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# Familiarising the Western Front

## Attachment to Belgium and France

The alien, repetitive, and shocking sights and sounds in Belgium and France contributed to infantrymen's sense of chronic crisis. Shellfire scarred the world around them; human and natural history were destroyed, sometimes in front of their very eyes. Nevertheless, soldiers – even if appalled – were able to familiarise, normalise, and become attached to what confronted them.

*The Dagger*, a soldiers' newspaper published by the 56th (London) Division, published an article in late 1918 playing on the often unconscious processes by which men internalised the war zone.[1] The author imagined that he had just arrived home on leave. As he alighted at Victoria Station, 'he suddenly lost his memory, or rather that part of it which covered his pre-war experience. He remembered only the life and surroundings of the line'. He had disembarked in a 'large town called London' (a name he had had last heard in Arras) and surveyed his surroundings with a professional eye: 'The trenches, strong points, dug-outs, wire and so on . . . are maintained and organised to a point of excellence' and 'discipline too becomes a reality here'.[2] The line began with a string of outposts along the river, which had 'a breastwork of solid granite' and were a 'comfortable height to fire over'. Worryingly, the defenders seemed 'idle'.[3] As he moved towards the rear, he found himself in the support line. This weaved its way down 'PICCADILLY TRENCH', before turning onto 'FLEET SUPPORT'. 'OXFORD TRENCH and HOLBORN TRENCH' formed the reserve line. Tube stations provided 'admirably equipped . . . dug-outs', while 'lorry-jumping is here officially recognised'. Food of unusually high quality was available in 'CARLTON in HAYMARKET Communication Trench' and he found 'plentiful' water at a 'gigantic' water-point in 'TRAFALGAR SQUARE' and a smaller bronze one in 'PICCADILLY CIRCUS'. Moving further back, he encountered 'BRITISH MUSEUM', which was one of largest of the salvage dumps he had ever seen. Apparently 'scrounging parties are detailed to clear areas literally thousands of miles away'. Pleasantly surprised, he noted that 'evidently the line here is very, very

[1] Cinq Neuf, 'On the London Front', *The Dagger* (1 November 1918), p. 26.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 27.

quiet' yet suspected that this had 'lulled the troops hereabouts into a false sense of security'. Consequently, he decided to 'patrol rather a nasty wood called BATTERSEA PARK'.[4]

The Western Front had become so familiar that this officer's mental map of the frontlines was transposed onto London with this satirical story pointing to the relationship that had developed between many men and their environment. This chapter describes how this came to be, and how these processes influenced soldiers' morale and sensemaking. It focuses on three central features of men's cognition: familiarisation, habituation, and attachment.

Their immediate physical surroundings dominated soldiers' present. George Mosse believed that service encouraged 'a heightened awareness of nature' and that imagined landscapes masked 'the reality of war'.[5] Men's experiences generally encouraged familiarisation with the world around them, which in turn cultivated meaning, created attachment, deflected crisis, and fostered endurance. This did not leave men ignorant of Belgium and France's horrors, but it made them more bearable, something that was aided by psychological habituation and normalisation. Men even developed an attachment to the places they inhabited. They were not passive inhabitants of the war zone. Instead, they explored it as tourists; traversed it by foot, road, and rail; invested it with personal and collective memories; became habituated to its more menacing characteristics; and spent time considering what their physical environment *meant*.

The environment has formed an increasingly important part of studies of modern war.[6] Even in twentieth-century conflicts, nature continued to play a central role and landscapes became actors of sorts. Tait Keller has revealed the ways in which the mountains conferred heroic stature onto soldiers serving in the Alps during the Great War.[7] British soldiers also developed a relationship with the physical world.[8] Combatants were revolted by the violation of the natural and human world, but trench warfare also saw the earth become a kind of home. Landscapes also provided a protective veil through which men interpreted the war.[9] An intimacy emerged from men's physical contact with their comrades and their surroundings.[10] The systems, processes, and patterns

[4] Ibid.
[5] Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, p. 107.
[6] C. Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (Manchester, 2012).
[7] T. Keller, *Apostles of the Alps: Mountaineering and Nation Building in Germany and Austria* (Chapel Hill, 2016); Keller, 'The Mountains Roar', pp. 253–274.
[8] Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, pp. 14–15; Jones, 'The Psychology of Killing', pp. 229–231. See also P.H. Hoffenberg, 'Landscape, Memory and the Australian War Experience, 1915–18', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 36 No. 1 (January 2001), pp. 111–131.
[9] Leed, *No Man's Land*, esp. pp. 37, 72, 105.
[10] Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, esp. ch. 2.

of soldiers' lives behind the lines helped men to develop relationships with the physical world and the civilians who shared these spaces.[11] Tommy's sense of place within the landscapes of Belgium and France was a key aspect of his 'endurance' and helps to explain 'why soldiers [chose to] fight'. By imbuing the Western Front with deep meaning, soldiers were able to adapt, accept, and find agency in their war experience. 'It was', Ross Wilson has argued, 'through the association with the landscapes which had been created by war, and the weapons and equipment of the conflict, that individuals took on and largely accepted their role within the army'.[12]

As the war transformed the natural world, another, less visible, process was taking place. Belgium and France were reconceptualised as trench lines were dug, and the BEF became a semi-permanent presence. The Western Front was anglicised. As many as 10,500 new trench names emerged as the war took on the character of a siege. These helped men to internalise an alternative map of northern France and Belgium. It became at once familiar, evocative, 'enchanted and mythical'.[13] Historian Chris Ward believes that these were 'a means by which immigrants asserted their presence'.[14] While these men never saw themselves as migrants, the towns and countryside were re-cast by the BEF's soldiers.[15] This could also occur in subtler forms, such as through the cultivation of allotments.[16] Tommy's material culture offers further evidence of his agency and character.[17]

This chapter explores the relationships that formed between infantrymen's morale and the Western Front. Individual and collective familiarisation took place. Men's engagement with the world was fed by psychological processes such as attachment.[18] Attachment theory explores the development of 'emotional

[11] Gibson, *Behind the Front*, pp. 53, 155. For other discussions of the area of British administration, A. Dowdall, 'Civilians in the Combat Zone: Allied and German Evacuation Policies at the Western Front, 1914–1918', *First World War Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2015), pp. 239–255. For sexual relationships, Gibson, 'Sex and Soldiering', 539–579; C. Makepeace, 'Male Heterosexuality and Prostitution during the Great War: British Soldiers' Encounters with *Maisons Tolérées*', *Cultural and Social History*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2012), pp. 65–83; Grayzel, 'Mothers, Marraines, and Prostitutes', pp. 66–82; Bourke, *Dismembering the Male*, pp. 155–156.

[12] Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, p. 218.

[13] Chasseaud, *Rats Alley*, p. 47.

[14] Ward, *Living on the Western Front*, p. 92.

[15] Gibson, *Behind the Front*, esp. pp. 188–221.

[16] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 24.

[17] P. Cornish and N.J. Saunders, *Bodies in Conflict* and *Modern Conflict and the Senses: Killer Instincts?* (London, 2016); Becker, 'Le front militaire et les occupations de la Grande Guerre', pp. 193–204.

[18] J. Bowlby, 'The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 39 (1958), pp. 350–373 and *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 1: Attachment* (New York, 1973).

and functional connections between place and people'.[19] The bond between infantrymen and their environment was central to his sensemaking and helped individuals to cope with an array of the chronic crises they encountered.

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Most English infantrymen adjusted to the Western Front. This was an organic process aided by predictable patterns of rotation in and out of the trenches as well as movement across Belgium and France. These changes of scene alleviated some of the pressures of service and allowed soldiers to begin familiarising their environment. This continued throughout the war, and many English infantrymen felt that they were occupying a recognisable world. Except in the most churned battlefields, they inhabited a landscape that was identifiable. The troops chose to explore, repurpose, and reconceptualise it.

Their lives were not limited to trenches. During the war, the 123 battalions that served in I through IV Division between 1914 and 1918 spent approximately 46 per cent of their time in the frontlines and 20 per cent of days fighting.[20] This does not mean that they were engaged in combat of the sort witnessed on the Somme or at Passchendaele so regularly. The remainder of their time was spent in camps and billets. Even at the front, units could expect to spend between a quarter and half of their time in reserve or rest billets several miles behind the trenches.[21] Processes of rotation helped soldiers cope with the pressures of service and nurtured familiarisation. Servicemen often returned to the same places. They sometimes spent months in a particular area of Belgium or France, be it along the coastline stretching from Dunkirk to Le Havre, in Belgian and French Flanders, Artois, or Picardy.

## Journeys on the Western Front: Familiarisation, Exposure, and Exploration

The British line was not unchanging. During the war, it grew and crept southwards from the channel ports. Battalions were tied to areas depending on that year's military strategy, and each sector was known for its 'nuances and

[19] H. Hashemnezhad, A.A. Heidari and P.M. Hoseini, '"Sense of Place" and "Place Attachment": A Comparative Study', *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2013), p. 5.

[20] R. Grayson, 'A Life in the Trenches? The Use of *Operation War Diary* and Crowdsourcing Methods to Provide an Understanding of the British Army's Day-To-Day Life on the Western Front', *British Journal of Military History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2016), esp. p. 174.

[21] P. Simkins, 'Soldiers and Civilians: Billeting in Britain and France', in Beckett and Simpson, *A Nation in Arms*, p. 178.

specificities'.[22] In 1914, after the war became static, the BEF's line stretched only twenty-four miles from the north-east of Kemmel to east of Festubert – with French or Belgian troops plugging a few holes here and there. On the eve of the Battle of the Somme, it had grown to over eighty miles long and extended in a 'continuous [line] from north to south'. It started at Boesinghe (just north of Ypres) and ended at Maricourt on the banks of the river Somme. By 20 March 1918, it was 123 miles long. Beginning at the south-west corner of Houthulst Forest in Belgium, it passed through Barisis in Picardy to the St. Gobain Railway on the Aisne. Following the spring offensives, the line contracted and expanded alongside patterns of retreat and advance.[23]

Some parts of the line were renowned for being 'quieter' and less dangerous than others.[24] A few areas (such as the Ypres Salient) were occupied by the British for most of the war and bore a strong imprint of the BEF. Behind the frontlines, there was an 'immense infrastructure' comprising of 'hospitals, barracks, training camps, ammunition dumps, artillery parks, and telephone networks, as well as military roads and canals, but pre-eminently it meant railways'.[25] Some men arrived in these places while they still retained traces of their original form. Witnessing their conversion into 'industrial wastelands' was a traumatic experience.[26] It is no surprise, then, that peace saw an international movement to 'repair ruined lands' and to 'mask the death and destruction' with 'lush lands' that represented 'innocence, peace, and return to normalcy'.[27]

While this was a relatively limited front (especially compared to the vast expanses in the East), local geography varied and influenced the character of the warfare. Landscapes and geology could also inform soldiers' perceptions of the conflict more generally. The environments soldiers encountered sometimes acted as a foil for their emotions. In Flanders, for example, the water table necessitated the building of breastworks above the ground while, in the south, where the line extended through Picardy, men were forced to dig down into the soil itself. Loos' old coal mines and slag heaps were evidence of an industry that, in peace, helped to feed the French economy but now offered defenders an excellent strong-point and made battle an even more unpleasant experience for the attacker.[28] Around Arras, historic quarrying provided

[22] S. Audoin-Rouzeau, 'Combat and Tactics', in J. Winter (ed.), *Cambridge History of The First World War: Volume II: The State* (Cambridge, 2014), p. 161.
[23] 'Part XXII: The British Line in France', in HM Stationery Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire* (London, 1922), p. 639.
[24] Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1914–1918*, p. 15.
[25] D. Stevenson, *1914–1918: The History of the First World War* (London, 2004), p. 182.
[26] T. Keller, 'Mobilizing Nature for the First World War: An Introduction', in Tucker et al., *Environmental Histories*, p. 5.
[27] Ibid., p. 14.
[28] 'Battle of Loos', *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, Vol. XVI, No. 1 (1 January 1916), pp. 21–25.

soldiers with cavernous protection within the limestone itself. A subterranean life might have been safer, but it held its own traumas. In 1917, those units that were posted to the Yser Front served around Nieuport and spent much of their time staring out into the North Sea or surveying the river for an enemy crossing.[29] Some regions offered protection; others (particularly around Ypres) provided little to help servicemen survive. The red-brown mud found around the city also seemed to take on the quality of blood. In poor conditions, the heavily manured soil was also the perfect habitat for infectious organisms like *Clostridium*, which caused gas gangrene. Yet, mud was not omnipresent. Behind the lines (especially in better weather), there were opportunities to retreat into relatively unscarred countryside and settlements.

