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**THINGS THAT MATTER.**

Colonel Fritz-Shrapnel receives the following message from "G.H.Q."  
"Please let us know, as soon as possible, the number of tins of raspberry jam issued to you last Friday."

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# “I will meet the world with a smile and a joke”

## Canadian Soldiers’ Humour in the Great War

Tim Cook

The Great War of 1914-1918 was a tragedy of monumental proportions. This cataclysm of world history left more than nine million dead with Canada adding more than 60,000 to that butcher’s bill. The memory of the Great War is mired in the mud and misery of the Western Front. It is the cries of anguish that resonate through the tragic memory of the war. British soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote in his angry poem “Suicide in the Trenches” that the Western Front was “The hell where youth and laughter go.”<sup>1</sup>

The language of the war – so brilliantly captured by the war poets – is of suffering, pity, and trauma. The constructed memory is built upon

**Abstract: The language of war captured and created by the war poets presents a constructed memory of the Great War that is infused with suffering, pity, and trauma. It seems almost blasphemous to suggest that trench warriors giggled and joked, played pranks and sang merry tunes, satirized and punned mercilessly. But of course they did. Humour remained an important safety valve for soldiers attempting to endure the destruction at the front. This article examines how Canadian soldiers refused to be broken in the machine of war and how they used low-brow culture and social interactions to survive on the Western Front.**

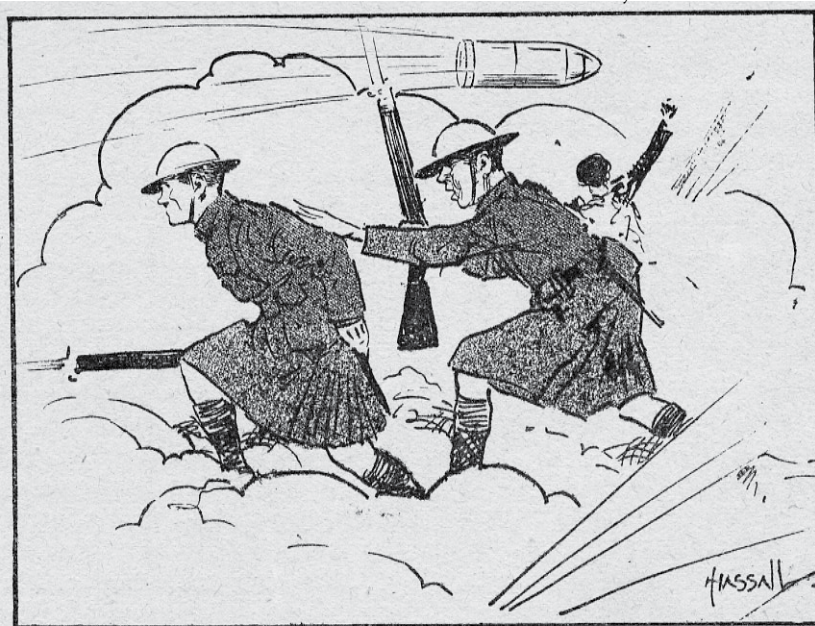
a belief that a lost generation was forced to flounder in the mud of Flanders or the slime of the Somme, eking out a grim existence with rats, lice, and unburied corpses, until some homicidal, septuagenarian general ordered the infantry over the top in a slow, methodical march into the mouth of the waiting guns. This is the most resilient strand of memory emanating from the war, and it is difficult for writers, film-makers, and historians to construct a narrative in disjunction to this.<sup>2</sup> If we do not use the language of suffering, what are we left with?

In the Great War for civilization, where the allies claimed that liberal values were pitted against unfettered militarism, was there time for laughter? In fact, was laughter in war not an insult to the legions of dead? It seems almost blasphemous to suggest that trench warriors giggled and joked, played pranks and sang merry tunes, satirized and punned mercilessly. But of course they did. Reading the vast discourse of published and unpublished memoirs, diaries, or letters reveals countless examples of soldiers’ humour. Jocular and wit were outlets for soldiers and one of the ways they staved off

the crushing psychological strain. Humour remained an important safety valve for soldiers attempting to endure the destruction at the front. Lieutenant Clifford Wells had a laugh as he censored a letter from a ranker who advised his wife to prepare the house for his arrival home at war’s end in 1925; Wells wrote to his own loved ones, “The men have a sense of humour which goes far towards lightening their burdens.”<sup>3</sup>

Soldiers’ humour has no uniformity. There are pieces of buffoonery mixed with maudlin

**Résumé : Le langage de la guerre, consigné et créé par les poètes de guerre, présente un souvenir construit de la Grande Guerre, imprégné de souffrance, de pitié et d’événements traumatisants. Il est quasi blasphématoire de suggérer que les combattants des tranchées riaient et plaisantaient, jouaient des tours et chantaient des chansons drôles, dressaient des caricatures grinçantes et faisant des calembours odieux. Mais c’est ce qu’ils faisaient. L’humour était une importante soupape de surpression pour les soldats qui cherchaient à endurer la destruction dont ils étaient témoin au front. Cet article examine comment les soldats canadiens refusaient de se laisser détruire par la machine de guerre et comment ils utilisaient la culture primaire et les interactions sociales pour survivre sur le Front occidental.**



By J. Hassall, R.I.

Jock (in the rear): "Don't duck, Rabbie, I'm behind ye!"

the horror of the 1917 Battle of Passchendaele that he had done his duty and would not let his personal sense of disillusionment cause his "comrades to be downhearted. So I will meet the world with a smile and a joke and trust that smile to carry me through."<sup>7</sup> In this war of endurance, laughter was armour, the joke was a crutch, and the song was a shield. Gentle or jagged, humour was everywhere.

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The Canadian Expeditionary Force was an army of civilian-soldiers. It drew its strength from across Canadian society, representing all regions, all classes, and all occupations. With only a tiny prewar cadre of professional soldiers numbering around 3,000, the overseas Canadian Expeditionary Force would eventually climb to over 450,000 by war's end. The vast majority of these soldiers were drawn from the ranks of bankers and farmers, clerks and miners, and while they would be remade into infantrymen, gunners, or engineers, they carried their prewar culture with them into the forces. The first Canadian division arrived on the Western Front in February 1915, and it was joined by three others, which would eventually form the Canadian Corps, although there were other cavalry and ancillary forces in Western Europe. While the Canadians fought as part of the British Expeditionary Force, throughout the war there was an emerging distinct identity among the formation and its soldiers.<sup>8</sup> With the Canadian Corps firmly anchored on the Western Front, it was that strange wasteland that most deeply shaped the soldiers' wartime experiences.

