

# Echoes of Passchendaele: An ANZAC Diary.

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## Day 1: Brimming With Excitement – 10 October 1917

Today, I arrived at the battlefield! I was thrilled to serve the Empire and help defeat the Germans. As I marched towards the army's position, my commanding officer instructed me to proceed directly to the front line. I was filled with admiration for his courage and hoped to match his bravery. This was what I had been trained for! But as soon as I reached the defences, my enthusiasm was tempered—the trench was a narrow, muddy nightmare—about six feet high and no more than four feet wide.

Water dripped incessantly, a maddening, rhythmic pattern that echoed in the confines. Still, I remained optimistic. *"Surely the mud would dry,"* I thought, *"and we'd be moved to a proper camp with warm meals and rest."*

Later, I was issued a rifle and watched a group of men playing poker. Their deck was worn and incomplete, and they used chunks of dried mud and uneven pebbles for currency. The sight dampened my spirits a little. That evening, as I searched for a place to sleep, I saw men crawling into dugouts carved into the trench wall or collapsing onto the ground, too exhausted to care. I finally lay down on the thick, wet mud covering the trench floor. As I stared into the dark, I couldn't help but wonder what tomorrow would bring.

## Day 2: Dulled Expectations – 11 October 1917

This morning I awoke drenched and shivering, the chill having seeped deep into my bones. I struggled to my feet, only to be told by a nearby soldier that our task for the day was reinforcing the trench with more sandbags. The bags were heavy, bloated with the copious amount of filthy water they had absorbed from the trench floor. Each layer made the wall higher and harder to reach. My arms ached from the effort, my fingers numb and stiff. Eventually, we were given the order to rest. Exhausted, I collapsed, grateful for even a few moments of reprieve.

## Day 3 Morning: A Terrible Loss – 12 October 1917

I woke up to a trio of rats the size of cats nibbling and scratching my face.

Screaming, I bolted upright and dragged the horrible creatures off my now scratched body. I touched my nose and a wet, humid liquid dripped onto my dirty, brown finger; it took me several seconds to realise that it was blood. By then, I had woken several soldiers huddling in a tiny hole in the side of the wall. They then proceeded to almost befriend me with lots of questions about my personal life and my status back at home. Home—it seemed like a distant and faded place although I had only been part of the war for three days.

I had been daydreaming when a scream of terror aroused me. I spun on my heels in confusion and stumbled having chosen that unfortunate moment to stand on a protruding rock breaking above the damp, muddy surface.

All around me, gunshots could be heard like lightning and bodies were crumpling and dropping dead on the ground. Tears rolled down my muddy cheeks as I fell, rolled, and began sprinting—I ran with all the power left in me, but my tired, strained legs had nothing to give to aid my survival. Just as I readied to give my life to Fate for her to decide what to do with it, I saw it, from the corner of my eye, a hole in the wall—a dugout.

## Day 3 Night: Sanctuary Amongst Danger – 12 October 1917

The barrage of bullets faded into the distance and as night fell, I sat here, crying

myself to sleep, wondering if I will live to see another day. I do believe, even after all the hardships I have faced here, that I will survive.

#### **Day 4: A Glimmer of Hope – 13 October 1917**

After the horrific slaying of thousands—friends and strangers alike—the remnants of our battered army stirred from a jittery, haunted night. Most of us had barely closed our eyes, jolted awake by distant shellfire, the sharp crack of rifles, or the moaning of the wounded echoing through the sodden air. Morning came reluctantly, hidden behind a curtain of low-hanging grey clouds that seemed to mourn with us.

As I made my way along the trench, the weight of yesterday's carnage pressed on me like a physical force. The air was thick with decay. I passed piles of bloated, disfigured corpses, the stench of rot mixing with the sour scent of damp earth and blood. Limbs jutted out from the mud like grotesque sculptures. Men walked past with hollow eyes, stepping over the fallen like they were part of the terrain. No one spoke. We just moved with grim determination, each footstep a protest against despair.

Some soldiers laid duckboards to make the passage less treacherous, others peered over the parapet, rifles ready in case of an attack. We were all soaked, muddied, and hungry—but still alive. In the middle of this desolation, I caught sight of a young soldier helping another bind a wound, their hands trembling but steady. I watched a group share what little rations they had, one man even cracking a thin, brittle smile as he handed over his last biscuit. And in that moment, despite the horror and filth, I felt it—faint but unmistakable—a glimmer, a warm thread of hope weaving its way through the gloom. Maybe, just maybe, some of us would make it through this. Surely it would get better than this? Right...?

#### **Day 5: Poorly Coordinated – 14 October 1917**

I couldn't have been more wrong.

We awoke at about 0500 to prepare for the assault on the German trench. Fear clawed at my chest at the simple sight of my fellow soldiers readying their rifles. The day was spent listening to the heavy bombardment on the opposing army—the occasional screeches and shrieks of dying men did nothing to brighten our already gloomy day.

After what seemed like eons of waiting, we were told to advance into No Man's Land to begin our poorly coordinated attack; by then, torrential rain was thumping on the ground, and it was now 2300. Fat raindrops the size of bottle caps were splattering onto our heads. Slowly, we sank deeper and deeper into the mud. One piece of shrapnel even hit this very book I am writing in now. Had it not been for the fact that I always kept this diary in my chest pocket, the shrapnel would have penetrated into my heart.