The war was a journey, and this fed an organic process of familiarisation. Most men's perceptions of Belgium and France were filtered through personal experience. It was what they saw, heard, and smelt that mattered as they built a picture of the Western Front. Their first trip across the Channel was dominated by anticipation and imagination; for those returning from leave or recuperation, it was tainted by trepidation. For many, this was their first international journey, but even the well-travelled sensed that this was a new passage in their lives.[30] Regular soldiers were accustomed to overseas service, but the cross-Channel voyage was a symbol of change.[31] Men glimpsed their sister service as Royal Navy destroyers accompanied traffic and were made aware that they were entering another nation's territory as their ships were inspected by French vessels, which provided them with their first opportunity to cheer their allies.[32]

Charles Dwyer spent several days at sea. When his boat hove to off Saint Nazaire, he and his comrades spent time staring at the novel building fronts.[33] Their first sight of land was met with 'a thrill of genuine excitement'.[34] Other men had less comfortable crossings and complained about the lack of refreshment or food. Many became nervous in bad weather.[35] Frederick William Child's trip from Southampton to Le Havre was a prolonged affair. The rough seas were compounded by embarkation delays in England and a long wait before being allowed to alight in France.[36] Child became very seasick in the cramped hold of the transport ship. However, when the

[29] TNA WO 95/3144/6: War Diary 2/5th Manchester Regt. July–September 1917.
[30] 'The 48th Regiment in the Great European War. A Brief Survey of the Operations in Which the Regiment Was Engaged', *The Talavera Magazine*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1 January 1920), p. 3.
[31] J. Lewis-Stempel, *Six Weeks: The Short and Gallant Life of the British Officer in the First World War* (London, 2010), pp. 72–73.
[32] MR 1/17/34: Letter from Lt. Col. F.H. Dorling to his Wife 24 August 1914.
[33] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 3–5 September 1914.
[34] 'In Foreign Parts', *The Red Feather*, Vol. I, No. 4 (1 June 1915), p. 69.
[35] IWM Documents.14710: R.D. Sheffield, Letter to Father 9 November 1914.
[36] SOFO Box 16 Item 42: F.W. Child, Diary 18–20 November 1916.

opportunity arose, he walked and 'watched the ships go by + the hills + fires in the distance . . . The scenery was lovely'.[37]

Soldiers' first steps on French soil were often in one of the ports facing the English Channel. The cobbled streets offered an uneven surface on which to regain their 'land legs', but this was a relatively peaceful introduction to the war. These bases maintained a near-constant British presence throughout the conflict – though sites such as Le Havre were briefly evacuated during the German advances of 1914. Familiarity was bred by the strong imprint Britain left on these places, some of which almost became BEF settlements. Some individuals felt they were remarkably 'English'.[38] However, in August 1914, the crowds of civilians welcoming the soldiers also underlined the 'foreignness' of the country.[39] Nevertheless, even in 1914, the majority of people that R.D. Sheffield encountered were from England.[40] One soldier had already come to consider Calais in the same breath as England and 'Hyde Park'.[41] A near-constant flow of soldiers passed through Boulogne, Calais, Le Havre and Rouen.[42] They quickly became semi-permanent centres of army logistics, and thousands of soldiers were based and billeted there.[43] So well-trodden were these routes that Lt. Frederic Anstruther formulated a code through which he could inform his father in which of these ports he had arrived.[44] In Le Havre, the British Army became a central feature of civic life. 1st Base HQ was established at Quai Transatlantique, while other headquarters, direct-orships, services, and supply depots requisitioned other buildings throughout the town. It became hard to believe that one was not in the United Kingdom. The same was true elsewhere. A post-war soldiers' travel guide noted that:

> During the war Boulogne became practically an English city; that is to say, a very large proportion of its inhabitants were British. There were huge rest camps for troops going on leave and returning from leave, situated near the harbour; hospitals sprang up in every direction, and were

[37] Ibid., Diary 19 November 1916.
[38] A. Mayhew, 'British Expeditionary Force Vegetable Shows, Allotment Culture, and Life Behind the Lines during the Great War', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 5 (Dec. 2021), esp. pp. 1360–1361.
[39] IWM Con Shelf: Postcard Signed by 'The Mademoiselle from Armentieres', Extract from local paper, perhaps the *Bucks Advertiser*, regarding the experience of Pte J.T. Greenwood, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, published 24 October 1914.
[40] IWM Documents.14710: R.D. Sheffield, Letter to Father 9 November 1914.
[41] IWM Documents.8631: Diary of an Unidentified Soldier of the [2nd Battalion] Border Regiment, 25 December 1914.
[42] IWM Documents.20770: A.L. Collis, Diary 3 and 19 January 1918.
[43] IWM Documents.8674: Pocket Diary 1914, August–September 1914; SOFO Box 16 Item 42: F.W. Child, Diary 19 November 1916.
[44] IWM Documents.9364: Lt. Frederic Anstruther, Letter to his Father 25 February 1915.

> perpetually full of wounded soldiers; thousands of officers and clerks were employed upon the duties connected with a huge base.[45]

In 1916, R.E.P. Stevens reported that '[one] cannot realise we have arrived in another country everything seems so English'. Stevens found that he was 'only reminded the place was a French port by the names on the shops'. The surrounding countryside even looked like England.[46] These were pleasant places to pass some time while not on duty. M.F. Gower reported,

> Havre is quite a decent town with its gay shops and cafes, shady avenues of trees, gardens and squares and is quite lively especially after 6 p.m. when the cafes are open to British troops. It is very pleasant sitting in the latter sipping harmless beer, the only drawback are the number of beggars who come in and sing horrible songs thro' their noses.[47]

Men also consumed less 'harmless' alcohol and embraced the opportunity to satiate their carnal desires.[48]

Parts of the coast were within easy reach and offered the chance for a brief holiday. Paris Plage was particularly popular. R.E.P. Stevens noted that it was 'picturesque and brought to my mind a picture I once saw of the Pied Piper of Hamelin'.[49] It was in these Channel Ports that soldiers also felt closest to home as they stared across the breaking surf towards Blighty and consumed up-to-date newspapers from England.[50] By 1918, these hives of activity also reflected the war's international character. The sight of a large contingent of 'Chinese and Black men' in Le Havre (alongside the cafés) reminded H.T. Madders that he was no longer in England.[51]

The towns also became familiar through repeated exposure and activity. Soldiers spent long periods of time resting, training, or recuperating from injuries in these places.[52] In fact, their suburbs and surrounding countryside were transformed by the war. Sprawling networks of British rest and depot camps, hospitals, prisons, Prisoner of War (POW) camps, and administrative offices grew outside many of these settlements. Between them were allotment

[45] Lt. Col. T.A. Lowe, *The Western Battlefields: A Guide to the British Line* (London, 1920), p. 6.
[46] IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 2, 6 and 12 November 1916.
[47] IWM Documents.255: M.F. Gower, Letter to Flo 26 June 1917.
[48] IWM Documents.7453: Col. L.H.M. Westropp, Memoir, p. 61.
[49] IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 13 November 1916.
[50] IWM Documents.7953: Pte. F.G. Senyard, Letter to Wife 14 December 1916.
[51] IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 29 March 1918. See Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, p. 92; X. Guoqi, *Strangers on the Western Front: Chinese Workers in the Great War* (London, 2011).
[52] IWM Documents.20770: A.L. Collis, Diary 18 December 1916–1 January 1917; SOFO Box 16 Item 30 3/4/J3/9: Lt. C.T. O'Neill, Diary 1–25 January 1918.

gardens built and maintained by soldiers.[53] There were church tents and a wide array of different trades – carpenters, tailors, shipwrights, coopers, and bakers, and an array of other 'support troops'.[54] Peculiarly British cultural pursuits also took place here. Sports and theatrical activities were common to nearly every part of the rear zone.[55] Nevertheless, the units posted to these bases permanently were blessed with theatre and music hall troupes that had more time to practice and buildings permanently set aside as theatres. The Royal Garrison Artillery Base Depot at Le Havre even maintained a complement of talented professional footballers.[56] More uniquely, in 1917 and 1918, the depot commander of Le Havre sought to improve yields in the soldiers' allotments by holding a vegetable competition and show in the city's Jardin St. Roche.[57]

Familiarity was not necessarily always positive. Training camps were rarely the location of soldiers' happiest memories. The most famous of these was the 'Bull Ring' at Étaples, where men were confined to a site on the outskirts of the town.[58] It began life in 1914 when new drafts were billeted there for the final stage of their training.[59] By 1916, it had grown exponentially with some 3,000 men training there each day.[60] 'Bull-ring' drill was strenuous but also became more specialised as the war went on.[61] The facilities diversified: there were shooting ranges, mock trenches and battlefields, live-fire exercises, gas simulations, and lectures that sought to teach men 'how to behave and what to avoid in France [and, presumably, Belgium]'.[62] It might have offered a first taste of warfare, but this experience fuelled common grievances. P.R. Hall recalled that the instructors were particularly hostile; the treatment of the men was a 'disgrace to the army and to GHQ'. Hall was left with the impression of a 'dirty and uncared for' place.[63] R.E.P. Stevens felt that the training indicated that 'they [GHQ] don't know what to do with us'.[64] It is unsurprising this was

[53] 'A Modest Beginning', *The Spud*, No. 1 (2 March 1918), 1 and 'Play for Your Side', *Sport & Spuds*, '20th Course' (27 August 1918), p. 1.
[54] 'Extract from "Le Havre" March 25th A.D. 2015', *The Hanger Herald*, No. 7 (1 April 1915), pp. 1–2.
[55] Fuller, *Troop Morale*, pp. 72–133.
[56] BL Tab.11748.aa.4.65: Charity Football Match Programme 25 November 1917.
[57] BL Tab.11748.aa.4.1-122: First World War, Misc. Leaflets, Programmes, Documents 90–113.
[58] IWM Documents.15268: E. Grindley, Memoir, p. 4; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0313: Pte. C. Clark, Memoir, p. 25.
[59] IWM Documents.11442: Lt. Col. K.F.B. Tower, Memoir, p. 5.
[60] IWM Documents.1708: Lt. W.B. Medlicott, Diary – Book 2, p. 7.
[61] 'S.O.S. Lights', *24th Battalion Journal*, No. 1 (16 September 1916), p. 9.
[62] IWM Documents.2619: L. Wilson, Memoir, p. 18. Institutional documents quite frequently only refer to 'France' when discussing the Western Front.
[63] IWM Documents.1690: P.R. Hall, Memoir, p. 30.
[64] IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 13–18 November 1916.

the location of the BEF's worst wartime mutiny in September 1917.[65] Despite this, though, in 1918 young conscripts were still arriving at Étaples and other camps for 'toughening up' that men reported was 'general fooling' that 'nearly broke our hearts'.[66]

However, Étaples was not universally despised. 2nd Lt. W.J. Lidsey had a better experience in November 1916. Detailed for specialist training alongside the Royal Flying Corps, he stayed in billets that were much better than those of the infantry. The experience was improved further by a happy carriage ride to training alongside a young French woman.[67] It was not only one long drilling exercise. The camp, like others in Belgium and France, also catered for other pastimes. There were 'hospitals – stores – main roads constructed cobbled – goods station – recreation huts in large numbers, YMCA, Scottish churches, church army & huts by private people – canteens Cinema – concerts in YMCA & Other huts'.[68] Despite these diversions, conversation was often directed towards 'events … "up the line"'.[69] Unpleasant though they may have been, these experiences were a tentative introduction to the Western Front and kick-started an institutionally driven process of familiarisation and normalisation.[70]

Men moved up the line from these camps. Much of the movement necessitated route marches, which offered offered a tiring but intimate introduction to Belgium and France. Some men enjoyed the exercise, and others found the experience of 'passing through so many villages and towns' diverting. The sights (materiel, places, and people) helped them to make sense of the war's progress beyond their unit.[71] The experience of marching could also help to solidify *esprit de corps*. Men sang as they marched and used the lyrics to express a common identity and to 'grouse'.

However, journeys were often arduous. In 1914, nearly all travel was done on foot. This could prove problematic for morale. The 4th Bn. Royal Fusiliers reported that during a 'freezing' night march on 20 November, the men's discipline had been 'very bad'.[72] They faced a similar problem on 30 November when many men fell out during a march to

[65] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0313: Pte. C. Clark, Memoir, p. 25.
[66] LIDDLE/WW1/ADD/104: Pte. A.G. Old, Diary 2–6 April 1918; IWM Documents.16824: R.C.A. Frost, Memoir, p. 1.
[67] IWM Documents.16504: 2nd Lt. W.J. Lidsey, Diary 23 November 1916.
[68] RFM.ARC.3032: L/Cpl. C. White, Diary 4 January 1917.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Strachan, 'Training, Morale and Modern War', p. 216.
[71] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 4–11 October 1914; IWM Documents.12819: Maj. J.S. Knyvett, Diary 24 October 1914; MR 2/17/57: 2nd Lt. Frederick Thomas Kearsley Woodworth, Extract from F.T.K. Woodworth's Diary. 1914–1918 – 25 March 1918; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0583: 2nd Lt. Sydney Frankenburg, Diary 27 October 1918.
[72] TNA WO 95/1431/1: War Diary 4th Bn. Royal Fusiliers, 20 November 1914.

Westoure.[73] Between 24 August and 5 September 1914, the 2nd Bn. Ox and Bucks marched 178 miles with only one day's rest.[74] By 1916, units were still spending between eleven and twelve days on the move between October and December.[75] Marching remained a central feature of the infantrymen's experience. In 1917, a unit shifting from Neuve Chapelle to Arras could still expect several days of tiring travel. Furthermore, during the chaos of the British retreat after 21 March 1918, battalions spent over a week retreating (and fighting) on foot.[76] Nevertheless, marching helped soldiers to become personally acquainted with the Western Front.

In later years, soldiers benefited from the BEF's more sophisticated logistical apparatus. Lorries, boats, and trains transported servicemen and offered them a different vision of Belgium and France. Some men journeyed on 'enormous barges' along the canals that connected towns and camps.[77] Travel in the ubiquitous 'cattle trucks' was less enjoyable. These train journeys, which sometimes lasted all night, left men tired, hungry, and thirsty. Some soldiers feared that they were more vulnerable to shellfire in these slow-moving locomotives.[78] There was also a 'sinister suggestion of equivalence' in the painted legend 'Hommes 40; Chevaux 8'.[79] However, W. Vernon concluded that while 'we don't have a very pleasant ride on the train [it is …] still it is better than marching with a full pack'.[80] Many individuals focused on the scenery that passed them by (if travelling in daylight hours). Squatting on the floor of the cramped carriages, men peered through 'the [carriage's] grill'.[81] The slow pace of movement allowed them to observe the landscapes passing by, which sometimes provided views of unscarred countryside – a welcome vision of peace for men returning from the trenches.[82]

The patterns of rotation meant that divisional or brigade rest camps became familiar waypoints. Yet, rest was rare amidst the fatigues, working parties, and training programmes that took place in such places. When given the opportunity, though, soldiers would walk to explore and unwind. The chance to wander

[73] Ibid., 30 November 1914.
[74] TNA WO 95/1348: War Diary 2nd Bn. Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Extract from the Diary of Lt. Col. H.R. Davies, Commanding 52nd Light Infantry.
[75] October through December 1916 in War Diaries of TNA WO 95/1655/1: 2nd Bn. Border Regiment [16 days]; WO 95/1565/1: 1st Bn. Devonshire Regiment [13 days]; WO 95/1564/2: 2nd Bn. Manchester Regiment [8 days]; 2nd Bn. Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry [13 days]; WO 95/1431: 4th Bn. Royal Fusiliers [8 days]; WO 95/1484/1: 1st Bn. Royal Warwickshire Regiment [12 days].
[76] Ibid. War Diary March–April 1918.
[77] IWM Documents.20329: H.E. Baker, Memoir, Part 6, p. 2.
[78] IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 3 April 1918.
[79] C.S.W., *The Outpost*, Vol. III (1 July 1916), p. 118.
[80] IWM Documents.12771: W. Vernon, Letter marked 22 July 1918 – addressed to Miss L Vernon.
[81] C.S.W., *The Outpost*, Vol. III (1 July 1916), p. 118.
[82] Ibid. Also IWM Documents.15040: A.E. Heywood, Diary 15 November 1917.

upright in comparative safety was a welcome one.[83] In 1914, even the area surrounding Ypres retained traces of the pre-war world. Houses, civilians, and evidence of once peaceful communities remained, and Charles Dwyer visited a café barely a hundred metres behind the frontline.[84] Capt. Maurice Asprey was able to purchase fresh meat, eggs, and sweets from the farms around his rest camp.[85] Postcards collected and produced during this time show that towns still retained much of their original form.[86]

The extension of the line in 1916 offered men a new opportunity to explore Picardy. It was still relatively unscarred by the war, which improved men's morale.

