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Opening extract from

True Stories from World War I

Written by

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REMEMBRANCE

Between 2014 and 2018 Britain is commemorating the First World War. For those alive at the time it had another name: The Great War. Tragically, some forty countries across the globe were involved. The main killing grounds were in Europe, but the conflict spilt out into the Middle East, Africa and across the oceans.

Losses were vast. Around 65 million men joined up and almost 10 million died – an average of 6,000 every day for four and half years. Another 21 million were wounded and, though many recovered, others bore physical or mental damage for the rest of their lives. Nearly 7 million civilians died from disease, starvation or were killed in military operations.

Every British family was affected. Children grew up with fathers away and went to schools stripped of male teachers. Women picked up the pieces in industry and agriculture, trying not to worry about husbands, sons, brothers or fathers fighting abroad. Families lived in dread of receiving Army Form B104–82 – the official notice that someone they loved was missing or killed in action.

With peace came time to grieve. No community was too small to have a war memorial, with a long list of the

dead carved in stone. No workplace, school or public building went without a Roll of Honour by the door bearing the names of those killed, perhaps in Flanders, on the Somme or in Gallipoli.

Today there are no surviving combatants of the Great War. Harry Patch, the last veteran who served in the trenches, died in 2009, while Claude Choules, the last sailor, died in 2011. Yet their generation lives on in stories told by millions of modern families. Diaries and letters from the front, pay-books and service bibles, faded photographs of smiling soldiers and sets of medals are treasured keepsakes. The Great War is not forgotten.

This book tries in a small way to join the commemorations with twelve cracking tales of bravery and endurance from that remarkable era.

INTRODUCTION

'THE GREAT WAR'

In August 1914 the showdown between the great powers of Europe began. The Allies – Britain, France and Russia – lined up against the Central Powers: Germany and Austria-Hungary. By the end of the year Europeans were already calling this 'the Great War'. No one expected the fighting to be so ferocious and no one could find a way to win. New and terrible weapons, especially artillery, machine guns, aeroplanes and barbed wire, brought a bloody stalemate and the deaths of millions. The killing lasted for four long years.

Alliance Trip Wire 1914

In 1914 most countries in Europe were bound together in tight alliances – so when the fighting began everyone piled in, like a deadly playground scrap. The crisis was

triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, Serbia, on 28 June.

- **Thwack!** Franz Ferdinand was the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. His death led an outraged Austria-Hungary to declare war on Serbia.
- **Thwack!** Russia, the ally of Serbia, began to **mobilize** a vast army on the Austro-Hungarian and German borders.
- **Thwack!** To hit first, Austria-Hungary's ally, Germany, declared war on Russia and Russia's main partner, France.
- **Thwack!** To knock out France, Germany launched the Schlieffen Plan – a huge attack through neutral Belgium.
- **Thwack!** Britain was dragged into the war to protect Belgium. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) of 100,000 men left for France.

Hopes of a short, sharp fight were soon dashed as the opposing armies dug in on the Western Front – over 400 miles (600 km) of trenches stretching from the Swiss border to the English Channel. Troops from all over the British Empire – India, Canada, New Zealand and Australia – flocked to Britain's aid, while Algerians and Africans fought alongside the French. Turkey joined the Central Powers.

1915

The Germans tried to break through British lines in Belgium and were the first to use poisonous gas. Stalemate on the Western Front led the Allies to attack Turkey at Gallipoli and Mesopotamia (Iraq). The passenger liner *Lusitania* was sunk by a German **U-boat** off the Irish coast, sparking rage in the USA, because many American civilians drowned. The bloodshed was carried across the Alps when Italy joined the Allies. London suffered its first Zeppelin raid, and aircraft on the Western Front were armed with machine guns – the war had spread to the air. Sir Douglas Haig became commander of the BEF.

1916

By January 1916 2.5 million volunteers had joined the British army, but this was not enough. Conscription was introduced. Germany launched a huge attack against the French at Verdun. In the war at sea, the Royal Navy faced its sternest test since Trafalgar, over a century before: the Battle of Jutland. The result was a draw, but the German High Seas fleet feared another showdown and stayed in port after this. On 1 July 20,000 British soldiers were killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, and the fighting there went on until November. Lloyd George took over from Herbert Asquith as British Prime Minister. Hindenburg became the German Chief of Staff.

1917

German U-boats almost cut off British food supplies from North America. The USA entered the war in April, and in November the communists seized power in Russia and sought peace terms from Germany. The British tried to break through enemy lines at Passchendaele with a huge loss of life.

1918

In March Germany launched a massive spring offensive and drove a wedge between the British and French armies. Haig issued his famous 'backs to the wall' order: 'Every position must be held to the last man.' By the end of April this attack was exhausted and the tide slowly turned in favour of the Allies. The last 100 days of the war began on 8 August with a great Allied victory at the Battle of Amiens. The Germans called this 'the Black Day' because they lost 27,000 men in casualties and prisoners. In the weeks that followed British and Empire troops drove the enemy relentlessly back. On 9 November **Kaiser** Wilhelm abdicated. At 11:00 on 11 November the war ended. Cheering crowds danced in the streets of London and Paris.

