Life in the Trenches

previous night that two Japanese who slipped through the line on the ridge managed to creep up close to the pit without detection. They jumped in and cut up the two men working the mortar before nearby mortar ammo carriers killed them. The wounded Marines had been evacuated, but one of them had died, and the other was in poor condition. The bodies of the Japanese had been thrown into some nearby bushes.

The man telling me of the tragedy and another crouching beside the gun pit had been ammo carriers but had now assumed new duties as gunner and assistant. I noticed that as the new gunner folded and strapped his gun to leave, he seemed reluctant to touch the bottom or sides of the emplacement. When he left and we came closer to the gun pit to set up our mortar, I saw why. The white coral sides and bottom were spattered and smeared with the dark red blood of his two comrades.

After we got our gun emplaced, I collected up some large scraps of cardboard from ration and ammo boxes and used them to cover the bottom of the pit as well as I could. Fat, lazy blowflies were reluctant to leave the blood-smeared rock.

I had long since become used to the sight of blood, but the idea of sitting in that blood-stained gun pit was a bit too much for me. It seemed almost like leaving our dead unburied to sit on the blood of a fellow Marine spilled out on the coral. I noticed that my buddy looked approvingly at my efforts as he came back from getting orders for our gun. Although we never discussed the subject, he apparently felt as I did. As I looked at the stains on the coral, I recalled some of the eloquent phrases of politicians and newsmen about how "gallant" it is for a man to "shed his blood for his country," and "to give his life's blood as a sacrifice," and so on. The words seemed so ridiculous. Only the flies benefited.

Eugene Sledge, *from* With the Old Breed, *the author's remembrance of his service in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II. The battle for control of Peleliu, a small island in the Pacific Ocean of no strategic importance, lasted seventy days and produced an honor roll of 1,529 American dead.*

1917: Hindenburg Trench

SIEGFRIED SASSOON IN NO MAN'S LAND

At 9:00 P.M. the company fell in at the top of the ruined street of Saint Martin. Two guides from the outgoing battalion awaited us. We were to relieve some Northumberland Fusiliers in the Hindenburg Trench—the companies going up independently.

It was a gray evening, dry and windless. The village of Saint Martin was a shattered relic; but even in the devastated area one could be conscious of the arrival of spring, and as I took up my position in the rear of the moving column, there was something in the sober twilight which could remind me of April evenings in England and the Butley cricket field where a few of us had been having our first knock at the nets. The cricket season had begun.... But the company had left the shell-pitted road and was going uphill across open ground. Already the guides were making the pace too hot for the rear platoon; like most guides they were inconveniently nimble owing to their freedom from accoutrement, and insecurely confident that they knew the way. The muttered message, "Pass it along—steady the pace in front," was accompanied by the usual muffled clinkings and rattlings of arms and equipment. Unwillingly retarded, the guides led us into the deepening dusk. We hadn't more than two miles to go, but gradually the guides grew less authoritative. Several times they stopped to get their bearings. Leake fussed and fumed, and they became more and more flurried. I began to suspect that our progress was circular.

At a midnight halt the hill still loomed in front of us; the guides confessed that they had lost their way, and Leake decided to sit down and wait for daylight. (There were few things more uncomfortable in the life of an officer than to be walking in front of a party of men all of whom knew that he was leading them in the wrong direction.) With Leake's permission I blundered experimentally into the gloom, fully

expecting to lose both myself and the company. By a lucky accident, I soon fell headlong into a sunken road and found myself among a small party of sappers who could tell me where I was. It was a case of, "Please, can you tell me the way to the Hindenburg Trench?" Congratulating myself on my cleverness, I took one of the sappers back to poor benighted B Company, and we were led to our battalion rendezvous.

