

**Private Donald Fraser, Canadian Expeditionary Force: Selections from
*My Daily Journal, 1915-1916***

During the day, if we are not on day duty, we are almost certain to be building dug-outs or fixing up the trenches, so our stretches of sleep even in the best and quietest of times is of short duration. If the line is quiet and the command does not anticipate trouble, two sentries can doze in their dug-out. The man on guard stands on the firing step and peers over the bags for any movement in No Man's Land at the same time listening intently for any sounds. The ears are more dependable when it is dark than the eyes. The touching of the wire, the stumbling against old tins, or the swishing noise of the grasses moving are apt to give a raider or patrol away. Unless on the skyline, it is difficult picking up anyone moving till they are almost on you. If you are suspicious, the usual thing is to get someone to fire a flare over the particular spot. A good sentry does not move much but keeps to a certain spot remaining mute for a considerable time and shows very little of his head. He is better able to detect and, what is of as much importance, he is less liable to be seen than a man who is moving around the bay. The majority of fellows, however, do not worry. They pass most of their time sitting on the firing step smoking the pipe of peace, with an occasional glance over the parapet. As a rule one can size up affairs pretty good. If Fritz is sending up star shells pretty frequently you can depend upon it his patrols or raiders are not out. If his riflemen are pinging bullets in our direction and they are low, you can rest easy in the belief that his men are behind his parapet. It is when his lights are not going up often or his shooting is nil or high, you should be suspicious and on the alert. It is then he is either up to mischief, making a relief or has fatigue parties out in front fixing up his wire.

A dull pop from the opponent's lines and one immediately scans the horizon for a trench mortar. In ordinary times such noises would escape one's attention. The German little fish tail bomb starts its course through the air with a swish, swish and makes a peculiar noise like wa-wa. Excepting high velocity shells, one has a fair indication of direction when he hears the report of the gun. Rifle grenades, when fired during shelling, are difficult to detect. I often wonder that when trench mortar companies intend throwing over their shells, they do not get the artillery to kick up a noise so as their opponents will have to rely solely on their sight to pick up what is going to happen.

At this stage it may be well to mention what the ordinary infantryman in the firing line has to go through and what his nerves have to stand. Old No Man's Land had an average width of 150 to 250 yds.; in many parts of the line it would come as close as 35 to 75 yds. As a rule, the narrower No Man's Land, the weaker the wire. The distance between is so little that fixing up wire is impossible. Ready-made wiring obstacles have to be thrown over and, of course, they cannot be expected to be very effective. In fact, later on, Fritz had the

audacity to fix on one of our wiring obstacles and pulled it on to his own side. Anyway, besides being liable to be shelled at any moment, the man in the firing line is liable to have bombs, grenades and trench mortar bombs thrown at him. Machine-guns may open up and rip the sand bags at pleasure. Clamped rifles go off every now and then, trained at likely spots the infantryman has to pass. Any moment a swarm of Huns may rush him. He is liable to be blown up by a mine tunnelled underneath the trench. On dark nights the enemy could crawl into his trench without being seen. It is the same when it is foggy. He exists under these conditions, wet or dry, often in mud and slush over the knees and almost frozen with the cold. Sometimes he sleeps on the firing step or in the bottom of the trench with practically no covering or protection. When he gets wet, his clothes have to dry on him--at times he is worked off his feet digging, draining, making dug-outs, carrying timber, corrugated iron, etc. and has to run the gauntlet of being sniped on many occasions. Knowing that any moment he may be hurled into oblivion, his nerves are keyed to a certain pitch and his existence is one of suspense. No wonder the average man's stay in the trenches is a few months. Unfortunately these men who brave such dangers daily, hourly, have nothing to show for it. A Canadian in England gets service stripes the same as he does, not so the British Tommy. A Brigade runner, who once in a while reaches the line, stands a better chance of a decoration. Hangers-on who are seldom within the fighting area and who sleep comfortably and soundly at night and can do their own cooking, get all the medals or clasps they are entitled to. It is high time some distinction was made between the actual fighting man and his numerous knockers in khaki who take practically no risk at all.

From: <http://legacy.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/1918Fraser.asp>

Diary of the damned: Never seen before, a lost diary of the Great War

- Harry Drinkwater joined a 'Pals Battalion' when the war began in 1914
- He was sent to the front lines and suffered the grueling realities of war
- He kept a diary of his time on the front lines.

Monday, December 20

The trenches are in a terrible condition — anything up to 4ft deep in mud and water. We're plastered in mud up to our faces.

Our food - cold bacon, bread and jam - is slung together in a sack that hangs from the dripping dugout roof. Consequently, we eat and drink mud.

Tuesday, December 21

Heavy bombardment at about 11am. Heard a fearful crash. The next dugout to ours blown to blazes, and our physical drill instructor Sergeant Horton with it.

I helped dig him out. But before we could get him anywhere, he'd departed this life - our first experience of death. I'm tired out, sick of everything.

Saturday, December 25

After five days in the trenches, we're thankful we can still walk. I've had approximately an hour's sleep a day - always standing up.

Often, when from sheer exhaustion I doze off, I'm awakened by a fat squeaking rat on my shoulder or feel it running over my head.

Most of the rations fail to arrive - because the communication trenches are water-logged and being continually shelled. We eat with hands caked in mud, which has caused many cases of acute dysentery.

In common with others, I've done regular turns at the firing line. It's a very creepy business looking over the top, imagining every noise is a German. A rat skirmishing among empty tins in no-man's land is sufficient to attract all our attention.

Each morning, one hour before daybreak, every man stands in the trench until daylight. This is in case the Germans follow the old custom of attacking just before dawn. The same happens an hour before sunset.

Last night, I had a narrow squeak. I was wedged in the mud when I heard a shell coming. Unable to move quickly, I crouched when it burst on the parapet and got covered in dirt.

Later, we marched to our billets [for rest days]. This morning, Christmas Day, I took my shirt off - thick with dried mud - and had a wash. We had one tub and no soap between about 50 fellows.

Friday, December 31

Back on the firing line, and nearly up to our waists in mud. We've found a new diversion — at dusk, we put a small piece of cheese on the end of a bayonet, wait for a rat to have a nibble, and then pull the trigger.

Saturday, January 8, 1916

At about 3.30am, I heard noises that sounded like wires scraping together. Half an hour later, a sentry spotted two men rising from the ground about 30 yards in front of our trench. We all opened rapid fire.

At daybreak, we saw the result: a dead German lay about 20 yards in front. Scattered around were about a dozen hand-grenades. Given another five minutes, our trench would have been blown to bits.

The victim had got partly through our barbed wire — which is probably what I heard. Later, we raffled his bayonet scabbard. I was the winner and sent it home as a souvenir.

From: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2491760/Harry-Drinkwaters-lost-diary-Great-War.html#ixzz3PTMycTsF>