

FIRST WORLD WAR

PART ONE: EUROPE GOES TO WAR

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The decision-makers who led the world to war

» ROGER MOORHOUSE

The best-laid battle plans – and how they went to pot

BERLIN, AUGUST 1, 1914
A crowd listens as a German officer reads the Kaiser's order for mobilisation. The following day, Germany invades Luxembourg

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WELCOME

Welcome to the launch issue of *The Sunday Telegraph's* compelling 12-part series about the First World War, which will run monthly up to the centenary of the war's outbreak.

Sponsored by Lord Ashcroft, *Inside the First World War* brings you insights and knowledge from IWM (Imperial War Museums) and opinions from leading military historians. Our objective? To explain the conflict of 1914-1918 and remember those who gave their lives.

In this issue, Europe Goes to War, we look at the events that led to war. Among regular features is Post Box, in which we invite you to share your memories, photos and correspondence from loved ones who experienced the hostilities. See page 13.

What Did You Do in the War? will focus on those who fought and later played a role in national life. We begin with Harold Macmillan, a young lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards. Each month, Lord Ashcroft will tell the stories of those awarded the Victoria Cross. We will also look at the poignant letters sent home by soldiers.

Inside the First World War will show how the conflict still resonates in our lives.

Zoe Dare Hall
Series editor



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Inside the First World War, a 12-part series, is sponsored by Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC, an international businessman, philanthropist and military historian. Lord Ashcroft is sponsoring the monthly supplements because he wants to promote a greater understanding of the First World War and

to remember those who gave their lives in the conflict.

Lord Ashcroft has established himself as a champion of bravery, building up the world's largest collection of Victoria Crosses (VCs), Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious award for courage in the face of the enemy. He has also written four books on bravery: *Victoria Cross Heroes*, *Special Forces*

Heroes, *George Cross Heroes* and *Heroes of the Skies*. In each of the 12 new supplements, Lord Ashcroft will tell the incredible stories behind First World War VCs from his collection.

Lord Ashcroft purchased his first VC in 1986 and currently owns more than 180 of the decorations. Three years ago, he began collecting George Crosses (GCs), Britain and the Commonwealth's most

prestigious award for courage not in the face of the enemy. He currently owns 11 GCs. Lord Ashcroft VC and GC collections are on display in a gallery that bears his name at IWM London, along with VCs and GCs in the care of the museum. The gallery, built with a £5 million donation from Lord Ashcroft, was opened by HRH The Princess Royal in 2010. Lord Ashcroft has been a successful entrepreneur

for the past four decades, launching, buying, building and selling companies – both private and public – in Britain and overseas.

He is a former Treasurer and Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. In September 2012, he was appointed a member of the Privy Council and was made the Government's Special Representative for Veterans' Transition. He is Treasurer of the International Democratic

Union (IDU) and one of Britain's leading experts on polling.

Lord Ashcroft has donated several millions of pounds to charities and good causes.

He founded Crimestoppers (then the Community Action Trust) in 1988.

He is the founder of the Ashcroft Technology College and Chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University. His numerous other charity roles include

being Vice Patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, a Trustee of Imperial War Museum, an Ambassador for SkillForce and a Trustee of the Cleveland Clinic in the US.

* For information about the Lord Ashcroft Gallery, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For information on Lord Ashcroft, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

THERE'S ROOM FOR YOU



ENLIST TO-DAY

➔ **A GOLDEN AGE?**
The First World War was a great wrong turning in history but hindsight has given us a rose-tinted view of pre-1914 Europe, writes **Patrick Bishop**. **P4-5**

➔ **HOW IT BEGAN**
Was the conflict inevitable after the killing of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo? **Saul David** on how European leaders took the world into the abyss. **P6-7**

➔ **THE ART OF WAR**
IWM curator **Richard Slocum** praises *The Kensingtons at Laventie*, official war artist Eric Kennington's magnificent tribute to his exhausted comrades. **P8**

➔ **DEAR MOTHER**
IWM's Principal Historian **Nigel Steel** discusses the tragic letters sent home from one teenage soldier. **P9**

➔ **TRUE COURAGE**
Michael Ashcroft tells the remarkable story of Victoria Cross and Military Medal winner Spencer "Joe" Bent, whose many acts of heroism throughout the war "illuminated the dark and desperate days of 1914". **P10-11**

➔ **THE ASSASSIN**
Tim Butcher looks behind the myths at Slav nationalist Gavrilo Princip, whose shots triggered the conflict. Plus your amazing stories of the men who fought in "the war to end war". **P12-13**

➔ **BATTLE PLANS**
Roger Moorhouse outlines the balance of power in 1914 and tells how the generals' plans for a fast-moving mobile war, with cavalry a key factor, were confounded. Plus how Harold Macmillan's experiences in the trenches helped shape his political career. **P14-15**

PERSPECTIVE

The world we left behind



WITH EUROPE TORN BY NATIONALISM AND CLASS STRUGGLES, WAS IT REALLY THE END OF A 'GOLDEN AGE'?
PATRICK BISHOP QUESTIONS OUR ROSE-TINTED HINDSIGHT

The First World War was a great catastrophe that begat greater and worse catastrophes. The ruin to come was famously glimpsed by the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey as he stood at the window of his office on the eve of Britain's declaration of war.

He looked out at the sun setting over St James's Park and the lights coming on in The Mall and remarked to a friend: "The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." It was a rare flash of eloquence from a man not noted for his clarity of speech.

The metaphor was chillingly precise – the world was indeed moving from light to darkness – and the prophecy remarkably accurate. Grey died in 1933, seven months after Hitler came to power and ensured that the First and Second World Wars became a more or less continuous event.

There were others across Europe who sensed the immensity of the storm that was breaking and understood somehow that a long and largely progressive era of the continent's history was at an end. "The curses of the nations will be upon you!" proclaimed Sergei Sazonov, the Russian Foreign Minister, when the German Ambassador presented Germany's declaration of war.

For many, though, the war did not feel like a disaster. Rupert Brooke's famous poem thanking God who had "matched us with His hour" may have been a piece of post-adolescent posturing inspired by a bust-up with his girlfriend rather than a burning desire to get to grips with the Hun, but it struck a chord in Britain.

In Germany, France and Austria-Hungary, mobilisation produced mass outbursts of patriotic hysteria and rejoicing. For the French, it was an opportunity to wipe out the shame of their defeat by the Prussians 43 years before and to restore Alsace and Lorraine to their rightful owners.

For the Germans, it was the chance to fulfil the destiny that had been denied them by their spiteful, greedy neighbours. For the Austro-Hungarians, it was a pretext to slap down the Serbs once and for all.

The spring in the step of the soldiers marching away and the ecstatic cheers of the crowds were a reflection of the widespread belief that the conflict would be short and sharp. "You will be home before the leaves have fallen from the trees," the Kaiser told departing troops in the first week of August. An officer of the Russian Imperial Guard fretted over whether he should pack his full dress uniform to wear for the triumphant entry into Berlin, or leave it to be delivered by the next courier. There were only a few – Britain's war minister Lord Kitchener was one of them – who foresaw the terrible slog ahead.

It is Grey's pessimism rather than the crowds' optimism that has stuck. We tend to view 1914 as a hinge in a doorway leading from a benign, sunlit past to a cold, dark future. It seems to mark the end of a long sequence of progress and prosperity and the beginning of a new Dark Age.

How real, though, was the "Golden Age" that the conflict apparently brought to an end? The great American historian Barbara Tuchman once offered a rule that "all statements of how lovely it was in that era made by persons contemporary with it will have been found to have been made after 1914".

Before the Great War, all the belligerents had their share of social and political problems. Worst of all

was Russia, seething with chronic discontent and presided over by an apathetic and fatalistic Tsar. The Habsburg empire of Austria-Hungary was coming apart, its patchwork of ethnicities and languages torn by nationalist passions. Germany, for all its economic vigour and sense of purpose, was taut with social and cultural tensions as was its arch enemy France.

In Britain, the strongly demarcated layers of society sat uneasily one on top of the other. Four-fifths of the population occupied the bottom stratum supplying the two million domestic servants who ministered to the needs of those at the top.

In Wales, miners were paid less than half a crown a ton to hew the coal that kept Britain's industries turning. When they rioted in Tonypany in 1910, troops were sent in. At the outbreak of war, no woman had the vote. As property qualifications were still in force, nor did many of the departing soldiers.