> The neighbourhood of Amiens, prior to the great attack of July 1st [was] a very delightful country [... with] beautiful woods, full of shady trees; cold rivers, pleasant to bathe in; happy, smiling villages, inhabited by simple and hospitable villagers; and, last, but not least, the lovely city of Amiens, with its open-air cafes and tempting shop-windows brim full of life and interest.[87]

Yet, the Somme region fell victim to the conflict, becoming a 'dreary ... joke'.[88] However, orchards and valleys in rear areas continued to offer some distractions. Even in late 1917 and early 1918, it was still possible to find entertainment in a few locations close to the line.[89] A.E. Haywood spent many evenings drinking in the towns near his camp. On 11 November he 'went into the village ... and got pretty well oiled up on Vin Rouge and Benedictine and Vin Blanc with beer for a change'.[90] Conversing with locals in stuttering pidgin French was absorbing, and combatants embraced any opportunity to speak to somebody not wearing khaki.[91] Even in 1918, J. Grimston still enjoyed Arras (despite the intense fighting that had taken place there in 1917) for its limited shopping and theatre.[92] However, such diversions were often inaccessible to

[83] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 27 September 1914; IWM Documents.12027: S. Judd, 30 December 1914; IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 21 November 1916; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0583: 2nd Lt. S. Frankenburg, Letter 19 December 1917; IWM Documents.14517: Capt. P. Ingleson, Letter to Miss Fulton 6 February 1918.

[84] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 24 October 1914.

[85] NAM 2005-02-6: Capt. M. Asprey, Letters to Mother 25 and 30 November and 4 December 1914 and Letters to Father 29 November and 20 December 1914.

[86] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0946: D.G. Le May, Postcard 132. La Grande Guerre 1914–15: 'Ruines de VERMELLES (Pas-de-Calais), – Cette ville réoccupée par nos troupes après une lutte héroique qui dura plusieurs semaines A.R. vis Paris 132.'

[87] Lowe, *The Western Battlefields*, p. 16.

[88] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0273: Capt. C. Carrington, Incomplete Letters to Mother 1916 [No. 89-105].

[89] NAM 7403-29-486-144: Sgt. H. Hopwood, Letter to Mother & All 15 December 1917.

[90] IWM Documents.15040: A.E. Heywood, Diary 11 November 1917.

[91] W. Louis Ruhl, 'A Prize Packet', *The Castronical*, Vol. I, No. 3 (1 May 1916), p. 6.

[92] IWM Documents.14752: J. Grimston, Diary 24 February 1918.

poorer men in the rank and file who frequently complained about the cost of living and price of entertainment.[93]

The relative comfort of rear zones encouraged a more constructive relationship with the environment. The *BEF Times* characterised 'Pop' [Poperinghe] as 'our holiday resort . . . horrible . . . as it was . . . It provided a break of sorts from the eternal mud and shells', though it had 'somehow fallen into disrepute'. It was vulnerable to shellfire but remained a relative haven compared to nearby Ypres. These places were prized for their *comparative* security. Another man recalled that 'Pop':

> stood for everything that meant civilization to the British Army. The road from Poperinghe to Ypres was known to every soldier: to march eastwards on this road meant work, trenches, mud – everything unpleasant; to march westwards meant rest, a 'comfy' dinner in the town, and possibly an evening at the club.[94]

Soldiers explored Belgium and France as soldier-tourists when they could, seeking out novel sights and experiences.[95] An article in one soldiers' journal, written after the Germans had been driven away from Arras, produced a short history of the city so that soldiers could recognise places of significance (where shellfire had not reduced them to rubble).[96] It was, perhaps, such an interest that led S.R. Hudson to collect spoons as mementoes of his time there as well as in Amiens, Boulogne-sur-Mer, and Doullens.[97] Men developed more intimate memories and diversified their routines; they saw new things and met new people.[98] Activities ranged from the mundane to the intimate. While 'cleaning equipment' behind the lines, soldiers were 'unofficially' 'frying eggs, drinking *café-au-lait* – the more fortunate ones, *café-au* something else, or teaching English to some ambitious demoselle [sic]'.[99] Henry Lawson only wished that he had a camera to 'show [his mother that] we are happy and do have amusing times'.[100] These places and regions were a tonic for the frontlines'

[93] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0144: A&C Black and Company, Employees of A.C. Black Publishers, Letters 1917–1918 from E.G. Gilscott; IWM Documents.7953: Pte. F.G. Senyard, Letter 14 December 1916.
[94] Lowe, *The Western Battlefields*, p. 11.
[95] A. Mayhew, 'A War Imagined: Postcards and the Maintenance of Long-Distance Relationships during the Great War', *War in History*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (April 2021), pp. 12–17.
[96] 'Arras', *The Dagger*, No. 1 (1 November 1918).
[97] IWM Documents.13760: Maj. S.R. Hudson, Images of Memento Spoons from the Western Front.
[98] K. Cowman, 'Touring Behind the Lines: British Soldiers in French Towns and Cities during the Great War', *Urban History*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (February 2014), pp. 105–123.
[99] J.T.S., '*Chez la Coiffeuse*', *The Outpost*, Vol. III, No. 3 (1 June 1916), p. 3.
[100] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0933: H. Lawson, Letter to his Mother 16 September 1917.

destruction.[101] As such, F.L. Clark wrote to Lt. J.H. Johnson on 12 December 1916: 'Plugstreet must seem even as the abode of the blessed to you' after 'the hell's delight of the Somme'.[102]

## Familiarising and Coping with the Frontlines

It was harder (and more dangerous) to familiarise the firing line. The destruction could be overwhelming, and soldiers sometimes felt that this was a world bereft of life.[103] The frontlines also contained constant reminders of combatants own mortality. In late 1914, shellfire had already shattered the landscape. J.E. Mawer explained that 'it is a sight to see the Villages we go through with most of the houses blown down by the shell[s]'.[104]

By 1915, Ypres was a 'dead city', 'its glories ... gone for ever'.[105] A soldier walking through its ruins was confronted by 'the broken walls of the Cloth Hall overshadowed by a fantastic fragment of the great church of St Martin, the crumbling belfry sliced by a gigantic shell'.[106] It created an 'impression of sadness and utter desolation' and left some soldiers 'overwhelmed by the tragedy of it all'.[107] However, it was still possible to interact with the city's rich history. Many buildings surrounding the marketplace were 'ruins', but a roofless café remained on Rue Jules Capron. On Rue d'Elverdinghe, there were also some 'modest shops and cafés' with flagstaffs 'tilted over the freshly swept roadway'. These became a symbol of resistance. Gardens, still bright with flowers, could also be explored even if the houses behind them had been reduced to a 'single red brick wall'.[108] 'Picturesque Ypres still stood, though torn and maimed, a shadow of her former self.'[109] The cellars, which also operated as shelters (and occasionally tombs), were places of discovery.[110] St Martin's sacristy had escaped the worst of the destruction and works 'by old Flemish masters still hung on the wall'. By 1916, though, there was little left except ruins, 'gigantic holes', and 'the rugged spikes of the ruined cathedral'.[111] Even so, Ypres' piles of ancient masonry, 'mighty

[101] IWM Documents.15040: A.E. Heywood, Diary 14 November 1917; IWM Documents.17029: Capt. A.J. Lord, Letter to Father 29 December 1917.
[102] IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Letter from F.L. Clark 12 December 1916.
[103] IWM Documents.16020: Capt. E. Lycette, Memoir, p. 55; NAM 1998-08-31: Pte. A. J. Symonds, Diary 26–29 July 1916.
[104] SOFO Box 16 Item 35 3/4/C/2: Pte. J.E. Mawer, Letter to Wife *c.* Christmas 1914, Doc.29.
[105] For the pre-war origins of these kinds of description see M. Connelly and S. Goebel, *Ypres* (Oxford, 2018).
[106] 'The Dead City of Ypres', *The "Snapper*, Vol. X, No. 6 (June 1915), p. 103.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid., pp. 103–104.
[109] 'Ypres. April/May,1915', *Cambridgeshire Territorial Gazette*, No. 4 (1 October 1916), p. 73.
[110] Ibid., p. 77.
[111] 'Reflections on Being Lost in Ypres at 3 a.m.', *The Wipers Times*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (12 February 1916).

**Figure 1.1** Ruins of the Cloth Hall in the City of Ypres, 1914.

Source: Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

rampart caverns', and the 'many cellars of her mansions' became a sort of 'home' for the British soldier and retained a strange beauty.[112]

The destruction became more pronounced as the years passed. Along the line, there was 'the same complete annihilation of the treasures of centuries'.[113] As he made his way to the trenches, Pte. F.G. Senyard felt that he was leaving any trace of 'civilisation' behind him.[114] Dilapidated villages and inanimate trench lines made the journey a 'horror'.[115] Forward zones felt 'unearthly'.[116] The 'terrible sights' of 'trees like stumps and every inch of the hill sides churned up with shell fire' resembled 'hell'.[117] It was the evidence of personal loss that was most depressing. Lt. W.B. Medlicott noted that artillery fire had 'scattered all the belongings right and left – there is nothing more depressing. School books etc. . . . all in a sodden mush on the floor'.[118] By the winter of

[112] Ibid. Also 'By a Visitor', *The Wipers Times*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (26 February 1916).
[113] 'The Dead City of Ypres', p. 104.
[114] IWM Documents.7953: Pte. F.G. Senyard, Diary 14 and 17 December 1916; IWM Documents.1665: A.P. Burke, 26 November 1916.
[115] IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 22 November 1916; IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 21 November 1916.
[116] IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 25 December 1916; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0266: Pte. E.A. Cannon, Diary 14 September 1916.
[117] RFM.ARC.2012.958: E.T. Marler, Diary 18 and 24 November and 8 December 1916.
[118] IWM Documents.1708: Lt. W.B. Medlicott, Diary – Book 2 [p. 10].

**Figure 1.2** Battle of Menin Road Ridge. German prisoners being marched through the Cathedral Square, Ypres, 20 September 1917.

Source: Lt. Ernest Brooks/Imperial War Museums via Getty Images.

1916, Picardy was also a 'beastly' vista.[119] It had become a landscape of 'desolated villages' in which 'no trace remains to mark the site of the many peaceful homes ... Save for a few shattered trees, and the countless wooden crosses'. It resembled 'a South African veldt'.[120] The battlefield had been reduced to little more than shapeless forms of rubble and mud.[121] In 1917 and 1918, much of the fighting occurred in areas that had already been the scene of combat. This sometimes imbued the fighting with the aura of futility. Men were shocked by the 'hideous' panoramas produced by both Third Ypres and the Spring Offensives.[122] Lt. J.H. Johnson was confronted by 'debris, graves and [the] loneliness of desolation'.[123] By April 1918, 2nd Lt D. Henrick Jones was desperate to escape this 'beastly country'.[124]

[119] B.M. 'Tommy Atkins', *The Mudlark or the Bedfordshire Gazette*, Vol. 3 (1 June 1916), p. 6; IWM Documents.16504: 2nd Lt. W.J. Lidsey, Diary 2, 4 and 18 November 1916.
[120] 'Our Christmas Greeting', *The "Snapper"*, Vol. XII, No. 12 (1916), p. 126.
[121] RFM Box 2014.9: Officers Photographs taken on the Front in France, Photograph D 309 – The roads of Flers.
[122] IWM Documents.16060: Rev. C.H. Bell, Letter to Herbert *c.* January 1918; IWM Documents.7233: Col. F. Hardman, Letter 3 April 1918; IWM Documents.14752: J. Grimston, Diary 24 April 1918.
[123] IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 18 February 1918.
[124] IWM Documents.16345: 2nd Lt. D. Henrick Jones, Letter to Wife 2 April 1918.

Despite inducing such reactions, the frontlines did have their own character. David Isaac Griffiths thought the trenches around the Scarpe River resembled 'a "prehistoric home"'.[125] The landscape was transformed at dawn and dusk.[126] Paul Nash explained that nightfall saw 'the monstrous lands take on a changing aspect [and the] landscape is so distorted from its own gentle forms'. The 'works of men' and light meant that 'nothing seems to bear the imprint of God's hand'. It could have been 'a terrific creation of some malign fiend working a crooked will on the innocent countryside'.[127] In such circumstances, the natural world could become an antagonist. The scarred slope facing Siegfried Sassoon in his poem *Attack* was 'menacing' and the sun 'glow'ring'.[128] G.A. Stevens found that he preferred the line around St Quentin (battered as it was) to 'beastly old Flanders which one hates now'.[129]

No Man's Land created its own anxieties. It was a space that eventually needed to be crossed and contained all kinds of horrors. There was always the chance that an enemy raiding party might emerge from the darkness without warning. Scouting parties forced men to confront their fears. These patrols, which left during the night, risked contact with the enemy and oblivion. The impenetrable darkness and the featureless landscapes meant it was easy to get lost and men sometimes vanished. On 21 November 1916, for example, a lance corporal of the 9th Royal Fusiliers disappeared without a trace after being left injured in a shell hole.[130]

Many felt that the frontlines were 'dead'.[131] Lt. J.H. Johnson described Arras as a 'city of ruins' and the area between there and Bapaume was a 'land of desolation – ruined and dead'.[132] Spiritually minded soldiers suspected these spaces were haunted or contained some paranormal force. Several individuals reported seeing crosses in the sky, being visited by angels, or witnessing heavenly signs.[133] On 27 December 1916, Charles Carrington recorded 'ghosts – ghost stories' in his diary.[134] The lack of context makes this entry difficult to unpick, but the dead appear to have been playing on his mind. The landscape's emptiness certainly created a ghostly visage. Those who had seen

[125] D.I. Griffiths, Letter to 'Batchie' 9 April 1917, *Europeana 1914–1918*, www.europeana1914-1918.eu/en/contributions/20788#prettyPhoto, accessed 15 November 2016.
[126] 'Aftermath' in S. Sassoon, *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London, 1919), p. 91.
[127] TGA 8313: P. Nash, Letter to Margaret 6 April 1917.
[128] 'Attack' in Sassoon, *The War Poems*.
[129] IWM Documents.12339: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 4 March 1918.
[130] TNA WO 95/1857/2: War Diary 9/ Royal Fusiliers, 21 November 1916.
[131] IWM Documents.7953: Pte. F.G. Senyard, Letter to Wife 17 December 1916.
[132] IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 8 December 1917.
[133] O. Davies, *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith during the First World War* (Oxford, 2019). See also L. Ruickbie, *Angels in the Trenches: Spiritualism, Superstition and the Supernatural during the First World War* (London, 2018).
[134] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0273: Capt. C. Carrington, 27 December 1916.

