"The past is never dead. It's not even past." **William Faulkner**

NOT EVEN **PAST**

In the Trenches: A First World War Diary

By Pierre Minault

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In the Trenches
Pierre Minault's Diary of the First World War

Not Even Past is marking the centennial of the outbreak of the first World War with a very special publication. Our colleague, Gail Minault, a distinguished professor of the history of India, has given us her grandfather's diary, a near daily record of his experiences in the trenches in France. Pierre Minault made his first diary entry on this very day, September 22, one hundred years ago, in 1914. We will be posting each of his entries exactly one hundred years after he wrote them. You will be able to follow Pierre's progress and read his thoughtful and moving personal observations of life on the front as day follows day.

Sylvain Minault originally translated the diary from French. Gail Minault edited this translation and added the following introduction. We are extremely grateful to her for sharing her grandfather's diary with all of us.

Introduction

By Gail Minault

This year we commemorate the outbreak of World War I, which began in August 1914, with all the powers of Europe declaring war on each other in a domino effect born of alliances and ententes. Reading the history of the war, one becomes aware of the carnage, the stalemate, the sacrifice of an entire generation of young men to great power politics. In August of 1914, none of that was apparent. In fact, there was a certain insouciance in the air, and a sense that it would be a short war. Austrians were going to make quick work of Serbia, the Germans thought they would be in Paris in a few weeks. The French looked forward to winning back Alsace-Lorraine and marching into Berlin by Christmas. Such optimism seems unimaginable in hindsight.

Winston Churchill, in a prescient statement made a few months after he became a Member of Parliament in 1901, noted that: "I have frequently been astonished to hear with what composure and how glibly Members, and even Ministers, talk of a European war." He went on to say that in the past, European wars had been fought "by small regular armies of professional soldiers," but in the future, when "mighty populations are impelled on each other," a European war could only end "in the ruin of the vanquished and the scarcely less fatal commercial dislocation and exhaustion of the conqueror." He warned that: "The wars of peoples will be

more terrible than those of kings."[1] Churchill had fought in the Boer War, a colonial war unlike most – those fought against poorly armed native populations. The Boer settlers were Europeans and had comparable arms to their British foes, and that war had been bloodier and less conclusive than the British had anticipated. Churchill's warning was unheeded at the time. At the Admiralty in 1914, Churchill realized that this war would be neither short, nor easy.

The Germans smashed through Belgium in the opening month of the war, but then were turned back from their drive toward Paris in the battle of the Marne. By October 1914, the war settled into the trenches of northern France, with artillery duels that chewed up horses and men like so much raw meat, and destroyed villages and crops in the fields.

French troops in Argonne (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Among the soldiers was my grandfather, Pierre Paul Antoine Minault, 26 years old, the father of two, a Sergeant in the 43rd French Colonial Infantry. He kept a pocket diary that described his experiences. He was educated, sensitive, and articulate, with a great appreciation for the beauty of the French countryside, and great sorrow at the devastation caused by the war.

Pierre wrote reassuringly to his wife, Dora, who was English, living in England on Martin's Farm, a small property that they had rented near Grately, Hampshire.

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[1] Cited in Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* (NY: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 3.

There they were raising their two sons: my father, Paul – born in France – then aged five, and his younger brother, Sylvain – born in England – who was two when Pierre was called to war. During a break in the fighting in mid-October, he sent her a post card. The picture on the reverse is of Bournemouth Beach, a place they had enjoyed together, taking the boys there to play in the sand, and which he remembered fondly:

My dearest little wife: 24 Oct. 1914
Lacking all other paper, I must send one of these postcards, which I have kept preciously so far. We have moved back from the front trenches at last, and have now had two days' rest, which has seemed to us like heaven. I for one feel a lot better for it. We shall soon move on again northward, I believe, where a good deal of fighting is going on. Do you know that since Sept. 22, I have received nothing whatever as letters… I wonder if you ever receive my letters. I send one every 3 or 4 days. How I wish to know how you are, and my 2 boys. Take care of yourself, darling, and keep good hope. Our sufferings are soon forgotten when we get a little rest and good living. A thousand kisses from your loving husband.

There are many personal memoirs of that war, and my grandfather's is an example of the genre that is, perhaps, in no way exceptional. And yet his pocket diary, written in French and translated here into English, helps humanize the experience of the war, the fear and the sound of guns, along with the tedium, the mud, the rumors, the occasional decent meal, or cigarette, or shot of brandy. Such personal documents by ordinary people provide the raw materials for the writing of history. My grandfather was just a solder trying to do his job, hoping to stay alive to return home to his family, like so many participants in wars before and since.

Pierre Minault (courtesy of Gail Minault)

September 22, 1914 – We do not know where we are going

We leave Montrouge [a suburb of Paris] at 9 o'clock in the morning, and arrive at the Gare de Lyon* at noon. The crowd of Parisians is generous and friendly. The knapsack seems heavy to begin with, holding two days' worth of food. We do not know where we are going. The train travels relatively rapidly until Laroche, where we drink a bowl of hot soup.

Reservists at Gare de L'est, Paris, 1914

In the evening, I have to intervene in a compartment where a man who is totally drunk threatens his comrades with his knife; finally he calms down and goes to sleep.

At one o'clock in the morning, we arrive in Dijon. The night has become very cold. We disembark and march across town to a different station. There, hot coffee awaits us, but after drinking it, we have to wait in the open for three or three and a half hours before our departure. There was a captured German bus there, and a tent with nine wounded Germans, badly shot up by our 75s,** and quite a few of our sick men, evacuated from the front because of the cold weather of the last few days. We leave again towards the North and arrive at daybreak at Is-sur-Tille. We scatter in the surroundings looking for breakfast; we eat and drink coffee, and I get to wash myself, which refreshes me considerably.

* one of several railroad stations in Paris
**A reference to the famed 75 mm French cannon, a field piece which was superior to the German 77 mm gun in range and accuracy.

September 23, 1914 – Oh, the hazards of war!

Oh, the hazards of war! After having traveled sixteen hours to reach here with our

300 men, we get back on the train – direction Paris. This redeployment towards the French left wing appears rather general, judging by the number of troop trains leaving in that direction.*

First trains of mobilization (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

* After its defeat at the Battle of the Marne, the German army retreated and tried to swing around the French left wing hoping to prevent French and British armies from joining. This was known as the Race to the Sea. The maneuver was ultimately unsuccessful.

September 24, 1914 – Battle cattle

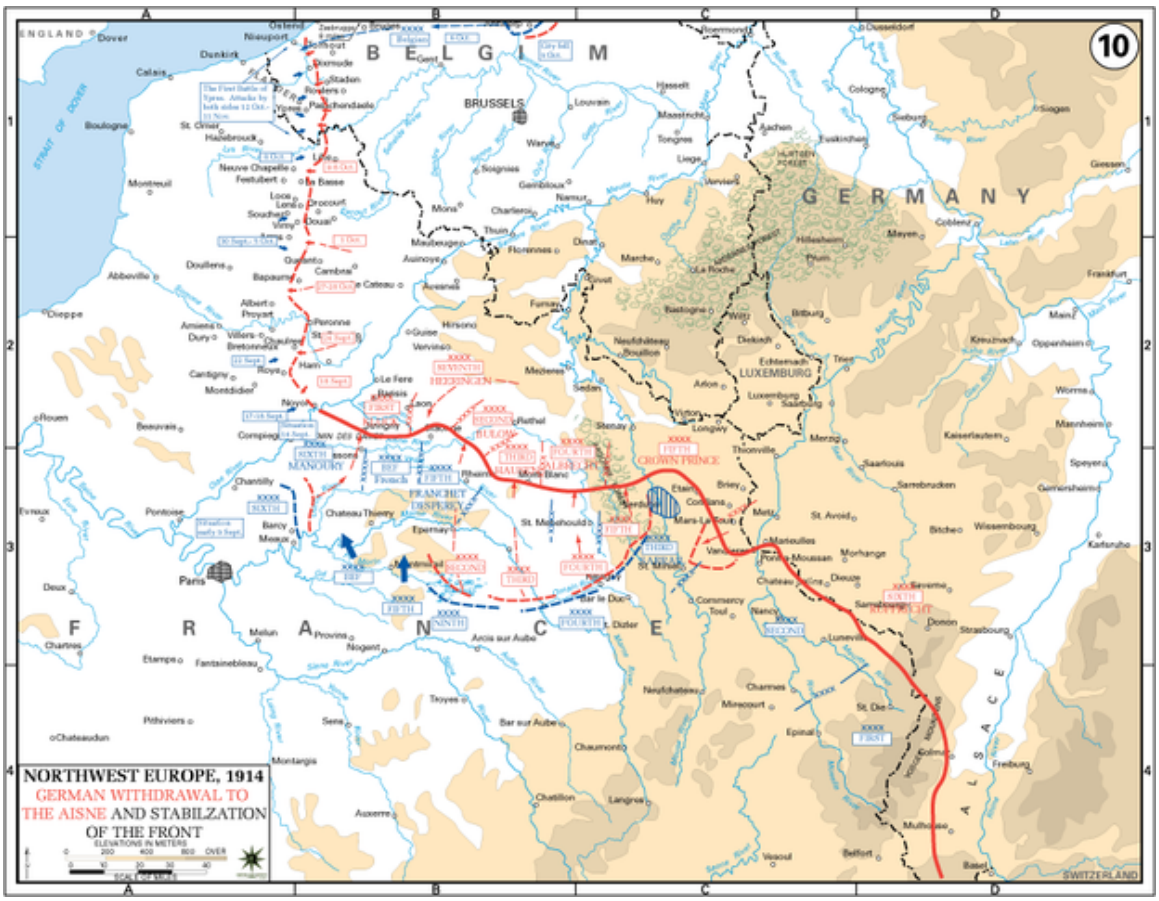
Return from Is-sur-Tille to Le Bourget (northeast of Paris). The trip: fifteen hours in cattle-cars. Mine had forty men, several of whom were half drunk, and with the encumbrance caused by knapsacks, equipment, and rifles, one distinctly has the impression that soldiers, in wartime, are cattle, battle cattle, it is true, but cattle all the same. I ended up sleeping an hour or two. We have been here at Le Bourget since 5:00 in the morning and it is now 1:00 pm. The train is awaiting a food delivery.