Ireland, "John Bull's Other Island", was riven by the Home Rule Question. The prospect that the army might be used against the Protestants of Ulster who were violently opposed to the idea of being ruled by an autonomous Dublin parliament, caused an extraordinary outbreak of defiance by officers. In March 1914, at the Curragh camp, the army's main base in Ireland, all but a handful said they would resign their commissions rather than fight the Ulster Volunteer paramilitaries.

But for all the inequalities and latent strife, British working-class men marched off to fight for their country with much the same enthusiasm as their French and German counterparts, cheered on by the same loyal women. The prevailing mood of Europe was nationalistic.

Nationalism was a reflection of patriotism and in 1914 patriotism could not be easily imposed or faked. Burgeoning communications, educational advances and the march of democracy meant that the nation had a better idea of what they were fighting to protect than preceding generations.

The mass of Britons were proud of who they were and their dominant place in the world. As Professor Sir Michael Howard pointed out: "It was assumed by all save a small dissident minority that the British Empire was the greatest force for good... ever seen since the disintegration of the Roman Empire."

They were taking up arms to preserve a system that, for all its shortcomings, was broadly felt to be travelling in the right direction. In 1934 (thus conforming with Tuchman's rule), when half of Europe was ruled by dictators, the British journalist and historian GP Gooch lamented the passing of the spirit of the time.

"I grew to manhood in an age of sensational progress and limitless self confidence," he wrote. "Civilisation was spreading across the world with great strides; science was tossing us miracle after miracle; wealth was accumulating at a pace undreamt of in earlier generations; the amenities of life were being brought within the range of an ever-greater number of our fellow creatures." Above all there was optimism, "a robust conviction that we were on the right track; that man was a teachable animal who would work out his salvation if given his chance".

In this atmosphere of prosperity, stability and optimism, the arts flourished. In France and Belgium,



WAITING FOR WAR
 Clockwise from far left: Henley regatta just before the war; Budapest learns of the mobilisation; a Sopwith Scout biplane; prewar slum children



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this was the belle époque encompassing the sensuous forms of art nouveau and the hard edges of cubism. In Germany, Richard Strauss led the world in musical innovation. Britain had a new crop of literary talent in Conrad, Wells and Kipling. In Vienna there seemed to be a genius in every kaffeehaus. From decrepit, reactionary Russia had emerged the gorgeous talents of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes.

Yes, great power rivalries created crises in contested colonies such as the 1911 Agadir incident between France and Germany, hinting at trouble to come. But the process of globalisation created commercial interdependencies that seemed to make the idea of a large-scale war impossible.

A big best-seller of 1910 was *The Great Illusion*. Its author Norman Angell argued that the disruption of international credit which would inevitably come with war would either prevent it from breaking out or, if it did, bring it to a speedy end. This view was widely accepted as the truth.

Co-operation rather than confrontation seemed to be the way forward. International agreements covering telegraphs, railways, meteorological data, maritime arrangements, the spread of disease and a host of other areas of mutual interest and benefit had been in place for decades.

There had even been an attempt to regulate war itself. In 1898, Tsar Nicolas II, of all people, called for an international conference which convened at The Hague to discuss not only arms limitation but the establishment of an international court to settle disputes between nations by arbitration.

At the opening session, the Tsar warned that the arms race being run by all the major powers to produce larger armies, heavier guns and bigger warships was "transforming the armed peace into a crushing burden that weighs on all nations and, if prolonged, will lead to the very cataclysm that it seeks to avert".

Fear of war, though, was outweighed by fear of unpreparedness if war broke out, and the race went heedlessly on. The Europe of 1914 swirled with threat and promise. Increased prosperity and a growing mass consciousness, brought about by the spread of literacy and the advent of mass media, increased the danger of class strife – maybe class warfare. Yet the mechanisms of democracy and what John Keegan called "the benevolent and optimistic culture of the European continent" offered the strong hope that harmony would prevail.

These elements of promise and threat were encapsulated in a single, wonderful invention – the aeroplane. Before the war, all over the continent the public flocked to air shows to marvel at the new flying machines and the daredevils piloting them. Inherent in the spectacle was the sense of possibility, that the frontiers of existence were joyfully expanding. Yet almost immediately, these blissful creations were being fitted with weaponry. Before long, the bomber would come to symbolise the horrors of a new form of warfare that spared no one.

The war, it was often said, came out of a "cloudless sky". No one, not even the Germans, wanted one. The sequence of events that produced it could have been broken at any time during the five weeks of diplomatic crisis that preceded the outbreak. When it started, each belligerent hoped that it would be brief and conclusive, redrawing boundaries and readjusting the scales of power – in its own favour, of course – and Europe could pick up where it left off.

“

THE ELEMENTS OF PROMISE AND THREAT WERE ENCAPSULATED IN ONE THING – THE AEROPLANE

Later, when it became clear this would not happen, Allied soldiers would be asked to believe they were fighting the "war to end all wars". This was the real "great illusion". The recognition of its hollowness would inform both post-war nihilism and a nostalgia for the world that the catastrophe had shattered.

That world may not have been as marvelous as memory painted it. As Barbara Tuchman observed, "a phenomenon of such extended malignance as the Great War does not come out of a Golden Age".

It is not hard, though, to see why hindsight should have bathed it in such a rosy light. The First World War marked one of the great wrong turnings of history. Had kings and statesmen, generals and diplomats taken a different path, not only would millions of lives have been saved; in all likelihood, there would have been no Hitler, no Stalin, no Holocaust.

READY FOR WAR

The Kaiser promised German soldiers that if there was a war, they would be returning home "before the leaves have fallen from the trees"

● Patrick Bishop is a historian and author

STRATEGY

In the space of exactly a month – from the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, to the Austro-Hungarian declaration of war on Serbia on July 28 – Europe went from peaceful prosperity to a conflict that would bring down four empires and cost more than 15 million lives.

It would also, thanks to the harshness of its peace settlement (signed at Versailles in 1919), sow the seeds for a second and even more destructive global conflict which, in turn, gave rise to the Cold War.

The causes of the war in 1914 are therefore immensely significant. Was it inevitable after Sarajevo? Or did Europe's monarchs and politicians have an element of choice in their decisions?

EMPEROR FRANZ JOSEPH I OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY

When Franz Ferdinand, his nephew and heir, was murdered, Emperor Franz Joseph I decided that military action was required to cut Serbia down to size. But with time lost to investigations and diplomacy, it was not until July 23 that Serbia was presented with a harsh ultimatum. Its demands included the denunciation of separatist activities, the banning of publications and organisations hostile to Austria-Hungary and co-operation with Habsburg officials in suppressing subversion and a judicial inquiry.

Serbia's measured reply was to agree to almost all demands. The only caveat was that the joint Austro-Serbian judicial inquiry would have to be subject to Serbia's law. The Austrians rejected the ultimatum and, on July 28, mobilised their troops in the Balkans.

Why did the 83-year-old Emperor Franz Joseph and his Vienna government take such a hard line? First, because their suspicions of Serbian complicity were at least in part justified.

More than two-fifths of Bosnia's population was ethnic Serb, many of whom yearned for independence and union with a Greater Serbia. Some of the secret organisations dedicated to achieving that end were based in Serbia proper, including the Black Hand, a group led by Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijevic, the Serbian military intelligence chief who had trained Gavrilo Princip and his fellow assassins.

An even more powerful reason was because many in the Austrian government and military felt the time was opportune. Unless Serbia's intrigues were stopped, they felt their polyglot Empire – made up of 11 ethnic groups – was in danger of disintegration.

They feared a pan-Slav movement spearheaded by Serbia (and backed by Russia), and were determined, in the words of Foreign Minister Leopold von Berchtold, to “tear away with a strong hand the net in which its enemy seeks to entangle it”. Yet Franz Joseph was only prepared to risk a war with Serbia and Russia because he knew he had the full support of his fellow monarch, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany.

KAISER WILHELM II OF GERMANY

Just a week after the assassinations, the German Kaiser Wilhelm II responded to Emperor Franz Joseph's assertion that Serbia needed to be eliminated “as a political factor”.