**Figure 1.3** The destruction of 1916. British troops at the Battle of Morval (Somme), September 1916. During the Somme battles, Picardy's once-attractive countryside became a lunar landscape pockmarked by shell holes, while villages were reduced to rubble. Note the chalky soil.

Source: Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Image.

these places before they were disfigured by shellfire were able to layer what confronted them with memories of a more peaceful time. Possibly reflecting this, Cecil White believed that the Somme had become a place of 'phantom' woods.[135] After the fighting at Cambrai in November 1917, J. Grimston noted that while 'not so smashed as Arras' it was now 'a city of the dead'. 'Not a soul [was] to be seen' along the 'rotten bumpy road' leading through its ruins.[136]

However, the frontlines could be fascinating, and some men were drawn to the destruction. They were a muse for Capt. G.K. Rose in his drawings of the Western Front. His pictures charted the sights he encountered: quaint and peaceful villages, barbed-wired trench lines, and the devastation. His drawings of the Baroque town square in Arras were reminiscent of the sketches of an amateur artist on his Grand Tour.[137] The ruination seemed senseless, but sites (at least where there were still discernible features) remained interesting.

[135] RFM.ARC.3032: L/Cpl. C. White, Diary 26 January 1918.
[136] IWM Documents.14752: J. Grimston, Diary 14 October 1918.
[137] Capt. G.K. Rose, *The Story of the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*. See also IWM Art 4905: G.K. Rose, 'Arras, Grande Place, September 29 1917' and IWM Art 4900: G.K. Rose, 'Hebuterne Church, September 1917'.

Lt. J.H. Johnson believed that 'many people' would be drawn to the 'waste land ... long after Death passed over it'. Yet, there would be 'worlds of difference' compared to 'those who saw it killed and just after'.[138]

Mutilated landscapes could also be familiarised. Veterans returning to Belgium and France after 1918 were sometimes angered by the battle zone's restoration.[139] During the war, when the frontlines had shifted (such as after the German withdrawals in early 1917), some men grasped the opportunity to explore the old frontlines. J.M. Humphries enjoyed the 'novelty' of searching for souvenirs.[140] John Masefield found that the old Somme battlefield evoked pathos but also believed that they were symbolic of the BEF's advance to victory.[141] The destruction could similarly be normalised. Stylised images of trenches were used on dinner menus, conference programmes, and Christmas cards produced by units. These included depictions of scarred frontline landscapes littered with barbed wire, shattered tree stumps, and shell-damaged towns.[142]

There was some strange beauty in destruction.[143] Paul Nash believed that any artist would find their muse amidst the devastation. He became obsessed with 'those wonderful trenches at ... dawn and sundown' and the 'wide ..., flat and scantly wooded' landscapes 'pitted' with shell holes and littered with the 'refuge of war'.[144] V.G. Bell was not so skilful an artist as Nash, but he was also struck by the resilience of nature. His drawings depicted 'hooded crows', owls, or the stray dogs that he encountered in the trenches.[145] He made sense of the sights through his art and recorded nearly everything: landscapes, animals, military activities, the trenches, and his billets. The rubbish, the shell holes, the destruction, and the rats were catalogued and internalised.[146]

Even if soldiers failed to see this beauty, the experience of the frontlines could inculcate a sense of authority, confidence, and power. This was revealed in the common phrase 'Before You Come Up', which was sometimes sometimes

[138] IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 10 January 1918.
[139] F. Uekötter, 'Memories in Mud: The Environmental Legacy of the Great War', in Tucker et al., *Environmental Histories*, p. 282.
[140] NAM 1998-02-232: J.M. Humphries, Letter to "Mater" 13 September 1916.
[141] J. Masefield, *The Old Front Line* (New York, 1918).
[142] RFM.2013.9: Miscellaneous Documents, Card: 'Christmas Greetings from 17th Infantry Brigade, 'Xmas 16'.
[143] IWM Documents.12339: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 6 November 1916; IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 10 November 1916; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0583: 2nd Lt. Sydney Frankenburg, Letter 21 December 1917; IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 25 December 1917; IWM Documents.17029: Capt. A.J. Lord, Letter to Father 16 January 1918.
[144] TGA 8313: P. Nash, Letter to Margaret 6 April 1917.
[145] BL RP9518: V.G. Bell, Sketches: 'The Wastage of War', Men in a Trench in the 'Duck's Bill' at Night 7/11/15, and 'Pumping a Flooded Traffic Trench'.
[146] Ibid. Sketch Albums – Western Front 1915–16, Egypt & Palestine, 1917–1920.

**Figure 1.4** The destruction of 1917. Soldiers in the trenches during the Battle of Passchendaele on November 1, 1917. By 1917, there were few discernible features left. Note the evidence of the high water table and much darker soil.

Source: Fotosearch/Getty Images.

rephrased as 'before your (regimental) number was dry', 'before you was breeched', 'before you nipped' or 'before your ballocks [sic] dropped'. These were 'crushing retort[s]' that meant:

> I was in the front line before you arrived from the base, I know more than you are capable of knowing, I've suffered more than you, I've done more than you, I'm a better solider than you and a better man. And I refuse to believe a word you say.[147]

Habituation helps to explain how combatants endured the war's chronic crises and the horrors of the frontlines. In her study of the Italian Army, Vanda Wilcox argued that 'a process of habituation, and a greater tolerance of the familiar, meant that passive acceptance often increased with exposure to life in the trenches'.[148] It can mitigate even the most bewildering of experiences and was a multifaceted process, exemplified in men's relationship with the novel smells and

[147] J. Brophy and E. Partridge, *The Long Trail: Soldiers' Songs and Slang 1914–18* (Aylesbury, 1965, 1969), p. 83.
[148] Wilcox, *Morale and the Italian Army*, p. 137.

sounds in the frontlines. Olfactory and auditory habituation occur organically outside more conventional and purposeful forms of habituation training.[149]

## The Trenches' Stenches

The experience of the frontlines was multisensory, and the smells that met men in the trenches were sometimes shocking. The frontlines were littered with rubbish, shell fragments, barbed wire and 'everywhere the dead. / Only the dead were always present – present / As a vile sickly smell of rottenness'.[150] In some sectors the smell of corpses was ubiquitous; it was 'infecting the earth'.[151]

Awful smells coalesced to produce a particular aroma in the frontlines. 2nd Lt. Guy Chapman described it as 'a sickly stench. The mixed smell of exploded … gas, blood, putrefying corpses and broken bricks'.[152] This smell-scape re-emphasised war's capacity for carnage. In active sectors, the scent of the dead was omnipresent. After combat, the smell of decomposing flesh was common to trenches or shell holes, which seemed to preserve the flavour of death.[153] The stench of corpses wafted across No Man's Land and the unsanitary conditions contributed to the undertone of faecal matter.[154] When possible, the dead were removed for burial, though shellfire – or trench work – sometimes disinterred rotten remains of old comrades and enemies. H.T. Madders had to live with the smell of some 'poor old transport horses'. Having 'rolled them' into a hole they continued to attract 'flies like bees' and to 'stink for days'.[155] Elsewhere, 'the nauseating smell of high explosive' struck men forcefully. It reminded troops approaching the frontlines of the dangers that awaited them there. One man noted that it left 'our hands … numb'.[156]

[149] R. Pellegrino, C. Sinding, R.A. de Wijk and T. Hummel, 'Habituation and Adaptation to Odors in Humans', *Physiology & Behavior*, Vol. 177 (August 2017), pp. 13–19; I. Croy, W. Maboshe, and T. Hummel, 'Habituation Effects of Pleasant and Unpleasant Odors', *International Journal of Psychophysiology*, Vol. 88, No. 1 (April 2013), pp. 104–108; T. Rosburg and P. Sörös, 'The Response Decrease of Auditory Evoked Potentials by Repeated Stimulation – Is There Evidence for an Interplay between Habituation and Sensitization?' *Clinical Neurophysiology*, Vol. 127, No. 1 (January 2016), pp. 397–408.

[150] A.G. West, *The Diaries of a Dead Officer: Being the Posthumous Papers of A.G. West*, ed. C.J.M. West (London, 1918), pp. 81–83.

[151] TKM Item 90/50/2: C.J. Richards, Diary 16 September 1916; E. Spiers, 'The Scottish Soldier at War', in H. Cecil and P. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon. The First World War Experienced* (London, 1996, 2003), p. 318.

[152] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0292: 2nd Lt. G. Chapman, Diary 16 November 1916.

[153] 'The Mermaid', *The Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*, No. 18 (1 April 1917), p. 19.

[154] A Commanding Officer, 'Notes on a Recent Visit to the Trenches', *The Red Feather*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1 March 1915), p. 42.

[155] IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 24 September 1918.

[156] 'Memories on Revisiting and Old Sector', *The Outpost*, Vol. V, No. 5 (1 September 1917), p. 168.

Pte. E.A. Cannon practised verse in the back pages of his diary. His unsophisticated poems reflected his visceral reaction to the smells he encountered: 'The stench here t'was / simply vile', so much so that he 'wondered if again I / should ever smile'.[157]

'Stench' and 'trench' were frequently rhymed in soldiers' newspapers.[158] The dead's presence was evident in the air as a constant reminder of the war's toll. This put a huge strain on frontline servicemen.[159] Other scents, such as that of an open wound, were also shocking. 'Rotten iron' produced its own aroma as rusting wire overwhelmed natural odours.[160] The poor sanitation led some men to report that the smell of 'shit' *was* 'the smell of Passchendaele [and] of the [Ypres] Salient'.[161] Rain had its own perfume, and some found that the hum of unwashed bodies was too much in the cramped conditions.[162] The reek of other men left some soldiers 'sad'.[163] The war had specific sensory facets, many of which reappeared in later memory processes. Smell can induce memory recall and Pte. Bert Fearns explained that 'smells are one of the big things'. 'I can often still smell gas today, and that manly dampness of men and mud at Yeepree [sic]'.[164] Sudden recollections, even of smell, are indicative of the place of traumatic memories within post-traumatic stress, both chronic and temporary.[165] However, they can also be positive. The whiff of 'HP Sauce' or 'hot tea outside on a cold day' took Fearns back to happier moments.[166]

Processes of habituation helped men to cope. The fact that they did not constantly bemoan the smell-scape suggests that they were able to ignore or adjust to it. A satirical sketch in *The B.E.F. Times* pointed to this process. On entering a frontline dugout, a senior officer exclaimed: 'Gawd! How this filthy place stinks.' He asked the men: 'what's this dreadful stench?' The

[157] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0266: Pte. E.A. Cannon, Diary [Draft Poem from June 1918].
[158] G.H.P.S., 'The Yule Log', *The Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*, No. 17 (1 February 1917), p. 10; W.O.W., 'Pioneering Platitudes', *The Outpost*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (1 June 1918), p. 3.
[159] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 20.
[160] A. Bamji, 'Facial Surgery: The Patient's Experience', in H. Cecil and P. Liddle, *Facing Armageddon*, p. 494; Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 69.
[161] Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 331.
[162] IWM Documents.16020: Capt. E. Lycette, Memoir, p. 9.
[163] S. Audoin-Rouzeau, 'The French Soldier in the Trenches', in Cecil and Liddle, *Facing Armageddon*, p. 224.
[164] Pte. Bert Fearns in Osgood and Brown, *Digging up Plugstreet*, p. 105.
[165] M.P. Koss, A.J. Figueredo, I. Bell, M. Tharan and S. Tromp, 'Traumatic Memory Characteristics: A Cross-Validated Mediational Model of Response to Rape among Employed Women', *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (1996), pp. 421–432.
[166] Osgood and Brown, *Digging up Plugstreet*, p. 105.

frontline officer replied: 'It's no good worrying about that, it's peculiar to the tunnel.'[167] Soldiers grew familiar to scents and could become accustomed to the unpleasant sensory features of the frontlines. In fact, the smell held 'a grim fascination' for some men.[168]

## The Sounds of War

The Western Front's soundscape was immersive. It too could be overcome, internalised, and normalised through habituation. For instance, many men were confident that they could predict the fall of shells by analysing the sound they made.[169] Charles Quinnell remembered that this was one of the first lessons a soldier learned in the trenches. 'You could tell by sound if a shell was going over you or was meant for you ... And if that shell was coming for [you,] you would lie right down, and believe you me, a man lying down takes a lot of hitting.'[170] Familiarity with the sounds of war contributed to morale and even helped men respond to acute crises such as bombardments.

Nonetheless, artillery fire was shocking. One soldier felt that 'modern warfare seems to me to be a series of stupendous efforts on the part of each opponent to outclass the other in creating an appalling noise or a ghastly mess'.[171] The sound of a bombardment could be stressful (even if it fell on enemy trenches). The *Manchester Weekly Times* described one attack as 'a confusion of lights of various colours ... and a tornado of sound, in which machine guns and trench mortars played their part'.[172] The orchestra of battle could be overwhelming. Even outside of combat, an incoming barrage was terrifying. On one occasion, H.T. Madders was suddenly woken up 'by the sound of his [Jerry's] shell coming towards us, [we] could only nestle closer to mother earth, it seemed as if he was going to blow us to smithereens, at last it dropped about 40 yds up the trench'.[173] His sudden awakening left him unable to gauge the shell's direction, and his sense of helplessness bred panic. Such incidences exposed men's vulnerabilities.

It could feel as if shells surrounded the men as batteries fired from their front and rear.[174] The 'roar' of their own shells passing overhead made 'a far more terrifying noise ... than the German shells bursting'.[175] Not only this,

[167] 'More Mud Than Glory', *The B.E.F. Times*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (15 August 1917), p. 12.
[168] IWM Documents.17029: Capt. A.J. Lord, Letter to Father 13 September 1918.
[169] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 106.
[170] IWM Sound 554: C. Quinnell, Interview Reel 10.
[171] S.M., 'High Explosives', *The Outpost*, Vol. III, No. 1 (1 March 1916), p. 20.
[172] IWM Documents.11585: 2nd Lt. C.W. Gray, Extract from *The Manchester Weekly Times* (Saturday, 28 October 1916).
[173] IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 31 August 1918.
[174] IWM Documents.16504: 2nd Lt. W.J. Lidsey, Sunday, 12 November 1916.
[175] IWM Documents.10933: Capt. G.B. Donaldson, Letter to Mother 31 May 1916.

but when following a creeping barrage (or when in one's own trenches) a misplaced British shell was just a deadly as those of the 'Boche'. The cacophony was an enemy of sleep and anybody within earshot of active frontline areas would find their nights interrupted – if not ruined – by 'deafening' artillery fire. Tiredness left men depressed and anxious.[176] Even the quietest zones were interspersed with gunfire. Men sometimes sat 'at ease and think it fine' amongst 'a peaceful evening scene' when a 'Crump!' signalled the 'burst of a 5.9 / In your best fly-proof latrine'.[177] Sudden gunfire or explosions could induce greater shock than regular artillery fire and provided an unwanted reminder of reality.

