

“We Couldn’t Enlist Quickly Enough”

Interviewer

Tell me your name.

Ted Francis

Edward Francis.

Interviewer

Okay. Is that good? And first of all, in 1914, tell me what was going on in your life and did you hear anything about what was going on in Sarajevo?

Ted Francis

Well, in 1914 I had a very mundane job working at a stationery which was in contact with several firms making their stationary as they like it, and I was the one who chose the paper for the envelopes and writing in that particular. It was only a small firm, about 20, that was all older than me. In fact I was the youngest one there.

Ted Francis

When I did read the paper in August 1914 that the Austrian king [Franz Ferdinand] had been assassinated in Austria on a visit I never connected that in any way with a war with Britain. I thought this was out of our realm altogether.

Ted Francis

I thought it was between Germany and other countries, but not us. I had no idea that war was impending. But later on, in two days time, on August 20th August the 6th war was declared with England because the Germans had invaded France, and we had a contract kind of thing with France that if they was attacked we should help them. And personally I didn’t think a lot of that, but we did and we more or less had to assist the French in keeping back the Germans who were already going all over France and with the idea of taking over the country. And of course England must have a reply for that, and they declared war.

Ted Francis

And I was still at my work when all the girls there were girls—that is mostly married women—elderly; as I’ve said before, I was the youngest one there. They said on August the 6th whether I was there—they said, “Ted, you can’t stop here now.” I said, “Why not?” They says, “Well, there’s a war on; I’ve just seen Lord Kitchener pointing at you saying that the country needs you. You must go and enlist.” I said, “But I’m not old enough.” I says, “I’m only 18,” I said, “you can’t enlist until you’re 19.” “Oh” and they talked and talked and talked.

Ted Francis

And somehow I thought “Well, that wouldn’t be a bad idea—getting rid of this mundane job.” And of course as a boy of eight I loved the tin drum in front of me and marching up and down with the youngsters. And I was also in the Boy Scouts and I liked that, so I thought, “Well, perhaps it would be a good idea.”

Ted Francis

And I stood in a queue at the Birmingham Town Hallâ€”as you know itâ€™s a large building. There was a large queue there on two days after war was declared and I joined the queue to enlist. But what I didnâ€™t knowâ€”we kept a public house at the timeâ€”and what I didnâ€™t know that two of our customers had passed by and recognized me. And of course they went straight to my mother and father and said, â€œYour Ted is in a line for enlisting as a soldier.â€

Ted Francis

And of course they went absolutely mad. Anyway, Iâ€™d passed very easily. I was very fit in those days and fond of all kinds of sports and exercise. And went allâ€”Iâ€™d really signed on and took the oath and the shillingâ€”the â€œKingâ€™s Shillingâ€ as they called it then.

Interviewer

Whenâ€”well, let me ask another question. When was the first time thatâ€”when did you first get a sense that you might become involved in this war?

Ted Francis

Personally or the country?

Interviewer

Yeah, personally.

Ted Francis

Personally.

Ted Francis

Yeah, when was the firstâ€”

Ted Francis

Yes, well, obviously it was the first day I enlisted. If I enlisted it wasnâ€™t like I enlisted in peacetime. I enlisted to fight the Germansâ€”to keep the Germans back, as everyone did.

Interviewer

What did everybody think? Were you the only one that was enlistâ€”what was the spirit at the time?

Ted Francis

What was the what?

Interviewer

The spirit, what was the attitude of all your friends?

Ted Francis

Oh, the spirit!

Interviewer

Wait one second"okay, now go ahead.

Ted Francis

The spirit really was absolutely they couldn't get to be a soldier quick enough because there was so big a queue as they had to tell them to come next day. And when I got over my mother says, "Have you enlisted as a soldier?" I said, "Yes."

Ted Francis

She says, "You little fool," she says, "only thieves and vagabonds join the Army," which was more or less true in those days. And she says, "You'll go back and tell them you've changed your mind and you don't want to be a soldier."