German soldiers in a railroad car on the way to the Western Front (Wikimedia Commons)

The sun is warm during the day, but how cold it is at night, especially sleepless nights! The food consists entirely of tinned meat and bread and somewhat lacks variety; however it is sufficient. I chatted with artillery men coming back from the front. Their advice might be quite helpful.

September 25, 1914 – We feel revived

We finally arrive at our destination of Ailly-sur-Noye in the Somme.* The night was very cold, but a big fire warmed us up as well as the coffee. We feel revived. The sun rises over this beautiful valley. In the distance canon fire thunders.



Stabilization of Western Front, 1914 (Wikimedia Commons)

*France is divided into administrative districts called “departments,” usually denominated by a specific geographical feature; for instance the river Somme flows through the department of La Somme. The administrative central town of the department is the “préfecture.” Smaller administrative centers are “sous-préfectures.”

September 26, 1914 – Oh, such voluptuousness!!

Yesterday we rested the whole day in the village of Ailly-sur-Noye. We expected an alert during the night, but it didn’t happen. We slept on straw in an old uninhabited shack, and as it has happened for the last several days, I woke up with my feet numb because of the cold.

Departure at 7:00 am. Our formation consists of the 17th light infantry regiment and us [the 43rd Colonial infantry regiment] and stretches out along the road which climbs to the plateau. This poor overworked, beautiful French road, with its central rib of granite and its two flanking ranks of trees is bearing up valiantly under the enormous war traffic. Ever since we left, the canons roar ceaselessly in the distance. It sounds like the approach of a summer storm. It comes from over there beyond Péronne, retaken the day before yesterday by our troops in spite of

the resistance of the enemy's right wing. I admire in passing the beautiful countryside of Picardy. The enormous quantity and size of the haystacks shows the fertility of the soil. There are undoubtedly a lot of weeds here and there, and also the fields lack the precision in shape which we in England insist upon.

French troops rest after a soup break, 1917 (worldwaronecolor.com)

Here we are in the 4th rest period. The cannon thunder becomes more precise and less like a rolling continuous roar. We have passed through Moreuil and are now on the road to Doullens, the sous-préfecture of the Somme. We have just passed a wheat field of some 10 hectares [25 acres], which promised a magnificent harvest, but where a cavalry detachment encamped all over the place; it is now an indescribable mess, and the farmer's loss must be enormous.

In the evening we arrive in Arancourt. The Prussians have gone through here and have swiped everything. After a long search, I managed to buy a goose and an enormous rabbit for my men, which were quickly executed and plunked into the pot. And then, while chatting with a pleasant local lady, I arranged to get a room for the night and a bed with sheets! Oh, such voluptuousness!! The room is nice and clean, but the Prussians have torn out the window and the casing, which is propped up against the wall. How can those people have the desire, the sense, and the energy for such destruction?

September 27, 1914 – There are fires everywhere

The cannon thundered all night, lighting up the horizon with short bursts of light. That did not prevent me from sleeping like a log in my feather bed with white sheets. As there was no immediate departure order, I was left to sleep until 7:00 am and got the best night's sleep since my mobilization. This morning, each squad was issued two geese, two ducks and two chickens. Mortancourt: It is beginning to feel like a battlefield; the wounded, bloody and summarily bandaged, return in long columns from the front; those more seriously wounded are brought back in Renault limousines, in horse-drawn carts, or farm wagons. They tell of their experiences this very morning. The German heavy artillery did the most damage, but altogether few dead. Here is a wounded Bavarian, sad but composed, plus some others in a cart. One wounded Zouave* horseman with a muscular arm dripping with blood, passed by, his horse led by a white-haired old woman. They tell us of a convoy of German prisoners. All along the road there are individual foxholes dug on the sides. But altogether the news is good. An army corps is arriving as reinforcements.

German prisoners in a French prison camp 1917-1919 (Wikimedia Commons)

We arrive at Bray-sur-Somme. Here the battlefield spreads out in a vast

panorama. The entire eastern horizon is gray with smoke. There are fires everywhere. White puffs of smoke appear all of a sudden over the field; they are our shell bursts. Nearer us, black shell bursts; they are theirs. Close by, policemen guard a Prussian officer, a tall man, ramrod straight, self-assured in his greatcoat. Our colonial soldiers shove each other to approach him yelling their hatred. The Prussian recoils into the haystack for protection. Some distance away, a Blériot airplane has landed. All of a sudden, its motor roars and the Blériot takes off, and climbs almost vertically into the beautiful blue sky. It flies towards the horizon, there where a white shell burst appears. All of a sudden it reappears and lands in the field from which it took off. Our shell bursts advance further away toward the north. Is the enemy trying to outflank us to the north? The evening is magnificent. An autumnal breeze, exquisitely soft, sweeps over the fields. Why must it be that in this marvelous area, everything reeks of the most awful destruction? But here is precisely the answer: this land of milk and honey stirred the envy of the German. Its incalculable value will only strengthen the will to hold on to it.

At 5:00 pm, we arrive at Bray-sur-Somme. The battlefront up the hill is only about 4 to 5 kilometers distant. Battle vestiges: crowded ambulances, heaps of knapsacks, cartridge-belts, water bottles gathered up from the battlefield. Each object denotes a dead or wounded man.

Our encampment is here in a corner of the little town. Quickly we peel potatoes and prepare some soup. As for me I go looking for a room and a bed, which I find without trouble. The evening is spent drinking coffee and then tea with our hostess, a very fine woman, and with other soldiers. We chat, sing songs, each one tells of his memories and experiences. Our good hostess listens, impressed by stories of England, of America. It was thus that the ancient Gauls prized their guests who told of faraway travels.

At 9 o’clock, I go to bed, all refreshed. Today’s distance covered: 16 to 18 kms.

*A French colonial soldier, distinguished by his colorful uniform.

September 28, 1914 – Everybody outside, in battle dress

Hardly was I in bed and beginning to feel its warmth and go to sleep, than I believe I hear a voice, a peremptory order coming from outside in the street, and as if getting an electric shock, I jump out of bed: “Everybody outside, in battle dress,” says the voice. In two minutes I am outside, equipped with my knapsack on. My squad bumps into each other in the narrow stable where we were

encamped; the men feel for their packs and their guns. The shadows are counted, the captain swears and grumbles. Finally we are ready. In silence the column starts out. We renew our advance toward the canon thunder.

En route, I distinguish shadows in the grass in the ditch. I see an artillery man stretched out on his back, his comrades unbuttoning his jacket. I hear the raucous squeal of his rapid breathing. We pass on. A hundred meters further on, heart rending shrieks pierce the air; it is the man over there in the wet grass who cries out in his pain. This time I am choked with emotion. The sight of the wounds of those young men lying on stretchers, that's nothing. But those horrible shrieks!

We arrive at a charming hamlet, huddled in the poplars along the Somme. It is Suzanne, our stationing for the battle, the trenches are nearby.

At midnight we lie down on the floor of the stable allotted to us. A bad night, cold and short besides, as we must get up at 3:00 am. We leave; we take 1000 paces; we stop; we wait. At 9:00 am, we are still waiting; we are the reserves. I write these notes, but the shells are coming nearer. They tear through the air. Will it be a short retreat on our part? We wait.

French cavalry with German prisoners 1914 (Wikimedia Commons)

"Vroom, vroom," repeat our 75s on the nearest slope. German prisoners are over there by the fire station. I go over to glance at them to take my mind off the battle; they are all deeply asleep.