We were at the end of a journey which had begun twelve days before, when we started from Camp Thirteen. Stage by stage, we had marched to the life-denying region which from far away had threatened us with the blink and growl of its bombardments. Now we were groping and stumbling along a deep ditch to the place appointed for us in that zone of inhuman havoc. There must have been some hazy moonlight, for I remember the figures of men huddled against the sides of communication trenches; seeing them in some sort of ghastly glimmer—(was it, perhaps, the diffused whiteness of a sinking flare beyond the ridge?) I was doubtful whether they were asleep or dead, for the attitudes of many were like death, grotesque and distorted. But this is nothing new to write about, you will say; just a weary company, squeezing past dead or drowsing men while it sloshes and stumbles to a front line trench. Nevertheless, that night relief had its significance for me, though in human experience it had been multiplied a millionfold. I, a single human being with my little stock of earthly experience in my head, was entering once again the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon. And I saw it then, as I see it now—a dreadful place, a place of horror and desolation which no imagination could have invented. Also it was a place where a man of strong spirit might know himself utterly powerless against death and destruction, and yet stand up and defy gross darkness and stupefying shell fire, discovering in himself the invincible resistance of an animal or an insect, and an endurance which he might, in after days, forget or disbelieve.

Anyhow, there I was, leading that little procession of Flintshire Fusiliers, many of whom had never seen a front line trench before. At that juncture they asked no compensation for their efforts except a mug of hot tea. The tea would have been a miracle, and we didn't get it till next morning, but there was some comfort in the fact that it wasn't raining.

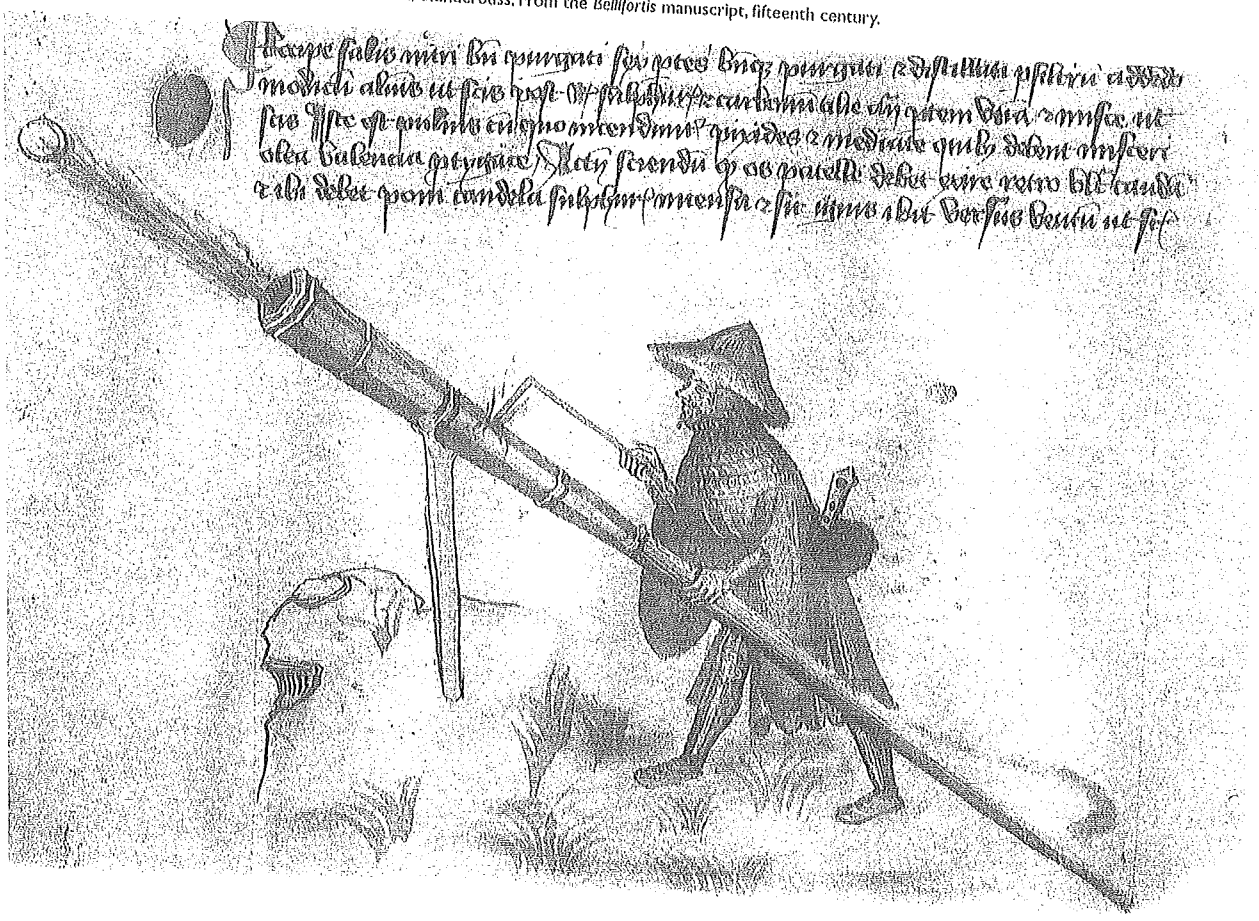
It was nearly four o'clock when we found ourselves in the Hindenburg Main Trench. After telling me to post the sentries, Leake disappeared down some stairs to the Tunnel. The company we were relieving had already departed, so there was no one to give me any information. At first I didn't even know for certain that we were in the front line. The trench was a sort of gully: deep, wide, and unfinished looking. The sentries had to clamber up a bank of loose earth before they could see over the top. Our company was only about eighty strong and its sector was fully six hundred yards. The distance between the sentry posts made me aware of our inadequacy in that wilderness. I had no right to feel homeless, but I did; and if I had needed to be reminded of my forlorn situation as a living creature, I could have done it merely by thinking of a field cashier. Fifty franc notes were comfortable things, but they were no earthly use up here, and the words "field cashier" would have epitomized my remoteness from snugness and security and from all assurance that I should be alive and kicking the week after next. But it would soon be Sunday morning; such ideas weren't wholesome, and there was a certain haggard curiosity attached to the proceedings, combined with the self-dramatizing desperation which enabled a good many of us to worry our way through much worse emergencies than mine.