Ted Francis

I says, "Mother, I can't do that. I have taken an oath for King and country and I can't break that, and even if I did I should be arrested." So she said, "Oh," and she said, "I suppose you'll be in France in a couple of days," and I said, "She can't see you again. I said, "No, mother, you've got it wrong. I says, "We shall have at least six to eight months training right here in England; not very far away."

Ted Francis

At that she seemed comforted a bit and she says, "You'll be able to come home then?" And I says, "Yes." Well, at that time, why I don't know, everyone"everyone thought the war would be over at Christmas. And that was why there was such a rush to get in to be a soldier. They thought"really thought"and quite a number of essential people"they thought"and with that thought, my mother was satisfied. She says, "Oh, we shall have you by Christmas." And that was the end of that.

Ted Francis

But I didn't know that that was the last time I shall see my mother alive. Because after five months training, not very far away in Malvern, which was only 30 miles away. I had to get leave there to attend a funeral.

Interviewer

Did you know what this war was about?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes, very much so. As I have said before we had got a pact with France that if ever she was attacked, England would come to her aid. And she was being attacked, very, very much so. They was already at the quarter of France and advancing, so that"that was a"one good reason for everyone"for the private upwards to go and enlist.

Interviewer

And you mentioned that your mother said that it was only vagabonds who joined the Army. What was different about this?

Ted Francis

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer

What was different about this? Why were so many people like yourselves“young professionals, joining?

Ted Francis

[Laughter] Well, like so many people myself, you must remember that the ages was anything from 16 Â½ putting themselves at 19 when he came to enlist, to about 22. Every young man had that idea. You see wages in those days and jobs were very, very poorly paid. And you worked for 15 shillings a week and that was less than a pound. For 48 hours.

Ted Francis

And that“™s why this seemed a wonderful opening for adventure“something they had read about in books. Like the “œCharge of the Light Brigadeœ or the South African War. You see those who read books in the free library (as I had) I thought, “œOh, it was wonderful to be a soldier.œ And that“™s why I joined more than anything.

The Pals Battalion Family

Interviewer

And what was different about the battalion that you joined? Was it“it was a city battalion; they called them Pals Battalions, didn“™t they? What was that about?

Ted Francis

Well, most big towns had their own battalions. In other words, they was built up by people who worked there the same as it was built up in and around Birmingham. And they thought they would start a battalion. But so big was the rush to get to get to be a soldier, to be a“they thought“the one thing of the young chaps there was, “œelf I don“™t hurry up I shall be out of it,œ each with the idea that this war would be over at Christmas and they wanted to get in and be there.

Ted Francis

And as lâ“it was necessary to“the thought that it was necessary at least six months training never crossed my idea or any other people, but that was the case. Until 1917-18 when we were short of men, we were scraping the bottom of the barrel. In 1918 we had to go around all the people on munitions and see if a lady or a woman could do the same in order to get men to join the Army. And there was no “œifœ or “œbutœ“you“™d got to join the Army, you see? In those times. And“

Interviewer

So what was different about the Pals?

Ted Francis

Different what?

Interviewer

What was different about the Pals Battalions?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes, well, the Pals was first thought of practically almost on the 4th of August and that was when the war broke out. It said that it would make a battalion of the workers of Birmingham and the surroundings. And the idea at first was to make one battalion, which was roughly about 1,000 men, but to their greatest surprise, 4,500 men in the end volunteered for the Birmingham Battalions and they had to make it three battalions and not one.

Ted Francis

And I was in the 16thâ€”well, allâ€”Iâ€”I joined only two days after the war. There was so many wanted to get in the city battalionsâ€”the Birmingham City Battalions, as they was called, I was in the 16th and the three battalions was called the 14th, 15th and 16th Royal Warwicks or the 1st, 2nd and 3rd.

Interviewer

But what did it mean? Who were you fightâ€”who were you going to war with? What did it mean to be in such a battalion? Who would you be going to war with?

Ted Francis

Well, we all spoke the same language in the same twang more or less, and you see when training and you was all from Birmingham or just around you quickly made friends of your own kind. And that was a great thing. It was quite different to join in the Army and not knowing where you was going or what battalion you was going in.