Other men found that the clamour of munitions could break the tedium of trench life. It reminded them where they were.[178] The strike of a bullet could drag daydreaming soldiers violently back into the present: 'Smack that one buried itself in the back wall of the trench. I start instinctively with the guilty feeling that my man has fired and I have forgotten to signal the shock.'[179] The familiar sound of the 'occasional whizzbang which passes one's ear of a night lends colour to the probability that such a person [as the enemy] exists'.[180]

Some men became accustomed to the constant noise of guns and perceived periods of silence unnerving; it seemed unnatural, and lulls were met with suspicion. These played upon their imagination, particularly at night. Christmas 1914 was eerie because of the stillness in the frontlines. K.M. Gaunt reported that 'not a sound could be heard anywhere'.[181] W. Tapp claimed that he missed 'the sound of the shots flying over it is like a clock which has stopped ticking'.[182] The soldiers' time horizons became inextricably intertwined with the noises of modern warfare. A.L. Collis felt a similar unease in March 1918. There was an uncommon 'quietness' in the frontlines on the eve of the German offensive, which left his unit fearful.[183] Silence could be a precursor to greater violence and seemed less predictable.

Sound was a source of information, which helped soldiers gauge events beyond their immediate line of vision. For instance, 10 October 1914 was memorable for Maj. J.S. Knyvett as 'our first day within the sound of firing'.[184] The percussion and reverberations of distant artillery offered insights into events elsewhere.[185] More experienced soldiers found that the 'rumble' of the

[176] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 8 November 1914; IWM Documents.12339: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Biddy (his Wife) 17 November 1916.
[177] 'A Perfect Nightmare', *The Fifth Glo'ster Gazette*, No. 21 (1 November 1917), p. 5.
[178] A.G. West, *The Diary of a Dead Officer*, pp. 79–81.
[179] C.S.W., *The Outpost*, Vol. III (1 July 1916), p. 119.
[180] Ibid.
[181] IWM Documents.7490: L/Cpl. K.M. Gaunt, Letter 25 December 1914.
[182] IWM Documents.18524: Pte. W. Tapp, Diary 27 December 1914.
[183] IWM Documents.20770: A.L. Collis, Diary 1 March 1918.
[184] IWM Documents.12819: Maj. J.S. Knyvett, Diary 10 October 1914.
[185] Ibid.

guns was a reminder of what waited up the line. The near-constant background noise could create an atmosphere of foreboding. This was true for those support troops moving up to bolster the British defences during the German offensives after 21 March 1918.[186]

Men tended not to sing en route to the trenches; it was against orders Yet, when returning from a tour of duty and as the noise of the frontlines faded away, they began to sing marching songs anew. The changing soundscape confirmed that they had left the killing zone.[187] Songs were a mechanism to combat fear and historian Emma Hanna has suggested that singing also helped to bolster identities (both civil and military), vocalise patriotism, poke fun at the military, and reject victimhood.[188]

Camps had their own, more pleasant, soundscape. The 'noisy rattling' of guy ropes and tent flaps straining against the wind were accompanied, in later years, by the mechanical noises of trucks and engines alongside the sharp 'warning blast[s]' of slow-moving trains' whistles. The shouted orders of non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers, the 'rush' of mess tins, and the 'clamours of men' all contributed to a more peaceful auditory experience.[189] There were echoes of the civilian world: music, football and rugby crowds, theatre, and laughter. These provided an imperfect but comforting reminder of home.[190] Sometimes these noises induced feelings of nostalgia, but this was not necessarily a bad thing.[191] The sounds of comrades enjoying themselves helped A.P. Burke to relax. One evening he reported that 'noise that's going on in the different huts' was like a 'carnival night'. It was 'lovely' and made the sight and sound of a distant German 'straffing [sic]' less oppressive.[192]

Familiarity with the sounds of war could become a coping mechanism. Self-deception helped many soldiers to diminish the danger by reconceptualising weaponry. An article in *The Wipers Times* was entitled 'to Minnie' and dedicated to the 'P.B.I [poor bloody infantry]'. In it, the author personified enemy weaponry. The German *Minenwerfer*'s 'voice' was heard 'with dread'.

[186] 'N.M., 'Somewhere-', *The Outpost*, Vol. VI, No. 6 (1 April 1918), p. 199.
[187] Brophy and Partridge, *The Long Trail*, p. 25.
[188] E. Hanna, *Sounds of War: Music and the British Armed Forces during the Great War* (Cambridge, 2020).
[189] W.S.C., 'Back to the Line', *The Outpost*, Vol. IV (1 October 1916), p. 26.
[190] IWM Documents.5092: Pte. W.M. Anderson, Letter 15 November 1916; IWM Documents.15743: J.M. Nichols, Diary 17, 18 and 19 December 1916; IWM Documents.12521: R.E.P. Stevens, Diary 25 November 1916; IWM Documents.14752: J. Grimston, Diary 12 October 1918; IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 2 and 5 January 1918; IWM Documents.7233: Col. F. Hardman, Letter to Parents 5 February 1918; IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, 1 January 1918. Also Fuller, *Troop Morale*, pp. 85–87.
[191] IWM Documents.2619: L. Wilson, Memoir, p. 45.
[192] IWM Documents.1665: A.P. Burke, Letter to Reg 2 November 1916.

It was a 'fickle jade' and 'traitorous minx'. The mortar had a 'raucous screech', which was particularly unpleasant when *she* 'force[d]' *her* 'blatant presence' and intruded 'uninvited'. His gendering of this weapon was taken further: 'once most loved of all your sex' Minnie was 'now hated with a loathing'. This feminisation became an aggressive psychological tool and the piece ended with the lines: 'when next my harassed soul you vex / You'll get some back at any rate'.[193] Whether this resentment of women was a product of personal slight (or bitterness at men's lot) is unclear. Weapons and military paraphernalia were often offered female form. It made retribution easier to imagine and may have been a reassertion of power.

Elsewhere, machine sounded like typewriters, while gas could be identified by its tell-tale 'flutter, flutter, crump'. This contrasted with the 'Whoo-Whoo-Whoo-WHOO-CRASH' of high-velocity shells.[194] Another soldier was able to distinguish between the noises of various 'High Explosives'. Mining caused 'a satisfying amount of noise and debris'. Upon detonation 'the earth rocks and rumbles with the concussion' causing 'a huge lump of the hitherto inoffensive landscape' to become 'violently aggressive'. In these moments the landscape became a weapon.[195] The experience of a mine's detonation was relatively rare and too unpredictable to be normalised. Other tools in the German arsenal were more familiar. Some frontline combatants learned to prepare for the 'concussion' of a high explosive shell, which felt like being 'hit . . . over the head with something about as heavy as a cheese'. Of course, the effect was far more destructive and traumatic near the impact zone, especially if men were buried by a collapsing trench wall. The 'light shell or whizz bang' had 'a loud noise' but 'its destructive qualities' were 'small'. Shrapnel shells on the other hand had 'a weird sound, a loud explosion, and a tremendous clatter of falling pieces of . . . shrapnel'. This sounded something like 'a Ford' whose owner had '"let her go all out"'. The 'hand bomb and the rifle grenade' were apparently about as effective as the 'whizz-bang'.[196]

Vanda Wilcox has argued that allusions to the sounds of conflict in Italian soldiers' songs allowed for the 'traumatic and alien soundscape of the war' to be 'rhetorically controlled'.[197] Refrains in the BEF such as *Hush! Here Comes a Whizz-Bang*, *The Bells of Hell*, or *We Are the Boys Who Fear No Noise* suggest that song played a similar role amongsts British troops.[198] It is not clear to what extent familiarity genuinely offered protection, but even placebos can

[193] 'To Minnie (Dedicated to the P.B.I.)', *The Wipers Times*, Vol. 1, No.1 (31 July 1916), p. 1.
[194] J. Walker, *Words and the First World War: Language, Memory and Vocabulary* (London, 2017), p. 127.
[195] S.M., 'High Explosives', Ibid., p. 20.
[196] Ibid.
[197] Wilcox, *Morale and the Italian Army*, p. 119.
[198] Brophy and Partridge, *The Long Trail*, pp. 47–49.

bolster resilience. This heightened awareness also helped men to infuse the environment with meaning and to combat their own fear.

The 'alien' smell and soundscapes of the Western Front reveal how men's immediate environment became the focus of their attention. By diminishing and controlling their reactions, soldiers were able to overcome the chronic (and sometimes acute) crises accompanying service in the frontlines. Habituation and familiarisation were conscious and unconscious processes and stemmed from soldiers' familiarity with the world around them. Yet, any re-conceptualisation of their surroundings required that they controlled their fear and revulsion.

## Familiarising the Western Front

Other tools helped soldiers to see beyond 'the great sameness' of the frontlines.[199] Places and settlements had forms and names long after they were reduced to rubble.[200] Maps (alongside signs recording the name of trenches, villages, and towns) encouraged men to recognise places as 'familiar' and to imagine that even the most shell-damaged parts of the Western Front were more orderly.[201]

Soldiers renamed the places they encountered. In 1914, official communiqués asked units to avoid using local names to avoid revealing troop movements and unit locations.[202] This catalysed a reimagining of Belgium and France. In September 1914, the *Illustrated London News* published images of hand-made signs from the Ypres sector, including Somerset House, Hotel de Lockhart, and Plugstreet Hall. According to this article, these revealed the soldiers 'love of home and his capacity for making himself comfortable in the

[199] NAM 1992-04-57-16-5: Lt. Col. J.E Smart, Hand Sketched Maps 'M4 18 Rifles' and 'M5 20 Rifles'. Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, p. 101.

[200] For trench maps, see TNA WO 153 and WO 207. IWM Documents.13760: Maj. S.R. Hudson, Map of area around Toilly [1916].

[201] NAM 2000-10-304: Notes on the Area of Ablainzevile, France, from General Staff, 5th Army; TNA WO 223: Wt. W. 15534-9497. Spl. 4000. 2/17. F. & Q. (H.C.) Ltd. P. 17: Notes on the Area of the Ablainzeveille, Achiet-le-Grand, Achiet-le-Petit, Bihucourt, Bucquoy, Gomiecourt and Logeast Wood: Prepared by General Staff, Fifth Army; NAM 1980-01-4: Field Message Book (Army Form 153), 21 (Service) Bn Manchester Regiment, Situation Report 27 January 1918; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0837: Capt. J. Isherwood, 1:20.000 map of Montbrehain, Edition 1.A; MR 2/17/67: Sgt. J. Palin, Maps [1/20,000 map of the Northern France; Also Hand Drawn Maps, including Mametz 1 July 1916]; IWM Documents.18455: Lt. Col. D.R. Turnbull, Letter to Sylvia 26 December 1916; MR 2/17/57: 2nd Lt. F.T.K. Woodworth, Diary 26 March 1918.

[202] TNA WO 95/1565/1: War Diary 1st Battalion the Devonshire Regiment: 'Appendix K. 10: Instructions for the Inspector-General of Communications [A1770]' [1914].

most adverse circumstances'.[203] This rechristening continued throughout the war. Many places became infamous: Devil's Wood, Lousy Woods, and Wipers (or Ips). Frequently, this was a bottom-up process. Some names were references to precise geographical features; others were linguistic efforts to control a hostile environment or evidence of humour and irony. Many were nostalgic references to home or the product of personal, regimental, or group associations (including the commemoration of lost comrades).[204] The power of local identity also revealed itself. Units from London named areas around Ploegsteert Wood after places in the United Kingdom's capital.[205] Elsewhere, at Foncquevillers, a battalion of Brummies used the names of Birmingham's streets to christen their trenches.[206]

This fulfilled secondary cultural and psychological functions. It allowed men to document 'precise locations' in the morass and played a role in 'evoking events, memories, and associations. All this is a kind of referencing. The name becomes the key to open the databank, the password to enter the archive'.[207] Peter Chasseaud has drawn a parallel between this and émigrés' use of familiar names when settling in new countries, concluding: 'the process undoubtedly staked a claim, but also established continuity with the past, and a sense of familiarity and security'.[208]

Many men embraced service on the Western Front as an opportunity for travel and discovery.[209] English–French dictionaries and stand-alone translation texts suggest men hoped to engage with their new environment and its population.[210] The sights and sounds were things of interest, while the destruction was something to be experienced and recorded. Maj. G.H. Greenwell wrote home: 'Should I ever have seen Arras and Ypres, Albert and Péronne under such interesting conditions if there had been no war?'[211] There were historic sites to visit. Lt. D. Henrick Jones hoped to see Rouen's 'cathedral and other famous places'.[212]

After cameras were banned in 1914, a few intrepid men continued to photograph the frontlines. Charting their experiences, they focused on the

[203] Chasseaud, *Rats Alley*, p. 23. See also IWM Documents.13260: Sgt. W. Summers, Diary of 1916, p. 12.
[204] Chasseaud, *Rats Alley*, pp. 26, 47–56.
[205] Ibid., pp. 22–23.
[206] Lt. C.E. Carrington, *The War Record of the 1/5th Battalion The Royal Warwickshire Regiment* (Birmingham, 1922), p. 16.
[207] Chasseaud, *Rats Alley*, p. 26.
[208] Ibid., pp. 24–25.
[209] Mayhew, 'A War Imagined', pp. 12–17.
[210] NAM 1998-10-306, *The Soldier's Word + Phrase Book French and German: Compiled by a Committee of Well-Known Teachers from Actual Experience of Soldiers' Needs* (George G. Harrap & Company [Undated]).
[211] IWM Documents.11006: G.H. Greenwell, Letter 17 November 1917.
[212] IWM Documents.16345: 2nd Lt. D. Henrick Jones, Letter to Wife 14 October 1914.

destruction.[213] Postcards also played an important role in recording the sights that soldiers encountered.[214] H.O. Hendry wrote on one such card: 'This is another building close by the church dear, I think it has been a school.'[215] He wanted to share what he saw. Yet, he was disappointed and 'could not get any decent cards love, this is a poor village, I wanted to get some ruins.'[216] Sydney Gill sent his wife a similar postcard of a 'typical country road + village, such as can be seen all over France'.[217] Men were sometimes granted on leave outside the zone of military operations. W. Vernon described one such trip 'we went through Paris, when we went up there I saw the big Tower called Eiffel Tower. It is a fine country all round there. I didn't think there was such nice scenery in France'.[218] Paris was always appreciated as a *real* escape. On one trip, Sgt. Henry Selly visited the Museé du Luxembourg and collected pictures of the sculptures he saw there.[219]

Soldiers' familiarity with the Western Front worked its way into their lingua franca.[220] French 'borrow words' entered their lexicon. 'Alleyman', 'Boche' and '*Pomme Fritz*' became synonyms for the Germans.[221] Other words hinted at their relationships with civilians. Most terms suggest these were quite basic interactions: verbs, nouns, and adjectives that facilitated understanding were most common. 'Alley' was used in place of 'run away', 'avec' indicated that the soldier desired spirits with his beverage, while 'bon', 'pas bon' or 'no bon' all indicated quality. Many phrases were bastardisations of their original form: *comme ça* was anglicised to 'comsah'; *fâché* became 'fashy' (anger); *pain* transformed into 'Japan' (bread); *manger* was converted to 'Mongey' (food); while 'bongo boosh' meant 'tasty

[213] LIDLLE/WW1/GS/0758: Capt. E.L. Higgins, Photographs of Shelled Farmhouse, Barbed Wire Defences, Men Digging Trenches, Ruined Villages, and Dug-Outs.