11 o'clock, the shell bursts come nearer, without our paying much attention, when all of a sudden, as I was looking at the evacuation of a German wounded man, I am struck as by the hiss of a viper. Instantly and as by a reflex, I flatten myself on the ground and at the same moment a formidable noise, as if lightning struck the nearby house, shatters the air. I feel myself, but all is well, and get up, and notice a piece of tile roofing fall just next to me. I hasten to rejoin my squad amidst a certain confusion, it is our first baptism of fire. We are ordered to evacuate the village and to regroup some 200 meters further back. A horse of the unit that has followed us passes by, leaving a trail of blood. A piece of shrapnel must have hit him. Finally, we install ourselves in a former chalk quarry and there we eat with a good appetite and get ready to make coffee.

We notice that the shelling is getting closer.

September 29, 1914 – He sleeps his last sleep

We left our encampment last night at 9:00 pm, to go rejoin the front line. But before leaving, I was able to witness a real battle from our trench. This spectacle was not really picturesque, as from time to time the German shells come bursting almost among us, but already we seem inured to war. The puzzling aspect of a modern battle is how little one can see in proportion to how much you can hear. A battery comes out of one wood and goes to hide itself quietly in another. A minute later, a clear line of four shell bursts methodically sprays the enemy. On the horizon, a black line advances; it is our men spread out in shooting formation. A shell bursts among them, momentarily breaking the line. This morning the village of Maricourt was shot up; the inhabitants have fled, the women weeping, having to walk twelve km. with their children in their arms.

Nevertheless, over there, on the slope of the hill, three heifers ruminate totally indifferent to the war, and at the bottom of the valley a shepherd slowly carries the barriers for the enclosure of his herd.

Towards evening, after supper, we open up a haystack and spread out the hay to make a momentary shelter and enjoy the sweetness of a short siesta. But at 9:00 pm comes the call to assemble, and we leave. In the night, the long silent column stretches out. In the middle of the road, shells have dug small craters, in which we risk stumbling. The fields have been ravaged by deep trenches, dug everywhere. We arrive in a little valley near a cluster of trees. Our regiment, it seems, is to occupy this wood, which is bordered on all sides by shell-holes. By moonlight, one makes out dark splotches. A dead horse lies at the entrance to the wood, which we enter in single file. An order is shouted: lie down along the path. We curl up among the thorns and that is how we spend the night. The cold

prevents me from sleeping. I shiver until morning, when a short slug of mint alcohol kindles a slight flame in my benumbed body.

At reveille, the men are assembled; one or two are missing, doubtless lost in this thicket. The sergeant-major of our company comes to look us over and takes us to meet our new comrades at the forward posts. Here is a group lying down with knapsacks on, facing the shelling. A shell has burst in that spot; the trees have been reduced to kindling. At the stump of one of those trees, one of our men is crouching, but his face is blackened. He sleeps his last sleep. And it appears that he is not the only one.

French 87th Regiment at Verdun, 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)

Noon: It seems as though things are going fairly well, for the shell-bursts seem to

be moving further away. We have dug trenches and with this substantial protection we feel more secure, and with each fall of a shell we no longer try to shrink our head into our shoulders. This wooded copse atop the cliff which looks out over the Somme River is simply charming. In normal times, it would be an ideal spot for a picnic. Now, the noise would be somewhat annoying.

One gets used to this continual zooming overhead of singing shells. I don't even think of it any more. But it gets a bit annoying after a while. One is tempted to exclaim, "Oh, stop it up there," or else: "Don't throw any more, the yard is full up!" In short, adversaries put a lot of effort into lobbing shells at each other, but with very little discretion.

An artillery man passes by. We shout to him: "How goes it out there?" The answer: "Not too bad. We have just demolished two of their batteries, one of 77 mm, the other of 105 mm. With our binoculars, we saw the aiming officer fly up, torn to pieces."

At 4:00 pm, we are showered by 77 mm German shells. They burst over our heads in the tree branches, while the shrapnel sprinkles everywhere. Six or seven shells burst close enough to shatter branches over our heads. Meanwhile we in our trenches stick our heads in our packs, like rabbits in their burrow. The lieutenant comes around to see if there are any wounded. Happily there are none. Now our guns retake the advantage, their detonations tear the air right and left, and the skies fill with their whistles. We foot soldiers sit down in a circle and take a brotherly drink of Byrrh, which restores our courage.

September 30, 1914 – Monkey meat

The lack of sleep, the lack of heat, the lack of food begin to make their effects known. My fitness has lessened noticeably. To wake up each morning with arms and legs deadened by the cold, and the body by the cold wet ground, and to have for daily food half a loaf of 10-15 day old bread, an egg-sized hunk of cold boiled beef, and one tin of "monkey-meat" [corned beef] for three men, afterwards to flatten oneself for hours, the knapsack on one's head, while shrapnel tears through the air and sends branches falling – all that doesn't make us happy, happy! To retain a bit of energy, at daybreak, fasting, we have the artificial "whiplash" of a mouthful of brandy or rum which the savvy ones manage to get in the area by scavenging in cafés. Because the comfort of a camp fire is strictly forbidden, no flame shines in our little wood where our silent men sprawl motionless as phantoms or cadavers.

Last night the firing never ceased, shells and bullets whistled and purred through space. The strategic situation, as the official communiqué would put it, is

unchanged. Yesterday, our regiment was to march forward to battle along with the 41st Colonial; the 41st was to wait to advance on one wing, until the 43rd had advanced to the other. Both advanced at the same time, the one sustained by artillery fire, the other…not! Result: many killed and wounded, of which many were my comrades from the day before yesterday, as well as one of the captains of our detachment, and the enemy did not retreat. It's announced that an army corps is to reinforce us… May they get here soon!

My thoughts wander to my home; to my wife and adored children. My wife so gentle, so lovely, so youthful, so loving; to my two boys, so lively, so impressionable, so full of life. How far away they seem, strangers to the situation in which I find myself here, so quiet in their security at Martin's Farm.

Pierre Minault and family, 1914 (Courtesy of Gail Minault)

Ah! If it were not for them, life would seem easy to sacrifice; shrapnel would be

less cruel in its strident and raucous shriek. But for them I must live—until the end! Later if destiny wishes that I survive, how sweet and precious will be the intimacy of my home, the smile of my wife, the babble of my children. As for me, I would have the satisfaction of thinking that my peril, my sufferings, my efforts will have contributed in slight measure to years of peace, prosperity, and tranquil happiness which will result from Europe being unified by meeting the threat of the Germanic Hydra.*

News arrives that an old woman and an old man from hereabouts have come here to reveal to our artillery officers the position of the heavy artillery, which has harassed us with impunity for the last three days. The battery is said to be in a quarry at some distance from here. The intelligence is good. But what courage for this old couple to come under fire to reveal the position of the enemy to our range-finders!

* A legendary many-armed monster.

October 1, 1914 – No chocolate, ham, lard, milk, nothing

Here we are on the 1 of October. Thus the war enters its third month. What has it got in store for us?

In order to write, I have come to sit on the rim of a shell crater a few meters from our encampment. I came here not because I am foolhardy, but because the sun—a very pale sun—has penetrated the thicket here and gives some vigor to my bones that are stiffened by the cold. Ah! The cold! What an adversary and so difficult to overcome! And how much does the War Office concern itself with protecting soldiers from it? Because since I have been here, I have slept on the bare ground, and I have nothing, absolutely nothing to cover my body. In spite of numerous complaints, I haven't obtained even the hope of a blanket. "Take one off a wounded man" is the only answer I got. Already I have dysentery and last night was extremely difficult.

Last evening, a happy diversion: I was able to go down to the little village, at the foot of the cliff on which we are perched, which clings to the bank of the Somme, to lead the coffee detail. It is an almost perpendicular descent, which warmed me up. There all the inhabitants, still terrorized by the recent cannonade, had some hope revived, because a patrol of our regiment had just captured a German patrol of 17 infantrymen who surrendered without resistance, and this event, together with the destruction of the enemy battery that was bombarding us for the last several days, was balm to the hearts of these good people.

A French soldier finds some time to write, 1917 (worldwaroneincolor.com)

There is absolutely nothing in this village, nothing which resembles provisions. No chocolate, ham, lard, milk, nothing. The Boches* have taken everything, everything, everything – repeats everyone. Last evening a brave woman would have gone to milk a cow for a bowl of milk for me, but there was a German shell in the stable which had not exploded, and she was afraid. All that remains is alcohol: gin, which was hidden away in houses at the approach of the Barbarians. Outside, all is calm. Yesterday morning around 11:00, there were a few salvos of shelling, but no damage, and since then the cannonade seems further away.

*Pejorative name for Germans.

October 3, 1914 – Black holes in the chalky soil

Yesterday saw an interruption in our woodsy existence. We left our fort, thanks to a morning fog, and went back to the village of Suzanne, where four or five days ago, we were supposed to encamp. This diversion, of a day of rest, will undoubtedly to allow us to wash, shave, and to get some food to eat. The village (Suzanne) has badly suffered since our last visit; the countryside all around has been torn up by shells, those huge German shells which dig big, black holes in the chalky soil. Also in the village itself, many houses were destroyed or gutted. A fine farm in the middle of the village has burned to the ground, grilling the 18 cows and 3 horses that inhabited it. Shrapnel has scarred or pierced bricks; slate and plaster are everywhere.