The Western Front was a vast, underground city of trenches, saps, and dugouts. With the battlefield swept by murderous small-arms fire and shells, the only place of relative safety was below the ground. Here the armies on both sides faced

sentimentality, of biting wit and groan-inducing ditties, of sardonic satire and simple quips. The soldiers' humour was enigmatic and must be understood within the context of creation, message, and audiences. The power of the soldiers' humour was its ability to adapt to changing circumstances, to meet the needs of divergent groups, and to push against the system but not to break it. This article will look at the jokes, pranks, and quips, but not songs or theatre shows, where humour was the key in connecting with soldier audiences.<sup>4</sup>

Jokes are infused with symbols. The language employed in the joke was important, as well as intangible supporting actions like facial gestures and tone of voice. The use of familiar slang, the reinforcement of stereotypes or in playing against them, all situate humour within the context of the time, place, or culture. Both the telling and reception of the joke are important, but it is challenging to recreate, or even place, the "topography of where jokes were told."<sup>5</sup> The mimicking of an officer's tone of voice or a sergeant's affectation personalized a joke for a select audience. Telling

a satirical yarn among a group of men in a dugout after a snort of rum had a different tenor than two bored soldiers trading jokes to keep each other occupied. While the historian can reconstruct the circumstance and place of the joke, he or she must often rely on the surviving printed word. This is an acknowledged limitation but one can still hear the echo from soldiers' humour.

The role of humour among soldiers in the Great War is a little explored topic, and this article attempts to address that gap by examining the multi-faceted role that jokes played in helping Canadians endure and cope on the Western Front.<sup>6</sup> It is important to stress that the war of the trenches was not some happy-go-lucky event where everyone danced in the mud and offered wise-cracks like some half-hour television sitcom. However, the story of soldiers in the Great War is one of resiliency rather than resignation. Comedy and humour allowed for the soldiers to exert some control over their wartime experience, which was profoundly discombobulating, unsettling, and terrifying. Infantryman Harold Simpson wrote to his mother after



off across no-man's-land. Trench fighting was about digging a hole in the ground and then defending it to the death. It was about the tense waiting, listening, and searching of the darkness for a lurking enemy. It was the misery of runny noses and feet that were always cold in the winter, and of sweltering heat and eye-watering body odour in the summer. In all seasons it was about the lice tormenting day and night and of constant thirst when being surrounded by dank water. There was relief from the trenches as units were rotated from front to rear, but the sharp end forces knew they would always be returning to the killing zone.

Within this grim environment, soldiers relied on each other for survival. They cooked and shared their food; they often built their own structures and then slept together; they guarded one another from attacks and then fought together. In their isolated community, soldiers talked about life after the war and promised to write letters to each other's family should they be killed in battle. Not all men were friends of course. There were mean, petty relationships and the "brotherhood of the trenches" could be strained by spending too much time together under unending stressful conditions, and the threat of death always present, but the strong ties of camaraderie bound most of the soldiers together. There was a unifying series of values and beliefs, which, while not uniform, forged common ground between men.

Morale and combat motivation required constant attention, both by the high command and the soldiers themselves. When the war on the Western Front degenerated into a protracted stalemate, the high command more readily embraced rotation and leave policies for soldiers, as well as the provision of chaplains for spiritual guidance and, from 1916 onwards, more formalized sports, theatre, and leisure activities

behind the lines.<sup>9</sup> The soldiers, too, played a part. They found solace in one another as they grouched and complained about the war, their plight in it, and those who were seemingly dodging their duties, from the red tabs in the rear to the conscientious objectors at home.

Within this constellation of morale-building activities, free time was also spent entertaining one another with jokes, pranks, puns, and all manner of humorous diversions. T.C. Lapp wrote from France in March 1918: "On one occasion after a hard day's march in the rain, we were billeted in a leaky old barn with the most 'odiferous' farm yard that I ever experienced. In spite of adverse conditions the place echoed with songs and laughter...I think that this unflinching sense of humor accounts in a large degree for the splendid morale of the Canadians."<sup>10</sup> Lieutenant J.M. Walton described the strain at the front during the 1916 Battles of the Somme, and shortly before his death:

The other day I was standing in a particularly hot spot when a large shell dropped thirty yards away, completely disintegrating an officer

and sergeant-major, and wounding two men...I used to get two hours sleep per day, and that was in a little funk-hole much too small. The other twenty-two hours were taken up with fighting and work. We struck this for ten days...My men were wonderful. Never a grumble or a groan, but actually an undercurrent of humour ran through all our miseries.<sup>11</sup>

Walton provides an important clue for how soldiers coped. Wartime journalist F.A. McKenzie echoed these sentiments when he wrote of the soldiers' turn to humour: "You cannot have large bodies of young men living together in the open, in the best of good health, with plenty of food, with abundant exercise, and have sustained gloom. Youth would find joy in life in a coal mine. High spirits, practical jokes, endless chaff and good fellowship are to be found in the army. The young soldier will make a joke about anything. If he is wounded that is a joke – if a joke can be had out of it."<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of this humour was its ability to help soldiers deal with their harsh environment. Soldiers



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whistled past the graveyard – or in it – with the hope of staving off death, or at least to avoid succumbing to the terrible pressure of the Western Front. Tom Leask of the Canadian Field Ambulance wrote to a friend at home about his experiences while campaigning: "It is a very strenuous life and a hard game. The people in Canada have no idea, nor can any person have unless they have been in it. The spirit of the soldiers is wonderful. They meet everything with a smile. I sometimes think that to them Death is a joke. To see them march up to the trenches smiling and joking apparently without a care in the world is wonderful to me."<sup>13</sup> Fear could be channelled into humour. Clifton Cate, nicknamed "Yank" by his mates since he was an American serving in the Canadian Corps, wrote of his battery's transport caught under the fall of high explosive bombs, when a number of enemy planes flew over their position. "I fell flat on my face in the shallow gutter by the roadside, and there awaited the first bomb – the others I never expected to hear." In the terrible seconds of waiting, some terrified comrade had the presence of mind to shout out "Goodbye France – Hello Satan!"<sup>14</sup> The guffaws were drowned out when the bombs crashed down.