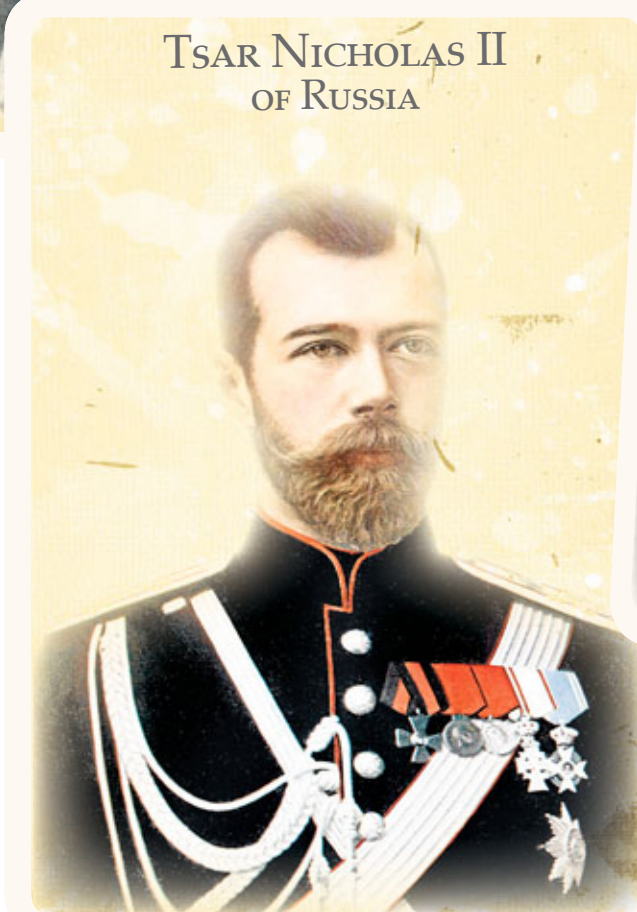
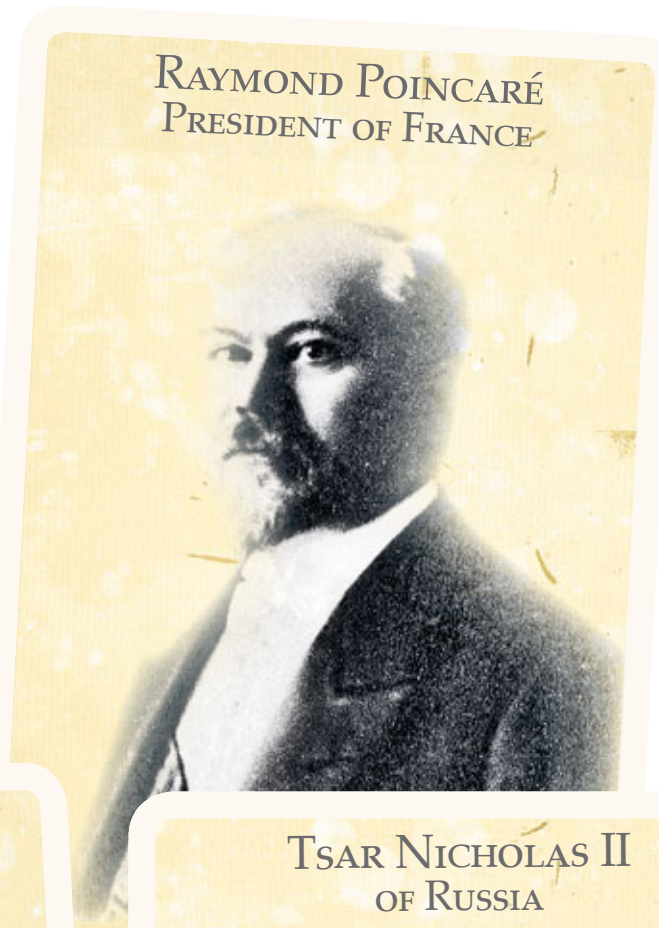
Wilhelm II assured the Austrian envoy, Count von Hoyos, that his country had Germany's backing to “march into Serbia”, even if war with Russia resulted. A day later, the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, repeated this secret guarantee.

In many ways, Germany had the most to lose from a general war. “In the previous round of wars,” noted a leading historian of the period, “it had humbled Austria and France and expanded its territory: its economy was one of the fastest growing in Europe.” But after the forced retirement in 1890 of the Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, the young Kaiser Wilhelm II became the dominant force in German politics, exerting great influence over diplomacy and in military and naval matters.

It was he who authorised the disastrous Weltpolitik (world policy) in the 1890s, ushering in a naval arms race against Britain that Germany could not win. The effect was to drive a resentful Britain into the arms of its former enemies France and Russia, completing the encirclement of the Central Powers.

But Austria was its only “dependable” great-power ally. And Germany feared that a huge increase in Russian military expenditure would jeopardise its secret strategy of avoiding a war on two fronts by first defeating the French army before dealing with the less sophisticated Russians. As a result, Germany's political and military leaders became convinced that the sooner a European war began the better.

The ideal outcome for the Kaiser in July 1914 was a localised Balkan war that neutered Serbia, bolstered Austria and split the Triple Entente. He also knew that if Russia intervened, a continental war was inevitable.



The outbreak of the First World War

WHAT MOTIVATED MONARCHS AND POLITICIANS TO TAKE THEIR COUNTRIES TO THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS? BY SAUL DAVID



“NONE OF THE MAJOR POWERS WORKED AS HARD AS IT COULD TO PREVENT THE WAR

difference? Probably not, because Poincaré – who took the lead in foreign affairs – had made it clear to the Tsar that France would back Russia's support of Serbia, even at the risk of war with Germany. The post-summit joint communiqué was explicit, saying the two governments were “in entire agreement in their views on the various problems which concern for peace and the balance of power in Europe has laid before the powers, especially in the Balkans”.

This crucial backing by Poincaré was what gave the Russians the confidence to stand firm behind Serbia. When this, in turn, resulted in a Russo-German war, there was no possibility that France would stand aloof (as Germany had requested on July 31). Why?

Because Poincaré was convinced that if France wanted to remain a great power, the preservation of the Triple Entente (with Russia and Britain) “was a more important objective in French foreign policy than the avoidance of war”. Not least because he feared that the loss of Russia as an ally would make France extremely vulnerable to German aggression.

France duly rejected Germany's ultimatum and began its own mobilisation – though the army was ordered to keep 10km back from the Franco-Belgian border. Germany declared war on France on August 3.

SIR EDWARD GREY, BRITISH FOREIGN SECRETARY

Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, has traditionally been portrayed as a peacemaker. On July 29, he told the German Ambassador Prince Lichnowsky that “mediation was an urgent necessity if those concerned did not wish to have things become a European catastrophe”.

Yet the message was mixed. On the one hand, he warned Lichnowsky that Britain might be forced to take precipitate action if Germany and France were drawn into the war; on the other, he said Britain had no legal obligations to its Entente partners.

Encouraged by a noncommittal Grey, the Kaiser's government made a clumsy attempt to ensure Britain's neutrality by offering to guarantee both France's and Belgium's territorial integrity in Europe – but not the former's colonies nor the latter's neutrality.

This Grey would not countenance. His counter offer, made without any authorisation from the Cabinet, was not just for Britain to stay neutral if Germany refrained from attacking France, but to vouch for French neutrality as well. In truth, the French would never have agreed to stand aside while Germany and Austria attacked its ally Russia, a position made very clear to Grey on August 1 by the British Ambassador in Paris, Sir Francis Bertie.

Brought to his senses, Grey withdrew the offer and, from this point on, Germany's leaders must have known that Britain would not stand aloof from a European war. Any final doubts were dispelled on August 3 when Grey told the House of Commons that the Belgian government had just been given an ultimatum by Germany to “facilitate the passage of German troops” through its territory or face the consequences. For Grey and the government, the only course available was to resist German aggression.

In the event, Britain declared war on Germany at 11pm on August 4, ostensibly because of Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality. The pretext was a useful one for a Cabinet that, until August 2, had been divided over the need to get involved.

A far more pressing reason to fight was to prevent Germany from dominating the continent and winning control of the Channel ports. The Cabinet also feared for the security of Britain's Empire and trade if, having failed to support France and Russia, its only option would have been an alliance with Germany.

SO WHO WAS TO BLAME?

Historians tend to blame the Kaiser and his chief military advisers. More recently, the spotlight has shifted towards the Austro-Hungarians, the Russians and, to a lesser extent, the Serbians. A modern theory is that the governments of all the main powers preferred war to diplomatic defeat that month, and it is hard to point the finger at any single participant.