Aerial view of ruins of Vauz France, 1918 (Wikimedia Commons)

A few inhabitants stayed behind, hiding in the cellars when the shells fell, and coming out when the shelling slacked off. A beautiful girl of around 12, already a woman, comes out of an old house in the middle of the destruction and smiles at me. “Well, well, young lady, aren’t you afraid of shrapnel?” – “Certainly not, monsieur,” answers the young girl, with a resolute air.
There, certainly, is good human stock!

We spend the afternoon in the park of a sumptuous chateau where the staff of

(our) Army Corps resides. It is a beautiful park where our passage caused much damage, not for the pleasure of destroying, but to create some shelter against the threatening rain. A corporal from our section and I constructed a sumptuous tent of branches, almost rain-proof, and spread it with fresh straw. However, we were quickly ordered to leave this cozy shelter to rejoin the billeting for the night. This is in the workshop of a worthy blacksmith. The bellows are quickly put to good use and in no time at all, the coffee is foaming, cabbage is cooking, the steaks are grilling. When the fires are put out, the shop is turned into a sumptuous dormitory, and sweet sleep closes this day of frenetic debauch!

In the morning, before daybreak we get back to our little wood, while in the distance the cannonade gets further and further away.

Yesterday, an artillery warrant-officer told me: “The Russians are in Berlin. It’s official.” I just don’t believe it, but if it were only true, our trials would certainly be shortened.

An artillery soldier gave me more probable news: Yesterday, he told me that we destroyed 18 enemy artillery pieces that were traveling down a road, but we also lost one gun with all four of its crew, a shell fell right on it.

October 4, 1914 – Pipe smoke replaces that of incense

It seems that it is Sunday today. That’s quite possible, but not a single bell rings to call the faithful villagers to the weekly service. What there are in the steeples of the nearby churches are German machine-gun nests which are there to wish us welcome. In the church naves on scattered straw are the wounded, where soldiers were previously encamped. Pipe smoke replaces that of incense. I slept last night in a trench dug in the shape of a bathtub, only 1.20 meters long. Huddled up until I got cramps, I still managed to sleep. Yesterday afternoon shrapnel visited us again. The bursting shells fell around us, breaking branches in the trees above. Ten, fifteen seconds after the shell bursts, shrapnel was still zinging around like big bumblebees. Their linear speed is not great, but the rotation speed is enormous. Some seem to swing in the air, just like a swing making slow arcs.

German barrage fire at night, Ypres (Wikimedia Commons)

Today is a weekly day of rest, but ever since reveille we have been digging trench upon trench. The German retreat continues, but in such order that we must organize our wooded patch for fear of an infantry counter-attack.

October 5, 1914 – A change is taking place

The day is surprisingly calm. We feel vaguely that a change is taking place. No more shrapnel and no more of our batteries firing behind us. All our guns seem to be assembled in front of us. Last evening under the cover of fog, our guns seemed to be seized by frenzy. In a few minutes, hundreds of shells were fired. It appeared as though four or five shots were fired simultaneously. We knew that such a cannonade had a purpose, and today it was reported that 36 German guns in a road convoy had been badly beaten up, and their horses chopped to pieces. Could that explain today's calm?

It is rumored that our section will occupy Vaux, in the valley. It is the village where we go morning and evening to brew our coffee. Perhaps we will be able to sleep under a roof?

October 6, 1914 – I lay in a neighboring garden

Last evening we occupied Vaux. I was ordered to guard a road. I lay in a

neighboring garden on a patch of freshly dug ground. Came back this morning to the encampment in the woods. The day is calm, no more shelling.

October 7, 1914 – On holiday – or just about

Today is a day of great rejoicing; for a night and a day, we are stationed in Suzanne, on holiday – or just about. The night in the trench was cold because of cold winds and the first frost, but with the dawn, the sun comforted us. It was a day to clean up and get some decent food. We washed ourselves and our clothes, and we cooked. Ah, what a treat to eat all you can and to drink warm drinks! This afternoon, following the visit of a German plane, vainly pursued by salvos from our 75s (he was at least at 4,000 meters of altitude), our positions in the valley got a violent and rather precise cannonade. I was able to observe the successive bursting of shells from a distance of roughly 1,000 meters. The penetration shells look like big, black bubbles digging the ground, and the explosive shells like a ball of white wool puffing out of the wind in the blue sky. In spite of this well directed shelling, I don't think that our canon battery was hit, nor the artillery park down in the valley, but undoubtedly the men in the trenches or in the woods got shelled. Many of them seemed to flee their position, which had become untenable.

Artillery piece in Belgium, 1917 (worldwaronecolorphotos.com)

Finally, today I have recent news of the war. Apparently everywhere else, it is like here: artillery duels, with slow pressure on both sides. We have apparently fallen back in the Oise department, and in the Nord department** towards Arras, the turning movement of the German right wing is being accentuated. But in Russian Poland a German army which advanced imprudently, has gotten itself into a formidable bloodbath. Yes, pressure against Germany increases. The pointer of its manometer rises, rises. Soon undoubtedly desertions will develop, symptoms of a coming blow-up.

This evening, the goal of our battalion is totally changed. Leaving the cold but safe shadows of the woods of Vaux, we are going to occupy advanced trenches, very close to the enemy positions. The hour approaches when we shall see the enemy face to face.

*This department is just south of the Somme department.
**North of the Somme.
*** These rumors of German defeats by the Russians are probably wartime wishful thinking.

October 8, 1914 – I will tolerate no weakness

Here we are in the first line of trenches, 300 meters from a small German outpost.

Border Regiment in dugouts, Battle of the Somme, August 1916 (Wikipedia Commons)

We came here last night. The town is Maricourt or rather it was…because Maricourt, a large village of well-to-do farmers is but a pile of ruins such as I never thought I would see. I didn't see a single house still standing, and apparently there were many hundreds of them. Farms, shops, workshops, the church – the big, square, solid church – have been victims of shells and fire. Nothing living remains here, except a cock, which I was surprised to hear announcing the frigid dawn. In the streets that we passed through, we had to go in single file because of the collapsed walls that blocked them. All the efforts of generations were devastated, roofs torn off, showing their timbers, doors torn off their hinges and blackened by fire, walls that contained nothing any longer. The mass of debris is such that one wonders if the returning inhabitants will find enough energy to undertake the clearing and the rebuilding of this mass of rubble.

As we left, the captain made a little superfluous speech: "This morning we will go to the front lines. We must maintain that line at any cost. I will tolerate no weakness. If there is any, I will punish it immediately, and you can guess how." Lugubrious words which vaguely betray the nervousness, the cowardice, and very little of the character of an officer, who, under fire, knows how to reassure his men by the straightforwardness of his attitude. The effect of these undeserved words on our men is nefarious.

As we arrive, we take over the old trenches, very deep and very safe…and immediately get the order to dig new ones at a different angle. For four hours during the glacial night we dig, then being relieved, we regain our dugout. The moon shines and it is very cold. Ice crystals scintillate on the grass. My night ends in semi-consciousness, a frozen numbness in which I dream of Captain Scott,* letting himself slowly and peacefully die of cold. Today we stayed crouched in our holes all day. The shelling goes over our heads, though nothing seems aimed directly at us. Our food: cold meat, bread and water.

*Robert Scott, British explorer who reached the South Pole shortly after it was first discovered by Amundsen in 1912, froze to death after he and his men ran out of food.

October 9, 1914 – it also grabs you by your soul

The progression of our sufferings is rapidly getting worse. Nighttime brings them on. Last night, we climbed out of our holes and worked on the trench started yesterday. A half-squad must work from 8:00 pm till midnight and is relieved by the next half-squad.

At 9:00 pm the canon fire which started up a while ago, suddenly swings towards us. A shell whistles in, followed by others and others still nearer us. My men drop

their tools and jump into the trench. I take cover in an enormous shell hole which is just in front of me. The captain appears and gives the order to retreat. Angry, nervous, impatient he summons the noncom. I come forward, and he orders me to have the tools picked up. I prepare to give the order, but it isn't practical because the men are already escaping towards the trench; I then pick them up myself, when bang, bang, a shell falls nearly on us. At that, I drop the tools, and noting that our chief – head down and double-time – is returning to his shelter, I too jump into my hole.

French trench (Wikimedia Commons)

The shelling lasts quite a while. A night battle seems to break out two or three kilometers away. At first, German artillery thunders away almost by itself. Suddenly, our 75s open fire, their specific resonance and powerful vibration are immediately recognizable. Its shelling does not stop, and soon the Boche machine guns, rifles, and large caliber guns hesitate, slow down and fall silent.

We go back to our digging. The night is very cold. I work like a slave with pick and shovel to keep up my circulation. At midnight we go back to our trenches leaving the work to others.