The monotony of the static Western Front produced humorous fodder. With much of the soldiers' day spent in manual labour or on sentry duty, it should not be surprising that the men at the front looked for ways to amuse themselves and one another. Artilleryman Albert Fereday wrote to his mother from "somewhere in France."

This morning our gun team were roused out of bed at 4am to go on a working party which occupied the time until 12 noon...Trench digging isn't bad fun and we all chat and make jokes together so that the time soon passes.<sup>15</sup>

While soldiers cursed the enemy or their commanders for the seemingly unending menial labour required in this war of the shovel, humour could be found in many of the monotonous tasks. Canadian officer D.E. Macintyre wrote of two wags in the line filling sandbags to repair a shattered trench parapet: "Finally in disgust one said, 'If those Germans want this country why don't they come over and get it? We've got it all shoveled into bags for them to carry away and the crazy part of it is we poor fools have come all the way from Canada to fill the bags for them.'"<sup>16</sup>

The soldiers' jokes were generally pretty gentle, with ample silly stories and playful puns. Hal Kirkland, a long service member of the PPCLI who would be wounded three times in the war, offered a groan-inducer to his loved ones at home about the close proximity of the German trenches: "Probably you haven't heard this one. In the trenches everyone does not possess a periscope – So they use their looking glass by fastening it to the end of a stick. One morning one of the fellows was shaving using his periscope as a looking glass. He scratched, scratched, made faces, and went thru all the operations of shaving. He at last finished the job, and to his great disappointment, for he had shaved a German." Somewhat apologetically, Kirkland remarked that "at the time of writing, this is considered a good joke."<sup>17</sup>

The Canadian 7th Infantry Battalion's trench newspaper, *The Listening Post*, which reached a circulation of 20,000 copies in the summer of 1917, offered some grim humour for its readers. These were new maxims for the trenches:

"A bullet in the hand is worth two in the head."

"People who live in shell-holes shouldn't throw flare lights."

"Half a rum issue is better than ten beers."

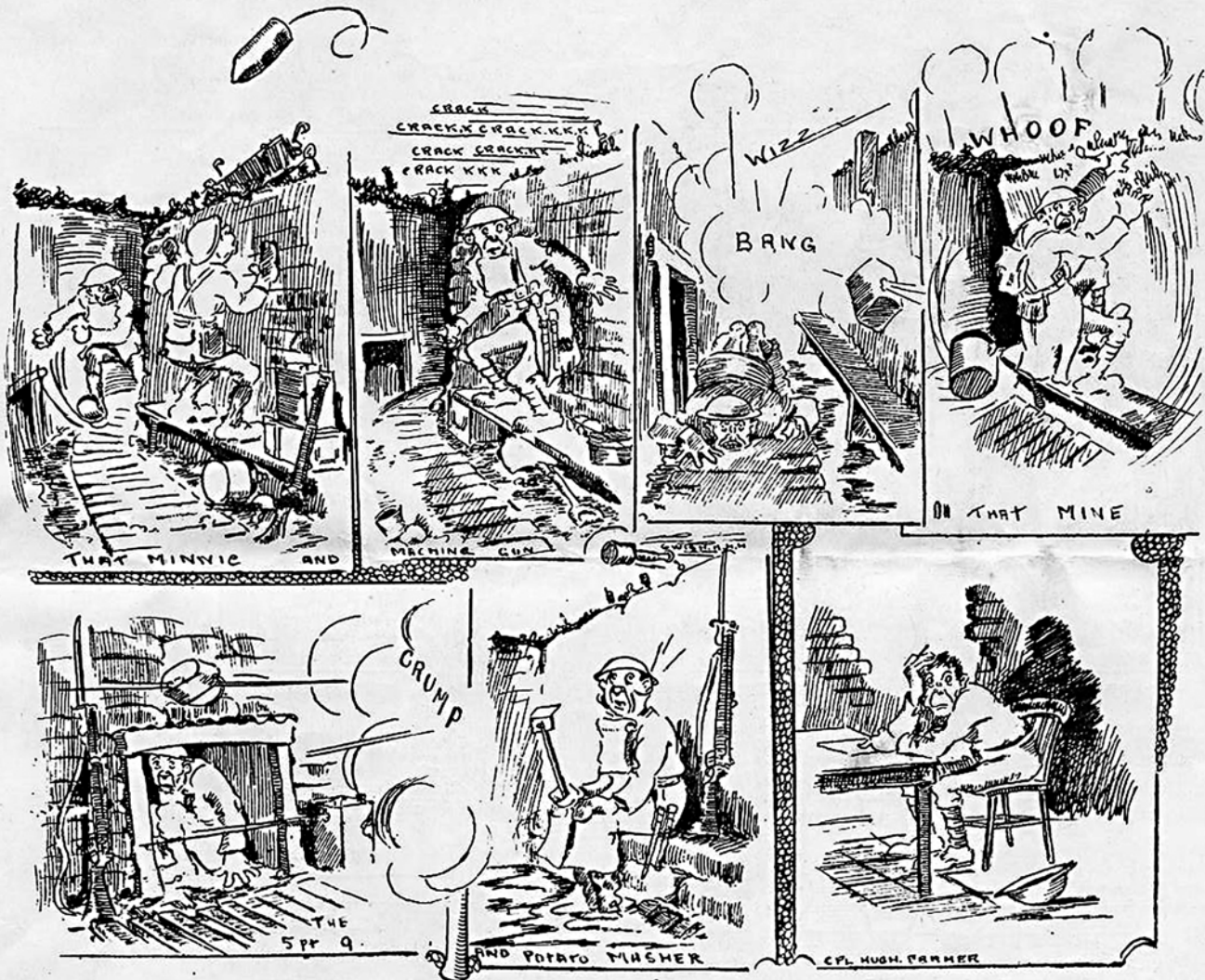
"A roaring shell gathers no moss."  
"Discretion is the better part of R.I.P."<sup>18</sup>

