

17 September 1914

Dear family,

The battle of the Marne has just finished 5 days ago. We were very lucky, we were retreating after the battle of Guise and the German armies were getting ready to march on Paris when the French general, someone called Joffre, noticed a big space between the two German armies and made us charge through it. It was a great victory, the Germans were encircled and they retreated till the river Aisne where they dug trenches, channels in the ground that are used as protection. These trenches have barbed wire in front and machine guns behind that kill anyone who tries to pass in no man's land, the land in the middle of their and our trench, and obviously our generals made us dig our own trenches.

Trench life is so boring and painful. They are all damp, putrid and there is a smell of rotting bodies. Some soldiers are catching already a new illness, trench foot, a disease that eats away the flesh of your feet. We are all really afraid of getting it. These trenches require really lots of work. Every day the generals order us to repair the barbed wire and to reinforce the trenches but they refuse to make us build dug-outs for us. Dug-outs are deep holes in the ground that are safe and comfortable but only the generals can have them as they say that this situation isn't going to last long. Even the food isn't so great, I remember mum's magnificent cakes and then I think of the canned food they give us here, stews of meat and vegetable that taste like paper! I think we are going to stay like this for lots of time. Yesterday a group of people volunteered to go 'over the top' at night to shoot at the enemy. They were exterminated by the enemy machine guns. It was a horrible massacre. Tomorrow I am going to do the sentry in a sap, a trench dug towards the enemy to spy the Germans, I am afraid of sleeping there. If I am caught sleeping I will be shot. I am very tired after the retreat prior to the battle. All the soldiers had to carry the Lee-Enfield and a big pack of other stuff that includes shovels, ammunition and grenades. 2 days ago it rained and the trench became like a big mud lake for pigs and we got all soaked and lots of pestering rats appeared from nowhere. We are all bored, we play cards and some of us write poetry. I really hope this war is going to end soon. Some time ago we passed near a trench built by the Germans, it was perfect, it had dug-outs for troops and the boards on the ground were much better placed than ours. We think the Germans are getting ready for an attack. They continue to fire at us with their artillery. Hell breaks out as they shoot. Explosions everywhere, unbearable sounds, hisses and shouts. We all hear out for the sound of approaching shells knowing that we could be dead any second. It seems that these trenches are undestroyable. Every time one of our men pokes his head out of the protective sandbags placed on the borders of the trench, he gets shot by enemy snipers. It is rumored that the generals are planning to make us go over the top and storm their trenches. I don't even want to think about it. That would mean certain death.

See you soon, *James*