

2nd batch of First World War Unit Diaries Go Online Revealing the Challenges of the World's First Industrialised War

EMBARGOED UNTIL Thursday 13 March 2014, London, 00:01 GMT – Today The National Archives is making the second batch of 3,987 digitised First World War unit war diaries from France and Flanders available online via its [First World War 100](#) portal.

This second batch contains records relating to the last of the Cavalry and numbers 8-33 Infantry Divisions deployed to the Western Front in the First World War. They cover the entire period of the units' involvement in France and Belgium, from their arrival on the front to their departure at the end of the war.

William Spencer, author and military records specialist at The National Archives said: "This second batch of unit war diaries provides detailed accounts of the actions of the next troops to arrive on the Western Front. They show the advances in technology that made it the world's first industrialised war with many mounted troops going into battle at first with swords on horseback and ending the war with machine guns and tanks. They also reveal the troops' experiences and responses to new military technology as it developed throughout the war."

The unit war diaries show both simple yet effective tactics – such as 'dummy soldiers' operated by strings - alongside the introduction of more advanced twentieth century technologies such as the first (German) flamethrowers and the first (British) gas attacks. Given these advancements in technology and the increasing threats, suspicions were heightened – even extending to cats and dogs that were believed to be working for the Germans (file ref: WO 95/1822).

Included in this batch are records of the Indian Cavalry (file ref: WO 95/1157-1188) – the first troops from the Commonwealth to join the British Army with first actions in Givenchy in the autumn of 1914 - and the South African Brigades (file ref: WO 95/1777-1786) - whose first major contribution was at the Somme where they saw the loss of around 80% of their men at the Battle of Delville Wood (14 July – 3 September 1916). Also contained in this batch is the unit war diary for The Welsh Guards regiment which was only formed in 1915 and saw its first fight at the Battle of Loos in September 1915 (File ref: WO 95/1224).

Highlights from the 2nd batch of unit war diaries:

- **Note from Captain L.B. Kenny on the success of using 'dummy attacks'** and sketch for how to use dummy figures entitled 'Method of Fixing and operating Chinese Attack' (*WO 95/1678 – pg. 48-49 of PDF on press preview site*).
- **A report on the attack at Hooge on 30 July 1915** about the use of flamethrowers "2nd line trench saw a sheet of flame go up rapidly behind the stables [...] The Germans were using liquid fire [...] The fire ran down G4 & G5 trenches as fast as a man could run, the flames appearing about 10ft high." (*WO 95/1864/2 – see p. 85 of PDF on press preview site*) A Victoria Cross was won by S C Woodroffe for service in this attack (see WO 95/1896 for the unit he was in).

- **Account of gas attacks in the Battle of Loos 1915** from a 'Lecture on the part played by the 9th Division in the battle of Loos by Lieut. Colonel S.E. Hollond' (*in unit war diary pg. 20-43 of WO 95/1733/2 – part 4 on press preview site*).
- **Account of Indian Cavalry action on the Western Front – 'Report on Operations carried out by Mhow Cavalry on 1 December 1917'**. "patrol galloped up to the trench and crossed it, pretending not to see the Germans, who let them go by. They then turned about and galloped back under heavy machine gun fire [...] Too much cannot be said of the spirit and conduct of all ranks of the Central India Horse throughout the day." (*WO 95/1157/1 part 2 – pg. 67-70 of PDF on press preview site*). Gobind Singh won a Victoria Cross for his actions in this battle on 1 December 1917.
- **Letter from Colonel Murray Threipland** ([awarded the Distinguished Service Order on 3 June 1916](#)) dated 28 September 2015 reporting on the Welsh Guard's first action in Loos (*WO 95/1224 – pg. 27-37 of PDF on press preview site*)
- **Intelligence report no. 14 in unit war diary WO 95/1822** reports incident on 8/9th July 1915 of a brown paper kite that was found in the trenches with a message from the Germans which was translated as follows: "You can fill your trenches with devils – we Germans fear nothing in the world [...] Englishmen, how badly you shoot! [...] You Englishmen – we have wine, sausage, and meat – your Englishmen are hungry and thirsty..." (*WO 95/1822 - pg. 99 of PDF on press preview site*).
- **Intelligence Report no.19 in unit war diary WO 95/1822** reports "Two cats and one dog are under suspicion as they have been in the habit of crossing our trenches at night; steps are being taken to trap them if possible." (*WO 95/1822 - pg. 112 of PDF on press preview site*).
- **Sketch of biscuit boxes used as latrines** (WO 95/1703 – pg.44 of PDF).

Operation War Diary Advances!

In the first 8 weeks since the launch of *Operation War Diary*; a joint project between The National Archives, Imperial War Museums and Zooniverse, over 10,000 people across the globe have volunteered to tag names, places and other details in the diaries. Initial reports show that there have been 260,096 tags relating to named individuals, 332,484 tags relating to places and nearly 300,000 tags relating to activities. This is the equivalent of two years work or someone working 40 hours a week for four years.

With over 200 diaries already tagged and verified, this innovative crowdsourcing project goes one step further than traditional transcription by using the data to digitally map and analyse patterns and trends in the unit war diaries offering new perspectives on the First World War.

We are encouraging more people to take part in *Operation War Diary* to allow this innovative project to advance. Volunteers wishing to take part in *Operation War Diary* can join the project here: www.operationwardiary.org.

For media enquiries please contact Rebecca Simpson, Press Officer at The National Archives on 0208 392 5277 or by email: press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Notes to Editors:

Spokespeople available:

William Spencer is Principal Military Specialist at The National Archives where he has worked since 1993. He served in the Royal Navy, including operational service in the Falklands in 1982, and holds an MA in War Studies from the prestigious Department of War Studies at King's College London. William is the author of the bestselling books *Medals: the Researcher's Guide*, *First World War Army Service Records*, *Air Force Records* and *Family History in the Wars*.

More on the Unit War Diaries (file series WO 95)

The National Archives has one of the largest First World War collections in the world. The diaries are the most popular records from The National Archives' First World War collection (file series WO 95) and the first in a series of First World War records to be digitised as part of The National Archives' centenary programme – [First World War 100](#) – which spans a five-year period from June 2014 to June 2019.

The unit war diaries are arranged by front, then by division, then by the units within each division. This digitisation will allow researchers around the world to access the diaries as never before. We plan to digitise more war diaries as part of our centenary programme.

First World War 100 - The National Archives First World War Centenary Programme

[First World War 100](#) - a new digital platform - has been created to guide people through the vast collection of historic records, letters, wills, maps, photographs, illustrations and artworks held by The National Archives. Adding content throughout the five year programme, [First World War 100](#) will be the central hub for the public to search and view official First World War records.

About The National Archives:

For the record, for good...The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk www.legislation.gov.uk

First World War Centenary Partnership, led by IWM

The National Archives is a member of the First World War Centenary Partnership, established in 2010 and led by IWM. The First World War Centenary Partnership is a network of over 2,000 cultural and educational not-for-profit organisations from 37 countries, who are producing a collective programme of events, activities and resources from 2014 – 2018 to mark the centenary. www.1914.org

Government's First World War Centenary Programme

On 4 August 2014 it will be 100 years since Britain entered the First World War. Within government the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is leading plans to build a commemoration fitting of this significant milestone in world history. As the Prime Minister made clear when he launched the programme in October 2012, the main theme will be remembrance with a particular focus on bringing the centenary alive for young people. There will be a number of national events across the four years, as well as cross-Government programmes to help deliver this. <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/first-world-war-centenary>