1919

The Paris Peace Conference led to the Treaty of Versailles. In it, Germany was blamed for the war, lost territory and paid huge compensation to the Allies.

Britain survived but at a heavy cost: 700,000 dead and debts of £1,000 million to the USA (about £1,250 billion today). Paying the interest on this debt took half the nation's taxes during the 1920s and 1930s.

War Stories

This book highlights six stunning stories from this gruelling war and gives you the fighting facts behind them.

- ***The Christmas Truce***

  Christmas 1914. Life in the trenches is miserable – cold, wet and extremely dangerous. But then there is hope, in the form of an unofficial ceasefire. But what will the generals say? Bruce Bairnsfather is in the front line on one of the strangest days of the war.

- ***An Underground War***

  Mysterious explosions rock the British line from December 1914 – the Germans are using mines. Something must be done, and quickly, but can the 'clay-kickers' (tunnellers) save the day?

- ***Gallipoli – a Side Show***

  With the war dragging on in Europe, the Allies are looking for a quick fix. Will an attack against Turkey solve all their problems?

- ***Guests of the Kaiser***

  The Canadian Baron Richardson Racey is captured during a German gas attack. Can he escape the grim camps and reach the safety of neutral Holland?

- ***The Prisoners' Martyr – Edith Cavell***

  In 1915 Edith Cavell is running an escape network for Allied prisoners in Belgium. Why is the prim and proper daughter of a Norfolk vicar taking such a risk . . . and why does she freely admit her actions to the enemy?

- ***Aftermath***

  Who is the Unknown Warrior and why is he so important?

If your reading ends up in no man's land, help is at hand. Words shown in **bold** type are explained in Trench Talk or the Glossary on pages 127–30.

Never Mind

If the sergeant drinks your rum, never mind
And your face may lose its smile, never mind
He's entitled to a tot but not the bleeding lot
If the sergeant drinks your rum, never mind.

When old Jerry shells your trench, never mind
And your face may lose its smile, never mind
Though the sandbags burst and fly, you have
only once to die,
When old Jerry shells your trench, never mind.

If you get stuck on the wire, never mind
And your face may lose its smile, never mind
Though you're stuck there all the day, they
count you dead and stop your pay
If you get stuck on the wire, never mind.

Trench song

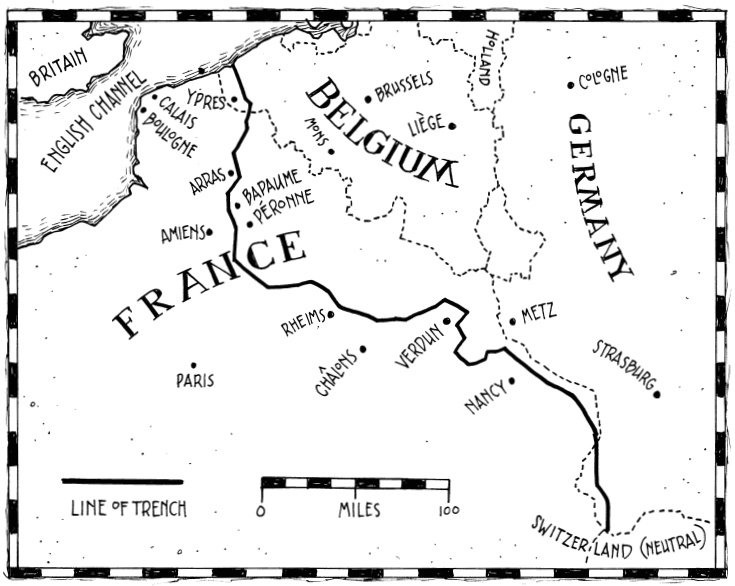
THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE

BATTLE BRIEFING

The Western Front

When World War I broke out in August 1914 the news was greeted by cheering crowds and yells of 'On to Berlin' or 'On to St Petersburg'. Most people believed there would be a decisive battle like Waterloo, a century before, and the troops would be home by Christmas. It wasn't to be.

German hopes lay in the Schlieffen Plan – a mighty right hook through Belgium to get behind the main French army and take Paris. It almost worked. The BEF and the French Fifth Army were hurled back, until a last desperate stand was made on the River Marne. This in turn forced the Germans to retreat and both sides began the so-called 'race to the sea' – fierce and bloody attempts to ***outflank*** *each other and capture the Channel ports.*



The Western Front, 1914

By November this war of movement was over and opposing trench systems had been dug from the Channel to Switzerland. Early attempts to punch a way through ended in terrible slaughter, as tens of thousands of men fell amid the chatter of machine guns. The pattern of the war was set for the next three and a half years: mud, blood, death and misery.

During the bleak winter of 1914–15 the BEF held the line in Belgium. Among the unlucky soldiers was Bruce Bairnsfather, a machine-gun officer in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. He had just arrived, fresh and optimistic, from England and was about to get his first taste of trench warfare . . . and a very unexpected Christmas.