Soldiers joked about their kit, their boring jobs, the slackers at home, and countless other subjects. One unnamed Canadian of the First Contingent wrote home in July 1915 of the lice: "I am alive, and so is my shirt."<sup>19</sup> The seemingly never-ending war was a source of grim inspiration. One of the stand-up comedians from the Canadian ranks, Gitz Rice, offered a little pitter-patter with a friend:

How long did you enlist for: 7 years.  
Oh, you're lucky.  
I enlisted for the duration.<sup>20</sup>

Gunner Frank Ferguson wrote in his diary on 6 September 1916, revealing classic soldiers' humour: "This is the 289<sup>th</sup> day since leaving home, and it doesn't seem any more than ten years."<sup>21</sup>

The army of young men often engaged in laddish behaviour and there were constant pranks played on one another, from pulling down tents behind the lines and diverting latrines towards sleeping comrades, to tampering with food or depositing newly-collected lice into the officers' mess. Infantryman Edward Sawell of the 21st Battalion talked about one prank among the officers. "Lt. Audette was to take over a raid the next night and he came in for a great many jokes and chaff that night, such as telling he had better make the most of the meal, as it would probably be his last. Then each of us asked for a part of his kit which he would not likely be in need of anymore. The next day, he had had his kit neatly divided out among us. Of course, all of this was in fun. Cruel fun when I think of it again, but it was a danger zone, and it helped lighten the moment and pull the men together, even the ones being led on."<sup>22</sup>



Those hairbreadth escapes we were to relate in that next letter home invariably end up in the bald language of the J.p.c.—  
I am quite well, etc.

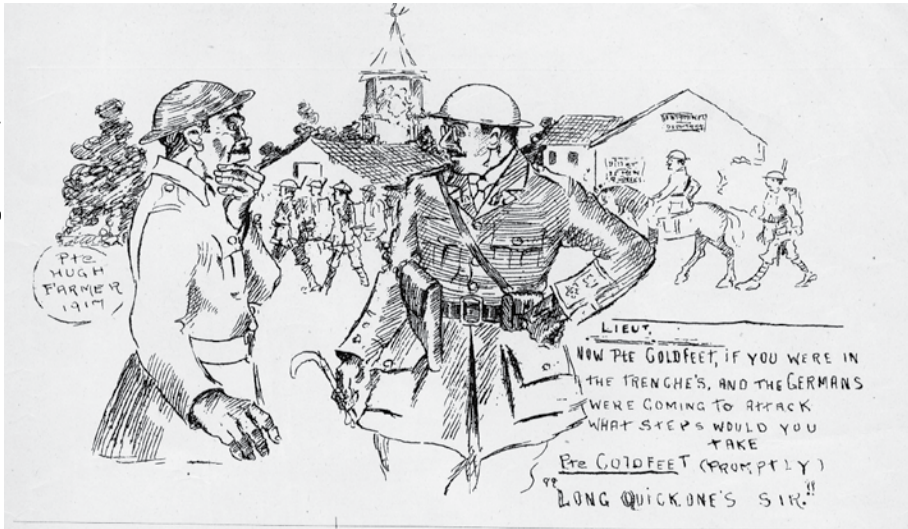
W.A. Spear of the PPCLI described a practical joke by the junior officers' mess on a new, unpopular member. While the officers were in their dugout eating, an intelligence officer returned from a patrol. Covered in mud and soaked to the bone, he spoke extravagantly to his chums, who were in on the joke, that he needed a towel, holding up his filthy hands. As he walked over to the unliked officer, he proceeded to wipe his hands on the man's uniform, loudly telling the group that he had been crawling through no-man's-land and unluckily put his hands through the ripe, rotting chest of a German soldier. The horrified officer whose uniform was being used as towel, "bolted out of the dugout and

brought up his latest meal" to the guffaws of the remaining officers.<sup>23</sup>

Another combat veteran, Herbert Clemens, wrote with great delight of a prank a group of privates pulled on a pompous member of their unit. The outcast, a man named Woods, "is a little short chap chuck full and running over with importance and truly when he speaks you listen to an Oracle. His wisdom is in inverse ratio to what he thinks it is though." The men wanted to put him in his place and a group of them devised a plan to dig a grave. As Woods walked by, he asked what had happened. "He was told it was a grave for a fellow who had just died in the surgical hut and as there was no room in the morgue they were going to bury him in this hole. Woods swallowed it all right but

couldn't see that the hole was long enough so he got down and laying at full length measured it to his own satisfaction. Then he went away." The men got one of the sergeants in on the prank and he asked Woods if he would be a pallbearer. Woods arrived at the designated time, with the group of men overly sombre, which made Woods carry "an air of profound dignity and mightily importance. Of course the news having got around there were a large number of 'mourners'. Woods was shown to the place where the 'stiff' was and was told he was in charge of the pall bearers." In his element, Woods began to give orders, and then grabbed a hold of the corpse. "Our respected friend took hold of the feet of the 'departed' and probably you





and at a signal all pulled together in our own trenches. Fritz hearing the noise, thought a raid was coming, vacated his front line and turned on his artillery in his own trenches, heavy stuff 5.9s etc. thinking of course to teach these raiders a lesson. I can well imagine how our fellows would laugh and roar, lie down on the trench mats and tie themselves in knots with glee and mirth."<sup>26</sup> Captain Frank Morison of the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion remarked on the give and take between the Germans and his own Canadian Highland battalion: "Jock will throw over empty bully beef tins to 'Fritz' and yell to him 'fill up the tins Fritz – we will soon be over.' Then Fritz will yell out, 'Hello Jock where are you' and Jock will say 'Here' and then there will be a veritable fire of rifles in that direction. They are very cute but they have not got any of us on that game yet. Then you will hear 'Jock' casually yell out, 'Be careful Fritz, you will hurt someone.' Really it is extraordinary how casual one gets under fire."<sup>27</sup>

Humour could also be directed at the enemy to rationalize the killing process and to make it less cold-hearted. Captain A. Milligan wrote callously of German dead on the shattered Somme battlefield, after more than three years at the front, "Outside the place is a mess – machine-guns, rifles, equipment, clothing and every form of rubbish of a battlefield is lying about. Two dead Huns are causing us about as much annoyance in their present states as when they were alive. They will have to be put out of sight soon, but there is something more important to do first, and that is to get a few more to put with them."<sup>28</sup> One of the Canadian trench newspapers, *The Brazier*, offered this account:

