

LETTERS AND DIARIES

What do soldiers and nurses tell us about their experience of war?

Here are a number of extracts from soldiers' and nurses' letters and diaries telling us about the Western Front.

Look at these and use them to create a summary of as many of these aspects as possible.

Then create a short summary of the experiences. This may be as a letter, an imaginary diary entry, a poem, a video diary, a song or any other means of communication. Share this with your partner school.

ASPECT	YOUR NOTES
Living conditions	
Weather	
Nature of the fighting	
Health / hygiene / disease	
Attitudes to the war	
Attitudes to the enemy	
Mateship / Comradeship	
Injuries and Medical treatment	
Attitudes to other Allies	
Patriotism / nationalism	
Qualities of the soldiers and nurses	
Impact of the war on them	
Behind the lines	
Hopes and fears	
Responses to fighting	
Attitude to death and killing	

EVIDENCE

SOURCE 1 *Sister Aileen Lucas writing from 1 Australian General Hospital tent hospital in France, 1917*

The river was frozen ... The water pipes burst, and we could not get any water for some time, not even to wash the patients ... Here we received the casualties straight from the field, some very severely wounded, and feeling the cold very greatly. A great number of them had trench feet and frost-bite. Several patients were frozen to death in the ambulances coming down to us.

(Jan Bassett, *Guns and Brooches*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, page 56)

SOURCE 2 *Sister Alice Ross King, writing about experiencing an artillery barrage at a Casualty Clearing Station at Messines in 1917. During this attack four sisters received Military Medals for their bravery during the night.*

... I could hear nothing for the roar of the planes and the artillery. I seemed to be the only living thing about ... I kept calling for the orderly to help me and thought he was funkling, but the poor boy had been blown to bits ... I had my right arm under a leg which I thought was [a patient's she was trying to help] but when I lifted I found to my horror that it was a loose leg with a boot ... on it. One of the orderly's legs which had been blown off and had landed on the patient's bed. Next day they found the trunk up a tree about twenty yards away ...

(Bassett, pages 63-64)

SOURCE 3 *Nursing in 1AAH in Britain*

All my boys are either winged or legs off, shoulders blown away, big head wounds, but nearly all healed up and just little pieces of dead bone keeping them from healing up altogether. They are such fine fellows. Some have only had 12 operations.

We are getting more stumps every day and now have about 300 without legs and arms.

I am sorry for Australia for it will be nothing but broken down men after the war.

(Sister Queenie Avenell, in Rupert Goodman, *Queensland Nurses – Boer War to Vietnam*, Brisbane, Boolarong Publications, 1985 page 91)

SOURCE 4 *In a ward for the shell-shocked*

One realises what the horrors of war must be like to reduce such fine men to this state. One aged 26 is just like a child, learning to talk again. He's very bright, you can't exactly call him mental but his condition never improves. It's pathetic to see the toys and picture books on his locker ... I never did like working with mentals, for it takes so much out of me. I feel like a piece of chewed string after duty ... Shell shock is fearful, worse than death.

(Sister Evelyn Davies in Marianne Baker, *Nightingales in the Mud*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989 page 160)

SOURCE 5 *In a French surgical hospital*

They have a special Jaw Ward here, where they have all the smashed-up faces, and really they do wonders. They have a special French sculptor – most frightfully clever – who makes new jaws and noses and faces and the men will hardly be disfigured at all. This is a special Surgical Hospital and we get all the worst wounds – so you can imagine the work there is...

... you can't get anything but beastly pastry and cream things here. I am sick of the sight of French cooking.

(Olive Haynes <http://throughtheselines.com.au/2010/research/olive-haynes.html>)

SOURCE 6 *May Tilton*

When I commenced my work, I hardly knew where to begin. My first patient was a dear Scotch lad with his skull and right leg fractured, his left leg and one arm amputated. Minor wounds covered his body. He talked to me as I attended him, but never uttered a word of complaint. When the ordeal was over, I stood for a moment, feeling his pulse. He said:

‘How is it, sister?’