This is going too far. None of the major powers worked as hard as it could have done to prevent war, but the decision taken by Austria-Hungary, backed by Germany, to emasculate Serbia was the moment a general conflict became probable if not inevitable.

It was taken in the firm belief that if the Entente powers chose to fight, they would be defeated; and if they did not, the Entente would collapse. The Central Powers could not lose. Or so they thought.

● *Saul David is Professor of War Studies, University of Buckingham, and author of 100 Days to Victory: How the Great War was Fought and Won*



Understanding the anguish in Rupert Brooke's 1914 'Peace'

Rupert Brooke's poem *Peace* is the first in a sequence of five sonnets that were published in January 1915 in the literary journal *New Numbers* under the title “1914”. Its opening line has become one of the best known in First World War poetry, along with that of the fifth sonnet, *The Soldier*: “If I should die, think only this of me...”

Brooke's high flown phrases have inspired and consoled generations of young men who found themselves facing the threat of death in war, although to many readers today they appear awkward and over-sentimental. But few people realise just how personal Brooke's sonnets actually were.

Having faced danger and the possibility of being killed during the expedition to Antwerp in October 1914, Brooke returned to Britain and reflected on the complexities of his colourful life. He was unsettled and lacked roots. He had spent a year in the US and the Pacific, but his tortuous romantic relationships were unchanged. War offered an honourable solution to his problems.

While not embracing or seeking death, its likelihood offered an end to his troubles. It would release him from the shame and confusion he felt over much of his earlier life, and this realisation filled him with a sense of peace. It is this acceptance of the inevitable that has made his sonnets universally popular. Yet they also deserve to be recognised far more widely as sophisticated expressions of one man's personal anguish.

Like many young people, Brooke had a morbid fear of becoming old and incapable. In January 1915, he wrote to fellow poet John Drinkwater that he felt he would almost certainly be killed in France that year (as his brother was): “Better than coughing out a civilian soul amid bedclothes and disinfectant and gulping medicines in 1950.”

In *Poems*, 1911, Brooke wrote several deliberately provocative poems about the destructive power of lust and its corruption of virility. He ridiculed lovers and their pretensions, reflecting the rage and jealousy of his own life. Now the simple nobility of what he saw as a “just war” enabled him to cleanse himself, throwing off this earlier sense of self-loathing.

PEACE

NOW, GOD BE THANKED WHO HAS MATCHED US WITH HIS HOUR,
 ⇒ AND CAUGHT OUR YOUTH, AND WAKENED US FROM SLEEPING,
 WITH HAND MADE SURE, CLEAR EYE, AND SHARPENED POWER,
 TO TURN, AS SWIMMERS INTO CLEANNESSE LEAPING, ←
 ⇒ GLAD FROM A WORLD GROWN OLD AND COLD AND WEARY,
 LEAVE THE SICK HEARTS THAT HONOUR COULD NOT MOVE,
 AND HALF-MEN, AND THEIR DIRTY SONGS AND DREARY, ←
 AND ALL THE LITTLE EMPTINESS OF LOVE!

OH! WE, WHO HAVE KNOWN SHAME, WE HAVE FOUND RELEASE THERE, ←
 WHERE THERE'S NO ILL, NO GRIEF, BUT SLEEP HAS MENDING,
 ⇒ NAUGHT BROKEN SAVE THIS BODY, LOST BUT BREATH;
 NOTHING TO SHAKE THE LAUGHING HEART'S LONG PEACE THERE
 ⇒ BUT ONLY AGONY, AND THAT HAS ENDING;
 AND THE WORST FRIEND AND ENEMY IS BUT DEATH. ←

Having already seen the war first hand at Antwerp, Brooke was realistic about his chances of survival. But he was also tired of the torments of his life and relationships. However drastic it seemed, death in action would provide an end to everything that had troubled him throughout his adult life.

The most prolonged relationship of Brooke's life was with “Ka” (Katherine) Cox. They had been lovers on and off for several years and she miscarried Brooke's baby in 1912. En route to the Dardanelles, he wrote to her: “My dear, my dear, you did me wrong; but I have done you very great wrong. Every day I see it greater... It's a good thing I die.”

Nigel Steel is Principal Historian for IWM's First World War Centenary Programme

ART OF WAR

THE
KENNINGTONS
AT LAVENTIE

Eric Kennington painted this magnificent tribute to his soldier comrades shortly after being invalided out of the First World War in June 1915. Kennington had served with the 13th Battalion, The London Regiment, known popularly as The Kensingtons, from 1914, experiencing front-line duties amid the bitterly cold first winter of the war. The painting recalls the moment when his exhausted platoon, having endured four days and sleepless nights in the fire trench, temperatures of minus 20C and almost continuous snow, arrived at the comparative protection of the ruined village at Laventie.

Unusually, *The Kensingtons at Laventie* is a reverse painting on glass. Kennington claimed he had "travelled some 500 miles while painting the picture on the back of the glass, dodging round the front to see all was well". But this method gave the oils a stunning clarity and achieved a Pre-Raphaelite level of mesmeric detail.

Exhibited for the first time at Goupil's gallery in April 1916, the painting was an immediate sensation. Hailed as "decidedly the finest picture inspired by this war as yet produced by an English artist", it was instrumental in securing Kennington the role of an official war artist in August 1917.

It is a highly democratic image, too, its composition arranged to focus on the bravest and best fighters of Kennington's platoon regardless of rank. Taking centre stage is the imposing, balaclava-wearing figure of L/Cpl "Tug" Wilson, neatly framed by his comrades, including the exhausted, prone figure of Pte "Sweeney" Todd. Kennington portrays himself, also wearing a balaclava, but modestly occupies the periphery, a mere onlooker.

Richard Slocombe, senior art curator, IWM

The Kensingtons at Laventie will feature in IWM's Truth & Memory: First World War Art exhibition, which will open in June 2014, along with new First World War Galleries; www.iwm.org.uk



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Lord
AshcroftI'm for the front so tell them
I'm only 17: a soldier's last letters

Stephen Brown's tragic story begins with an undated letter from early July 1914, after he enlisted in the regular Army Reserve. The teenager – who claimed to be 17½ – may not have appreciated war was imminent as he talks only of his

contrition for an unknown transgression at home. Stephen appears to join his battalion during the Second Battle of Ypres. The postcards from Rouen may have been his last. His is one of the 58,896 names listed as missing in the Ypres Salient.

5th Bn, King's Royal Rifle Corps, Winchester

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am getting on all right in the Army. I hope that you are all well as I am myself. I am very sorry for what I done when I was at home and will pay you back when I get some more pay. I like the Army very well for I am going to join the Regulars when I have done my time in the Reserve. Then I shall be able to pay you back for I get 30/- [30 shillings/£1.50] as a bounty. I hope you and Dad will forgive me for what I done when at home. I cannot write no more at present for I have to do some more work. Trusting you will forgive me. I remain your son, Stephen Brown

→ c. early July, 1914

He appears to have received forgiveness from his mother by his next letter, written in early August, as it describes other reservists being called up. It dwells on pay but his real concern is his feelings for his family. His love and greetings to his siblings make his naivety and youth very clear.

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am getting on alright. I hope [you] are the same. I am sorry I did not write before. We are so busy that I have had [no] time. We are confined to barracks so I can not get a stamp... I hope Tommy and Archie Hammond are all right. Give my love to Kitty, Lillie, Maggie, Freddy and Ted. I hope Dad is quite well... I thank you for forgiving me. I know I don't deserve it. Tell Auntie Tot and Uncle Bob that I am getting on fine. Is Uncle Bob been called up yet? We are calling all our Reservists up and those on leave. This is all at present. I remain your loving son, Stephen

→ August 4-9

Revealing of the fact this soldier is just a young boy, he adds kisses for Mother, Lillie, Kitty, Fred, Maggie, Ted and Dad, sends love again to his aunts and uncles and fills the last page with kisses, as a child might. Stephen expresses hope that he will be home soon for the weekend.

Dear Mother

Just a line to [let] you know that I got the fags on Tuesday. I thank you very much for sending them... They have stopped the weekend passes as there are a lot of absences, but I shall ask the Captain for permission to come on [a] pass. We are going to the front on the 19 of November. Dear mother, do not worry about me for by God's help I shall come home well. Give my love to Lillie, Kitty and Freddie and tell him I will come and see him by and by. You will receive 3/0 shilling from me and the same from the War Office which will make six all together. Give my love to all... This is all at present. So goodbye from your loving son, Steve

→ November The process of mobilisation continues and, after moving to Sheerness in November, Stephen is sent to join the 4th Battalion, which had returned from India to join the British Expeditionary Force in France. Shortly before his departure, Stephen writes a cheerful and positive letter.