Hun: (shouting across to the Canadians): "Say, do you know Ottawa?"  
Canadian: "Yes."  
Hun: "Well, I've got a wife and

could hardly blame him for jumping about 25 feet in the air and producing a very wild and terrifying look on his face when the stiff sit up and grabbed Woods around the waist and hugged him. Never was there such a jovial bunch of mourners."<sup>24</sup>

All of these pranks were infused with a masculine spirit of teasing. There were elements of rough justice, too, with the outsider getting his come-uppance. In this case, pranks were a means of reinforcing group actions, affirming norms, and singling out the unwanted, unliked, or "other." The case of Lieutenant Audette is equally interesting as he played along with the "game," embracing the possibility of his own death, especially in mocking the sacred act of dividing up his kit.

These jokes and pranks suggest that not only were their rules to follow in dispensing with humour, but also in receiving it.

Soldiers traded taunts and insults with the enemy across no-man's-land. Stereotypes were used freely, with the Germans referred to as sausage-eaters or Canadians chiding the Germans to "bring the menu!," a reference to the supposed large number of German waiters in England before the war.<sup>25</sup> There were also gags and pranks with which to torment the enemy, to varying degrees of seriousness. John Law wrote to his mom in the summer of 1916: "My old battalion played a huge joke on Fritz the other day. During the night some of the men went over and tied ropes to his barb wire,



three kiddies in Ottawa.”

Canadian: “Just put your head over the parapet for a minute and you’ll have a widow and three orphans in Ottawa.”<sup>29</sup>

Here was *schadenfreude* with an edge. In another example, the 16th Canadian Infantry Battalion defended against an enemy raid on 21 July 1918. The Canadian Highlanders lost no men, but a number of enemy soldiers were wounded or killed. The glib Highlanders buried a few of the German dead and put a none-to-nice cross above it, with an inscription that read:

R.I.P.  
Unter Offizier Otto \_\_\_\_\_  
Corporal \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ German Infantry Regiment  
Attempted to raid 16th Canadian  
Scottish  
24-7-18  
Enough said.<sup>30</sup>

Captain J.B. Paulin who served with the machine gunners recounted this dark story of a German sniper firing at the Canadians in their trenches, shooting through the sandbags in the hope of hitting the men. One bullet nearly struck the colonel who was tramping through the lines. The enraged officer ordered one of his best scouts to go out and get the sniper. The man snuck out and eventually tracked down the enemy, catching him in a vulnerable position: “whereupon the sniper, who spoke very good English, held up his hands and cried ‘Mercy, Mercy,’ but the soldiers said, ‘No mercy for you, you missed the colonel.’”<sup>31</sup> In the joke, we have a soldier who might have spared the sniper if he had actually hit the unpopular colonel; instead, he executes the sniper, after offering the cheerful aside. The joke sounds apocryphal, and certainly seems honed from much telling and retelling, but there is a message of cruelty buried around

the veneer of humour, as well as antiauthoritarianism.

While soldiers were death-dealers, they were also aware of their own fragile existence. For men who lived with death everyday, often in an open graveyard, with the dead protruding from the sludge, much of the humour was dark. In glancing at an enormous crater, 160 feet wide, which had been blown under the Germans, one Canadian quipped that the Germans were “up in the air” about it.<sup>32</sup> Gallows humour and wartime wit carried many men through the long days and longer

nights. This was humour for soldiers by soldiers. It was deeply influenced by their environment, both in the trenches and in the army. It was self-referential and usually crude, which made it more appealing and less likely to be understood by civilians. “Humour out here is a saving grace,” wrote Lieutenant William Gray. “Of course,” he added, “no one who hasn’t been out here can appreciate” the soldiers’ humour.<sup>33</sup>

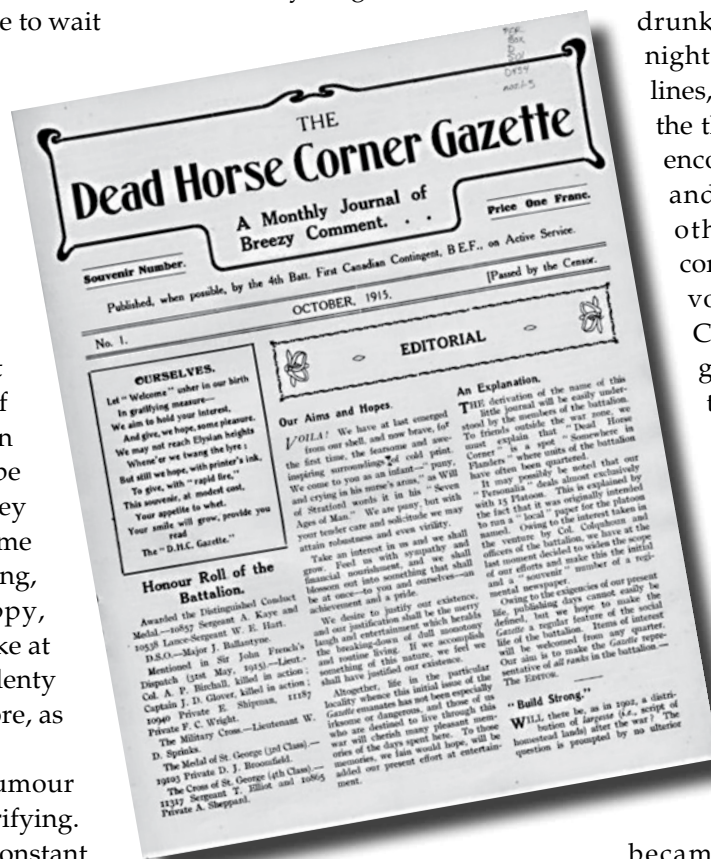
Cecil French, a prewar student studying to be a missionary in India before his enlistment, wrote of his experience in the lines during one of



his tours at the front: "Just a line to tell you we're here and to say Hurrah! By 'here' I mean that we're where we can see 'Fritz'; that is, we could see him if he'd only poke up his head. He's too wary for that, so we have to wait till a 'whizz bang' or one of its big brothers blows Fritz into the air and into view. Oh yes, we talk in cruel terms here, but it's usually done with a lighter heart than folks at home imagine. I've seen nothing – absolutely nothing yet compared with the almost literal hell which most of the boys over here have been through, but they seem to be much the same boys as they were before. (The human frame can become used to anything, it seems). They seem happy, they laugh at danger and joke at hardship, and they have plenty to laugh and joke at, therefore, as a rule."<sup>34</sup>