[214] Ibid. Postcards: Doullens – Vue sur l'Authie; No. 1–3 Guerre 1914–15–16. Doullens (Somme); Guerre 1914–16. Doullens (Somme); No. 81. La Grande Guerre 1914–15 – Albain St Nazaire (P.-de-C.) ['What Remains of the Town-Hall after the battle']; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0699: J.L. Hampson, Postcards of 'Grande Boucherie Tournaisienne – Spécialité de Moutons' and 'Bailleul (Nord) – Rue de Cassel – Cassel Street'.

[215] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0746: H.O. Hendry, Postcard 'Mazingarbe (P.-de-C) – Ecole Communale de Garcons'.

[216] Ibid.

[217] RFM.ARC.2495.5: Sgt. S. Gill, YMCA Postcard.

[218] IWM Documents.12771: W. Vernon, Letter to Miss. L. Vernon 22 July 1918.

[219] NAM 2000-09-153-51: Sgt. Henry Selley, Various Postcards of Venus from the Museé du Luxembourg [9–13]. NAM 7403-29-486-144: Sgt. H. Hopwood, Letter to Mother & All 1 July 1918.

[220] SOFO Box 16 Item 30: Lt. C.T. O'Neill, Diary 15 February 1918; IWM Documents.1665: A.P. Burke, Letter to Reg 26 October 1916.

[221] Brophy and Partridge, *The Long Trail*, pp. 64, 74.

morsel' and bore only a passing resemblance to *bonne bouche*.[222] The term 'Napoo' – meaning 'finished; empty; gone; non-existent' – was 'corrupted from the French *Il n'y en a plus*'.[223] Flemish (and Flanders' landscape) also crept into daily usage. 'Bund' described the region's many banks and dams.[224] Some terms were used exclusively by officers – such as 'embusqué' for shirker.

Soldiers' slang extended beyond *Franglais*. Towns and settlements were renamed. 'Bert' became Albert's *nom de guerre*.[225] Euphemisms humanised and diminished the dreadfulness. Death was known colloquially as 'hanging on the old barbed wire'.[226] Heavy guns were known as 'big boys' or 'Billy Wells' (a famous boxer of the period), while high-calibre shells were referred to as 'Black Marias' or, after 1916, 'Coal Boxes'.[227] Trench Mortars were simply 'footballs'.[228] Shelling was referred to as 'hate' or more comically as 'bonking'.[229] Reality only crept into the mundane: an empty bottle of beer was known as a 'dead soldier'.[230]

Men's repeated exposure to the Western Front fuelled familiarisation. Men reinterpreted the environment and the war. Far from passive observers, they were able to see the Western Front as more than just the canvas for their suffering; it became a place of personal significance. As Yi-Fu Tuan has argued, perceptions of landscapes are 'fleeting unless one's eyes are kept to it for some other reason, either the recall of historical events that hallowed the scene or the recall of its underlying reality in geology and structure'.[231] Tellingly, each part of the Western Front could be viewed with a familiar eye. Even the trenches could be 'traversed until its every feature was imprinted on the memory', while 'every part of the landscape' and 'almost every hole was intensely familiar'.[232]

[222] Ibid. pp. 75, 98, 111, 122.
[223] Ibid., p. 123. See also RFM.ARC.2012.146.1: Albert Victor Arthur, Diary 20 September 1917.
[224] Brophy and Partridge, *The Long Trail*, p. 78.
[225] Ibid., p. 71. Also NAM 1999-09-74: Pte. Sidney Platt and Pte. Vincent Platt, Notes on the Pronunciation of Loos, Hulloch, Ypres, Rheims, Béthune, Chocques, and Lille.
[226] Brophy and Partridge, *The Long Trail*, p. 78.
[227] Ibid., pp. 71–72.
[228] Ibid., p. 101.
[229] Ibid., pp. 75, 107.
[230] Ibid., p. 90.
[231] Y. Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974), pp. 93–94.
[232] 'Memories on Revisiting an Old Sector', *The Outpost*, Vol. V., No. 5 (1 September 1917), p. 169.

## Personalising the Western Front

Familiarity allowed soldiers to internalise the environment.[233] Landscapes were imbued with meaning and resonated with soldiers. The battlefields, frontlines, and rear areas were layered with memories, both personal and collective. These formed around specific experiences and moments, fusing with the physical world and making the Western Front a patchwork of sites of memory. Pierre Nora describes a '*lieu de mémoire*' as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature which . . . has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.[234] Belgium and France became a symbolic space for both units and individuals and provided conceptual reference points that helped combatants make sense of the war.

The histories conjured by these sites did not have to be positive; even unhappy events were meaningful. Different sectors were characterised by commonly held impressions. One article in the *BEF Times* described the different characteristics of the line stretching from 'Wipers' to 'Vilecholle'.[235] Ypres was at once unpleasant and poignant. It was hard to 'cultivate a love for the salient' but it had come to embody 'Kultur and its effect'.[236] Tellingly, the author had actively 'cut out' memories of Passchendaele. Saying that, the Somme had been 'anything but an enjoyable experience, and we were all heartily glad when our turn came to go out to "rest"'. Shattered landscapes were still significant. 'War ruins' symbolised the desecration of France and the enemy's barbarity.[237] Albert's church steeple and Ypres' cloth hall were particularly popular symbols amongst the troops of the BEF. Smaller towns such as Arras, Bailleul, or Doullens also resonated strongly with servicemen.[238] S. Smith collected

[233] Masefield, *The Old Front Line*.

[234] P. Nora (ed.), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past. Vol. 1: Conflicts and Divisions*, trans. A. Goldhammer (New York, 1996), p. xvii.

[235] F.J.R., 'For Future Historians of the War', *The B.E.F. Times: A Facsimile Reprint of the Trench Magazine* (15 August 1917 [believed misprint of 1918]), p. xi.

[236] Ibid.

[237] E. Danchin, *Le temps des ruines 1914–1921* (Rennes, 2015) and 'Destruction du patrimoine et figure du soldat allemande dans les cartes postales de la Grande Guerre', *Amnis*, Vol. 10 (2011), http://journals.openedition.org/amnis/1371, accessed 8 February 2018.

[238] NAM 2005-02-6: Capt. M. Asprey: Postcards of Albert 'avant et après' the German Bombardments; H.T. Madders, Postcard Collection to Arthur; IWM Documents.7076: S.A. Newman, Postcards of Arras; LIDLLE/WW1/GS/0758: J.L. Hampson, Postcards of 'Grande Boucherie Tournaisienne – Spécialité de Moutons' and 'Bailleul (Nord) – Rue de Cassel – Cassel Street'; LIDLLE/WW1/GS/0758: Capt E.L. Higgins, Postcards of Doullens ['Vue sur l'Authie', 'No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3 Guerre 1914–1915–1916' and 'Guerre 1914–1916']; IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Postcard Collection to Arthur; LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0746: H.O. Hendry, Postcard: 'La Grande Guerre 1914–1915. Aspect de FESTUBERT (P.-de-C.), après le combats héroiques et victorieux qu'y soutinrent les alliés'.

postcards depicting the damaged basilica of Albert. These showed the old building in ruins with its famous 'Leaning Virgin' hanging precariously from its roof.[239] As a religious site, it became a striking indication of Germanic brutality. In such ways, the environment could symbolise the justice of the Allies' cause.

Memories of happier times played a pivotal role in helping individuals to personalise the Western Front. *The BEF Times*' author fondly remembered the 'comparative peace and comfort' of Neuve Eglise and Hill 63 during a quieter period of the war.[240] Yet, enemy advances during spring 1918 meant that 'the Hun inhabits, for the moment, all our old haunts'. As a consequence, this soldier was bitter and wanted vengeance.[241] Cheerful memories of football matches and dinner parties motivated him to protect what remained of the sector.[242] Another recalled Loos, not for the fighting that took place there in 1915 but for the camaraderie during an 'enjoyable Xmas day'. A church service under 'Tower Bridge' had included a heartfelt rendition of *God Save the King* 'within 300 yards of the Hun Lines'. This was followed by a lavish dinner 'in the old brewery cellars'.[243]Amiens had been 'one of the most comfortable sectors that we have ever struck' as a consequence of to its functioning canteens and dances. 'The whole back area soon rivalled London's night clubs' with the 'exception [of . . .] the rustle of petticoats'.[244] Significant, the city's buildings escaped relatively unscathed until the Germans approached the town in April 1918 so it provided many men with their first sight 'houses and civilians' for many weeks.[245] There were shops and markets and soldiers were able to visit the theatre or cinema.[246] For others, Amiens' heritage and history provided a welcome distraction.[247] G.A. Stevens felt that 'nothing can hide the beauty' of the city.[248] Those men with enough disposable income could withdraw money here to cover a nice lunch or purchase luxuries otherwise difficult to obtain such as Martini cocktails, lobster, fresh chicken, or other 'extras' needed to supplement dinners in the Officers' Mess.[249]

[239] MR 3/17/145: Pte S. Smith, Postcards 3 (Albert) Somme and Guerre 1914–1916 No. 80 Albert (Somme).
[240] Ibid.
[241] F.J.R., 'For Future Historians of the War', p. xv.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid., p. xv.
[244] Ibid. pp. xxii-xxiii.
[245] IWM Documents.7035: Lt. J.H. Johnson, Diary 9 January 1918.
[246] Ibid.
[247] NAM 1998-08-31: Pte. A.J. Symonds, Diary 15 August 1916. Symonds also enjoyed visiting Couin.
[248] IWM Documents.12339: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 6 November 1916. See also Michelin's Illustrated Guides to the Battle-Fields (1914–1918), *Amiens: Before and during the War* (Michelin & Cie, 1919).
[249] IWM Documents.16504: 2nd Lt. W.J. Lidsey, Diary 14 and 16 November 1916.

For many, it was the relationships that they built with locals (often when billeted in their homes or farms) that were most consequential.[250] Despite warnings from the authorities, in many areas locals remained 'willing to take all risks'. Even in 1917, one soldiers' newspaper noted that '[m]any still continue to till their shell-stricken fields. Others seek to obtain a livelihood by catering for the wants of the most fastidious individual – the British "Tommy"'. Their small canteens and estaminets were places where soldiers could briefly forget the war (even if they felt that the food was overpriced).[251] For J.L. Hampson, these human connections fused with the environment. His diaries were filled with the names and postal addresses of people he met, both soldiers and civilians.[252] Sgt. Harry Hopwood remembered the kindnesses of the locals he encountered.[253] It made the sight of ruined villages and towns all the more dispiriting and one man noted that 'we never knew how much they meant until we lost them. "Pop" [Poperinghe] became a skeleton of its former self, from which the inhabitants were forced to flee; Bailleul is now a heap of ruins; Béthune is unrecognizable; Doullens and Amiens are sadly changed'.[254] Individuals relationship with the people, places, and spaces of Belgium and France nurtured a determination to defend it. Furthermore, the destruction convinced many soldiers that they must ensure it could 'never happen again'.[255]

Men's comradeship was also transposed onto the physical world. Capt. W.S. Ferrie, Pte. William Harrop, and Pte. H.S. Innes kept photographic postcards frozen in location and time. They were mementoes of friendships and locations.[256] Ferrie included biographical details in the photographic postcards he sent home: his captain was 'good', however one NCO was 'a Cambridge Mathematical Scholar and was proving to be a very poor sergeant'.[257] Another soldier, J.L. Hampson, had companions sign the back of their photographs.[258]

[250] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0699: J.L. Hampson, Photograph Postcard of 'Mlle Elisa Audenaert'; MR 2/17/53: Patrick Joseph Kennedy, Postcards from Marie Souise; F.J.R., 'For Future Historians of the War', p. xv.

[251] J.T.S, 'The French Peasantry in the War Zone', *The Outpost*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (January 1917), p. 84.

[252] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0699: J.L. Hampson, Names and Addresses in 'Telephone Days', 'At Home Days', and 'Memorandum' in Diary '1917 in Belgium and France' and Blank Pages of Letts Pocket Diary 1918.

[253] NAM 7403-29-486-144: Sgt. H. Hopwood, Letter to Mother & All 26 December 1917.

[254] Lowe, *The Western Battlefields*, pp. 11–12.

[255] IWM Documents.1708: Lt. W.B. Medlicott, Diary, Book 2, 3 October 1916, p. 11; IWM Documents.12339: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 27 January 1918.

[256] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0833: Pte. H.S. Innes, Photographic Postcards of Sergeants and of Group of Soldiers in Camp.

[257] IWM Documents.12643: Capt. W.S. Ferrie, Photographic Postcards, File 6.

[258] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0699: J.L. Hampson, Photograph Postcards, 1: Joe Diamond, R.S.M., L/Cpl Anderson, Sgt Ferrar, American. and J.L. Hampson, 2: Joe Diamond and J.L. Hampson, Box 2.

For similar reasons, Pte. A. Joy's autograph book became a relic of sorts; it contained notes from family members but also the signatures of comrades and the locations where they met. These were often accompanied by words of encouragement, cartoons, or bawdy poems.[259] In his notebook, Guy Chapman recorded each of his men's military identification number, rank, name, height/size, religion, the outcome of his service (wounded, hospital, promotions), and previous occupation.[260] Some NCOs followed a similar practice. C.H. Insom kept a list of his comrades and details about their lives.[261] These were a physical manifestation of the 'bond' between individuals that served in the frontlines.[262]

The interweaving of memory, human connection, and the environment was evident in the pilgrimage texts written by veterans after 1918.[263] The roads were a central feature of H. Williamson's post-war journey across France and Flanders. The highway 'from Poperinghe to Ypres' was familiar to hundreds of thousands of men. Its straight roadway, crumbling houses, scarred elms, grassy edges, surrounding cropland, unmarked graves, heavy traffic, and the feel of the paved road underfoot were seared into Williamson's memory.[264] Lt. Col. T.A. Lowe's 1920 guide for the Western Front was written to enable old soldiers to rediscover such places. He hoped his reader 'will find himself able to roam at will over the ground and visit the spots which for various reasons may be sacred to him'. Such sites might have been the location of 'working parties and reliefs' or 'the scene of some patrol incident . . . or the attack on a wood or village'.[265] These all formed a part of men's mental maps, which both supplanted and incorporated the destruction.