But, wait! Our matamore* [the captain] must undoubtedly have had a nightmare, because he soon passes the order around to get out and spend the rest of the

night in the trenches which we have just dug, as a German attack is expected during the night. But these trenches are not yet very deep, and give us only the possibility to sit on the crest and to wait, motionless. But to sit in the alfalfa when it is freezing and you have nothing to cover yourself, and to stay there for five hours under the moon is no picnic, especially when you are already stiff with the cold and sleeplessness, and you await the dawn. I stand it for two and a half hours, then half dead of cold and stiffness, go back to digging the clay soil. The air is calm, a slight fog rises. The German attack never occurs except in the exalted brain of the captain, but on the other hand, over this beautiful landscape, the nauseating stench of rotting flesh weighs upon us. It grabs you by the nose, by the heart, and by the stomach. It also grabs you by the soul. Why so much destruction? In front of our trenches, there is a field with five or six dead horses, other numerous ones lie in the village, and undoubtedly in the neighboring fields.

At daybreak, I slip back into the ruins of Maricourt, and climbing over the fallen walls of houses, with their detached doors, I ferret around among the debris and find a filthy old horse blanket. That's OK, I'll take it. I return and finally, wrapped up in my acquisition, I fall into a heavy sleep.

In the morning, the war routine begins again. Prolonged inspections by airplanes, squandering of shells in the clay of the fields. The weather remains good.

*From Matamoros [killer of Moors], a character in Spanish comedy; a cowardly braggart.

October 12, 1914 – We don't advance, we don't retreat

I made no entries in this notebook the last two days, because these two days were exactly the same as the preceding days. Rest during the day and work at night. My body has finally given out because of the return and the aggravation of the same maladies. I have dysentery, pains, and fever. Besides it is useless to complain to anyone. There is no infirmary here, and one is not evacuated for such trifles. Shelling continues…quiet during the day, stronger at night. In different areas, there seems to have been fighting in forward positions. The village is still burning and at night it is an easy target. I am again without a blanket. Reinforcements have finally arrived—450 men—I recognized a few of them. They bring vague news, nothing certain, just like the present state of the war. We don't advance, we don't retreat. Ah, how we would love to hear of something that approximates a solution. But no. We are going to spend the winter, suffering from the cold, buried in the same trench, stagnating during whole weeks in the same spot, until such time as the munitions, the food, and the funds of the Germans are exhausted. When, oh when, will I again see Martin's Farm, my wife, my children? Will I ever see them again?

Panoramic view of destruction, 1917 (worldwaronecolorphotos.com)

October 14, 1914 – An opium pill

The day before yesterday in the evening, my dysentery took a turn for the worse. It was extremely painful and I decided to go see the captain and implore him for either medical care or permission to spend the night in the big trench. He received me very brutally, refused all my requests, and sent me away with an opium pill. Hardly had I left him than heavy firing started up, many bullets whizzed around me. I crawled to get my rifle, and got ready to rejoin the firing trench where my squad was already. But I was so weak that I could not crawl with the rifle. Also my diarrhea caught up with me and forced me to make a long and painful stop in the shelter of the parapet. I rose again only to face a man, bayonet on his gun. He approached me yelling many warnings. Two sentries had also seen me and cried out twice: “Halt. Who goes there?” and I did not answer. They thought that I was part of an enemy patrol trying to get to the rear of our position. They were just about ready to shoot me.

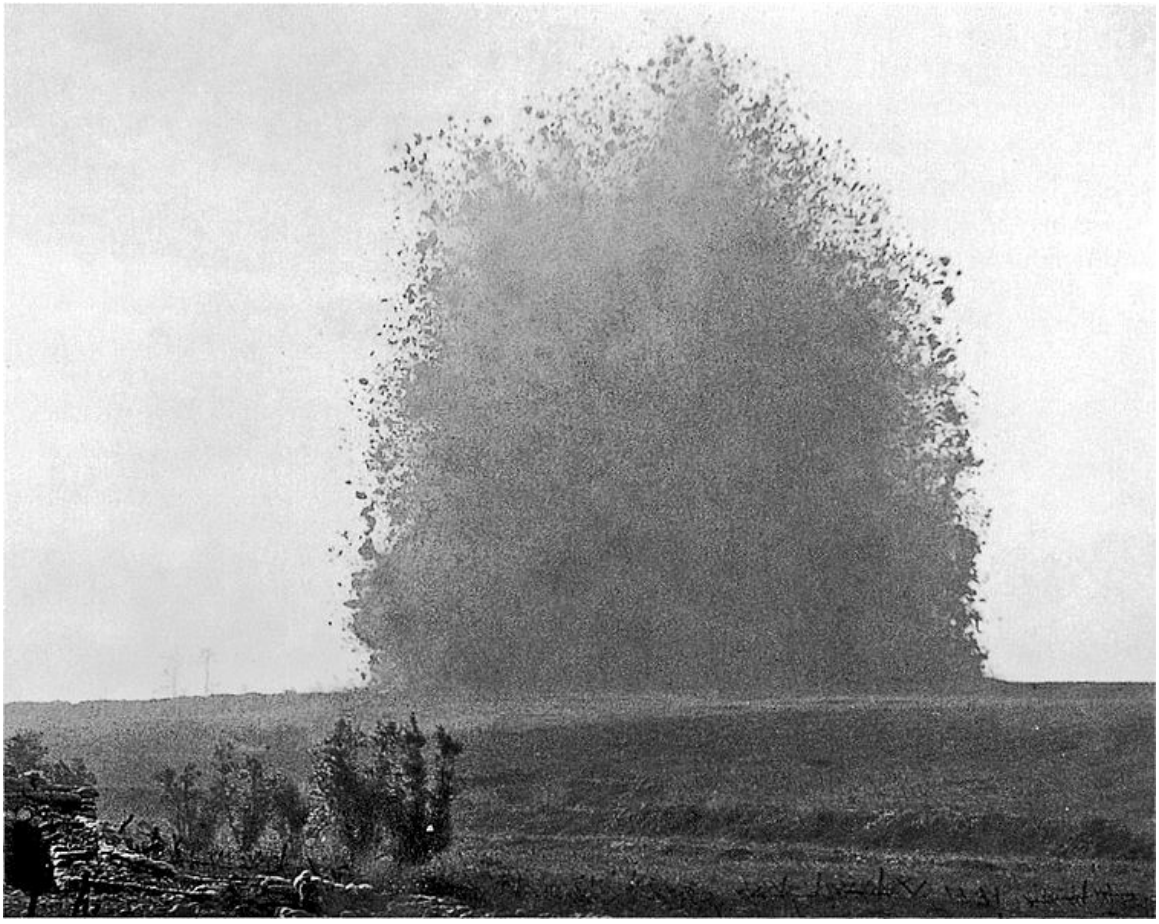
Cheshire Regiment in a trench, Somme, 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)

The captain has been made aware of this incident and judges that I failed in my duty to rejoin my post immediately. First he wanted to demote me, then only to drop me one rank. It is all the same to me. But he doesn't say that during all this firing and during the night attack, he stayed in his hut, well sheltered, and that our company was without command, firing without direction and risking to fire on our forward positions. My life, with no relief from pain, is a real nightmare. I eat practically nothing. I have a fever. It has begun to rain and the trench hardly shelters me. Last evening in the firing trench, we were subjected to a fierce and precise shelling. Large caliber shells burst a few meters behind me, and shrapnel was falling all over the place. I hardly paid attention to it. The only thing I wanted was to sleep and forget.

This morning I went to see the major [a doctor]. "Diarrhea! What's that? Everybody has it." There is no bismuth in Maricourt, therefore he is going to give me opium, still more opium! I ask to stay for a day of rest in the cellar of the chateau, above which are the accumulated ruins of two sumptuous floors. "Certainly not! There's no room; besides you are quite well-off in your trenches!" So I come back to live life in my hole, doing a real steeple-chase at each step over the trunks of enormous trees, cut off just above their roots as by a scythe! And there are deep craters and smoking beams everywhere.

October 15, 1914 – We all get a blanket

The night was spent on alert in the trench under a steady rain. There was an attack this morning at 3 o'clock. Firing seemed to come from everywhere at once. Bullets were crackling in every direction amidst the roar of the canons. But so far, we have been able to leave the job of firing to the avant-garde and to the section occupying the little wood on our left. Our chief warrant officer had his jaw smashed by a bullet.



Explosion of a mine at Hawthorne Ridge, July 1, 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)

I am feeling a little bit better, thanks to two days of nearly absolute fast, but the form of my diarrhea makes me believe that I
have real dysentery.

This morning, immense satisfaction: We all get a blanket. One must not despair! A blanket after having slept 22 nights in the open without one!

October 16, 1914 – He slips me two chocolate bars

Last night, the captain ordered me to go to the Police Station at the other end of Maricourt and there to await a section of engineers, who are coming to dig trenches at our forward posts. I am to guide them around the ruins and in the darkness. A wet fog descends, the trees drip, and on the scarred ground, our feet slip and sink into the mud.