As we continued to advance, I saw half a body flying toward me. It hit the ground with a dull thud and the earth shook underfoot. I felt the urge to step out of the line to mourn him; it is to this urge that I almost succumbed. After a long trek in the gooey mud, we finally reached the German trench but they were ready. As I jumped over the barbed wire and fell into a collapsing wall of sandbags, a group of Germans raised their rifles. I fired at one, his face caught in a tragic, frozen moment of acceptance.

### **Day 6: The Small Things – 15 October 1917**

Today was the first day in what felt like forever that no one screamed. No thunder of shells. No wrenching sobs in the dark. Just silence—and the low murmur of card shuffling.

Corporal James—a newfound friend—found a nearly intact deck buried in a food crate—filthy, stained, and two cards short. We sat in a semicircle under a sagging tarpaulin, playing by lantern-light. The rain pattered steadily above like a lullaby. We laughed at jokes that weren't funny, desperate to stitch something human back into the fraying cloth of our lives.

I lost every hand. It didn't matter.

Someone found a chocolate bar in a Red Cross parcel and broke it into twelve pieces. Mine melted in my palm, but I ate it slowly—reverently. It tasted like Christmas mornings and birthdays rolled into one. I cried while I ate it. Not because I was sad, but because I remembered what joy felt like. I almost didn't recognise it. Later, while on watch, I noticed something strange nestled in the trench wall—a small patch of moss, bright green and defiantly alive. It was beautiful. Just... green. That's all. But my God, it stood out like a lantern in the dark. I stared at it for nearly half an hour.

Private Thompson showed me a drawing his little sister sent. Crayon scrawls of sunflowers and blue sky. He folded it into his breast pocket like it was scripture. "It makes me feel like I still belong to the world," he said.

I swear that even the rats were quiet tonight. One scurried across my boot and didn't startle me. I just watched it go, wondering if it had a family, if it ever paused to mourn its dead.

The stars were out when I crawled into my dugout. I could barely see them through the mist, but they were there. And somehow, the faint glimmer reminded me that I'm still alive. I don't know for how much longer. But for tonight, I am breathing. And I'm grateful—for cards, chocolate, moss, and the gentle lie that we might make it through this.

### **Day 7: The Tunnel – 16 October 1917**

I can barely write. My hands tremble. Not from cold, but from fear and pain and the weight of what I know is coming.

At dawn, I was told I'd been assigned to tunnel duty. The Germans had been mining under No Man's Land again, and someone needed to inspect the shafts. I didn't question it. I nodded like a good soldier. Inside, my stomach turned to glass.

I climbed down into the narrow passage with four others. We were quiet. Even jokes felt sacrilegious in that place. It was pitch black, save for our small lanterns. The walls dripped with sweat-like condensation. The air was sour and stifling.

Then the smell hit—sharp, choking, unmistakable. Mustard gas.

"Up! Up! Get out!" I screamed. The others didn't hesitate. They scrambled toward the surface as I turned to block the gas from creeping further into the trench system.

That's when it happened.

A dull, echoing thump. The tunnel shook. Earth cracked. A roar of pressure and heat exploded behind me. I turned just in time to see the entrance collapse. A German demolition charge.

I was sealed in.

By myself.

I clawed at the walls, screamed until my voice gave out. My lantern shattered. The gas—creeping, vile—began to burn my lungs. My eyes blistered. My skin felt like fire. I tore off my tunic and wrapped it around my mouth, but it was no use.

It's been hours, I think. Maybe days. Time doesn't exist down here. My throat is raw. My thoughts come in flashes now—of my mother's lullabies, of my brother laughing as we skipped stones, of her smile the last time I saw her. I should have told her I loved her. I should have written more. I should have done everything.

I don't want to die like this.

Alone.

In the dark.

Unmarked.

No grave, no goodbye.

I write now by feel, fingers tracing the last pages of this diary. If someone finds this—please, please let them know I mattered.

That I was here.

That I was brave.

That I loved.

And if I'm forgotten—if I become nothing more than dust beneath Passchendaele—then let this be my final breath:

I was human.

I was young.

**And I didn't deserve to die this way.**

### **Epilogue: What Remains – Months Later**

They found his helmet buried in the rubble of the collapsed tunnel.

The engineers unearthed some bones, a scrap of torn uniform, and a diary half-dissolved by earth and water. They pieced together what they could. Most pages were illegible. Some were folded and pressed together like desperate hands praying for salvation.

He never made it out.

A small wooden cross was erected near the spot. It bore no name. Just the word ANZAC burned into the grain, weathered and worn by the endless Belgian rain. Back home, a mother received a telegram. Her hands shook as she opened it. She dropped to her knees in the garden, beside the very flowers her son used to water. The wind blew gently. The daffodils didn't understand. How could they?

His younger brother never spoke again.

His sweetheart waited. For months. Then years. Every knock at the door, every footstep on gravel, she turned her head in hope. He never came. She kept his letters under her pillow until the ink faded into ghostly lines.

The war ended.

The world moved on.

But some names were never etched into stone. Some voices never echoed in memorial halls. Some stories—like this one—survive only because someone took the time to write them down, even in the dark.