

Primary Source Excerpts

Excerpt 1

The enemy battle-cruisers came up very rapidly, and must have made a speed of at least 26 knots . . . The enemy had separated and formed two groups, the leading one having three, and the other two ships. They were trying to keep at the farthest firing distance . . . The enemy battlecruisers then turned at once to a northerly course to . . . turn on the *Blücher* . . . Very soon after her engines were damaged another shot caused an explosion and a fire . . . the *Blücher* was sunk.

—Manfred von Richthofen, *Der Rote Kampfflieger (The Red Fighter Pilot)*, 1917

Excerpt 2

We heard strange throbbing noises, and lumbering [moving] slowly towards us came three huge mechanical monsters such as we had never seen before . . . Big metal things they were, with two sets of caterpillar wheels that went right round the body. There was a bulge on each side with a door in the bulging part, and machine-guns on swivels poked out from either side . . . There they sat, squat [thick] monstrous things . . . crushing the sides of our trench . . . [and] with their machine-guns swiveling around and firing like mad.

—Bert Cheney, *An Account of the First Tanks in Action*, 1916

Excerpt 3

I was awakened by a terrific crash . . . I could hardly breathe . . . I was put into an ambulance and taken to the base . . . I suppose I resembled a kind of fish with my mouth open gasping for air. It seems as if my lungs were gradually shutting up and my heart pounded away in my ears like the beat of a drum. On looking at the chap next to me I felt sick, for green stuff was oozing from the side of his mouth . . . I dozed off for short periods . . . I was always surprised when I found myself awake, for I felt sure that I would die in my sleep. So little was known about treatment for various gases.

—William Pressey, *Gassed at Messines Ridge*, 1917

Excerpt 4

There's a zone
 Wild and lone
 None claim, none own,
 That goes by the name of No-Man's Land;
 Its frontiers are bastioned [defended], and wired, and mined,
 The rank [foul] grass shudders and shakes in the wind,
 And never a roof nor a tree you find
 In No-Man's Land.

—Major “H. D.’A. B.,” *No-Man’s Land*,
 exact date unknown

**Excerpt 5**

I had taken the position of the three [enemy] ships before submerging, and I succeeded in getting another flash [look] through my periscope before I began action. I soon reached what I regarded as a good shooting point. Then I loosed one of my torpedoes at the middle ship. I was then about twelve feet under water, and got the shot off in good shape . . . I climbed to the surface to get a sight through my tube of the effect, and discovered that the shot had gone straight and true, striking the [enemy] ship . . . There were a fountain of water, a burst of smoke, a flash of fire . . . Then I heard a roar and felt reverberations [a boom] sent through the water by the detonation [explosion]. [The enemy ship] had been broken apart, and sank in a few minutes.

—Otto Weddigen, *A Memoir of the Sinking of the Aboukir, Cressy, and Hogue by U-boat U-9*, 1914

Excerpt 6

Our gun's crew was busy mounting the . . . gun on the parapet [walls] and bringing up extra ammunition from the dugout . . . I trained my . . . gun on their [the enemy] trench and its bullets were raking the parapet [scraping the wall]. Then over they [the Germans] came, bayonets glistening . . . they looked like some horrible nightmare. All along our trench . . . guns spoke . . . They went down in heaps, but new ones took the place of the fallen. Nothing could stop that mad rush.

—Arthur Guy Empey, *Over the Top*, 1917

Excerpt 7

It was yesterday evening, just as night fell, that it happened. The day had been fairly calm . . . and nothing forewarned us of a German attack. Suddenly one of my comrades shouted, “Hallo! what is this coming down on us? Any one would think it was petroleum [fuel].” At that time we could not believe the truth, but the liquid which began to spray on us was certainly some kind of petroleum. The Germans were pumping it from hoses . . . A few seconds later incendiary [fire-starting] bombs began to rain down on us and the whole trench burst into flame . . . the men began to scream terribly, tearing off their clothes, trying to beat out the flames . . . We had our eyebrows and eyelashes burned off, and clothes were burned in great patches and our flesh was sizzling like roasting meat.

—Philip Gibbs, “Story of the Evening of Liquid Flames,” in *Soul of the War*, 1915

Excerpt 8

Last night Fritz [the Germans] put on a whale of a bombardment [attack], and I don’t see how any of us escaped to tell the story. In the thick of it our communications were knocked out and I was detailed to repair the telephone line . . . Well, I thought of all the mean things I’d done in my life, breathed a little prayer, climbed out of my foxhole, and darted out . . . Flashes of exploding artillery at intervals lighted up the blackness of the night. Explosions of enemy shells on every hand and the scream of big ones going overhead to back areas added to the thunderous uproar so that I could not have heard my own voice had I dared to speak . . . I was splicing [joining] the wire when—Shriek! Bang! A ton of steel came over me.

—Corporal Elmer Sherwood, diary entry, October 30, 1918

Excerpt 9

I turned from this extraordinary spectacle in midair to witness another which in all my life at the front I have never seen equaled in horror and awfulness. The picture of it has haunted my dreams during many nights since . . . I saw that a general fight was on between the remaining ten Fokkers and the eight Spads . . . Like a flash [Lieutenant] White zoomed up . . . and made a direct plunge for the enemy machine . . . without firing a shot the heroic White rammed the Fokker head on while the two machines were approaching each other at the rate of 230 miles per hour! It was a horrible yet thrilling sight . . . Wings went through wings and at first glance both the Fokker and the Spad seemed to disintegrate. Fragments filled the air for a moment, then the two broken fusilages, bound together by the terrific collision fell swiftly down and landed in one heap on the bank of the Meuse [River]!

—Eddie Rickenbacker, *Fighting the Flying Circus*, 1919
