

**CHAPTER 14**

**From *Time Travels* by Dillan Murphy  
YPRES, BELGIUM - 1917**

I arrived at British General Sir Hubert Gough's Fifth Army headquarters the first week of July, 1917. We were thirty miles behind the front lines that faced the German trenches just beyond the town of Ypres in Flanders, Belgium.

Expressing my desire to go up to the Front, a junior officer thought with a name like Murphy that I should be assigned to the Irish Guards. I was therefore introduced to Major Horace Crawford of the Irish Guards First Battalion of the British Expeditionary Force. He was no rear-echelon staff officer. To the contrary he was hell-bent to be right in the thick of the fight.

"I'm returning to my regiment in two days, Mr. Murphy. If you wish to see what this war is really about, I shall take you up to the Front," Crawford said. "I've been in this fight since '14. Rough go back then. The Krauts almost pushed us back, but we held Flanders and therefore we held France. Now it's an ugly contest fought from muddy holes."

The British were the primary Allied forces fighting in Belgium. The bulk of the French forces were engaged to the south. The United States had not yet entered the War in early 1917.

The Major and I rode in an ambulance eastward from Fifth Army headquarters outside Amiens. A few miles west of Ypres, the ambulance deposited us outside the town of Poperinghe. A large tent had been erected over an excavated area to afford some protection from artillery. The Major informed me this was the Division's headquarters, several miles to the rear of the front line trenches. This far removed from the front lines seemed to me to limit command effectivity in the event of an enemy offensive. Seemed more a benefit for senior officers to remain in comparative safety.

Motioning to a soldier, the Major said to me, "This is Staff Sergeant Doyle. Follow his lead and you'll have as good a chance as any to survive up here. The Sergeant's a top soldier. Sergeant?"

"Sir!" the Sergeant braced to attention with the compliment. He looked like an old hand with a lean build that suggested a wiry strength, punctuated with a well-groomed large red mustache.

"This is Mr. Murphy, Sergeant. Newspaper correspondent from the States. He wants to go up to the front with us tomorrow. Give him what assistance you can."

The Major entered the tent and left me with the Sergeant.

The Sergeant offered his hand. "Glad to meet you, Sir. Are you Irish, Sir?"

“Irish descent. Both my mother and my father’s parents came from Ireland.”

“Well I’d say you’re Irish then, Sir. We’ll be relieving the Grenadier Guards Second Battalion who’ll change places with us here in the rear. You see we’ve got two of the Brigade’s battalions on the front line at any time, with two held in reserve. Theory is, if there’s an attack, the reserve battalions can be directed to plug any breach in our lines. This your first time at the Front, Sir?”

“Yes it is, Sergeant. That’s not a problem is it?”

“No, Sir. Just that things can be pretty harsh in the trenches. Not many people who have a choice would want to venture out there. Fact is you’ll be the first civilian I’ve known of.”

“That’s where the real news is, Sergeant. I won’t get much hanging around with the brass back here.”

“Right you are about that, Sir. So it’s an early call, Sir - three AM. I’ll show you to a place where you can get a wee bit of rest. Do ya have plenty of socks, Sir?”

“I think so, but why’s that so important?” I asked.

“Must keep your feet dry. Bloody wet in the trenches. You need to change at least three times a day otherwise you’re apt to get trench foot. Trench foot is some mean shit, Sir. You’ll want to be avoidin’ it. I’ll see about getting you some extra socks from the quartermaster. Can’t have too many socks.”

I picked up my gear, which was the typical conventional British Army issue. It was a heavy load that took some doing to hoist onto my back. Consisting of a large backpack, haversack, blanket, ground sheet, water bottle, eating tin, shovel, helmet, and gas mask, it weighed about fifty pounds. In place of a rifle, I carried a portable Corona typewriter in a leather case. It was a comparatively new invention within the last few years, weighing only five and a half pounds.

As we were walking, it started to rain so I broke out my waterproof cape. The Sergeant remarked, “Fuckin’ rain, if you par-

don my French. Freeze your arse off in the winter, then it rains almost every bloody day in the spring. Now it's summer and still raining."

Sergeant Doyle took me a short way to a ladder descending into a trench. He explained that though we were in the rear of the front lines, German artillery could still reach this far, so even here they lived in trenches. It was to be my first taste of trench life.

