A Letter to my Family

By Quang Huynh­

Dear Family,

It has been hard living down in these trenches, and I miss you guys very much. I miss all the delicious food that mom would cook, as the trenches had processed canned food. I’ve seen some disgusting things that happened to the soldiers that lived in the trench. There were dead bodies everywhere, scattered around the trench, and the smell was awful. We always had to be cautious when we were going to be attacked, as it could’ve happened anytime. There were many diseases and medical conditions that happened during this war as well. Here are some that I’ve encountered.

There hasn’t been any amusement while in the trenches. The only exciting part about being in the trenches is basically the fighting part associated with hiding in a trench. Well, there was chess, but it would get repetitive at times. There isn’t anything to do in the trenches, as it was scattered with pests such as rats, and because it was very cramped. So, to keep myself not bored, I would write in diaries, except I’d have to hide my diary. The reason on why I had to hide my diary is because if an enemy raider would read it, it would potentially give away valuable information. Furthermore, writing and drawing in my diary helped pass the time. In addition, the soldiers had to work jobs in the trench. For example, some men had to work on trench maintenance, filling the sandbags, cleaning weapons, running errands and carrying supplies. My job was to repair damages toward the trench caused by the weather, or enemy fire. It was a very important job, since the trench can be very vulnerable if not repaired.

There were many diseases and medical conditions in the trenches. One of the conditions was known as **Trench Foot**. The water in the water was very dirty and full of bacteria. The water caused bacteria to thrive and live, as it provided the perfect circumstances for bacteria. Trench foot is caused by persistently standing in the mud and water. First, the skin would wrinkle, and then the foot would swell up into an enormous size. After that, the skin dies, and the foot turns black and begins to rot. These are symptoms of trench foot. It can also cause damage to the nerves, skin and muscle of the foot. Similarly, this made a soldier’s feet permanently wet if they had the condition. Trench Foot is not contagious and can be prevented. But speaking of medical conditions, there would always be a medical check on every soldier each day. The officers of the trench examined soldiers who were affected with Trench Foot. Officers checked if the soldier rubbed oil on their foot, if they dried their feet, and then tell them to put on some dry socks. This didn’t help the infected soldier very much, as their feet got wet as soon as they put on the dry socks. In addition, lice were a major problem, and there an outbreak of cholera, typhus, and dysentery. There was influenza and measles. These diseases killed thousands of men in the war. Equally important, there was another medical condition known as trench fever, which had symptoms similar to the flu. Victims of this condition would receive very high temperatures for around 3 to 5 days. After those days passed, victims of the trench fever would get better. Although officers did regular daily check-ups on soldiers, there were no antibiotics for injured soldiers, so wounds would become infected. This would lead to gangrene. Many soldiers had to get amputated, and many died from infections or septic wounds. Moreover, there were field hospitals, but many soldiers were very weak, and had a very low chance of arriving at the hospital alive. Lots of soldiers sadly died before they got to the hospital, and some even died from blood loss. There were instances of x-ray in hospitals, but it was very rare to see them, and needles were not sterilized, so many infections would occur because of this. I also heard that American introduced blood transfusions late in the war. The British tried to do blood transfusions as well, except they failed due to the British not knowing the difference between blood types. Finally, a fun fact for dad is that, the rapid growth in prosthetic limbs led to the development of plastic surgery.

In the trenches, food was very plain and remained all the same throughout the war. The quantity and amount of food solely depended on the weather, transport, and enemy activity or movement. A problem with the food was that there was no fixed ration for every soldier. The choices of food were narrow, as there were only around 10 items on the menu. Those items were cans of **bully beef**, bread, pork, cheese, beans, butter, and more nourishments. The jam that was consistently the same variety, which made many soldiers tired and sick of the jam. Additionally, a loaf of bread normally had to be split and shared between up to ten men. There was also a tin of stewed meat and vegetables called a **Maconchie**, which would be shared with four men, even though they thought they could’ve finished one of the Maconchies off themselves. At the same time, soldiers had a tremendous amount of biscuits, exceptionally hard and solid biscuits. Soldiers would soak the biscuits in water to make the biscuits soft enough to eat. Some soldiers even had to wait for days for a biscuit to soften up. A complication in the trenches was getting clean water to drink. The water would be contained in petrol cans, which would be very dangerous to drink out of. Equally, chloride of lime was added into the water to kill off germs. Little did the soldiers knew, this contaminated the water and would damage one’s insides if they drank the water. Soldiers got dysentery due to this, which was an infectious bloody diarrhea disease. Dysentery was spread by contaminated food and water. But going back on track, the water that was given to soldiers had a sickening and disgusting taste to it. Of course, soldiers wanted fresh water to drink out of, so some collected rainwater to drink from, or from melted snow and ice.

Every morning, I would wake up wondering if this was the day I would die, as war was very stressful. A classic day in a trench started at dawn. At that time, an order of the name of **stand down** was given. Basically, this meant that the threat of an enemy raiding the trench at night was over. This indicated that men could safely get on with assembling their breakfast. After time passed, it would be now evening. In the evening, soldiers would rest, and tried to get as much sleep as possible. Although it was difficult to sleep, since the soldiers were being disturbed by gunfire, rats, false alarms of attacks, or the cold. Hardly any men slept more than 3 or 4 hours. Then, during the night, sentries had to watch for enemies attacking in the dark, as every single soldier relied their life on the sentries to warn them if an enemy was attacking. For other people, they thought that repairing the trench was the priority, but this was dangerous. Enemy sentries can hear or see trench repairmen. Another priority to other soldiers was patrolling **No-Man’s-Land** to capture prisoners, or maybe try to spy or overhear enemy plans. But when dawn arrived, this whole process would start over. It was a very boring life in the trenches.

Next, while being under continuous anxiety of being under fire and hearing these explosions all day caused shellshock. Shellshock is basically a type of PTSD, which would trigger when someone witnesses a distressing event. At first, shellshock was not seen as a medical condition, but later, it was understood, and soldiers were sent home. Many of these soldiers were identified as cowards to their family and friends, since in some men, any sudden or loud noises can trigger trembling, shaking, fear, or cause them to cry out in absolute horror. Others would have wept due to their memories scaring them too much.

Sincerely yours,

Quang Huynh