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am alright. I am enjoying myself... I will soon be home. Love from Steve

→ December 13 The 4th Battalion arrives in France. Stephen is at the front. He sends a postcard home, still enthusiastic about being in the Army.

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I am quite well. I am for the front on Tuesday. But if you write to the Commanding Officer and say I am only seventeen it will stop me from going. Get it here before Tuesday for I cannot get a pass to come and see you. Don't forget. From Stephen

→ April 1915 The trail goes cold until April 6 1915 when Stephen says he is soon leaving hospital, apparently having fallen sick. But he is now to re-join the 4th Battalion. Shaken by his earlier experiences, he appeals to his mother.

Mother
Just left for France
Stephen

→ April Perhaps his mother wrote too late, or did not write at all. No letter was apparently received. His next card is marked "On Active Service".

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I arrived quite safe. I hope you are quite well as it leaves me the same. Give my love to all at home. From your ever loving son, Stephen

→ April 30 In a couple of days he is cheerful again. From the base camp in Rouen en route to re-join the 4th Battalion, he sends a postcard.

Dear Mother

Just a line to let you know that I sent you all a photo of myself outside a tent door with two of my mates. Hope you will get them safe. Hoping you are in the best of health as I am myself. Goodbye for the present. I remain yours truly, Stephen

→ May After one more card from Rouen, he returned to the 4th Battalion. On May 4 he was mortally wounded, his body being discovered six days later.

VC BRAVERY



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The Suffolk lad who came out fighting



RSM SPENCER 'JOE' BENT VC MM SHOWED OUTSTANDING GALLANTRY EARLY IN THE WAR — AND THEN DID SO AGAIN AND AGAIN. **MICHAEL ASHCROFT** TELLS HIS STORY

Drummer Spencer John Bent arrived in France on August 22, 1914, the first day of armed skirmishes between Britain and Germany. He was 23 and destined to become an “Old Contemptible”, the affectionate name later given to members of the British Expeditionary Force who saw the early fighting during the First World War (the Kaiser allegedly made a caustic reference to Field Marshal Sir John French’s “contemptible little army”).

Bent was born on March 18, 1891, in Stowmarket, Suffolk, a market town that sits beside the River Gipping. By the age of 10, he was an orphan: his father, who had served with the Royal Horse Artillery, was killed during the Boer War and his mother had died, too. He was largely brought up by his uncle and aunt. He was just 14 when he joined the Army in 1905 as a drummer in the 1st Battalion, the East Lancashire Regiment. When he boxed at lightweight in Army championships, he was soon christened “Joe” — a corruption of “Chow” Bent, a well-known professional boxer at the time. The nickname stayed with him

until his death, with only his closest family continuing to call him by his second Christian name of John.

After the outbreak of the Great War, Bent accompanied his regiment to France and saw action at the Battle of Le Cateau. However, it was for gallantry in the first Battle of Ypres, which started on October 19, that he was awarded his VC. His platoon was holding one of the front-line trenches near Le Gheer, Belgium, after a ferocious day’s fighting. On the night of November 1/2, an exhausted Bent was trying to get some sleep but awoke to find his comrades abandoning their positions. There was no officer in the trench to give the order to withdraw, nor even a non-commissioned officer, because the platoon’s sergeant was visiting an advance post. Yet someone had passed word down the line that the battalion had been ordered to retire. Bent started following the others but then decided he could not bear to leave his treasured French trumpet, so he made his way back.

When Bent reached the trench, he spotted a soldier, raised his rifle and demanded that the man, whom he assumed to be a German, identify himself. It turned

out to be the platoon’s recently returned sergeant, who told him that no orders to retire had been given. Bent immediately ran after some of his comrades to call them back and encountered an officer who helped him round up the rest of the platoon.

Early the next morning, German infantry advanced confidently towards the trench, clearly believing it had been abandoned. When they were within 400 yards, the British machine gun and rifles opened fire, causing the advancing infantrymen to run for cover. Before long the German artillery launched a heavy bombardment and the officer, platoon sergeant and a number of the men were killed or injured. Bent took command and repelled several more infantry attacks until, later in the day, he was relieved.

This was just one of several courageous actions by Drummer Bent in late 1914. On October 22 he carried ammunition to a patrol that had been cut off by the Germans. Two days later he brought ammunition and food to a front-line trench under heavy shell and rifle fire. On November 3, he repeatedly risked his life by venturing into no-man’s land to rescue several wounded men. One of these, Private McNulty, was 25 to 30 yards from the British trench and, when Bent attempted to lift him, the two men came under a hail of enemy bullets. To get him to safety, Bent hooked his feet under McNulty’s armpits and edged backwards, dragging the injured man behind him.

In an interview with his local paper, the *Suffolk Chronicle and Mercury*, shortly after the war, Bent recalled the incident: “After we had had breakfast,

Private McNulty went out of the trench, and on returning was hit in the pit of the stomach. He fell, and the Germans were trying to hit him again; you could see the earth flying up all around him. I said, ‘Why doesn’t someone go and help him?’ and got the reply, ‘Why not go yourself?’ I went, and to make it difficult for the Germans to hit me, I zigzagged to him. They did not snipe at me whilst I was advancing, but as soon as I got hold of McNulty’s shoulder something seemed to take my feet from under me, and I slipped under McNulty. This took place close to the walls of a ruined convent, and just as I fell, several bullets struck the wall, sending a piece of plaster against my left eye. I thought I was wounded and started to rub the blood away, as I thought, but fortunately the skin was only grazed. I felt it was time to get out of it, and knowing it was impossible to stand up, I hooked my feet under McNulty’s armpits, and using my elbows I managed to drag myself and him back to the trenches about 25 yards away. When I got him there safely, I went for a doctor and stretcher-bearers. As far as I know he is still alive. At any rate, [it] was the last time I heard of him.”

Days later, Bent was seriously injured, sustaining a gunshot wound to his leg. By then, he also had shrapnel injuries to both arms and hands, on top of his head wound. He was sent back to England, where he received several months of medical care, and only learnt he had been awarded the Victoria Cross when he read about it in a local paper. His decoration was announced in the *London Gazette* on December 9,

HEROIC STORIES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Tory peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story behind “Joe” Bent’s VC appears in his book *Victoria Cross Heroes*. For more information, visit www.victoriacrossheroes.com.

Lord Ashcroft’s VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum. For more information, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For more information on Lord Ashcroft’s work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft.

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1914, where his citation highlighted his “conspicuous gallantry” and identified four separate acts of bravery. He also received £50, then a considerable sum, from an Ipswich resident who had offered it to the first local man to be awarded the VC. Bent was the first man from his regiment to be awarded the VC in the Great War, receiving his decoration from George V at Buckingham Palace on January 13, 1915.

Bent was promoted to corporal and helped with the recruitment campaign for six months before being promoted again, to sergeant. On August 25, 1915, the *London Gazette* announced that Bent had been awarded the Cross of St George by Russia for gallantry and distinguished service. It was during his period that, in Plymouth, he met the girl he would later marry: Alice Powell, daughter of the chief boilermaker at the Royal Naval Dockyard, Devonport.

By now engaged, Bent returned to France in the summer of 1916 and rejoined his old battalion on the Somme, remaining there until November when he again returned to England to convalesce, this time from rheumatic fever.

Bent and Alice Powell were married in Plymouth on January 16, 1917, when he was 26 and she was 22. But later the same month, Bent was back in France, this time as a volunteer with the 7th Battalion of his regiment. He took part in the assault on Messines Ridge, later describing his own involvement as “as good a work as ever I did during the war”. This, coming from a recipient of the VC, suggested he had been courageous in the thick of the action yet again.

After being promoted to company sergeant major, Bent fought at the third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele, and then rejoined the 1st Battalion in time for the German Spring Offensive and the subsequent battles of summer and autumn 1918.

During fighting around the village of Sepmeries, this formidable soldier showed outstanding bravery for which he was awarded the Military Medal (MM), notably for leading two patrols that attacked the enemy on October 29, days before war’s end.