At the Police Station, I go in to take shelter. All of a sudden I hear a delightful music. It is the voice of my friend Seigneury, whom I left at the depot two weeks ago. He was my best friend. We recognize each others' voices, shake hands in the dark. There where everything is hostile, nauseating, what balm is a friend's voice! Quickly I tell him of our misery, my present ailment (dysentery). What a great friend! He slips me two chocolate bars. Then he pours some grains of caffeine into my hand, which I wash down with a mouthful of herbal tea. He then rolls me a cigarette of fine tobacco. Ah, such a pal! Then in the basement, by candle-light, we tell each other our adventures. He left Paris only eight days ago and arrived with the reinforcements; he tells me his horror at this terrible war. Then he gives me news of Paris and of Europe. Antwerp seems to have fallen (Is it still true?), but France is holding up well. The German movement of encirclement is still pushing towards the North.

Trench warfare at the Battle of Ginchy, 1916 (worldwaronecolorphotos.com)

Later in the night, the section of engineers arrives. The poor blighters, loaded down with their tools, have been walking here since noon to dig trenches and pits at 2:00 am and then go back at daylight. Their lieutenant, a charming man, has more recent news. Yesterday must have been very good over the whole front line. The 20 army corps, that is us, will leave any time now for the North, that is towards Arras.

I guide the little army of diggers through all the obstacles. The night is horrible, black, slimy, and the fog, close to the ground, traps the smell of rotting flesh. It's a nightmare.

October 19, 1914 – It is no longer peace that we long for

It's again Sunday, they say. Nothing has changed. Ah, but yes. Yesterday my demotion from sergeant was confirmed because of the incident concerning my diarrhea. It is a hardship which bears it's own remedy, because if I am demoted, I am also in a new company and I can leave behind this cowardly, Breton captain, a disgrace to his rank, the mere thought of whom causes me to shudder with hatred. I walk quietly through the woods to my new company and find myself in the trenches at the edge of the woods. They receive me quite well and the same life starts all over again.

This trench life is really rather simple, free of much effort, slow and amorphous. We are here, in one place, we eat a little to subsist, we sleep a little in daytime, and less at night. We must keep our eyes peeled for hours on the beetroot fields in front of us, because from these fields, 300 meters away, could at any moment spring waves of attackers and a rain of bullets. Sure they could, but nothing happens. It is a war of enemies staring at each other, and days and weeks go by. My body, emaciated by dysentery and starvation is a constant burden, too long for the narrowness of the trenches and too tall also to contain in my veins the warmth which would dispel the glacial winds of the long nights, it is constantly stiffened by cramps, shaken by shivers, and wracked with pain.

The nights are fearful because they bring on the cold. They prolong each day; but the day does not bring back any warmth.

During our dozings which are never deep, because something always wakes us up, we dream at times, divine dreams, which dispel momentarily the misery of reality. Ah! The good meals one then has! What succulence! Vol-au-vents,* delicate hors-d'oeuvres, the tasty meats of our English feasts, the cakes of my dear Dora, and our good French wines.

Soldiers in French trench, 1917 (worldwaronecolorphotos.com)

And what richness in the hot café au lait which steams on the table at Martin's Farm next to the buttered toast! "Coffee you guys!" cries a raucous but muffled voice; it's the coffee man who comes around with his canvas bucket filled with a thin and tepid brew, which he calls "coffee." We rush up with our tin cups and hungrily dip a bit of bread in the miserable brew. That will be the only "breakfast" of the day.

And always the acute privation of even small things. We reflect each day: Ah! If only we had a cigarette, a chocolate bar, a drop of rum. Never even any sugar, never a glass of wine, no writing paper, no matches. Nobody has a match, nor an old newspaper, nothing, always nothing. My purse swells with my accumulated

pay, never used. And yet, what would I give at times for the least of those things? All of the commodities of civilization, the resources of commerce, the satisfaction of the most elemental needs of our companies of men of 1914, are immediately refused, suppressed, annulled. That's what it is like to be at war.

It is no longer peace that we long for. It is for a day, for 24 hours only, of relaxation in any little town where there would be water in the fountains so we could wash, fresh straw in the barns, and one or two well stocked shops so that we could obtain a little well-being and some provisions.

As for the war, for the last two days, absolute calm. From time to time the whistle of a bullet. Shelling – far away, but here – nothing, absolutely nothing is happening.

*Puff pastries.

October 21, 1914 – Cruel deception

Still in the trench in the open field.

Aerial photo of a battle, Somme, 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)

We stay here 36 hours and then go back into the woods for a day. Yesterday we were officially told that we are at last relieved and can go back to a village billeting. We got ready feverishly, and an hour later, cruel deception: we stay where we are; in the evening we go back into the trenches. Ah, the bitterness! Could we not be spared this deception? And there are plenty of others. The wind is glacial, we can't manage to warm ourselves. Food is again insufficient: a thumb-sized piece of meat, a little mashed potatoes, a tin cupful of tepid coffee in the middle of the night, that's it for 24 hours. It's black misery! We are watching the Germans, they come and go in their trenches, and they duck, because this afternoon, our 75 mm guns sent them some well-aimed shells. The soil heaped up in front of their trenches flew up 30 meters into the air.

October 25, 1914 – Delights of Capua

I see that I have neglected my notes for four days. It is because I have been absorbed in the "Delights of Capua" [i.e., they had 3 days' leave from the trenches], and my regular habits have somewhat relaxed. Also the routine of the war ends up by giving us a passive soul. We left our front line trenches on the 22 in the evening and, as it was raining, our departure was a total mud bath. In the most total darkness, the slippery clay gave us no footing, so we advanced across the field, calling out to each other, feeling out the path with our feet. I slipped and fell a couple of times at the risk of breaking a leg, but paid really no attention to it.

Postcard of the main street of Combles, France, 1916 (Daily Mail, Wikimedia Commons)

The march in the night turned out to be a cruel experience, though the distance to Suzanne was short – only 4 kilometers – but the chafing of the packstraps was painful after a month of inactivity in the trenches. In Suzanne, we found a barn, where I delighted in a sleep of which I had nearly lost the notion. At daybreak, we wander around for any kind of breakfast. I end up by finding a plate of grilled eels in a bistro, which I share hastily with a pal, and already assembly is sounded. We start marching, leaving behind us the detested noise of the shelling. But how hard is the march in the mud, and how heavy the sack on our shoulders! We pass again through Bray-sur-Somme and reach Merlincourt, which I have already mentioned, a large farming village, where our section parcels itself out among the old and poor, but extremely hospitable, people. I befriend a dear old woman, and during the three days which constitute our rest period in this hamlet, I enjoyed sitting by her fire and being sheltered by her roof. A rapid raid of the grocery store make me the happy possessor of a liter of rum, a pound of chocolate, and some cans of sardines, and I begin to feast on these miraculous foods. We have a few days of rest and letting go, where the body takes back its rights and demands them aggressively. Only tobacco is lacking, and our men suffer unbelievably from that lack. We worry about it, talk about it, and arrive at the following explanation: the colonel of the regiment had sent a magnificent leg of lamb to be roasted at a bakery. When it was perfectly ready, some unscrupulous trickster, aware of the order, presents himself to the baker, says he is the orderly of the colonel, requests the leg of lamb, gives a tip of 5 sous to the baker and leaves with the roast. A moment later, the real orderly of the colonel arrives and discovers the hoax. To punish us, the colonel impounds the tobacco van, and doesn't relent for two days, accompanying this act with a note stating that such larcenies will be punished with the most terrible reprisals. Friday night, departure is ordered for 4:00 am. The regiment is lined up; the animation of a great departure reigns in the ranks, but an hour passes, nothing. Three hours later, we are sent back to our billetings. We are not leaving.

We finally leave in the evening, after night fall. We camp at Maricourt, after having recrossed the Somme. Then in the night at 4:00 am, we arrive here at Bayeux [en Dampierre], where we await…anything…Rumors circulate: we are headed to Verdun, to Belgium. Where else? In fact, nobody knows. Our army is treated like a bunch of mercenaries. Everything is kept from us until ten minutes ahead of time. Orders when given are only partial and get to us by means we know not, nor from whence nor when they come. This destroys the interest and the enthusiasm which any thinking person has in what he is doing, and that applies even to that which he is being forced to do, if only he knows what that is.

October 28, 1914 – Mead!

Yesterday 120 Berliet trucks picked us up from our holiday in Bayeux-en-

Dampierre and took us rapidly 20 kms. northwards, to the department of Pas-de-Calais, where we were billeted in Sombrin, Doullens, and Arras. Well back from the front trenches, but we are on an “alert encampment.” My section is encamped in a prosperous farm, and as this area did not experience the first German invasion, everything is still in abundance. Our hostess is very gracious (exceptionally – as people from Picardy are, in general, not so), cheerful and generous. Unfortunately my poor carcass won’t allow me to enjoy her kind deeds. My dysentery is hanging on, and as it has been three weeks that I suffer from it, I am beginning to feel dangerously ill. The major [a doctor] whom I go to see, prescribes always bismuth and opium. What I really need is a good warm bed for a week. At night, in the drafty barn and under the weight of my clothes, my body is burning up and nightmares haunt me. I have a high fever and feel miserable.