At its core, gallows humour helped to trivialize the terrifying. There was no escaping the constant and sometimes instant death at the front. Experienced soldiers knew when to run and when to duck, and over time honed a sixth sense for survival, but for many there was no dodging one's fate. Humour became another form of shielding against the strain. John Sudbury made light of the earth-shattering artillery bombardments on the Somme: "I have been under some shellfire in, days gone bye but down here Oh! my word. How annoying the smoke is, and those showers of mud after a burst - most aggravating to get into our fresh made tea and fried bacon. Yes that's the comic side but the other side is best left unsaid..."<sup>35</sup> Alexander Decoteau tried to share the soldiers' mentality with this sister: "Most of the boys turn (Fatalists). I don't know if I've got it spelled right, after a few month[s] fighting. They believe that

everything is prearranged by Divine Power, and if it one's time to die no matter what one does, one has to die. Their motto is 'If my turn comes next, I can't do anything to



avoid it, so 'I should worry'. They don't worry either. Of course there are lots who suffer from shell shock or nervous breakdown, and they can't fight against fear, but most of the boys have a keen sense of humor, and laugh at almost anything. I know of one in particular, a corporal. He is the life and wit of our party. A shell landed close to him one night and the concussion threw him on his head several yards away. The shock stunned him for a minute and when he came to the first question he asked was 'Is my head still on?' That sent the rest of us into a roar, and only a minute before they were all ready to beat it to the nearest dugout. It's the likes of him that make army life bearable, and the army is full of such as he."<sup>36</sup>

Scoffing at death to pluck up one's courage was one thing, but infantryman Will Bird recounted the sometimes harsh slide from joking to cruel humour. His comrades, drunk on cheap French wine the night before going into the front lines, "shouted at each other about the three kinds of cases we might encounter, 'walking,' 'sandbag,' and 'stretcher,' taunting each other with grisly questions concerning 'next of kin,' made vows to either get a Victoria Cross or a 'wooden one.'"<sup>37</sup> The grotesquery of war became the fuel that drove the dark humour that sustained many men. "We have been under attack for some days now," wrote Private Bert Drader of the 49th Battalion. "The boys have got a good many new dances named here – to wit – 'Machine Gun Flop,' 'Whiz Bang Glide,' 'Sausage dip,' 'Shrapnel Wiggle,' etc."<sup>38</sup> Within this sepulchral, death became a joke, at least through outward acts of bravado. The dead, too, were fit for pranks or jokes.

The rotting corpses that protruded from the trench walls were so common as to be a part of the landscape. The horrifying discovery that a soldier was bunking down beside a rotting cadaver is a common occurrence in soldiers' writing, but so too are the jokes and callous pranks at the expense of the dead. "Along the road was an unburied hand of a soldier," wrote Lieutenant Fred Wells, "some of our 'wags' would pretend to shake hands with it – a bit of humour along the way."<sup>39</sup> The hanging of gas masks from sun-bleached femurs or the striking of matches on the mummified heads of the dead were examples of a studied callousness and of how dark humour was a shield. "We are all used to dead bodies or pieces of men, so much



so that we are not troubled by the sight of them," wrote one Canadian. "There was a right hand sticking out of the trench in the position of a man trying to shake hands with you, and as the men filed out they would often grip it and say, 'So long, old top, we'll be back again soon.'"<sup>40</sup> Infantryman John Becker wrote of the "black and bloated" dead, "covered with flies and maggots, a sight that would turn the stomach of one who had not grown accustomed to such sights. It seems cruel to think of the crude joking remarks that were passed among us at the sight of these remnants of men but it was necessary to force jokes at times like these although invariably we were sick and weary and ready to quit – if there was any way of quitting." Without such cruel jokes, "We would have gone crazy otherwise."<sup>41</sup>

There was humour in suffering. One soldier penned a poem that made light of the soldiers' lice infestations, and of a particular officer who thought he would be immune to the privation.

He always used to laugh at us  
When we looked through and  
through  
Our shirts for little things that bite  
But now he's lousy too.

While we would sit  
and scratch all night,  
He'd lay abed and  
snooze;  
But now they're  
marching 'round his  
back  
In fours and threes and  
twos.

He used to grin as we  
stripped bare  
And found more than  
a few;  
But now we love to  
hear him swear;  
For he is lousy too.

Yes! Waltonhammer has them  
now;  
He's hunting day and night;  
So now we laugh and jolly him;  
It serves him damn well right.<sup>42</sup>

Herbert White wrote of a comrade, Jacobs, after their last rotation through the line. "He had found a nice new pair of Fritzie's long leather boots and was going to take them home with him when he discovered that part of the legs and the feet of the German still remained in the boots so he left them there."<sup>43</sup> The most popular Canadian trench newspaper, *The Listening Post*, scoffed at death:

New Draft: "Why do we have to wear two identity-discs?"  
Old-Timer: "They take one when you are napoo'd and the other one is left to identify you by when they dig you up a year later to see if you're properly shaved and have you iron ration with you."<sup>44</sup>

A macabre joke conflating death and superstition circulated among Allied soldiers: "It is considered bad luck to be killed on Friday."<sup>45</sup>

British wartime veterans and compilers of soldiers' song and slang,

Eric Partridge and John Brophy, observed that with formations consisting of civilian-soldiers there were usually a handful of professional or semi-professional singers, jesters, actors, or simply funny men, "who would produce, for the battalion or battery concert party, jest and ditties about topics of the moment or outstanding personalities of the unit. Such songs as these correspond to the 'family' jokes abhorred of visitors."<sup>46</sup> The "in-joke" or "family" joke was pervasive in the closed soldiers' society. Almost everything was a target for a pun, an ironic statement, a satirical slash. While jokes and humour were one method of communicating the experience of war back to civilians at home, not all of the content was fit for sharing, or even able to be understood.