The trench was about eight feet deep. Rainwater ran down the sides filling the bottom. There were wooden planks, trench boards that you walked on to elevate you from the water. But that depended upon the amount of rain. I followed the Sergeant into a large room-type excavation covered with a wooded roof. The bunker was crowded with soldiers who all looked toward us as we entered.

"This here's Mr. Murphy, lads. He's a newspaperman from America, but he's Irish. Goin' up to the front line with us. He'll be making you famous back home 'less you'll be showin' him what a bunch of dumb arseholes you are," the Sergeant said.

The men were of good cheer and we shook hands all around. I unbuckled my gear and sat down on a long wooden bench. There were no bunks. At best I might find enough room to lie down on the wood planking. The floor was mud, getting worse as more rain water poured down the walls of the excavation. Sitting up, I dosed fitfully for a few hours until Sergeant Doyle rattled a mess tin with his bayonet to rouse the platoon. It seemed the middle of the night, which it was.

I fell out with the rest of the soldiers. Everyone was silent and grim. They had done this before. The fellow next to me said it would take two hours to cover the three kilometers to the front trenches. "Why so long?" I asked.

"It's tough going with all your gear. Especially in the dark. You'll see why when we're out there," he answered.

While still miles from the British lines, the terrain started to abruptly change as we marched east. From intact farm structures we moved to damaged farms and barns, then to no structures, then to no trees, then to no grass. We trudged through the once magnificent medieval town of Ypres. Its grand Cloth Hall, built in the thirteenth century, and its imposing cathedral, had been reduced to rubble by German artillery over the past years of constant shelling. Every building was destroyed or damaged. The civilian population had long since left.

Shell craters became increasing numerous until there was no direct route. We stumbled along in single file making a serpentine traverse through a field of gaping artillery craters filled with water. Our heavy packs made us prone to stumbling and falling. In places you sunk calf-deep into the mud. It was a cloying clay composition exceedingly slippery. Only where there were wooden *duckboards* was it possible to walk normally. And the rain continued.

"It's a good night to be on the march. Black as the Kaiser's soul," the soldier next to me whispered. "If they spot us, their artillery would do a bloody number on us out here in the open. That's why we move at night."

Sergeant Doyle kicked the soldier in the butt and whispered. "Shut your mouth you stupid bugger. If the Boche lob any artillery on us, I'll put a bullet through that empty fuckin' head of yours."

We arrived at the beginning of the front trench fortifications as dawn was breaking. The trenches were not mere holes, but rather a complex network of parallel and perpendicular excavations designed to anchor a defensive position. In the coming days I would learn that there were front line and secondary line traverse trenches, connected by perpendicular service and communication trenches. Underground bunkers were periodically spaced to store supplies and afford some soldiers shelter from the elements. It was a rat maze in more ways than one.

As dawn broke, I got my first glimpse of what was known as no-mans-land, the few hundred yards between the opposing forces trenches. Beyond the front lines was a surreal landscape starting with rows of barbed wire entanglements followed by ground so corrupted that the rims of shell craters literally joined each other. A few stumps of sheared-off trees jutted from the ground, otherwise the landscape was totally devoid of any vegetation. I glimpsed this through angled observation binoculars that allowed the viewer to stay below the trench rim. Exposing your head would invite a German sniper's bullet.

"Jesus, Sergeant, if that isn't a vision of Hell I don't know what is," I remarked as I surveyed the landscape through the glasses. The rain had lightened but the gray sky added to a sight so alien I knew I would have difficulty finding adequate descriptive words.

"Right you are, Sir. It is Hell," Sergeant Doyle said. "When you're out there you have to give up any hope of surviving. Bullets zipping by. Artillery rounds and grenades sending terrible shrapnel about. There's always the threat of poison gas. It's a stupid weapon, ugly as sin. Then there're the machine guns. Take out a whole platoon in a couple of minutes, they can. Seen it happen. All this as you're stumbling through this artillery-plowed field with its tangle of barbed wire, and always the endless mud. Seen many a soldier drown in a crater hole filled with water. Or you might just sink out of sight in some mud holes that are like quicksand. Better to die by a bullet I say."

"How long have you been here Sergeant?"

"Since '15. Survived the Battles of Loos and the Somme. Not many of us original regulars left. All these lads about you are fresh enlistees or conscripts. Good lads, but still don't have much training."