‘Fine. How do you feel now, laddie?’

‘I feel fine, too, thanks, sister.’

Next morning he died.

For several hours each day I assisted in the acute gassed wards. Most of the poor boys died, but those who still lived, to die later, suffered intensely. This mustard-oil gas burned their bodies ... We were unable to work for any length of time in these gassed wards. Stooping over out patients, we soon became affected by inhaling the gas. Our throats became sore and set us coughing, while our eyes became weak and watery. The odour of the ward was in our nostrils for weeks.

(Sister May Tilton, *The Grey Battalion*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1933)

SOURCE 9 *Sergeant K Lyall*

The country around here is very much knocked about by Artillery and shell holes are the worry of our lives - one cannot walk 10 metres in the dark without tumbling into one. Barbed wire entanglements are scattered about, and at night we have to keep our eyes open, otherwise we get caught in it. ... Grave yards are everywhere and no matter where one looks he sees little white crosses.

(KM Lyall, *Letters From An Anzac Gunner*, Lyall's Yarns, 1990 page 106)

SOURCE 10 *Citation for Military Medals*

Private William Harold Aundrick, Private Arthur Corbett, Private Hubert Allen Nason, all 25th Battalion, 11 November 1916

During attack on German position North of FLERS during 5th and 6th November, 1916 these men upon orders given, worked continuously for 30 hours carrying in wounded from NO MAN'S LAND despite heavy machine gun, shell and snipers' fire. They showed great determination under most trying circumstances working mostly in daylight. They are suffering still from their exertions. Military medal each.

(Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, 11 October 1917)

SOURCE 7 *Lt John Raws*

I can't sleep now because –
Six shells are bursting around here every minute
Guns are belching out shells, with a thunderous sound each time
The ground is shaking with each explosion
I am wet and the ground on which I rest is wet
My feet are cold, in fact I'm all cold with my two skimpy blankets
I am covered with dirt
I am hungry
I see no chance for a better tomorrow.

(Lt John Raws AWM 2DRL/0481)

SOURCE 8 *Sergeant L J Martin*

One of our officers got shell shock under all the shelling and he cried like a child. Some were calling out for their mother.

(Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Melbourne University Press, 2010 page 165)



SOURCE 11 *Lt H W Crowle*

24/8/16

Dearest Beat and Bill,

Just a line you must be prepared for the worst to happen any day. It is no use trying to hide things. I am in terrible agony. ... Tomorrow I shall know the worst as the dressing [on his wounded leg] was to be left for 3 days and tomorrow is the third day it smells rotten. I was hit running out to see the other officer who was with me but badly wounded. ... I got two machine gun bullets in the thigh. ... The Stretcher Bearers could not get the wounded out any way other than over the top and across the open. They had to carry me four miles with a man waving a red cross flag in front and the Germans did not open fire on us. Well dearest I have had a rest, the pain is getting worse and worse. ... So cheer up dear I could write on a lot but I am nearly unconscious. Give my love to Dear Bill and yourself, do take care of yourself and him.

Your loving husband

Bert.

(Lieutenant H W Crowle died a few hours after writing this letter. Gammage page 172)**SOURCE 12** *Lt John Raws*

The Australian casualties have been very heavy – fully 50 per cent in our brigade, for the ten or eleven days. I lost, in three days, my brother and two best friends, and in all six out of seven of all my officer friends (perhaps a score in number) who went into the scrap – all killed. Not one was buried, and some died in great agony. It was impossible to help the wounded at all in some sectors. We could fetch them in, but could not get them away. And often we had to put them out on the parapet to permit movement in the shallow, narrow, crooked trenches. The dead were everywhere. There had been no burying in the sector I was in for a week before we went there ...

One or two of my friends stood splendidly, like granite rocks round which the seas stormed in vain. They were all junior officers. But many other fine men broke to pieces. Everyone called it shell shock. But shell shock is very rare. What 90 per cent get is justifiable funk, due to the collapse of the helm – self-control ...