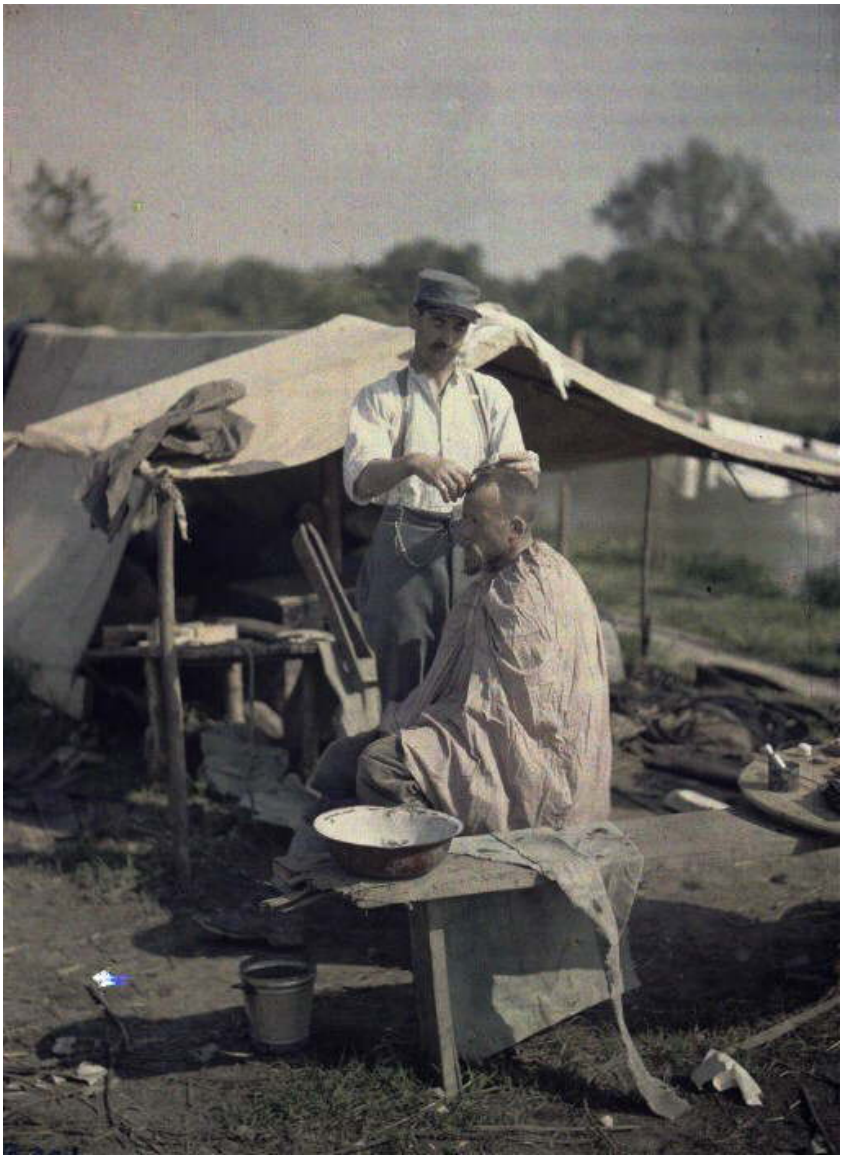
British camp in away from the trenches, Somme, 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)

My kind hostess lets me sit by her fire. She stops in the midst of her baking and goes to her cellar to bring back a heavily dust-covered bottle of mead!* Mead! My memory associates this drink with our ancestors, the Gauls. It is exquisite and is very good for my sore throat.

*A sweet liquor made by fermenting honey and water.

October 31, 1914 – Shelling in space

After Sombrin we move five kms. to Saulty, where we encamp comfortably until this morning. My strength has returned and I finally feel ready to face new challenges. This morning we started out and crossed the main road from Doullens to Arras, by which the German invasion would take place, if ever our northern army were defeated. On the rail line which parallels the road there is a lot of train traffic. In the distance, large caliber guns thunder ceaselessly. We stop at Hambercamp, another muddy village where we will undoubtedly encamp. The fullness which we have experienced since we left our trenches has given us back our morale. We joke, and our Parisian jokers have rediscovered their priceless ability to wisecrack. There's no more quarrelling.



French soldier receives a haircut, 1917 (worldwaronecolor.com)

Our cooks use their ingenuity to improve the cuisine, and we are eating like Gargantua.* At night, in the barns, the stories go on and on. Most of the men tell of their exploits at the beginning of the war, the noted retreats of Neufchâteau, of Morhange, of the Marne, where men marched heedlessly forward only to be mowed down by German machine-guns. Others, according to their trade or profession develop theories about work, pay, or the effect of their work on their existence. Among us farmers we discuss the various crops, harvests, livestock. And thus time goes by and we forget a little our past suffering and the separation from our wives and our children.

But always, the uncertainty of tomorrow weighs on us. These moments of well-being appear only as preparation for the ills that await us, to death which can come upon us at any moment. It is wartime, and nothing can take away from that fact a small fraction of the dangers that are contained therein.

Battle of Verdun seen from a German trench, 1916 (Wikimedia Commons)

Same day, 4 pm – Again we are to go back to the trenches this evening. It is said that the spot is “hot.” The General commanding the 2nd Army Corps came to visit us this afternoon. He questions each of us good-humoredly. For us this form of humor is of questionable taste. All day, our planes have crisscrossed the skies, miraculously evading the black bursts of German shells. It is marvelous

how they escape. Yet, I have seen them doing reconnaissance each day from the beginning of the campaign and return each day to their departure point, apparently unscathed. Shelling in space [anti-aircraft gunnery] apparently poses exceptional difficulties. This morning we find ourselves at 300 yards from one of our large 155 mm. guns; its detonation was incredible. I could observe the maneuvering from a distance: after charging and aiming the gun, a soldier came forward with precaution, and pulled on a cord; immediately an enormous explosion of smoke and flames surrounded the battery, and a second later, the air was torn by a deafening noise.

* A character from Rabelais' writings, a giant who has an enormous appetite.

November 1, 1914 – The feast of the dead

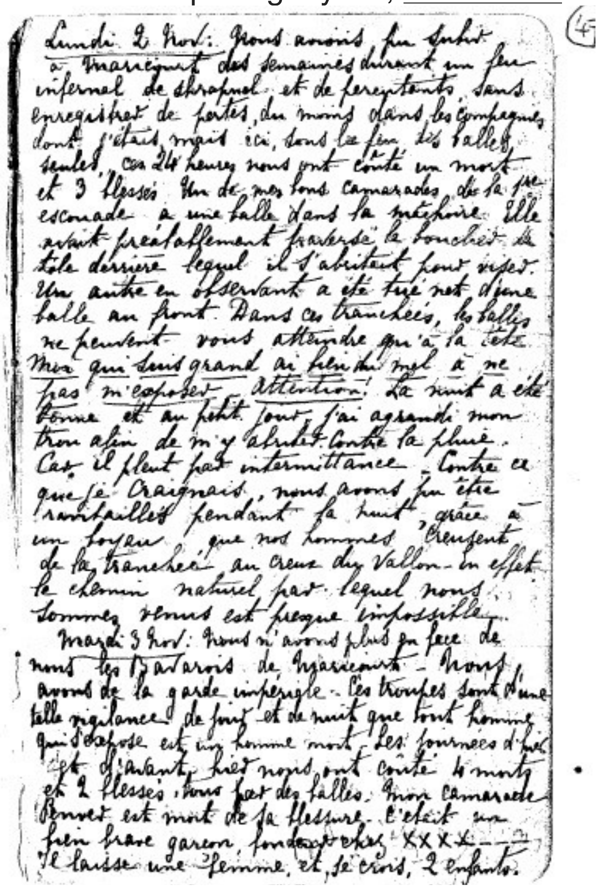
Today, the feast of the dead. To observe it, Parisians go to the cemeteries, and we too go to such places. "Violent fighting" said a recent official press release, "including bayonet charges, have taken place in the Arras area." I am in the trench from which it sprang, that bayonet charge. On the left, on the right, and in front one can see several hundred bodies of infantry men lying in the mud, and who, it is said, have been awaiting burial for the last three weeks. In the road by which we reached this trench, under a rain of bullets, it was a real charnel. We had to step over dead bodies to go forward: some with their noses in the mud, others on their back, seeming to sleep. Very near me here, another fell while he was going to the toilet. In front of the trench, in all directions, bodies are strewn on the ground. A machine-gun has made a clean sweep.

French bayonet charge at the Battle of Charleroi, 1914 (Wikimedia Commons)

Since our arrival during the night, the fire of the German infantry, whose trenches are only fifty meters distant, has not stopped for a minute. You can't take a peek over the trench, but immediately a bullet whizzes by. One of our men has just been hit in the jaw. On the other hand the Germans do not seem to have any artillery, and that certainly is small compensation. The weather is again harsh; the east wind is very cold, and my feet were near frozen all night. Luckily, I was fortunate enough to pick up the blanket of a dead man when we got here.