Interviewer

So did you know people? Did you know people who joined up with you?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes; scores of them, yes, yes. And the best time actually of the war was my eight months of training before we went to France. And there, as you will see on various photographs that I had, weâ€”I was in a section of about 14 men and we became like one good family. We knew about everybodyâ€™s home life and where we came from and what we thought of the war, etc. And that grew up, you see, in eight months or 12 months of training until we were so itchy to get to France.

Ted Francis

You see the greatâ€”the great idea, whoever thought it up, that the war would be over at Christmas, thatâ€™s whatâ€™s getting to our lads. They thought theyâ€™d be too late, itâ€™d be all over and they really badly wanted (and I was the same) badly wanted to get to France to get in the fighting. Because as I say, â€œfightingâ€ we called it, but donâ€™t forget we was innocent 18-year-olds. And we didnâ€™t know much about it; only from books. And you couldnâ€™t rely on those books because they was years and years old like the South African War when mostly soldiers was on horseback.

Interviewer

So did youâ€™weâ€™™I move on in just a momentâ€™but just tell me briefly did you join up with any brothers or with your friends or were there other people that you knew on that line at the town hall?

Ted Francis

No, friends I had very little. But one of the biggest surprises to meâ€™my elder brother, four years older, whoâ€™™d only just passed for an accountantâ€™after lâ€™™d been in the Army five months I had a card, a letter from him saying heâ€™™d joined alsoâ€™the city battalions. Well, that was a big surprise for me because Harry was a well-educated sort of man and was about to start his own business and I thought well, it mustâ€™he must have the pull as lâ€™™ve got to get into the Army to see these things through.

Ted Francis

And weâ€™although we wasnâ€™™t exactly together in the battalion we saw a lot of each other, more so in France than in England.

Interviewer

And what would people say to you if you didnâ€™™t join up? If you didnâ€™™t join up?

Ted Francis

Ha. Well, the war had only been on two or three days, and I was walking downtown and an elderly lady came to me and says, â€™œWhat are you doing here?â€™ I says, â€™œWhat do you mean?â€™ She says, â€™œDonâ€™™t you know thereâ€™™s a war on?â€™ And she picked a white feather out of her bag and gave me.

Ted Francis

Well, I was very annoyed at that. And if it was a man, I should have punched his nose, but she was a lady and she made itâ€™made off.

Ted Francis

But I reported to the officer when I got back to camp and he says, â€™œOh, that wonâ€™™t do.â€™ And he made that little bagâ€™that little disk as you see on my coat, which says â€™œCity of Birmingham Battalion, 1914,â€™ with the royal crown above it.

Interviewer

What did a white feather mean?

Ted Francis

A white feather means youâ€™™re a coward. You should have joined up but youâ€™™re a coward; youâ€™™re frightened.

Interviewer

Which wasnâ€™™t the case.

Ted Francis

Oh, it wasn't the case if I was a soldier then but no uniform. You see, they had tens of thousands of uniforms to be made, quick, and we wasn't prepared for war in any way, either in munitions or uniforms or anything else. And we had to wait a considerable time until the generous Birmingham Corporation came in and said, "For the three battalions we will buy them all a blue uniform and a hat to go with it." They bought us a splendid outfit, which we wore for about four or five months until we had khaki. You see there were so many thousands of men wanted khaki uniforms that they couldn't cope with it.

Ted Francis

But we was very glad of the Birmingham Council to give us all a really good uniform which looked very smart—that was absolutely fitted to us in a few weeks time. And of course that had to go when we had khaki uniforms.

Training for the Trenches
Interviewer

Did you—what sort of training did you get? Did you think you got proper training for the war that you wound up fighting?

Ted Francis

Oh, we—because we was the first, you see, we was the first to join up, only a week after the war started we had a wonderful training and every man jack of us enjoyed it to the full. We went to Malvern, which is about 30 miles from Birmingham, a lovely place, a little cottage town I called it.

Ted Francis

And the people there gave us a wonderful welcome and we was out in tents; each section or company all got together and the training of which I was training before I joined up. I was very, very strong. I used to hold exhibitions in the back of my father's pub and lifted weights that six-foot policemen strong couldn't touch. And I enjoyed all the work that the Army could give us, but of course we didn't stop all the while there; we moved to various places and came the great day for us young ones where they issued us with a rifle, the newest Lee-Enfield rifle.