## Death and Commemoration

The commemoration of the dead played a pivotal role in the process of familiarisation. The network of graves and monuments charted the war's ebb

[259] NAM 1992-09-139: Pte. A. Joy, Autograph Book: G.L. Gowing; W.L. Shipton; A.L. Wood; W.J. Hunt; T.H. Potter; G.A. Richardson; Pte. W.H. Gibbs; Pte G. Williams; G.L. Gowing; J. Baker; L/Cpl. James Hall; Pte John J. Miller; Pte. Moon.

[260] LIDDLE/WW1/GS/0292: 2nd Lt. Guy Chapman, Diary 1/1: List of men under his command, 1916.

[261] IWM Documents.16336: C.H. Isom, List of soldiers in his unit, 1918.

[262] IWM Documents.8059: Maj. S.O.B. Richardson, Letter to Mother and Sister 1916 [No. 4].

[263] J.O. Coop, *A Short Guide to the Battlefields* (Liverpool, 1920); Anon., *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Ypres Salient* (London, 1920); *The Illustrated Michelin Guide to the Battlefields: Ypres and the Battles of Ypres* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1919). Although some of these were produced for a wider audience than just veterans.

[264] H. Williamson, *The Wet Flanders Plain* (Norwich, 1929, 1987), pp. 46–48.

[265] Lowe, *The Western Battlefields*, p. 1.

and flow.[266] An important feature of the physical world, they provided both concrete and conceptual reference points. These memorials ensured that even the newest arrivals were aware of the sacrifices of their forebears. Individuals were encouraged to acknowledge their place in a community of soldiers – living and fallen – and ensured that *esprit de corps* extended beyond the living. Collective memories (and sacrifice) were embedded in the environment, offering a further justification for soldiers' continued suffering.

Infantrymen were unable to ignore the dead.[267] In a spare moment, V.G. Bell sketched a picture of another soldier sitting on a fire-step staring at a cross reading: 'Pte. A. Jones XII Middlesex. TP E JT. RIP'.[268] Bell described the scene: 'in a British first line trench. One of many who have died at their posts, now buried below the actual fire-step.'[269] This grim reality could be hugely detrimental to morale and resilience. On the night of 9/10 July 1916, the 11th Bn. Border Regiment occupied trenches that were plagued by death. Officers were unable to collect more than twenty men to undertake a bombing mission. Many others reported sick. The medical officer informed a court of enquiry that these infantrymen had been 'digging out the dead in the trenches and carrying them down as well as living in the atmosphere of decomposed bodies'. The impact of heavy casualties on 1 July, physical exhaustion, sorting through deceased comrades' kits, incessant shellfire, and exposure in an open trench undermined their endurance. Kirkwood concluded that 'few, if any, are not suffering from some degree of shell shock'.[270] Chronic crises – namely the omnipresence of death and destruction – became harder to endure amidst the acute crises of combat or a bombardment. In fact, they undermined soldiers' ability to respond to these.

Men's letters offered glimpses of this horror. A few soldiers acknowledged the existence of German dead and even revelled in their presence as evidence of success.[271] Yet, descriptions of deceased comrades tended to be

[266] Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, esp. pp. 35–36, 128–170. See also N. Silk, '"Some Corner of a Foreign Field That Is Forever England": The Western Front as the British Soldiers' Sacred Land', in A. Beyerchen and E. Sencer (eds.), *Expeditionary Forces in the First World War* (London, 2019), pp. 289–311.

[267] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 22 September, 12–13 and 30 October 1914; IWM Documents.12819: Maj. J.S. Knyvett, Diary 19 October 1914, p. 19; IWM Documents.17029: Capt. A.J. Lord, Letter to Father 21 April 1918; IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 24 and 28 August 1918.

[268] BL RP9518: V.G. Bell, 'A British Front Line Trench 3/3/16'.

[269] Ibid.

[270] RAMC 446/18: 'Extracts from the proceedings of a court of enquiry re failure on the part of the 11th Border Regiment, 97th Infantry Brigade, to carry out an attack'.

[271] IWM Documents.11445: Brig. Gen. H.E. Trevor, Letter to Mother 3 October 1914; IWM Documents.18524: Pte. W. Tapp, Diary 26 November 1914; IWM Documents.1665: A.P.

fragmentary.[272] One letter reported 'of course we came across one or two poor Tommies but the boys have buried them'.[273] The loss of friends was a shock, but the events were generally left undescribed.[274] However, there was no lack of detail in the correspondence of Reginald Neville. He was remarkably honest with his father, perhaps because he was a veteran of the Boer War. In one graphic account, he explained how 'one poor devil [... was] coughing and spitting his very soul out' and a sergeant had his 'leg blown off' by a shell.[275] On another occasion, he described how another shell had killed several members of his unit. 'As soon as it got dark we collected some bits of men, put them in a sandbag, carried out the recognisable bodies over the top and dumped them in a shell hole'.[276] Such incidents were not rare. Three privates in the 16th Bn. Manchester Regiment went missing during a bombardment on the night of 14/16 June 1917. When a rescue party reached their trench all they could find were 'the remains of 3 bodies ... but no identification was obtainable'.[277] Archaeological evidence points to the damage that artillery wrought on the human body. Skeletal remains reveal that multiple fractures, lost limbs, gaping wounds, and fractured skulls were common.[278] Sometimes the dead were left unburied.[279] Bodies littered battlefields and during warmer weather they were infested with flies, while rigor mortis meant that their limbs were often outstretched at odd and unnatural angles.[280]

Men had to cope with this. Practical strategies such as quick burials, disinfection, and the cleaning of trenches accompanied a variety of psychological mechanisms. Alexander Watson suggests soldiers sought to diminish the impact of death. Self-deception helped to combat their sense of mortality.

Burke, Letter to Reg 25–27 November 1916; IWM Documents.20211: F. Hubard, Letter to Mr and Mrs Underhill 8 December 1917.

[272] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 14 and 19 September and 16 October 1914; IWM Documents.18524: Pte. W. Tapp, Diary 26 November 1914; IWM Documents.20211: F. Hubard, Letter to Mr and Mrs Underhill, 8 December 1917; IWM Documents.11976: Lt Col. A.H. Cope, Diary 26 March 1918, p. 13.

[273] IWM Documents.1665: A.P. Burke, Letter to Reg 7 July and 25–27 November 1916.

[274] IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 24 August 1918.

[275] SOFO Box 16 3/4/N/2: Lt. Reginald N. Neville, Letters to Father 13 July and 19 September 1917.

[276] Ibid. Letter to Father 11 December 1917.

[277] TNA WO 95/2339/1: 16th Bn. Manchester Regiment, Appendix II, Casualties June 1917.

[278] Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, pp. 36–37; P.Y. Desfossés, A. Jacques and G. Prilaux, 'Arras "Actiparc" les oubliés du "Point du Jour"', *Sucellus*, Vol. 54 (2003), p. 90; P. Bura, 'Étude anthropologique de la sépulture multiple', *Sucellus*, Vol. 54 (2003), p. 93.

[279] IWM Documents.11173: Reverend E.N. Mellish, Letter in *St Paul's, Deptford, Parish Church Magazine* 18 April 1918.

[280] IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 28 and 29 August 1918; MR 2/17/53: Patrick Joseph Kennedy, German Postcards [Nos. 126, 138, 164, 282, 283, 284, 294 and 440]; IWM PC 1784: Maj. Frederick Hardman, Photographic Postcards of Various Dead British Soldiers.

Frontline soldiers also learned to normalise the dead and, as already described, mocked the enemy's instruments of destruction. Positive illusions (such as Charles Quinnell's confidence that he could trace a shell's trajectory) and a religious belief in the afterlife were also important.[281] Capt. A.J. Lord tried to ignore the bodies. He told his father that 'the dead, no matter in what shape or form, no longer cause the slightest concern', although he continued to find the groans of the wounded haunting.[282]

The internment of comrades and friends was never pleasant.[283] Yet, it offered the opportunity for a last display of intimacy and burial could prove cathartic. Where possible, soldiers spent time burying their dead and marking the locations with crosses, shell fragments, or rifle butts.[284] Significantly, memorial rites emphasised resurrection and life after death.[285] Where time allowed, soldiers would hold a brief service and even hasty internments were completed 'reverently'.[286] The very act of commemoration could provide some solace. Charles Dwyer felt that he generated some agency as he carved crosses for the graves of deceased comrades.[287]

Heavy casualties created a network of cemeteries and isolated white crosses.[288] The presence of so many graves on the battlefield is evidenced in the numbers that were damaged by shellfire.[289] These were locations invested with meaning and reminders of the survivors' cause: to fight on in memory of the dead.[290] The landscape was littered with temporary crosses or bottles containing the details of a casualty and charted previous years' fighting.[291] One soldier retraced his steps across the battlefields after 1918 and found that '[t]he sight that touches me up most is the number of little crosses, denoting the graves of our lads who were killed in the advance'.[292] In 1914, civilians often shared the same dangers as combatants and the death of a

[281] Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, pp. 88–102.
[282] IWM Documents.17029: Capt. A.J. Lord, Letter to his Father 28 August 1918.
[283] IWM Documents.14707: F. Worrall, Memoir, p. 4.
[284] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 21 September, 16 and 22 October 1914; IWM Documents.4772: Canon E.C. Crosse, Diary 4 July 1916.
[285] MR 3/17/91: Memorial Service Programme.
[286] MR 2/17/57: 2nd Lt. Frederick Thomas Kearsley Woodworth, Diary 29 March 1918 'Thorpe's Death'.
[287] IWM Documents.16676: C. Dwyer, Diary 21 September 1914.
[288] CWGC/1/1/10/C/WG 1406.2: Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – Lists: Plotted Map of N.E. France & Part of Belgium.
[289] CWGC/1/1/10/C/WG 1406: Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – General File, Temporary Memorials 25B and 'List of Temporary Memorials' esp. 20th Battalion Royal Fusiliers at Ceguel British Cemetery. Also, Acquisition of Land – France – DGRE Files, L1.15.3 'Very Valuable Report' O.C. G.R. Units: Somme 6.5.17.
[290] IWM Documents.12819: Maj. J.S. Knyvett, Diary 17 February 1918.
[291] IWM Documents.10933: Capt. G.B. Donaldson, Letter to Mother 29 June 1916.
[292] IWM Documents.15040: A.E. Heywood, Diary 14 November 1918.

**Figure 1.5** A burial party on the Western Front *c*. 1917.

Source: Popperfoto via Getty Images/Getty Images.

soldier could become part of the fabric of local memory.[293] In an interview with a member of the Graves Registration Unit (GRU), one French civilian recounted how two British soldiers had been killed around his home. One had been shot through the brain as he picked an apple from his orchard, while the other knelt on his doorstep and returned fire until he too had been shot dead by the enemy.[294] Of course, this was more common in the war's early days when civilians occupied the battle zone in greater numbers.

Bonds of comradeship existed between the living and dead. Burials were moments for collective remembrance that acknowledged the dead's sacrifice.

[293] Dowdall, 'Civilians in the Combat Zone', 240, 243.
[294] CWGC/1/1/1/MU 3 Catalogue No. 3 Box 2029: Early Letters about Graves: Report to The Hon. Arthur Stanley C.V.O., M.P. 10 May 1915.

Men even attended other units' services (especially if there was music), perhaps because the ceremony offered some comfort.[295] Illustratively, on a cold day in December 1914, a GRU officer was struggling to erect a cross over the grave of a soldier 'in some out of the way turnip field'. Some passing soldiers noticed and 'obtained leave to fall out and help'. After burying the body, 'without a word they all sprang as one man to attention and solemnly saluted the grave of their dead comrade-in-arms. It was a most impressive and touching sight'.[296] This spontaneous reaction reflected the connection many felt with those killed in service. Furthermore, it mirrored the Edwardian culture of reverence and respect for the dead. Funeral practices were therapeutic and drew on values of respectability.[297] New Army servicemen displayed similar intimacy. After 1 July 1916, survivors in the 8th and 9th Bns. Devonshire Regiment buried thirteen officers and 148 comrades in two trenches in the old frontline at Mansel Copse. Filling in the trenches, they levelled the ground and then enclosed them with barbed wire and subverted its martial purpose. They were 'anxious that grass seed should be sown this year and specially Devonshire plants'.[298] The 8th and 9th Devons attempted to re-nationalise the frontlines and used Devon as their muse. Such measures could boost morale and *esprit de corps*. The flora of south-west England were a proud regimental symbol and reminder of home; they honoured the dead and comforted the living by helping men inhabiting a line otherwise bereft of life.

In the 'sameness' of shattered landscapes, cemeteries became oases for reflection. One Horticultural Department report evaluated the 'value' of sowing annuals in these cemeteries. It noted that the plants helped 'to brighten places often very barren and desolate'. While annuals need to be replanted each spring, they are bright and vibrant, tend to bloom all season long, are cheaper, and require less attention. The authorities believed that 'they cheer our men'.[299] Soldiers were 'constant visitors to our cemeteries' and 'frequently pass . . . when on the march'. Cemeteries offered 'relief and interest' for servicemen who would

[295] SOFO Box 23A Box 2E: Rev. K.C. Jackson, Diary 27 and 28 August 1916; SOFO Box 23A: Capt. J.H. Early, Daily Routine 12 December 1916 – 4.00 pm Burials; RFM.ARC.2495.5: Sgt. S. Gill, Diary 10 October 1916.

[296] CWGC/1/1/1/MU 1 Catalogue 1 Box 2029: Narrative Letters and Reports, Report from R.A.L. Broadley 6 December 1914.

[297] J. Walvin, 'Dust to Dust: Celebrations of Death in Victorian England', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Fall 1982), pp. 353–371; J.-M. Strange, '"She Cried a Very Little": Death, Grief and Mourning in Working-Class Culture, *c.* 1880–1914', *Social History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2002), pp. 143–161 and *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 1–26.

[298] CWGC/1/1/1/WG 549.1: Acquisition of Land – France – DGRE Files: 21–15. 3 D.G.R.& E 'Somme' Report 1 August 1916.

[299] Ibid.