"How often do you attack?"

"Every time General Haig has a fart caught crosswise and thinks it's an original thought. Bloody too often if you ask me.

And you know what happens if you're lucky enough to make it across no-man's land without being hit? You get to occupy the German's trenches. This shithole we're in right now used to be a German trench we took from them a year ago. That's all there is here in Flanders, endless trenches. Just trade one fuckin' hole for another, but only after you kill thousands on both sides."

It started to rain again.

"Fucking rain. That's all it's done since the start of spring. You see, Mr. Murphy, this is the worse place to be fighting a war from bloody trenches. I'm told Flanders has a delicate drainage problem. Now there's a stupid understatement. Can't even dig a hole without it filling with water. Then you plow up all the ground with years of artillery bombardment to make a real fucking mess. And if it ain't winter snow, it's rainin'.

"Newbury, front and center," the Sergeant said, signaling a soldier. "Newbury, this is Mr. Murphy, newspaper man from America. Be a good lad and help him get about."

"Peter Newbury. Pleased to meet you, Mister Murphy," the private said shaking my hand. He was a big-eared kid with a broad toothy grin. "Grab your gear and we'll find a place for you in the bunker."

I started to question the wisdom of wanting to be up here on the front lines as we sloshed down the trench. Rivulets of mud flowed down the sides of the trench. Boards lined the bottom of the trench so you could walk without sinking, but the water was still over the boards and up to your ankles in places. I could see why the extra socks. If the rain persisted, you were going to stand in water a good deal of the day.

By a *place*, Private Newbury meant a spot not otherwise occupied. There were no bunks, no chairs, no tables. These front line trenches were decidedly more miserable than those in the rear back at division headquarters. I put my waterproof ground sheet down and parked my gear. The bunker itself was a depressing place. It was nothing more than just a wider hole than

the trench itself covered with a leaking wooden roof and duckboard floor. Kerosene lamps cast uneven light. It smelled of damp clothing and unwashed bodies.

Most of the men of the Second Platoon of Company A were in their early twenties. I couldn't imagine a crueler place, yet they were of surprisingly high spirits. In spite of being forced to live worse than an animal, with the strong likelihood of death or wounding that awaited their future, they joked and generally took care of each other. I believed it was a means to hold their individual terrors in check.

I intended to write about these brave men, to put a human face to this terrible conflict for my readers back in the States. By all indications, the United States would soon be entering the conflict. Americans needed to see beyond the lofty patriotic soundings by public figures and understand what it would mean for their young men. This was not to be a war of quick adventure like the Spanish-American War. The horrors would be worse than the American Civil War over fifty years ago.

After an evening of playing cards, smoking, and finishing off their daily rum ration, those not on guard duty found their spots to sleep for the night. I too wrapped myself with my blanket and attempted to try to sleep. It was not to be. The rain persisted with an even heavier downpour. Water flowed down the walls of the bunker raising the ground water level well above the duckboard floor. Everyone sought a way to not have to sit or lay in the water. The best I could do was lean against the sloping bunker wall with my feet in the rising water.

Bad as this was, there was worse. Once the lamps were extinguished I could hear noises of what sounded like the scurrying of small animals. Something touched my thigh. "Newbury? What's that noise?" I asked urgently in a harsh whisper.

"Rats. Big fuckin' rats. Won't bother you though. They're just scavenging for food. Everything always needs to be secured in crates or the nasty bastards will get into the rations."



I willed myself to suppress the panic, and then lit a match. Staring up between my feet was the ugliest looking rat I had ever seen, literally the size of a rabbit. "Sonofabitch!" I yelled and dropped the match. "Christ, did you see the size of that rat, Newbury?"

"Seen bigger I'm afraid. We call 'em corpse rats. They been feedin' off corpses. You see, there's a whole lot of dead out there from both sides that never got a proper burial. Lots of bodies you can't get to after a battle. Lots just sink into the mud. Everything freezes over in the winter, then come spring they start popping up. Rats have a feast."

"Wonderful. So what do you do about them?"

"Nothing you can do. They won't bite you. Some blokes kill 'em for sport. Some have been known to eat them. Meat rations are rare out here. As for me, no thanks. Not eatin' rat that's been feeding on a rottin' corpse," Newbury said.

The bile rose in my throat. Needless to say, my first night in the front line trenches was sleepless.