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Opening extract from

Line of Fire
Diary of an Unknown Soldier
August-September 1914

Written by

Barroux

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Thanks to the cold of winter
Thanks to Marie-Thérèse M. for her patience
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Thanks to all those who believed in this project

Thanks to the unknown soldier, whose diary I give you in its entirety

Barroux



LINE OF FIRE

DIARY OF AN UNKNOWN SOLDIER

(AUGUST, SEPTEMBER 1914)



BARROUX

Translated from the French
by Sarah Ardizzone

LINE OF FIRE

AN INTRODUCTION

by Michael Morpurgo



It is now a hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War, in which millions upon millions suffered and died in a holocaust of such unthinkable magnitude and such indescribable horror. It is almost impossible for us today to imagine how it must have been to live through it, to endure it. Wilfred Owen called them 'the mouthless dead'. Most were indeed 'mouthless', but some did speak out, some did tell it down in their own way. We have their witness statements. They were there.

Painters, poets and novelists; dramatists and film makers and historians have tried to tell the story, and have done it wonderfully well – and many of those were there. We have *All Quiet On The Western Front, Journey's End, Oh What A Lovely War* and *Birdsong*. We have the paintings of Paul Nash and Stanley Spencer and Christopher Nevison, and we have the poems of Owen and Sassoon and Thomas. Through these great works and many others we can have some sense of how it might have been to be there. But for me it is when the 'mouthless dead' speak directly to us, without the artifice of art, that we can best begin to understand the agony and the pity of it all; the senselessness, the waste and the futility.

In *Les Paroles des Poilus,* for instance, a collection of letters and first hand accounts, we hear the authentic voice of the soldier in the French army: a voice telling a story, not rhyming a poem, or making a story or a play, but simply speaking, telling how it was, straight. In Richard Holmes' *Tommy*, we can hear that same authentic voice, the voice of the British Tommy.

I myself, born twenty-five years after the end of the First World War, who read the poems, studied the history, watched the films and the plays, only really began to understand the horrors and terrors, the camaraderie, the humour, the sadness and the suffering, when I met someone who had been there, who had seen it all, lived it all himself. It was this chance meeting in my local pub thirty-five years ago with an old soldier - a cavalryman, a veteran of the trenches of the First World War - that convinced me I should and could write about the universality of suffering in that war, as seen through the neutral eyes of a war horse, as much a victim as any of the soldiers and civilians who died on all sides in that war.

But *War Horse* is a work of fiction: an attempt to imagine, to tell another kind of truth certainly, but nonetheless a contrived truth. It is not the voice of someone who was there, who saw it, heard it, felt it, suffered it. We need the voice of a witness to tell the unadulterated truth. We have it in this remarkable book.

It is a book of evidence. *Line of Fire* is not a work of fiction, it is a witness statement: the untrammelled, unedited voice of someone who was there. Here are the daily jottings, the notebook of an unknown soldier in the French Army, an ordinary enough man, like millions of them on all sides who finds himself born away from the normality of his everyday existence and thrust into the hideous violence of war. Here you will find no high flown prose or poetry; no sophisticated explanations, no elaboration, no embroidery or exaggeration. It is simply the written record of a man joining up and going to war, being frightened and cold and exhausted, and then wounded. It doesn't even have an end. It simply stops, as so many lives did. We don't know if this diary was lost, or if the author survived; we only know it was unsigned. We do not even know his name. All we do know is that somehow this notebook survived and was miraculously discovered.

He is the unknown soldier and these are his words.

Read them and weep.





I'll walk, it's not far.



I go at a steady pace from Bastille to République.
A shivery sun breaks through the clouds, winter shows its face.



The street comes to life. In front of me, two men covered in grime are huffing and puffing.



In the middle of dusty words and smiles turned yellow with time, a cardboard box catches my eye.

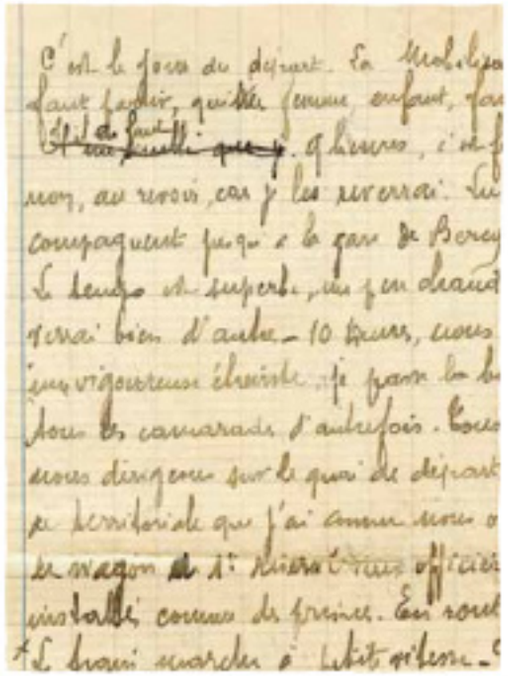


They tip damp papers, mouldy books, black lumps of coal and weary furniture onto the pavement.





3 AUGUST 1914





Today we're off. Mobilisation has been declared, and it's time to go, leaving behind wife, children and family. My morale is good, it has to be. 09:00 hours. This is it: farewell to all. No, goodbye. For I shall see them again.



Lucien and René accompany me to Bercy Station, where I've been summoned. The weather is glorious. A bit hot, but pleasant. I shall see others.



10:00 hours, arrival. After holding each other tight, I go through the barrier and meet up with my army friends from the old days. Everyone is in good spirits. We head for the departure platform.



There, I recognise a lieutenant from the territorial infantry who invites us to join him in the first class carriage reserved for officers, and soon we're as comfortable as princes.



Bound for Montargis. Cheers rise up from all sides. The train trundles along. Juvisy: the locals bring us bottles of wine.



Corbeil, Malesherbes, everywhere we go we're greeted with cheers of "Long live France!" "Long live the army!"



16:00 hours, we reach Montargis Station and the old memories come flooding back as we survey the path leading to our barracks.



At last, each man can join his company. Fernand is in the courtyard and has been waiting for me since this morning. He takes me to the company stores.



What a mess inside! I collect what I need and then we go to the home of his parents-in-law. I am welcomed by Madame Fernand and her parents as if I were one of the family. These decent people are trying to ease the pain of separation in the morning.





After a wholesome dinner, I am shown to my bedroom. I fall asleep, but not without a final thought for those I've left behind.



05:00 hours: Up early as today the company has to move to its billets in town. We reach the barracks where I rush to hang up my bag and equipment.



Afterwards, during company parade in the yard, rations and ammunition are doled out.



Not being assigned to a platoon, I enlist as an extra for the 3rd, which is the sergeant-major's platoon and, more importantly, Fernand's platoon, so we'll be staying together from now on. Towards 10:00 hours, everything is ready and we leave to take up our billets while awaiting departure, which is set for the following morning.



Newspapers arrive from Paris announcing that the bad news is official. War has been declared. This is it then, we're going to fight!