Following the end of hostilities, Bent returned home in May 1919, having served with distinction throughout the war. He remained in the Army until 1926, serving in the West Indies and Malta. Leaving

DEVASTATION

Clockwise from top left: destruction at Ypres, 1914; a road obstruction in the same battle; Bent wearing his VC; the first wounded of the 7th Division at Ypres; field guns deployed in the attack on Wytschaete, October 31, 1914



BENT ONLY LEARNT HE HAD BEEN AWARDED THE VC WHEN HE READ ABOUT IT IN A LOCAL PAPER

with the rank of regimental sergeant major after 21 years’ service, Bent was still only 35 years old.

After his military career, the father of three went on to work as a school caretaker and a commissionaire, continuing part-time work until he was 85. He died peacefully in his sleep in Hackney, London, on May 3, 1977, aged 86. He was cremated at West Norwood Cemetery and Crematorium, London, where there is a plaque in his memory.

During his life, Bent had a fondness for using the phrase: “We had our money’s worth.” So after his death, Captain R W Thorne MBE wrote an obituary of Bent which ended: “Perhaps it can be said of the man who illuminated those dark and desperate days back in 1914, who illuminated the history of his Regiment and the British Army, and illuminated the lives of those who knew him, especially those privileged to be counted among his friends, that he gave his Sovereign, his Country, his Regiment and his fellow-men ‘their money’s worth.’”

A thanksgiving service for the life of “Joe” Bent VC MM took place at the Chapel of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, on June 15, 1977. His widow, to whom he was married for more than 60 years, survived him and eventually died on December 7, 1984, aged 90.

I purchased Bent’s gallantry and service medals at a Dix Noonan Webb auction in London in 2000. By then, I had been fascinated by bravery all my life, a passion partly inspired by my late father, Eric, who had served in the Army during the Second World War and had taken part in the D-Day landings of June 6, 1944. My passion for bravery, in turn, led to an interest in gallantry medals in general and the VC in particular. After making some money as an entrepreneur, I bought my first VC in an auction in 1986. Today I own more than 180 VCs and my collection, which includes Bent’s VC, is on display in the gallery bearing my name at the Imperial War Museum, along with VCs and George Crosses (GCs) already in the care of the museum.

In future supplements, I will be telling the dramatic stories behind other First World War VCs from my collection.

FATAL SHOTS

Who was Gavrilo Princip?

TIM BUTCHER LOOKS BEHIND THE MYTHS AT THE ASSASSIN WHO STARTED THE WAR

History has not been kind to the teenager who triggered the First World War by assassinating Archduke Franz Ferdinand on a sunny Sunday morning in Sarajevo.

So colossal was the impact of his actions and so modest his backwoodsman background that the story of Gavrilo Princip has often been overlooked, misrepresented and misunderstood.

Muddled theories, often as batty as they are unverifiable, have circulated ever since Princip fired his Browning 9mm pistol on June 28, 1914: he was working for the Freemasons, an agent of the Russian secret service, a diehard Serbian nationalist, an unwitting puppet of German warmongers.

Even the most famous photograph of Princip, showing him "under arrest" after the assassination, is problematic. It has been used by historians, newspapers and broadcasters, from AJP Taylor to Wikipedia, and they are all wrong. The man was an innocent bystander called Ferdinand Behr.

So, stripped of the prejudices and mistakes of those who came later, who is the real Gavrilo Princip? He was born a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in summer 1894 in a small village called Obljaj. The date is disputed, recorded as June 13 and July 13 in local records, most likely using the old Julian



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calendar which was then 12 days behind the modern Gregorian calendar. No matter which date is accepted (June 13, June 25, July 13 or July 25), Princip was 19 when he shot the Archduke.

His home village is in what is now Bosnia though when he was born, no such nation existed. Instead, the west Balkans was a mosaic of land parcels mostly divided between foreign empires.

For four centuries his home was occupied by the Ottomans, which led to many local Slavs converting to Islam, progenitors of today's Bosnian Muslim population. But in 1878, Bosnia was "flipped", occu-



MISTAKEN IDENTITY
This famous photograph of Princip under arrest in fact shows a bystander

ped by Austria-Hungary, and any sense of Bosnian national identity was then a flight of fancy.

The Slav community that Princip's family belonged to followed eastern Orthodox Christianity, making him an ethnic Serb – although this did not make him Serbian. To be Serbian you had to live in Serbia, land east of Bosnia which had bloodily and recently won independence from Ottoman control.

The Princip family were at the bottom of the pecking order. They survived like medieval serfs, obliged to give almost all their meagre farming earnings to overlords. They lived in a hovel with a beaten earth floor and rock walls roofed by shingles cut from local timber. Six of Princip's eight siblings died as infants.

To seek a better life, he left Obljaj in 1907, enrolling in a secondary school in Sarajevo, capital of the Austro-Hungarian colonial province. There he shone, outdoing classmates from richer backgrounds. But it was in Bosnia's schools that the green shoots of nationalism were showing and he soon fell in with youngsters demanding freedom from colonial rule.

A key mistake is made by historians who say that Princip supported Serbian nationalism, the theory that the Balkans should be ruled by an enlarged Serbian state. This is not true. All the evidence shows that Princip supported Slav nationalism: the idea that foreigners should be driven out so local people could rule, no matter if they were Serbian, Croatian or from other ethnicities.

After leaving school in Sarajevo, Princip travelled to Serbia where he hatched the assassination plot. There he received help from Serbian nationalists, but Princip's motives were never exclusively Serbian.

Arrested moments after the shooting in Sarajevo, he was under the 20-year age limit required by Habsburg law for the death sentence. Instead, he was sentenced to 20 years in jail, to be denied food once a day each month. He died in 1918, shortly before the end of the war. Aged 23, his body had become racked by skeletal tuberculosis that ate away his bones so badly that his right arm had had to be amputated.

Tim Butcher's book on Princip, *The Trigger*, will be published in May 2014

POST BOX

We have received a magnificent postbag and inbox of letters, documents and stories in response to our request for readers' First World War memories. Here are just a few of the many we would like to share with you. Please keep them coming.

Write to: First World War, Telegraph Media Group, 111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0DT or email firstworldwar@telegraph.co.uk

Some memories relate to events far from the battlefields. Sue Gewanter's great grandfather, John James Hunter, was head maltster at the Bass Brewery in Burton-on-Trent when war broke out. "His youngest daughter, Sheila, spoke of the brewery shire horses decked out in flowers and ribbons and the town turning out to cheer as the horses were taken from the stables to the station, en route for France. She remembered crying, despite the festive air surrounding this first part of their war service."

The speed with which men were plucked from their daily lives and transplanted into the terror of front-line war comes across vividly. Mike Cazalet writes about his great uncle Lawrence Barnard Carlton, who qualified as a dentist at the outbreak of the First World War. "He enlisted and was sent to the Dardanelles. After a few days of acclimatisation, he went forward with fighting troops. While attending a wounded soldier, Lawrence was shot dead by a Turkish sniper. Lawrence was mentioned in dispatches. I have the letter sent in the King's name."

Mr Glyndwr Watkins, an Old Boy of Hackney Downs



School, tells of the enormous contribution of ex-alumni, 110 of whom – out of 600 service personnel listed in the school's roll of honour – died in the war.

"Some were listed as having died, yet lived. Others were not listed at all – it quickly became 'easier' to find the dead than the living and those who survived the conflict became forgotten men," Mr Watkins writes. Among those to lose their lives was former Best Boy, Lieutenant Arthur Heath (pictured), serving with the 6th Bn Royal West Kent Regiment when he was killed on his 28th birthday in 1915. Then there was Lieutenant Edward Cohen, Best Athletic Boy in 1913. "His reward was to be shot in the lung by a sniper... and to linger between life and death for 12 hours in a trench. Heath is recorded on the memorial at Loos; Cohen on the Menin Gate.

"To those who died, we owe the most enormous debt," says Mr Watkins. "To those who survived, many of whom went on to serve in the Second World War, we also owe enormous gratitude. But we must not forget those poor souls who returned, shattered in body, mind and spirit, and who endured the consequences of the war for many long and painful years."

Finally, for now, Patrick Delaforce – from an English/Portuguese family – shows there can still be black humour when recalling terrifying times. His father, Victor, was a Royal Field Artillery officer, winning a Military Cross and Mention in Dispatches. "Since Portugal, as our oldest ally, sent a large army corps to the Western Front in 1917, my father became an interpreter to the Portuguese High Command. I asked him once how he survived and he replied, perhaps as a joke: 'When the Portuguese army ran [in the fearsome German counter-attacks of 1918], I ran too!' He was awarded three or four lovely Portuguese medals. He survived and post-war soldiered in the British Army of the Rhine to keep the Teutons from being difficult."