My battalion has been at it for eight days and one-third of it is left – all shattered at that. And they're sticking it still, incomparable heroes all. We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven, sleepless. Even when we're back a bit we can't sleep for our own guns. I have one puttee, a dead man's helmet, another dead man's gas protector, a dead man's bayonet. My tunic is rotten with other men's blood and partly splattered with a comrade's brains. It is horrible but why should you people at home not know.

(Letters of Lieutenant John A Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481)**SOURCE 13** *Private W D Gallway*

In one trench I saw three or four Germans pinned in. The side of the trench had closed in pinning them as they stood. The tops of their heads were blown off with machine guns. It was a horrible sight. Blood and brains had trickled down their faces and dried ... I was filled with delight to see so many Huns killed and could not help laughing.

(Gammage, page 228)**SOURCE 14** *Lieutenant J Maxwell*

At Vignacourt we faced an era of peace. We did not know it but we were destined never to go back to that hell of mud and steel in the north. There followed pleasant days of rustic joy, wine-drinking with an old couple with whom we were billeted.

(<http://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/58/vignacourt/>)

SOURCE 15 *Sergeant A Barwick*

A 24 JULY 1916

All day long the ground rocked & swayed backwards and forwards from the concussion ... men were driven stark staring mad & more than one of them rushed out of the trench over towards the Germans. Any amount of them could be seen crying and sobbing like children their nerves completely gone ... we were nearly all in a state of silliness & half dazed but still the Australians refused to give ground. Men were buried by the dozen, but were frantically dug out again some dead and some alive.

B 18 AUGUST 1916

I shall never forget the mad intoxication one seems to be in [during battle] ... you see absolutely no danger & will do almost anything, for the roar of the guns are ringing in your ears, & you can smell the salty fumes from the powder stinging your nostrils, & ... the shouts of the boys & the ... ghostly lights of the many colored flares ... these are moments when I reckon a man lives 10 minutes of this seems to be at the time worth a year of ordinary life, but the reaction sets in afterwards & nearly all men feel a faintness come over them ... but this don't last long either & you are soon itching for another smack at the rotten Hun.

C 5 NOVEMBER 1916

[Men were] falling everywhere & the boys struggling through the mud bogged nearly to the knees ... [In the German wire, I] got badly cut all over & ended up by getting hung up in the stuff for all the world like a sack of wool chucked onto a heap of barb wire, but I felt nothing at the time for my blood was running hot & we only thought of getting in their trench, the fighting by this time was very fierce, shells, mortars, & worse than all liquid fire bombs were falling among us like hail ... I had one of the most thrilling minutes of my life for I was rushing ... down a shallow trench ... when ... a Hun rushed out at me & made a desperate lunge

at my body. ... his bayonet slid down my rifle & stuck in the fleshy part of my leg ... a sharp stinging pain went through my body ... but I kept my block & before he could draw his rifle back for another attempt I shot him dead.

D 2nd AUGUST 1916

Another beautiful morning, & everything is so quiet & restful after the trying ordeal we have come through. I am sitting on lovely green grass & clover fully a foot high under the shade of a fine old apple tree. In front of me the old & grassy orchard runs for about 200 yards ... [to a] clear river with plenty of fine trout in her. Every here & there little columns of smoke are rising up towards the bright blue sky showing where the boys are camped & are cooking their breakfast ... On either side of me are lovely crops stretching right away to the horizon & broken here & there by little clumps of trees & great long avenues showing where the roads are running. Above, all the birds are singing for all they are worth, & the sun shines brightly over all. I can see the French women & girls at work in the fields, some reaping, mowing, hoeing, some at work with the teams helping cart the hay & clover in, others leading their cows home to be milked. It's wonderful how quiet the stock are here.

E 11th OCTOBER 1916

We are living pretty well just at present, plum puddings, cake & etc. being the order of the day, for we have a bonzer canteen & they supply us with plenty of money.