Out in No Man's Land there was no sign of any German activity. The only remarkable thing was the unbroken silence. I was in a sort of twilight, for there was a moony glimmer in the low-clouded sky; but the unknown territory in front was dark, and I stared out at it like a man looking from the side of a ship. Returning to my own sector I met a runner with a verbal message from Battalion HQ. B Company's front was to be thoroughly patrolled at once. Realizing the futility of sending any of my few spare men out

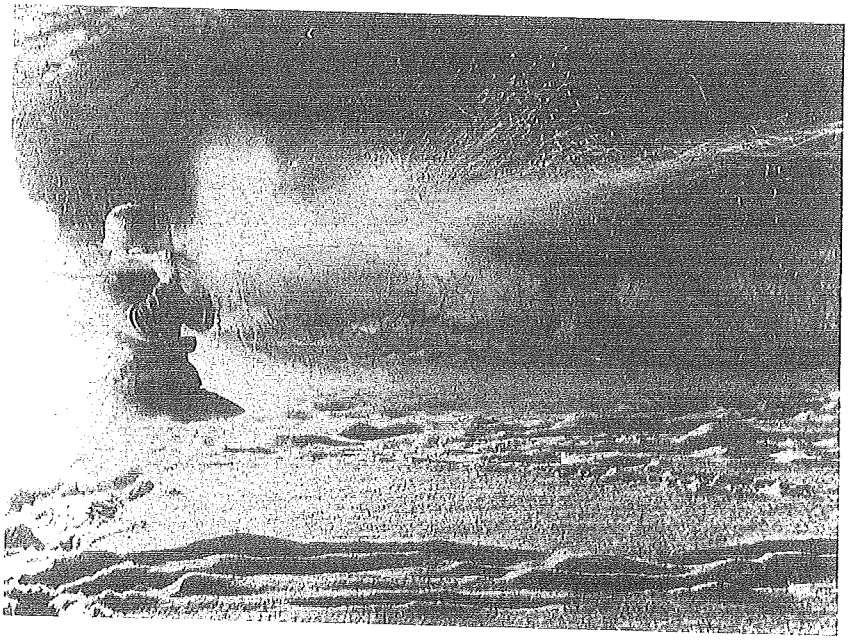
on patrol (they'd been walking about for seven hours and were dead beat), I lost my temper, quietly and inwardly. Shirley and Rees were nowhere to be seen, and it wouldn't have been fair to send them out, inexperienced as they were. So I stumped along to our right-flank post, told them to pass it along that a patrol was going out from right to left, and then started sulkily out for a solitary stroll in No Man's Land. I felt more annoyed with Battalion Headquarters than with the enemy. There was no wire in front of the trench, which was, of course, constructed for people facing the other way. I counted my steps; two hundred steps straight ahead; then I began to walk the presumptive six hundred footsteps to the left. But it isn't easy to count your steps in the dark among shell holes, and after a problematic four hundred I lost confidence in my automatic pistol, which I was grasping in my right-hand breeches pocket. Here I am, I thought, alone out in this god forsaken bit of ground, with quite a good chance of bumping into a Boche strong-post. Apparently there was only one reassuring action which I could perform; so I expressed my opinion of the war by relieving myself (for it must be remembered that there are other reliefs beside battalion reliefs). I insured my sense of direction by placing my pistol on the ground with its muzzle pointing the way I was going. Feeling less lonely and afraid, I finished my patrol without having met so much as a dead body, and regained the trench exactly opposite our left-hand post after being huskily challenged by an irresolute sentry, who, as I realized at the time, was the greatest danger I had encountered. It was now just beginning to be more daylight than darkness, and when I stumbled down a shaft to the underground trench, I left the sentries shivering under a red and rainy-looking sky.