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BATTLE PLANS

The military balance



IT WAS TO BE A MODERN, MOBILE WAR, SAID THE GENERALS, AND IT WAS... TO START WITH. **ROGER MOORHOUSE** EXPLAINS

It was the elder Helmuth von Moltke, field marshal and chief of staff of the Prussian Army, who coined the maxim: "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." He was right.

In fact, for all the planning and war-gaming of previous years, few of those engaging in the opening phase of the First World War had much idea of what to expect. Britain was primarily a naval power whose Grand Fleet was the envy of the world, but whose small standing army was soon to be dubbed "contemptible" by the Kaiser. The Germans anticipated a swift victory in the west, while the French envisaged an offensive war to regain the lost provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. When Russia's peasant armies were mobilised that summer, some of them mustered in complete ignorance of whom they would be fighting. "Is it China?" they asked.

The various powers that were to collide across Europe were similarly disparate. The British Expeditionary Force, or BEF, was a small, professional, volunteer army, which sent only around 150,000 men to France in 1914. Well trained and motivated, it had benefited from recent army reforms and was a formidable force, whose drilled rifle fire would be mistaken for machine-gunners by the Germans. The

French allies, meanwhile, fielded a much larger army (more than a million men) who, though conscripts, were nonetheless reasonably well trained and well equipped, particularly with their *Soixante-quinze*, 75, the best field gun of the age.

Peculiarly, perhaps, French forces were resolutely wedded to the idea of an offensive campaign. The general staff's Plan XVII, bearing the stamp of General Joffre, foresaw a swift strike into Alsace-Lorraine to catch German forces on the back foot.

Yet just as the French were crying "à Berlin!", their German opponents were bellowing "nach Paris!". Germany was the best prepared for war in 1914, with seven armies - from the duchies and kingdoms of the empire - fielding a total of 1,800,000 men. Given the tremendous prestige all things military enjoyed in Wilhelmine Germany, its soldiers were well trained, well equipped and highly motivated.

Germany was similarly well prepared strategically. A modified version of the famed Schlieffen Plan of 1904 foresaw German armies executing a "right hook" through Belgium, wheeling around to threaten Paris itself and attack French forces in the rear. With France thus rapidly defeated, the logic ran, German forces could then be transferred east to engage the

Russians, who would be slower to mobilise. It was a plan which almost succeeded.

Russia, meanwhile, the "colossus with feet of clay", was viewed as a lumbering, would-be superpower. Its 1.3 million-strong conscript army was dwarfed by a largely untapped reserve, but it lacked adequate training, equipment and officers, and fielded barely 600 vehicles in 1914. Even so, its military potential was obvious, and its lowering presence was enough to strike fear into Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Germany's ally Austria-Hungary was the least militarily formidable of the powers. A multinational, dynastic state undermined by the growing forces of nationalism, it had sparked the conflict by attempting to slap down an upstart Serbia on its southern flank. Ironically, the Austro-Hungarian army - about a million strong in 1914 - was one of the few cohesive forces in the land, welding together its various nationalities under the command of the largely German and Hungarian officer corps. Yet poor supply and training, as well as the centrifugal forces of rival nationalisms, meant the army was prone to desertion and ill-discipline, as hilariously related in Jaroslav Hasek's post-war novel *The Good Soldier Svejk*.

Considering that the First World War has become

EARLY DAYS

As the maps show, the Germans had made significant advances into France in the opening weeks of World War One

synonymous with the trenches of the Western Front, it is notable that such methods barely featured in the military handbooks of 1914. Trenches had been used in the 19th century, in the Crimea and the American Civil War, and every soldier was accustomed to digging a foxhole or slit trench to provide temporary cover, but the war was envisaged by all as a mobile one of infantrymen, artillery and, crucially, cavalry.

The opening engagements of the war, then - at Tannenberg on the Eastern Front, on the Marne in the west - were all ranging battles of movement, characterised by infantry assaults and cavalry charges. The German army, for instance, deployed more than 77,000 cavalrymen in 1914, and even the tiny BEF exceeded 10,000. Tellingly, the first British death of the war was that of Private John Parr, a member of a cycle reconnaissance unit, which ran into a German cavalry patrol.

There are other illustrative examples of the fundamentally 19th-century character of the early phase of the conflict. British officers still carried their swords into combat, and it is notable that a humble "saddler" is listed among the dead on the Suffolks' Memorial at Le Cateau.