Ted Francis

That was—if you'd of seen some of the lads looking at it that had never held a gun in their life—and afterwards polishing it and then afterwards we went to the range where we have so many bullets to fire at a target to see what sort of a shot we were.

Interviewer

This training experience, the experience that you were getting in a field in England, was that—looking back—was it the right sort of preparation that you needed?

Ted Francis

Oh, we had the best preparation that any battalions who followed us, because they hadn't the time, you see? Where we had eight months, the following battalions—because the men was wanted so quickly in France, the men was got ready in four months. Well, they didn't have training like we had.

Interviewer

But did your instructors know anything about trench warfare at that point?

Ted Francis

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer

Did your instructors know anything about trench warfare at that point?

Ted Francis

Well, no, they didn't. You see, most of our NCOs—sergeants, corporals and that—were old soldiers of the South African War who had been retired more or less—they was old enough to be my father. But they was in charge; they'd been in Army probably for 16-17-18 years. And been called up again to look after us boys. And they knew their job and they did it thoroughly, and we was congratulated as a battalion by the I-officers when we was ready to go to France.

Interviewer

But I guess my question—were they perhaps—were they training you for a different sort of war than the one that you would wind up fighting?

Ted Francis

Well, they couldn't really. They tried to. You see what we was training for was a trench war. Nobody in South Africa or any other battle had known a trench war, a war where you're in trenches facing each other and with the shells coming over every minute. These people knew nothing about that.

Ted Francis

Until people who had been in France for a—for a few months were sent back to England, and they took over the training knowing what we'd got to put up with.

All Quiet in the Bray Trenches

Interviewer

So what did you expect? Did—when did it hit you that this was going to be a very different sort of a war? When did it hit you personally?

Ted Francis

Well, I used to—I read Lord Kitchener's report after the war had been on a month, and he ridiculed the idea that this war would be over at Christmas. He says, 'I'll give this war four years,' and he was, well, six months out—the war was on four years and six months.

Ted Francis

And that—that didn't—it was in the papers, of course, and—but it didn't upset our lads; if you'd have said 10 years—we were still in England mind you; we knew nothing—we were actually, we were itching to go to France. But we had no idea what it

was like when we got there. All we was thinking aboutâ€”â€œWe must get to France before the war is over.â€ Everyone had the idea that it was going to be a short war the moment the English came in or the war they thought was finished. But it wasnâ€™t.

Interviewer

So whenâ€”when in France, when when you were already in France, did you realize that this was going to be a difficult and brutal war? When did it firstâ€”

Ted Francis

Well, we crossed over to France after weâ€™d finished our training and our first look was atâ€”we landed below and we had a walk at least 15 miles to where our camp was. Well, 15 miles in full equipment on as well and carried all the things that we had to in those days was a lot, and most of us were exhausted and some of them actually fell out, but we stayed at the came only a short time before we went to a little village called Bray that was on the Somme; Bray-sur-Somme, where the war was quiet there.

Ted Francis

When I say â€œquiet,â€ they was facing each other in trenches but there was no attempt to go any further. We wasnâ€™t attacking them and they wasnâ€™t attacking us. But there was bullets and shells and bombs every minute of the day trying to hit someone. And they was called â€œquietâ€ trenches for the new people from England to get broke in to see whatâ€”the weather, of course, at that time was not so bad.

Ted Francis

But came the time that it was our turn to go up into the trenches and we was all more or less all very pleased with that and the regiment coming out was an old regiment, had been there almost since the start, and they looked at us and smiled as if to say, ha, youâ€™re smiling now but you wonâ€™t be later.

Ted Francis

And anyway, we passed seven days and nights in there, and beyond heavy shelling and machine gun firing, nobody was hurt, and after a week we came out.