By ten o'clock I was above ground again, in charge of a fatigue party. We went halfway back to Saint Martin, to an ammunition dump, whence we carried up boxes of trench mortar bombs. I carried a box myself, as the conditions were vile and it seemed the only method of convincing the men that it had to be done. We were out nearly seven hours; it rained all day

A soldier fires a blunderbuss. From the *Bellifortis* manuscript, fifteenth century.



and the trenches were a morass of gluelike mud. The unmitigated misery of that carrying party was a typical infantry experience of discomfort without actual danger. Even if the ground had been dry, the boxes would have been too heavy for most of the men; but we were lucky in one way: The wet weather was causing the artillery to spend an inactive Sunday. It was a yellow, corpselike day, more like November than April, and the landscape was desolate and treeless. What we were doing was quite unexceptional; millions of soldiers endured the same sort of thing and got badly shelled into the bargain. Nevertheless I can believe that my party, staggering and floundering under its loads, would have made an impressive picture of "Despair." The background, too, was appropriate. We were among the debris of the intense bombardment of ten days before, for we were passing along and across the Hindenburg Outpost Trench, with its belt of wire (fifty yards deep in places); here and there these rusty jungles had been flattened by tanks. The Outpost Trench was about two hundred yards from the Main Trench, which was now our front line. It had been solidly made, ten feet deep, with timbered firesteps, splayed sides, and timbered steps at intervals to front and rear and to machine-gun emplacements. Now it was wrecked as though by earthquake and eruption. Concrete strong-posts were smashed and tilted sideways; everywhere the chalky soil was pocked and pitted with huge shell holes; and wherever we looked the mangled effigies of the dead were our *memento mori*. Shell-twisted and dismembered, the Germans maintained the violent attitudes in which they had died. The British had mostly been killed by bullets or bombs, so they looked more resigned. But I can remember a pair of hands (nationality unknown) which protruded from the soaked ashen soil like the roots of a tree turned upside down; one hand seemed to be pointing at the sky with an accusing gesture. Each time I passed that place, the protest of those fingers became more expressive of an appeal to God in defiance of those who made the war. Who made the war? I laughed hysterically as the thought passed through my mud-stained mind. But I only laughed mentally, for my box of Stokes-gun ammunition left me no breath to spare for an angry guffaw. And the dead were the dead; this was no time to be pitying them or asking silly questions about their outraged lives. Such sights must be taken for granted, I thought, as I gasped and slithered and stumbled with my disconsolate crew. Floating on the surface of the flooded trench was the mask of a human face which had detached itself from the skull.



A German soldier fires his bazooka, 1945. Photograph taken by the German Army.

From Memoirs of an Infantry Officer, *the poet's account of his years as a British officer in World War I. Sassoon's near suicidal heroism on the Western Front inspired his fellow soldiers to award him the nickname "Mad Jack." During the war his public statements of pacifism prompted higher-ranking military authorities to place him in an asylum for the temporarily insane.*