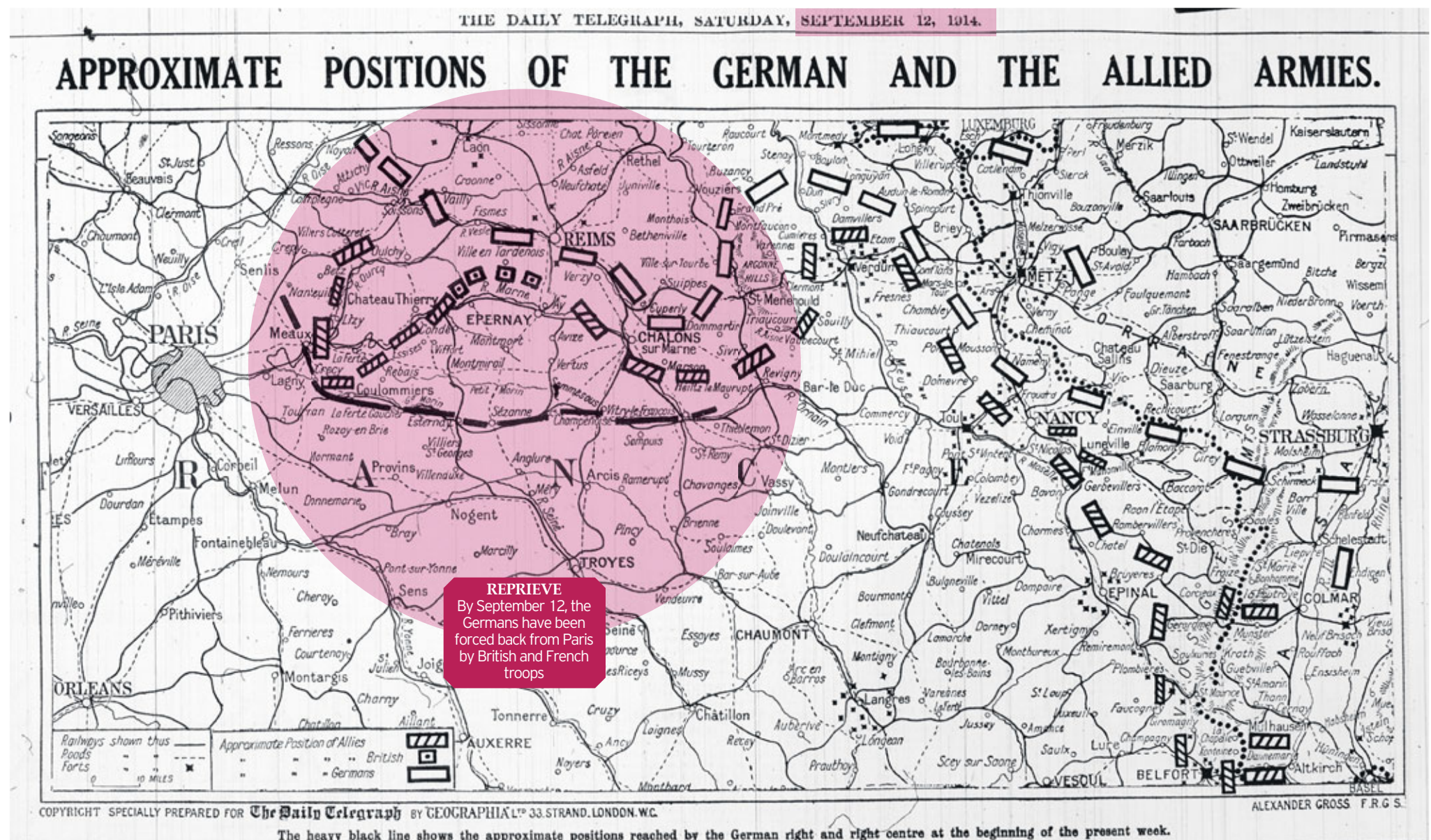
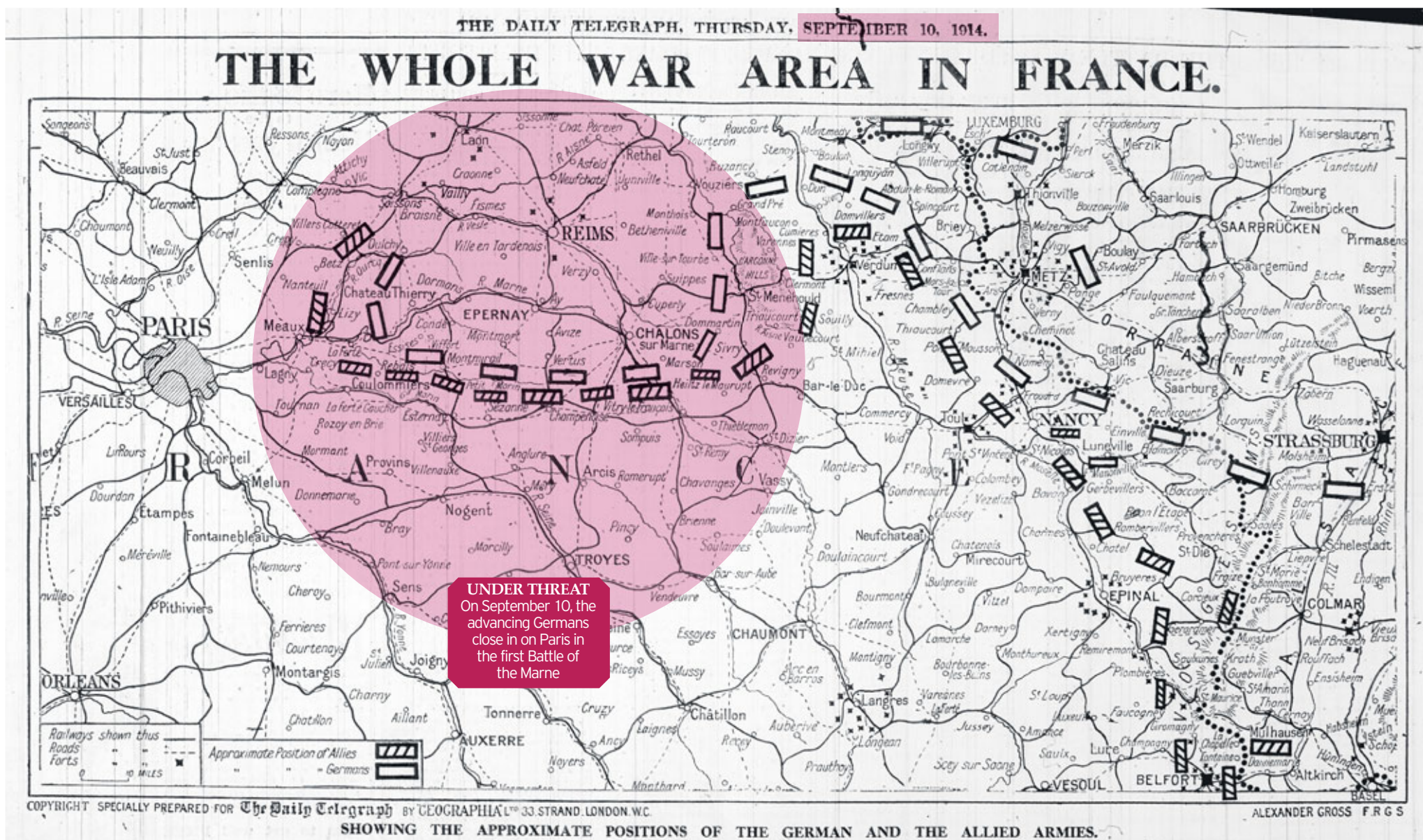
The French army, meanwhile, eschewed

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camouflage, its infantrymen wearing blue greatcoats and bright red trousers; its cavalrymen sported polished breastplates. The Austrian and German Uhlan regiments were similarly brightly coloured - with plumes and plastrons (steel breastplates) - and brandished a 10ft lance. They would engage their Russian counterparts in August 1914 at Jaroslavice in a classic cavalry engagement which Wellington himself would doubtless have appreciated.

For all the stereotypes of mud and trenches, therefore, it's hard to escape the impression that the opening engagements of the First World War had as much in common with the Battle of Waterloo as they would have with the later Battle of the Somme. They marked the end of an era; a moment when the time-worn plans and strategies of the generals were - as von Moltke predicted - torn up and rethought. When the officers halted a couple of weeks later - when the cavalry dismounted, and the first trenches were dug - a new age in modern warfare dawned.



OFFICER CLASS Subaltern Harold Macmillan (second from right, front row) with fellow Guards officers

From Lieutenant Macmillan to 'Supermac'

Born in Chelsea in 1894 to Maurice Macmillan, whose father had founded Macmillan Publishing, and Nellie Belles, an American socialite, young Harold Macmillan's childhood was privileged and cosseted - though not without its misfortune. His early school years in Oxford were blighted by shyness and depression. He then won a scholarship to Eton, but contracted near-fatal pneumonia that saw him return home early.

At Oxford, Macmillan excelled academically and immersed himself in politics of all shades, supporting women's suffrage and the Liberal Party's "radical

wing" while also joining the Conservative and Socialist clubs. He became secretary of the Oxford Union in November 1913 and was on track to become president. Then war broke out.

An operation for appendicitis delayed Macmillan from joining up in 1914. But on August 15, 1915, as a second lieutenant in the Grenadier Guards, Macmillan left for France. On the Western Front, he was tasked with censoring letters his fellow soldiers sent home. "They have big hearts, these soldiers, and it is a very pathetic task to have to read all their letters home," Macmillan wrote to his mother. "Some



of the older men, with wives and families who write every day, have in their style a wonderful simplicity which is almost great literature... And then there comes occasionally a grim sentence or two, which reveals in a flash a sordid family drama."

In 1915's Battle of Loos, where the British Army - using poison gas for the first time - lost nearly 60,000 men over just a couple of miles, Macmillan was shot through his right hand. A contemporary commended his courage, recalling that "during the next two years or so, anything brave was described by the Guardsmen as 'nearly as brave as Mr Macmillan.'" But the injury permanently affected Macmillan, leaving him with his famously limp handshake.

He returned to the Western Front in April, 1916, to Ypres. Of life in the trenches, he observed: "One can look for miles and see no human being. But in those miles of country lurk (like moles or rats, it seems), thousands... of men planning against each other

perpetually some new device of death." Macmillan suffered further injury at the Somme in July, 1916, wounded as he led his patrol in no-man's-land. "I motioned to my men to lie quite still in the long grass. Then they began throwing bombs at us at random. The first, unluckily, hit me in the face and back and stunned me for a moment."

His war was not without intellectual fulfilment, however. On this occasion, he lay in a trench reading Aeschylus' *Prometheus* in Greek while dosing himself with morphine. "It was a play I knew very well, and seemed not inappropriate to my position... I read it intermittently," he explained. Shortly after, he wrote to his mother: "Do not worry about me. I am very happy; it is a great experience, psychologically so interesting as to fill one's thoughts."

Two months after the Somme, he was shot in the leg during an attack and he feigned death when any Germans came near. "The stench from the dead

bodies which lie in heaps around is awful," he wrote to his mother. His wounds became infected, forcing him to return to London where his mother transferred him to a private hospital - which, Macmillan acknowledged, saved his life.

When the war was over, Macmillan joined the family publishing company and became Tory MP for Stockton-on-Tees in 1924. He was an outspoken backbencher marked by the horrors of the trenches and later, a prime minister nicknamed "Supermac" for his dauntless, unflappable approach.

If one thing defeated him, however - triggered, no doubt, by survivor's guilt - it was his dread of returning to Oxford. He had left his course halfway through, "sent down by the Kaiser", as he put it. In his year at Balliol, 28 students went to the Western Front. Only Macmillan and one other came back.

Zoe Dare Hall

NEXT ISSUE

● The battles that shaped the war: from the moustachioed generals to victory and surrender on all Fronts, we look at the players and powers from 1914-1918 - and the battle that is said to have won the war. All in next month's *Inside the First World War*.

● Don't forget to write to us with your First World War photos and memories.



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