November 2, 1914 – I, who am tall

When we were in Maricourt, facing weeks under infernal artillery fire of shells and shrapnel, we managed to avoid casualties, at least in the companies I was a part of. But here, under fire of only bullets, the last 24 hours has cost us one dead and 3 wounded. One of my best comrades in the first squad got a bullet in the jaw; it had first penetrated the metal shield behind which he was firing. Another one was killed outright, while peering over the parapet, by a bullet in the forehead. In the trenches, bullets can only hit you in the head. I, who am tall, have a great deal of trouble not exposing myself, watch out!*


Lundi 2 Nov: Nous avons pu subir
à Maricourt des semaines durant un feu
infernal de shrapnel et de percutants sans
enregistrer de pertes, du moins dans les compagnies
dont j'étais, mais ici, sous le feu des balles
seules, ces 24 heures nous ont coûté un mort
et 3 blessés. Un de mes bons camarades de la 1re
escouade a une balle dans la mâchoire. Elle
avait préalablement traversé le bouclier de
tôle derrière lequel il s'abritait pour viser.
Un autre en observant a été tué net d'une
balle au front. Dans ces tranchées, les balles
ne peuvent vous atteindre qu'à la tête.
Moi qui suis grand ai bien du mal à ne
pas m'exposer — Attention! La nuit a été
bonne et au petit jour j'ai agrandi mon
trou afin de m'y abriter contre la pluie.
Car il pleut par intermittance. Contre ce
que je craignais, nous avons pu être
ravitaillés pendant la nuit, grâce à
un boyau que nos hommes creusent
de la tranchée au creux du vallon. En effet
le chemin naturel par lequel nous
sommes venus est presque impossible.
Mardi 3 Nov: Nous n'avons plus en face de
nous les Bavarois de Maricourt. Nous
avons de la garde impériale. Ces troupes sont d'une
telle vigilance de jour et de nuit que tout homme
qui s'expose est un homme mort. Les journées d'hier
et d'avant hier nous ont coûté 4 morts
et 2 blessés, tous par des balles. Mon camarade
[illegible] est mort de sa blessure. C'était un
bien brave garçon, fondeur chez XXXX
Il laisse une femme et, je crois, 2 enfants.

A page from Pierre's diary dated November 2, 1914 (Courtesy of Gail Minault)

The night was good, and at daybreak I managed to enlarge my hole, in order to shelter myself from the rain, as it rains intermittently. Contrary to what I feared, we were supplied during the night with food, thanks to a cut which our men dug from the trench to the little vale
to our rear. Indeed the way we first came here is now practically impossible.

*Underlined in the original.

November 3, 1914 – Farewell, old mill!

We no longer have opposite us the Bavarians we had at Maricourt. We have members of the Imperial Guard; these troops are of such vigilance that, day or night, any man who raises his head, is a dead man. Yesterday and the previous day have cost us 4 dead and 2 wounded, all by bullets. My friend Peuvet died of his wound; he was a really fine fellow, a foundryman at [indecipherable]. He leaves a wife, and, I believe, 2 children.

Engineers in a destroyed mill, Reims, 1917 (worldwaronecolorphotos.com)

Yesterday evening, I went to the vale on water duty; my rifle in one hand and a 10 liter bucket in the other, bent over like a hunchback through 400 meters of

trenches and 400 of broken ground, under a hail of bullets. I recommend this exercise to persons suffering from lumbago. I was totally done in. This resupply duty is decidedly not easy. There is near us, about 60 meters away, a poor but beautiful windmill built to last a thousand years, with walls as thick as those of a fortress. The only battery which remains to the Boches opposite us is knocking itself out trying to bring down the mill. Little by little they have pierced it, gutted it, torn off one sail, then another, now a shell has opened an enormous breach in the belly of the mill, and now they are trying to break up the inner machinery.

Farewell, old mill! We will never again see the flour of this good farmer of Merle-au-Bois. Your light sails will no longer beat the air. Ah, the Vandals!

November 5, 1914 – The cavalry leaves its horses behind

Spent the 5th night in the trench. Nothing is being said about relieving us. It rained heavily during the night, and the trench is a real cesspit. Everything is coated with a film of clay; our jackets and pants are turning reddish. The night food duty in the middle of this muck was Homeric, with the carriers sliding and skating with their sacks and buckets, cursing and swearing like the damned. The food, however was good, in spite of the fear that, while eating the rice, we should bite into a piece of clay. We eat like pigs with muddy hands, out of mess kits which are never washed; the food cold and the fat all coagulated. We eat all the same, and at times it even seems good. Ah, when one imagines similar meals in our homes, such food would quickly be thrown into the garbage can.

French cavalry at river crossing at Verdun (Wikimedia Commons)

The gunfire continues at the rate of 100 to 200 shots a minute night and day; but we are now aware of it, and there have been no further casualties. I continue to be well, and by clever earthworks to ameliorate my existence. The multitude of bodies is beginning to spread a sickly smell. What is surprising is that the stench is not worse. Within hands' reach of the trench parapet lies the body of a cuirassier.* In this war, as a matter of fact, the cavalry leaves its horses behind, and fires from the trenches, just like us. It is announced that we have declared war on Turkey. That is in no way going to hasten the end of this war!

* A cavalryman with breast-plate.

November 10, 1914 – Mon petit village

My notes are becoming less frequent. It is because our operations are always the same. We have spent eight and a half days in this trench without notable incident, except for the following story, which happened to a company of soldiers next to ours. One evening a couple of German soldiers, who got lost, calmly arrived at their trench, each carrying a bucket of soup and of coffee. One realized his error and managed to escape into the night, the other was nabbed, along with his two buckets.

Mailman delivers letters in French village, 1917 (worldwaronecolor.com)

After having him taste their contents, as a precaution, our men ate their fill of the soup and the coffee, especially delighted that it was at William's* expense, and those gentlemen opposite will have to tighten their belts. We were relieved Sunday night and have returned to encamp at Berles-au-Bois. We found there a new contingent of reinforcements that just arrived from Montrouge.** Ah! How clean and fresh they appeared next to us! One or two gave or sold me some chocolate. For me, manna from Heaven!

The day before we left, I received at daybreak, along with my cup of coffee, three very warm letters, one from Aunt Sophie and two from my dear Uncle and Aunt Marty; the latter contained a card which Dora had sent her, dated October 2, that is to say more than a month old, but the sight of her handwriting and the words of valiance and love towards me warmed my heart indescribably.

Ah! my dear little wife! How she fills my thoughts and the tenderness of my heart! How I shall love her if only I can return to her!

The quatrain of du Bellay*** comes constantly to my mind:

Quand reverrai-je, hélas, de mon petit village
Fumer la cheminée, et en quelle saison
reverrai-je le clos de ma petite maison
qui m'est une province et beaucoup d'avantage.

Alas, when will I again see
The chimney smoke of my little village,
And in what season will I again see
The yard of my little cottage,
Which is like a province, and so much more, to me.

*William = Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany.
**The location of the headquarters of the regiment, a southern suburb of Paris.
***Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560), who served in Rome for several years and expressed his nostaligia for his home.

November 14, 1914 – A farm owned by Maggi

The village opposite which our trenches are located is called Monchy, and we can't get the Boches out of there. Why? The explanation which is given is as follows: It is claimed that in the village is a farm owned by Maggi, and naturally this German firm hides a formidable collection of small fortresses, and this farm has a huge underground of reinforced-concrete stuffed with guns and a whole German system of impregnable positions. Early on, an armored car is said to have driven through the village without having seen a single German. But when we wanted to advance, the trenches opposite were manned. Our machine guns,

batteries, and men were flattened like flies and had to fall back. That is why there are so many dead bodies in front of our lines. Indeed they still have their knapsacks on and were advancing without foreseeing the danger. Ever since then, our big guns pound the spot ceaselessly, without ever weakening the enemy resistance. Besides, two forward sections are said to have been taken prisoner…

* * *

At the bottom of this page, in a different handwriting, is the following note:

This is the end of the notes of Pierre Minault, stricken by a shot to the forehead on the 16 of November, and died as a result of his wound on the 17 of November.

The 19 of November was his 27 birthday.

* * *

Afterword

By Gail Minault

When Pierre was killed, his notebook was found on his body. Inside the front cover was a note: “In case I get myself killed, please send this notebook to my uncle, M. Marty…” with his uncle’s address. The notebook, written in pencil, was copied over in pen, perhaps by his uncle, and then sent to his widow, Dora. Dora kept the notebook and passed it on to her sons. My father, Paul Minault, was five years old in 1914 and remembered his father as a tall, sternly affectionate man. His younger brother, Sylvain, who was two when Pierre went to war, does not remember his father at all. Dora returned to France after the war and raised her sons in Paris. She remarried much later, in 1928, an American scholar of French and a widower, Donald King, who was completing his Doctorate in Paris. The family then migrated to America.

I found the notebook among my father’s papers several years ago, and read it in the original French. My uncle Sylvain had a photocopy of it and translated it into English for the benefit of his sons and family. I have edited his translation, and my cousin Kent visited a number of the sites mentioned in the notes and added the photographs of the

places as they look today. Pierre's notebook is a part of the history of our family, but it also deserves to be placed in the greater context of his generation's tragedy.

Pierre Minault's grave in Henu, France (Courtesy of Gail Minault)