'adorn' graves with 'plants and shrubs found in derelict gardens'.[300] In fact, the maintenance of cemeteries apparently became a 'point of pride' for men billeted nearby.[301] These sites were a testimony to the Edwardian love of gardening and became a means of resistance against the war's destruction.[302]

Men's connection with the dead was also maintained through institutional and regimental memory. Histories of the Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission have demonstrated that the preservation of British (and British Empire) graves was driven by an ethos of 'uniformity regardless of rank, race or creed'. The locations, size, and structure of cemeteries were informed by common standards.[303] However, large-scale grave concentration only took place after hostilities ended. During the war, memorials to sacrifices and exploits emerged from personal or unit-directed memorialisation.[304] In fact, the Directorate of Graves Registration and Directories was sometimes willing to establish memorials at the behest of individual battalions.[305] Many of these were in areas that were of special significance to the units. By 1918, there were approximately ninety-five 'battle exploit' memorials on the Western Front, while the number of unit and personal memorials was incalculable.[306]

At Dantzig Alley, a five-foot cross was erected in memory of the officers and men of the 20th Bn. Manchester Regiment and placed next to that of fifty-seven British soldiers of an unidentified unit.[307] Memorials were sometimes crafted from local stone and maintained by the local populace.[308] At Verneuil Chateau, one had been carved from local limestone and inscribed in French: 'R.I.P. Compagne 1914.15.16.17 Le 57e Rmt. d'Infie Francais aux Camarades

[300] CWGC/1/1/1/SDC 72: A.W. Hill's Reports on Horticulture, Report 1: Reports on Thirty Seven Cemeteries Visited between March 15th and 31st 1916.

[301] A.W. Hill's Reports on Horticulture, The Care of British Graves in France and the Work of the Horticultural Department: Report by Lieutenant A.W. Hill on his visit to France March 18th–April 8th, 1917.

[302] D. Ottewill, *The Edwardian Garden* (New Haven, CT, 1989). Also J. Kay, '"No Time for Recreations Till the Vote Is Won"? Suffrage Activists and Leisure in Edwardian Britain', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (2007), pp. 540–542.

[303] J. Summers, *Remembered: The History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (London, 2007), pp. 14–17; P. Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: The History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (Barnsley, 1967, 2003), p. 86.

[304] CWGC/1/1/10/C/WG 1406: Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – General File.

[305] CWGC/1/1/10/C/WG 14061 PT.1: Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – Divisions; Brigades; Regiments; Etc. – General File, 4/C32/330/V Letter 4 March 1932 to Adjutant, The Rifle Brigade.

[306] Ibid. AB/NH. Unit Battle Exploit Memorials 13 July 1926.

[307] Ibid. Temporary Unit Memorials [1406] No. 5 Area IWGC Albert 23.7.24.

[308] CWGC/1/1/1/MU 1: Narrative Letters and Reports, Report from R.A.L. Broadley 6 December 1914; The Mobile Unit & The Graves Registration Commission to The Hon. Arthur Stanley, C.V.O. M.P. 13 April 1915 and Early Letters about Graves, Report to The Hon. Arthur Stanley C.V.O., M.P. 10 May 1915.

Anglais tombés au champ d'honneur dans le Secteur de Verneuil.' It was a monument to shared loss and 'honour'.[309] Regiments celebrated past exploits and built bridges between new drafts and their predecessors. Having served in Belgium and France since August 1914, the 2nd Bn. Ox and Bucks Light Infantry had several memorials preserving the unit's collective memory of loss and heroism. In October 1917, the battalion unveiled a memorial near Langemarck and Gheluvelt. The service was led by the battalion's old commanding officer and dedicated to the 'memory of 5 officers and 70 NCOs and Men, 52nd Light Infantry, killed in action 21–23 Oct 1914 some of whom are buried near this spot'.[310] Static war meant that these were often part of the battlefield. Passing soldiers would have been aware that they were traversing or relinquishing hallowed ground, which explains why one report on morale claimed that this 'loss of ground [... had] acted as a powerful tonic on the moral [sic] of the army' after March 1918.[311]

Memorialisation nurtured a sense of ownership.[312] Ypres became a 'sacred monument' for the British.[313] Historian Mark Connelly has argued that a 'consensus around the meaning of Ypres was constructed' producing an 'imagined landscape' that 'linked veterans, the bereaved, and the town's native inhabitants'.[314] This process began during the conflict.[315] The city was a kind of tomb.[316] Graves and battle-scarred landscapes were physical reminders of a

[309] CWGC/1/1/10/C/WG 1406: Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – Lists, Temporary Memorials 25A.

[310] TNA WO 95/1348: War Diary 2nd Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, 11 October 1917. See also Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – General File, Lists of Temporary Memorials, Temporary Memorials 22a.

[311] TNA WO 256/33: Report on BEF Morale 12 July 1918, p. 1.

[312] Ward, *Living on the Western Front*, pp. 92–97.

[313] CWGC/1/1/9/B/WG 360 PT.1: Ypres – General File: Draft [1] of Letter from H.M. Ambassador in Brussels to the Belgian Minister for Foreign Affairs [Report of Anglo-Belgian Conference at Ypres 14 July 1919]. See also M. Connelly, 'The Ypres League and the Commemoration of the Ypres Salient, 1914–1940', *War in History*, Vol 16, No. 1 (2009), pp. 51–76. See also J.M. Winter, *Sites of Memory Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1995, 2003), pp. 52–53; S. Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914–1940* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 29–30, 175–176. For 'sacred places' in the Anzac context see K.S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne, 1998, 2008).

[314] Connelly, 'The Ypres League', p. 53.

[315] D. Lauwers, 'Le Saillant d'Ypres entre reconstruction et construction d'un lieu de mémoire: un long processus de négociations mémorielles de 1914 à nos jours', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, European University Institute (2014); Connelly, 'The Ypres League', pp. 54–55.

[316] CWGC/1/1/9/B/WG 360 PT.1: Ypres – General File, Extract from *Illustrated Sunday Herald* 15 February 1920 – Julius. M. Price (the well-known War Correspondent & Artist), 'Picnics at Ypres: The Desecration of Britain's Holy Ground'; Cutting from the

debt owed to the fallen. One Scottish trench journal explained that the BEF's survivors 'lived to mourn' the fallen, who would 'never fade from our memories'. Their 'sacrifice will be as an incentive to others'.[317] This sentiment was evident on monuments' dedications, which often included phrases lifted from the bible such as 'BETTER [usually worded greater] LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS – THAT A MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS.' Elsewhere, they included descriptions of 'GALLANT DEFENCE' or simple pleas to remember the dead.[318]

National history nurtured other connections between the landscape and the dead of other wars. History held broad appeal (across all classes) during this period.[319] One man found himself thinking about Napoleon.[320] Others were confident that the battles of 1914–1918 would take their rightful place in this historical record.[321] Moments from English, British, and regimental history had taken place in northern France and Belgium. Calais was England's last possession on the continent, while Agincourt, Crécy, and Waterloo were sites of historical significance. J.W. Fortescue (the British Army's official historian) published *The British Soldier's Guide to Northern France and Flanders*. In this affordable pamphlet, Fortescue explained that 'the Low Countries and Northern France are the oldest and most familiar of the British Army's campaigning grounds . . . This . . . is an attempt to enable Regiments to form some idea of the time and circumstances of their former visits to this area'.[322] Connections were drawn to the campaigns of William III and the Duke of Wellington. Each regiment's exploits were described, as were the historic battles and events that had occurred throughout the British zone of operations.[323] Even further back in history 'Englishmen [had] fought and died for Merrie England' during the campaigns of Edward III and Henry V.[324] One

*Daily Chronicle* of 15th January, 1920; 17.3.28.3 'A Memorial in Ypres' Letter to the Editor of *The Times* from R.C. Padre.

317 Uncle Bob, 'Letter', *The Outpost*, Vol. IV, No. 2 (1 December 1916), p. 55.

318 CWGC/1/1/10/C/WG 1406: Memorial Crosses and Unit Memorials – Lists, Temporary Memorial Sketches of Unit Memorials, esp. Wieille Chapelle New C.C. – Stone Memorial to King Edward's Horse and Memorial to 6th Seaforth Highlanders in Mont du Hem Cemetery. Also List of Temporary Memorials in Cemeteries No. 1 Area P.R. 1723/AS.

319 Readman, 'The Place of the Past', pp. 147–199.

320 IWM Documents.11289: H.T. Madders, Diary 1 November 1918.

321 SOFO Box 16 Item 36: W.J. Cheshire, Diary 14 September 1914; IWM Documents.12339: Brig. Gen. G.A. Stevens, Letter to Mother 2 November 1916; SOFO Box 16 Item 12: Capt. L.W.E.O. Fullbrook-Leggatt, Regimental Orders Saturday 8 December 1917 [describing action on 30 November].

322 J.W. Fortescue, *The British Soldier's Guide to Northern France and Flanders*, (London: *The Times*, Undated), p. 1.

323 Ibid.

324 Viking, 'Historical Coincidences', *The Outpost*, Vol. V (1 March 1918), p. 166.

popular song's lyrics were 'literally true'. It went '[h]ere we are, here we are, here we are again!' In this regard, the Great War represented continuity. Nonetheless, Fortescue concluded: 'in every case France was the enemy, and the general front of the British was towards the West and South. Now, with that most gallant nation for our friend, we face in the opposite direction'.[325]

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Ross Wilson has observed that 'whereas the battlefields were the scenes of destruction and death, ruined buildings and scenes of brutality, the ways in which soldiers responded to these conditions acted to alter and shift the meanings of the landscape'.[326] This provided 'a different context in which to consider their lives at the front'.[327] English infantrymen developed an attachment to the physical world. They familiarised the Western Front through exposure and exploration, which helped them to normalise and overcome what confronted them. It was possible for soldiers to become habituated to the Western Front's more distressing sights, sounds, and scents. They also nurtured meaning and developed deep bonds with their surroundings. Geographer D.W. Meinig has argued that landscapes are 'defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds' and are 'composed not of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads'.[328] France and Flanders became a meaningful space, but it never threatened to become home. Men remained keen to escape, and individuals from other parts of the world had very different responses to the Englishmen studied here.

'Place attachment' (a concept borrowed from environmental psychology and sociology) helps to explain this. It does not necessitate a preferential perception of a landscape but rests on a person's experiential relationship with their surroundings. Psychologists Leila Scannell and Robert Gifford have described this process as 'the bonding that occurs between individuals and their meaningful environments'. 'Attachment is an effective, proximity-maintaining bond that can be expressed without an underlying purpose of control.'[329] Though frequently an individual phenomenon, it can also take place collectively. Personal connections are built upon memories, connections,

[325] Fortescue, *British Soldier's Guide to Northern France and Flanders*, p. 1.
[326] Wilson, *Landscapes of the Western Front*, p. 162.
[327] Ibid., p. 143.
[328] D.W. Meinig (ed.), *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 3, 33–34. Referenced and discussed in P. Readman, '"The Cliffs Are Not Cliffs": The Cliffs of Dover and National Identities in Britain, *c*.1750–*c*.1950', *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*, Vol. 99 No. 335 (April 2014), esp. pp. 244–245.
[329] L. Scannell and R. Gifford, 'Defining Place Attachment: A Tripartite Organizing Framework', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 30 (2010), pp. 1–2, 4.

and feelings of growth, whereas shared attachment stems from symbolic cultural meanings or communal historical experiences, values, and symbols. Personal memories of places, people, and events; the collective memorialisation of dead comrades; and institutional and historical memory helped to cultivate a connection with the Western Front.

Various processes feed place attachment. It can be driven by affect and some researchers point to topophilia (a very positive perception of an environment).[330] Others suggest that attachment stems from an emotional investment in, or pride about, a space. Significance can be bred by fear, hatred, or ambivalence. Yet, it is generally more positive emotions that are most significant. Displays of human kindness, feelings of comradeship, or moments of relaxation and discovery nurtured soldiers' relationships with particular locations. Cognition is also influential as 'memories, beliefs, meaning and knowledge' can become fused with places and spaces.[331]

Familiarity is a central pillar of cognitive place attachment. The Western Front was intensely familiar. Exposure and exploration allowed men to acquire beliefs tied to their experiences in Belgium and France, to seek meaning in the world around them, and to develop knowledge particular to the landscapes there. This became intertwined with soldiers' self-perception: their sense of duty, their role as combatants, and their membership of a community were all informed by this physical frame. Attachment was demonstrated behaviourally.[332] Soldiers renamed the frontlines, incorporated French into their vernacular, collected images of the sights they encountered, and eventually returned on pilgrimages after the war. Religious pilgrimage and reconstruction (physical or conceptual) are indicators of place attachment.[333]

This also served psychological functions. Place attachment provides actors with the perception of security and wellbeing.[334] It also gave meaning and structure to the conflict, which was invaluable to morale. Place attachment nurtures feelings of continuity. Memories are projected onto the physical environment, which can become part of personal histories and shared cultural

[330] Tuan, *Topophilia*.
[331] Scannell and Gifford, 'Defining Place Attachment', p. 3.
[332] Ibid., p. 4.
[333] For reconstruction, W. Michelson, *Man and His Urban Environment: A Sociological Approach, with Revisions* (Reading, MA, 1976). For pilgrimage, S.M. Low, 'Symbolic Ties That Bind', in I. Altman and S.M. Low (eds.), *Place Attachment* (New York, 1992) and S. Mazumdar and S. Mazumdar, 'Religion and Place Attachment: A Study of Sacred Place', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 24 (2004), pp. 385–397.
[334] Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, esp. pp. 70, 204, 373. Also S. Chatterjee, 'Children's Friendship with Place: A Conceptual Inquiry', *Children, Youth and Environments*, Vol. 15 (2005), pp. 1–26.

events.[335] The Western Front became the stage for the pursuit of victorious peace and bonds are sometimes produced by the expectation or success of goal pursuit.[336] Scannell and Gifford have argued that this can 'lead to place dependence, a type of attachment in which individuals value a place for the specific activities that it supports or facilitates'.[337]

Men's relationship with the Western Front helped to combat chronic crisis and deflect acute crisis. By layering memories upon the environment, infantrymen were able to see beyond the destruction. Their attachment to Belgium and France offered a sense of security, the perception of order, and familiarity in a world that was frequently confusing. Yet, as the next chapter will show, the environment still sapped their energy and resilience.

[335] C.L. Twigger-Ross and D.L. Uzzell, 'Place and Identity Processes', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 16 (1996), pp. 205–220 and S.M. Low, 'Cross-Cultural Place Attachment: A Preliminary Typology', in Y. Yoshitake, R.B. Bechtel, T. Takahashi and M. Asai (eds.), *Current Issues in Environment-Behavior Research* (Tokyo, 1990).

[336] Scannell and Gifford, 'Defining Place Attachment', p. 6; G.T. Kyle, A.J. Mowen and M. Tarrant, 'Linking Place Preferences with Place Meaning: An Examination of the Relationship between Place Motivation and Place Attachment', *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 24 (2004), pp. 439–454.

[337] Scannell and Gifford, 'Defining Place Attachment', p. 6.