This evening we had a nice game of football, officers & all had a go. Funny you know, football about 3 miles behind the lines. It was in a nice little grass paddock all among the guns & howitzers.

The Belgians are bombarding heavily tonight, & the air is all quivering with the vibration from their guns.

continued >>

F 16th OCTOBER 1917

I am sitting writing all this tonight in a noisy crowded little estaminet ... At present you can scarce hear yourself talking. The little "boozer" is chock full of Tommies & Australians, & beer, wine ... are circulating freely & opening all their mouths. As for smoke, why you can scarce see to the end of the little room, & every now & again someone strikes up some old tunes on the piano & there is a violin to help. At present they are playing & everyone is singing "If You Were the Only Girl in the World". They have already sung "They Wouldn't Believe Me", that beautiful song that I first heard sung 18 months ago at the Gaiety in London, & the lovely strains always bring back old memories & days that have been & perhaps will come again.

Soldiers, take them all round, are very sentimental & anything in this nature appeals to them far more than any classical music ever would. This might seem strange to anyone outside khaki, but if they were only among us for a while they would understand. Perhaps the very fact of ours being so uncertain a life & the distance we are from home has a lot to do with it, & nowhere have I seen the power that music has to sway people so pronounced as among soldiers. Many & many a time have I seen tears brought to the eyes of some of the hardest men it would be possible to dig up anywhere & they have become as easily led as kids, so great a charm has sentimental music got.

G 17TH NOVEMBER 1917

This afternoon I went for a short walk down the little valley. Everything showed the signs of autumn: the trees slowly shedding their golden & russet leaves, gently floating down in the cold still air, covering the grass, which is fast turning yellowish, with a brown layer of leaves. The old trees looked very bare with the pale sunlight flooding the countryside & only here & there could be seen a few hardy flowers which still hung out in spite

of the cold winds & frosts. Nevertheless the old valley had a certain kind of beauty which was unmistakable. It must be a very beautiful little spot in spring & summer & a delightful place to spend a little holiday in, so quiet & peaceful & far removed from any big town. Salvecques is one of those quiet little French villages that still lie buried far from the roar & rattle of the busy towns & railways, & kinder people it would be hard to find. Once we get away from the war zone the difference in the people we meet is remarkable.

H 25TH APRIL 1918

We struck some pitiable sights all along the road for the poor old French people were tramping painfully along with their few treasured possessions done up in bundles which they were carrying in their hands. Some of the more fortunate ones had their carts & these were loaded with their few little scraps of furniture, bedding, some hay for their horses & etc., & on top as a rule there were seated some old people who had been driven from their one-time happy & prosperous homes & were now fleeing for their lives. Following the people up came their cattle, horses, sheep & etc., & among all this mixture we were threading our way slowly up to meet the wily Hun.

Now there is one thing I am going to say right here & that is this: when a lot of these old people saw we were Australians, they stopped on the road & some of them even turned back, such faith they have in our chaps. More than one old lady I heard say, "Bravo Australia, Australia bon," & some of the old people actually cried with joy & relief when they saw the lads coming up with that firm easy swinging stride which belongs to us alone when marching in columns. Here, they thought, were troops who would give Fritz a fight for it, come what may. I don't suppose you will believe me but what I say is quite true. We have a reputation second to none, & I don't think we are going to lose it either.

SOURCE 16 AIF casualties April 1916 – March 1919

Source	No. casualties	% of total casualties
High velocity bullets (rifle and machine-gun)	48 309	33.93
Shell fragments and shrapnel pellets	72 513	50.93
Hand bombs and grenades	2 714	1.90
Bayonets	396	0.28
Burial by shell burst, and aeroplane crash	Nil	Nil
Fire (flame-thrower)	Nil	Nil
Gas	16 822	11.82
Shell concussion ('shell shock')	1 624	1.14
Total	142 378	100.00

(Figures from A.G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services* Vol 2, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940.
For a monthly breakdown of statistics see www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/~rmallett/AIFcasualties.html)



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