always wondered what the German trenches are like. I expect they must be far worse than ours!

#### 24<sup>th</sup> January 1917

As the days go by, it gets progressively worse. I am beginning to regret ever signing up for the war. What was I thinking? The trenches and the whole atmosphere have totally destroyed my life. I have deep bags under my eyes and my limbs have worn away after all this walking and strenuous labour. I had recently sent a note to my parents during my free time to apologise for my absence during Christmas with the family. How guilty I am for leaving them! I miss them dreadfully and feel I have betrayed them. I hope they do write soon, but I would not be surprised if they don’t. Until now, I had always been there for them. I know with a heavy heart that this war is never going to end and that it is most likely that I am not going to see my parents again until a long time. But that is if I am lucky enough to survive, which is seeming more and more unlikely. Already so many soldiers have fallen – why didn’t I listen to those who advised me not to join!

Sometimes, as I am writing these words, I can hear the faint chattering of German soldiers as they are sitting in their own trenches. Now and then I can even hear a burst of laughter. I wonder if their experience of war is better than mine. It sounds like it!

As I look across at my comrades around me, there was Owen preoccupied with his usual habit; head bent over his crumpled layers of sheets, scribbling furiously under the moonlight.

Occasionally, he raises his head to stare vacantly off under a lucid trance, across the smoking front line. I wonder if he was reminiscing over better days gone by or the ones to come, should he survive? Sometimes he looks at me with that knowing look, it's as though he sees right through me, with a mixture of pity and anger. I am sure he suspects that I am very young, so I avoid his eyes as much as I can!

28<sup>th</sup> January 1917

The news spread quickly of a fellow soldier (I think his name is Private Thomas Evans) who had to get his foot amputated because he had a severe case of trench foot. I was not surprised as we are constantly walking through murky and dirty water. We have to get regular inspections – that is how serious trench foot is. Another day of hard work has passed and I do not feel any better than I was yesterday. I had to fix that wretched barbed wire which was broken by enemy fire. The number of times I have been cut by that barbed wire! My hands have been torn to shreds. What was worse was that I had to empty out the latrines. The stench is unbelievable and sometimes they even overflow! It makes me sick to the stomach. Everyone tries to avoid that job! I was asked to deal with it, but surprisingly another soldier came to help me tackle it. I was emptying out the latrines with great pain when I felt someone tap my back. This soldier happened to be John Blewett! He gave me a small smile and a comforting hug. The war had done a lot to change his physical appearance and no doubt his personality. He had a drooping face and his eyes were sunken with grief. He looked so affected by the war, I could barely even recognise him. After the nightmare duty was completed, dinner was served so I scraped the sticky mud off my boots using the bayonet on my rifle. Dinner is never appetising and it is the same slop every day; traditional meat stew. They say it is roasted vegetables with meat and gravy. But I think it is just rocks hard enough to break your teeth and some muddy water. I regret every complaint I made about mother's golden vegetable soup. Nothing can be worse than this!

29<sup>th</sup> January 1917 (in retrospect)

I was lucky enough to have been found by an officer and taken into a hospital for care. Other soldiers weren't so lucky. No Man's Land has been completely destroyed. There is not a patch of green left and thousands have lost their lives. I will never forget any of it. I was sleeping in a shallow ditch in the trench, trying to catch a few moments of rest before work duties again. John was picking fleas off his uniform and George was writing discreetly in his diary. Suddenly a soldier followed by a barking dog sprinted down the trenches shouting, "The Germans are attacking, quickly everyone, grab your weapons!" I looked at John and George who exchanged terrified looks and we quickly grabbed our rifles and climbed over the trenches into No Man's Land. There were constant gun shots going off and grenades hitting the trenches, causing loud explosions. I looked around clutching my rifle. Soldiers whom I knew were being killed just a few feet away from me. A bullet immediately struck my arm and I squealed in agony. It was then that George came rushing up to me and helped me to my feet. John was not there with him. I peered into the distance and through the crowd of fighting soldiers and I saw a German soldier as he gave a sly smile and aimed his rifle towards John. I shouted "John, look out!" He turned towards me, his eyes red and full of apprehension. But before I knew it he was gone. He collapsed in a heap on the field with a bullet through his head. My best friend had just been killed.