The popularity of Bruce Bairnsfather, the most famous English cartoonist of the war, struck a chord with most allied soldiers. His antiheroes Old Bill and his friends, who groused and complained their way through the war, were wildly popular with Canadian soldiers, who could see themselves in the cartoons, and hear their own dialogue repeated back to them. But Bairnsfather was initially condemned by many on the home front for his seemingly antipatriotic messages.<sup>47</sup> It was only after the overwhelming support of the soldiers for Bairnsfather that civilians embraced his cartoons, although many grimaced as his characters pushed back against authority and embraced antiheroic themes.

Antiheroic jokes were among the most transgressive forms of humour as they seemingly undermined the patriotic and heroic







**KEEPING HIS HAND IN.**

**Private Smith, the company bomber, formerly "Shino," the popular juggler, frequently causes considerable anxiety to this platoon.**

discourse of the war.<sup>48</sup> Soldiers embraced the antiheroic in their comedy, songs, and skits because it allowed them to distance themselves from those at home, and reinforce the bonds that strengthened their own insulated society. *The Listening Post* had one amusing exchange between soldiers about the issuing of gallantry medals:

Bill: "Say, hear that Jock Robinson got the D.C.M. [Distinguished Conduct Medal]"  
 Fred: "What for?"

Bill: "I dunno."  
 Fred: "Blimy, why ain't I got one too, I hid in the same dug-out."<sup>49</sup>

Building on the unheroic account above, jokes like this were not uncommon:

"Did You hear that shell just now?"  
 "I did. Twice. Once when it passed me, and again when I passed it."<sup>50</sup>

Grin-inducing perhaps, but it is worth considering in more detail as

there would have been a particular edge to this quip; running away from the front in battle could – and occasionally did – result in a death sentence.<sup>51</sup> John Sudbury recounted a "good joke" to a friend at home in the summer of 1916: "The Chaplain of this identical battalion was going on his usual Sunday morning round talking to the boys, when he came to an Irishman. 'Well Pat!' he said, 'Have you seen Fritz this morning.' 'No! Yer reverence,' says Pat with his head well below the top of the parapet, 'And I'm darn sure he hasn't seen me.'"<sup>52</sup> Every soldier, even the most fire-eating types, could at times empathize with these antiheroic sentiments, and of course the antihero played against the constructed civilian image that equated all servicemen with selfless heroics. For soldiers who had seen much of the heroics blasted away from front-line service, they often embraced the antiheroic.

Jokes could also be a subtle form of warning. Infantryman A.O. Hickson of the 26th Battalion from New Brunswick offered his philosophy at the front: "Keep your mouth shut and your bowels open; keep your throat wet and your feet dry; keep you pecker up and your head down; and never, never, never volunteer."<sup>53</sup> Another Canadian infantryman, Percy Willmot, wrote how he warned a friend who had recently arrived in the battalion, "I gave him the usual caution – half joke – half earnest – Keep your head down."<sup>54</sup> Half-joke, half-earnest seems an important clue. Sergeant Harold Baldwin, a First Contingent veteran, wrote of one chirpy, Irish-Canadian soldier who had survived death by mere inches: he happened to bend down just as a shell came roaring through the trench. The shell took off the head of the man behind him, but the lucky, and probably dazed, Irish man quipped, "Shure it always pays to be polite."<sup>55</sup> While

most soldiers knew the value of ducking at the right time, there were lessons in the humour, even if it is the wisecrack that is remembered rather than the headless victim. The jokes were coded partially because of the masculine nature of soldiers, who often were forced to face nonchalantly the worst of the war, and had to prove their toughness, but veterans of the front also had lessons for new soldiers, which they shared in their own particular, almost ritualized manner.

The lewd, the rude, and the crude all rose to the forefront. The laddish behaviour of a masculine culture lent itself to rough jokes.<sup>56</sup> "There is no girl to say it's terrible or something like that, so you can get on with it, and that gives you a good laugh," remembered British infantryman George Coppard who had enlisted at the age of 16, lying about his age to get into the ranks.<sup>57</sup> While some soldiers refused to engage in such behaviour, the tough life of soldiering, when combined with bravado amongst comrades, often led to hyper-masculinity. As Canadian Leonard Youell wrote to his family, he would "become a man with a capital M."<sup>58</sup> *The Kilt*, the trench newspaper of the 72nd Battalion, chided that those who, in their civilian lives before joining the army, "used to lie in bed to nurse a headache," now had been transformed into "men."<sup>59</sup> The soldiers' humour reflected and fed this masculine environment. First Contingent soldier Richard Graeme wrote of the myriad of jokes and songs howled by him and his comrades, many of which were rough and unsophisticated. As he noted, "there is nothing subtle about soldier humour."<sup>60</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

The multiple strands of constructed memory that cocoon the war, which are spun by each new generation, offer us a changing view

of the traumatic event and what it continues to mean after almost a hundred years. While satirists have occasionally found fodder in the Great War's absurd slaughter – most strikingly in England through the television series *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989) and here in Canada through Donald Jack's novels featuring the cheerful, incorrigible incompetent, Bartholomew Bandy – the most common strand of memory remains that most closely associated with the

disillusionment writers, with the English poets or Erich Remarque having remarkable longevity as they are taught, read, and revered in the western world.<sup>61</sup> New generations of academic historians have railed against the view of an all-encompassing hopeless and disillusioned generation at war, and have tried over the years to inject a more balanced assessment of the war's multiple meanings, but even the most successful admit defeat or

