(1)

Live and let live:

Now a sort of muted example of this takes the form of live and let live. As long as you weren't actually going to attack the enemy, as long as you weren't trying to kill them to some purpose, or run the risk of being killed to some purpose, you might as well make life as comfortable as possible for each other. And, so, certain informal ways of behaving developed. You fired your bombardments at particular times of day. The command had made it clear that a certain number of shells had to go over every day in order to make life miserable for the enemy. But, okay, you sent them over, but not at that time of day when the enemy would be having dinner, because on both sides meals were a terribly important part of life in the trenches on the Western Front. They were the thing you looked forward to, that you cared about. If your dinner didn't reach you, if supplies didn't come along the communication trenches, then you were really having a miserable time. Well, one way that you were going to prevent yourself from having a good dinner was to bombard the enemy at dinner time because he would retaliate. If you made life exceptionally miserable for him, he'd make it exceptionally miserable for you. So, an unwritten arrangement developed that if you had to fire a bombardment, you wouldn't do it at these absolutely key times. And, often you wouldn't fire at a position that was likely to hurt many of the enemy. You didn't fire at their trenches (assuming you were capable of hitting them) but beyond their trenches. That way, you've done your duty, you've fired off the required number of shells, you've shown you were hostile and in fighting mode, but you haven't actually done the enemy a lot of damage. At the same time, he hasn't done you a lot of damage either, and so you can live to fight another day. You are alive to fight on a day when you're fighting to some purpose

(2)

The Christmas Truce:

Along the British section of the line, about 22 miles in Flanders, particularly on and around Christmas Day (it wasn't just a Christmas Day phenomenon), both sides began to detect in the opposing trenches, certain signs of Christmas celebration (if celebration is the right word in such a setting). Germans would be heard singing, "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht." The British would respond with a British Christmas carol. In some places, food was lobbed over into the opposing trenches. I think on one or two instances, the Germans erected Christmas trees. And, there was a kind of mutual curiosity, and certainly instances of soldiers applauding each others' singing; and it became a kind of friendly duel, if you like. And, people would shout messages like: "Fritz, here. I was a waiter in a Manchester hotel before the war. How are my friends from the Lancashire? (Fusiliers? etc., etc.)" On Christmas Day itself, the first curious, slightly headstrong people, perhaps, from both sides poked their head above the trenches, and being made aware that somebody on the other side wasn't going to shoot it off, then clambered cautiously out. Others followed suit. People stopped in the middle of no-man's-land, shook hands, exchanged buttons and badges, cigarettes. And, this went on, in some parts for two or three days. And, then, partly because the Generals didn't want it to happen, and partly because units moved out of the line and others came in, the thing died away. It was never repeated. So, it is very much a 1914 phenomenon. I think it's wrapped up with the fact that you could still be sentimental in 1914. Whereas, when total war became much more all-pervasive later in the war, and the war became much more sort of a mass war for everybody, I think the sort of slightly old-fashioned sentiments lost their place and it became much nastier business.

(3)

What to do:

I think that just after the battle, for the average soldier, the most important diversion was sleep. I think we have to imagine how exhausted these men were when they were coming back from two weeks of front line positions. I think that the second diversion was to write: write to family, write to loved ones. And, the third was to eat, because eating meant something very clear to soldiers. When you eat after combat, when you eat, you can be sure that you are alive. Your body is still there.

There is an important thing to understand about trench warfare and what it was like to be in the trenches. It was not the same people in the same trench all through the war. A soldier would usually occupy a front line trench for only a week at a time. The army realized that even in quiet periods, being in the front line was a terribly wearing experience. At any moment, if you put your head above the parapet, a sniper might get you; at any moment, a trench mortar or shell might land among you, killing and maiming. Consequently, people there are living in a state of great anxiety, which if continued for long, would wear them down; and they would wear down pretty rapidly to the point where they can't be used again. To avoid this, the army was constantly recycling people, having them in the front line a week at a time, then moving them to reserve trenches, then moving them out of the lines altogether (giving them time to recuperate), and then bringing them back again.

Rats. I haven't talked about rats and lice. There were rats the size of cats. Both the Germans and the British were troubled with rats. The rats ate corpses, then they came in and snuggled next to you while you were sleeping. And, they ate your own food, and they were filthy creatures. And, they also carried disease -- bubonic plague primarily. Many people think that the great flu epidemic of 1919, and following, which affected the United States, had something to do with bubonic plague which was being carried by these trench rats. Actually, more American troops died of flu than of bullets and shell fragments in the war .

(4)

Dulce et Decorum Est: Disillusionment

Wilfred Owen

The experience of World War I was profoundly disillusioning to those who believed in nineteenth-century ideals. After World War I, Europe was no longer characterized by the sense of optimism, progress, and glory that had typified Europe for most of the period between the eighteenth century and 1914. This is evidenced in war poems that no longer glorified the struggle but instead conveyed a sense of the horror and futility about it. One of the best of these antiwar poets was Wilfred Owen, born in England in 1893 and killed in action in 1918, one week before the armistice. The following poem has the ironic ending, "It is sweet and proper to die for one's country."

Consider: *The psychological consequences of the war for the soldiers; other ways this same disillusionment might be shown in novels, plays, paintings, or even historical analyses of the time.*

DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An Ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.