I was going to sprint to where his body lay, but an officer pulled me away. He said that there was nothing I could do and I knew with a heavy heart he was right. He told me, George and a couple of other soldiers to try and reach the German trenches. So we all rushed towards their trenches, shooting along the way. We climbed down quietly into the German trenches, our hands shaking with fear. I could not even hold the rifle straight. I was shocked and surprised to find that the conditions were much better in their trenches than ours. The trenches were empty. The trench walls were lined with tied willow and barbed wire and I did

not see many of the pesky rats about. It was then I glimpsed a sudden movement coming from the corner of the trench. A German soldier came out of the blue and pointed his rifle at me. I was paralysed with fear and stood motionless. I thought this was the end. His hands were shaking and his eyes were full of tears. He gestured to me to escape by flicking the barrel of his gun to the side. I was shocked when he did this but kept quiet and fled from that side of the trench.

I sensed something strange in the atmosphere and quickly turned around. Some distinctly yellow gas tumbled in at high speeds. I let out a frenzied cry, "GAS! GAS!" All the British soldiers halted on the spot and fumbled as they desperately tried to pull out their gas masks. At times the gas masks don't provide efficient protection from the gas particles. But it was better than nothing! I quickly looked around and saw George and some other soldiers hurrying away from the gas. They were about to put on their Gas Masks but were too late. They were engulfed by the smoke and I saw blood coming out of their noses. It was then I felt a sudden faintness come over me. The last sounds I heard were of footsteps gradually getting louder.

### Appendix

Patient name: Blackmore, Charles

Hospital: No 4 British Red Cross, Sir Henry Norman's Hospital, France

Date of Admission: 29/01/1917

Date of Discharge: 14/03/1917

Private Blackmore is a 17 year old soldier who was admitted to us in the early hours of the morning on the 29<sup>th</sup> January 1917 after being injured on the Western Front. He was unconscious on arrival and had remained in that condition for the most part of the day. As well as the common and obvious blisters and sores scattered all over his skin resulting from exposure to fumes and gas, we detected through an x-ray scan that the humerus of his left arm had been fractured. Although there was no trace of a bullet, we were certain that a bullet was the cause of the injury, as there was a circular laceration on the skin over this area. His temperature was abnormally high and this was presumed to be a presentation of trench fever. Evidence of this was confirmed through the presence of a few body lice on his uniform. Additionally, he had suffered from a major blood loss and was found to be in a state of significant malnourishment.

With respect to treatment of this particular patient, management was prioritised according to the severity of the presenting complaints. Private Blackmore successfully received a transfusion of two pints of blood in order to replace that which had been lost in the course of his injuries. Shortly after this procedure was carried out, the patient's pallor improved considerably. Furthermore, salt water was used to clean the wound caused by the circular laceration, which was thereafter dressed using a secure bandage. The fractured humerus was splinted, then fixed in place with plaster of Paris and we anticipate the duration of healing to be at least six weeks. With regards to his trench fever, his temperature was fluctuating throughout his stay, but very little could have been done, other than to wait for it to resolve through its own accord. However the patient had been complaining of headaches and muscle pain on a regular basis and was therefore prescribed with small doses of morphine to help with easing of his pain during his recovery. As he had shown signs of sufficient recovery, the patient was finally discharged from this infirmary on the 14<sup>th</sup> March subsequent to a satisfactory review. He was deemed fit to travel home to England where he may continue to recuperate with his family.

We have done everything we could for his physical scars, as to the emotional scars and trauma sustained, only time will tell.

Dr Francis Crawford, MRCP

TELEGRAM FROM THE OFFICE OF MILITARY RECORDS

To the family of Private George Milton

We deeply regret to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office that Private John Arthur George Milton was killed in action on the date of 25<sup>th</sup> January 1917 at the Western Front. He fought valiantly and served his King and Country well.

I am to add that any information that may be received as to Private Milton's burial will be communicated to you in due course.

I am,  
Sir or Madam,  
Your obedient servant,  
J. E. Brooke  
Officer in charge of Records