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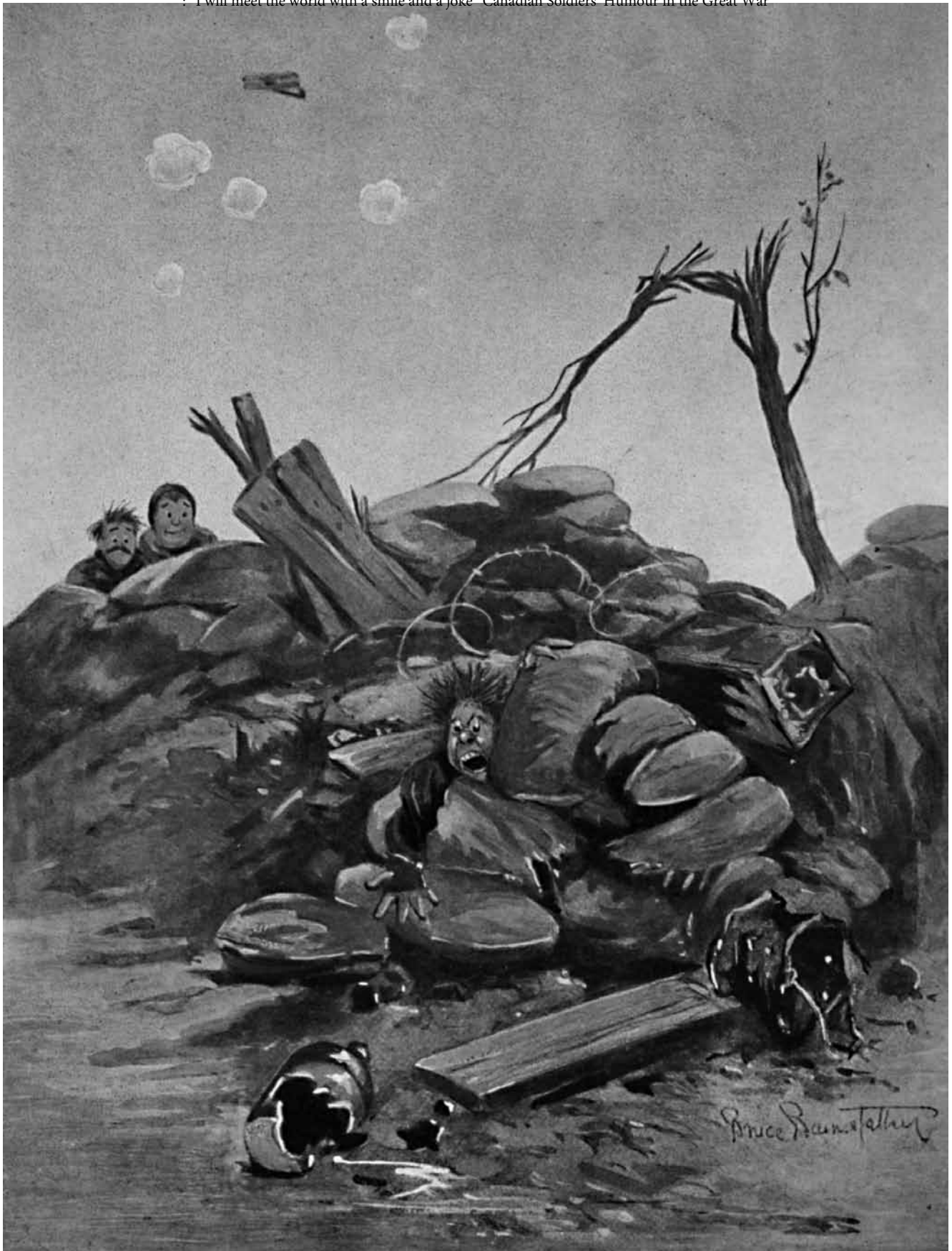

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**COIFFURE IN THE TRENCHES.**

**"Keep yer 'ead still, or I'll 'ave yer blinkin' 'ear off!"**

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**THE THIRST FOR REPRISALS.**

“And me a rifle someone. I’ll give these \_\_\_\_\_s ‘ell for this!”

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draw at best in the battles to shift, or add levels of nuance, to the popular memory of the futile war.

The bountiful range of soldiers' humour indicates that it was a common element in the serviceman's day to day activities. While this article is not suggesting that humour is, or should be, the dominant trope of memory, historians need to make allowances for soldiers' pranks, jokes, and laughter. These comedic by-products of the war became essential tools to battle boredom and ennui, to rail against the system, and are a reflection of how soldiers resisted the dehumanizing effects of the war.<sup>62</sup> The jokes, satire, and all-encompassing irony were one method by which soldiers dealt with death, constructed new concepts of masculinity, and embraced antiheroic sentiments; they are an indication of the wider, every day practices and behaviors of men coping in their surroundings.

While the use of humour was a coping mechanism – with Canadian T.W. Johnson writing that he believed that “the gift of humor is as priceless as the gift of physical courage”—the nature of Canadian soldiers' humour does not appear to be linked to national identity.<sup>63</sup> That is to say, the content of the Canadian jokes was not exclusively about Canadian subjects or mores, and referenced more generally the experience of all soldiers at war, and the trials they faced. While some of the Canadian humorous songs and theatre plays make direct reference to Canadian subjects – the much maligned Ross rifle or politicians back home – the content of soldiers' jokes drew from a more universal experience of trench warfare, although we must allow for the countless jokes that were never captured on paper.<sup>64</sup> While soldiers' humour is less about identity construction and more about coping, it is also clear that these jokes were one of the ways that soldiers

tried to stay in contact with those on the home front. While many soldiers claimed that their loved ones at home would never understand what they were experiencing overseas, they nonetheless tried to offer a glimpse of their world through their letters home. This sometimes came in the form of direct descriptions of hardships and loss, although censorship muted some of these messages.<sup>65</sup> Jokes and quips were a means to soften the grim descriptions and while not all of these humorous offerings likely resonated or were even understood, they could lighten the emotional load for mothers, fathers, and siblings. Humour at the front helped to raise morale in the trenches; it also appears to have been used by soldiers to ease the worry of those across the Atlantic.

“We are bound to win this war, because we've tried our damndest for 4 years to lose it,” wrote B.H. Cox to his loved ones in the summer of 1918. Perhaps wondering if his parents got the joke, he added: “Laughing is good for the morale of the troops, you know.”<sup>66</sup> Ignored at the time, and for much of the last 95 years, soldiers' humour remains buried in their writings, although these old punch lines and insults should remind us of how these Canadians refused to be broken in the machine of war and how they used low-brow culture and social interactions to survive on the Western Front. It was a strange and ironic war that few predicted and fewer still knew how to end; sometimes it was faced with disillusionment or a howl of anguish, and other times with a grin or belly laugh.

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