Ted Francis

Our nextâ€”we had a rest of six days or seven days and back in we went again. And then came the greatest sensation, I call it, but it wasnâ€™t a sensation; someone said to us excitedly, â€œJack Smith!â€ I said, â€œWhat about him?â€ (I knew Jack Smith.) â€œHeâ€™s dead; heâ€™s been shot,â€â€”the first one of the battalion to be shot. I said, â€œWhat?â€ â€œYes, heâ€™s dead; been shot. He put his head too far over and a sniper got him.â€ And that caused a bit of a sensation amongst the lads.

Ted Francis

They thought, â€œWell, this is not exactly what we come for kind-of-business. But later on, from that day onwards, when we went to the trenches it was 3 killed, 4 killed, 5 killed, 20 killed, 100 killed, and then by then we was veterans. We knew all about the trenches and its risks and what we had to do and what we had to suffer, because after a week in the trenches, or a fortnight in the trenches, withâ€”when the winter came on with muddled water you got to put up with lice and rats.

Ted Francis

Rats was in the hundreds everywhere. If we was billeted when we came out to a French shed or something and a farm, you couldnâ€™t get a good sleepâ€”we slept on the floorâ€”no bedsâ€”we couldnâ€™t get a good sleep because the rats would nibble our ears and you had to wake up and shoo them away. Butâ€”

Interviewer

Howâ€”describe for me the trenchâ€”what it was like to live in those trenches for a week at a stretch when the conditions starting getting really bad.

Ted Francis

Well, when the trenchâ€”when the weather changed to rain and mud it is impossible, almost, to describe the ground. You must remember that we had between two and three miles behind the trenches to walk to get into the trenches, and in that two-mile walk it was absolutely terribly muddy and sometimes you was in water up to your waist and youâ€™ve got to walk in like that to do a week toâ€”before you got in the firing line. But the idea of walking, it used to take us practically six or seven or eight hours to do that two miles, and we arrived at our posts in the frontline of the trenches absolutely exhausted.

Ted Francis

Because under those conditions they couldnâ€™t bring food up; they couldnâ€™t bring water up; it was all spilled, all the people bringing it was shot down or shelled, and many and many a time weâ€™d only got the water and food that we carried and itâ€™s got to last seven or eight days, so we was hungry and thirsty most of the time, and we got to keep a sharp lookout because the Germans was hotting it up; I mean raids at night.

Interviewer

We have to change the tape. Do you want a drink of water? [Laughter]

Crossing â€œOver the Topâ€ to No Manâ€™s Land

Interviewer

This is Ted Francis, tape 216.

Interviewer

Ted, when it was muddy and you were hungry and you were in the trenchesâ€”was this the adventure that everybody had expected?

Ted Francis

[Laughter] Iâ€™m afraid not. We used to say when weâ€™d been there about six months or eight months covered in mud, wet through practically all day, and absolutely chewed up by lice, we used to say, â€œAnd to think when we was at lovely Malvern, training, we wanted to come to this hole.â€ [Laughter] I said, â€œYes, we didnâ€™t know.â€

Ted Francis

But as time went on, when we was there eight months we felt like, you know, old soldiers. Weâ€™d been there, we could look upon the new people coming, like we came eight months ago, and look at them and say, â€œAh, you donâ€™t know what youâ€™re in

for.â€ But we did. And the times that we went inâ€in and outâ€was coming to a close because they decided on this particular quiet sector to make an attack.

Ted Francis

There was a certain German trench of three or 400 yards, maybe more, in front, that they decided weâ€™d have a go to take, and that means, of course, going over the top and dashing for this trench.

Ted Francis

Well, in little assaults like that they got as many guns going forâ€that four or five daysâ€as possible on the German lines and the Germans instinctively knew that something was going to happen and that means us coming over. And of course the day came (the morning came rather) when at 6:00 or such times, officers of which are down below us in the trenches with a whistle, and when they blow that whistle, we got to dash out of the trenches and make for this German placeâ€trench.

Ted Francis

And it is in those few four or five minutes that we lookâ€look at each other and say (this is the first time, remember) we look at each other and say, â€œOh, well, now I shall do this.â€ Some were visibly shaking; some were crying; some were almost shell-shocked before they start because the noise then of all this shellfire of the Germans and our own machine guns and their machines going was enough. Itâ€™s perfectly true to say that everyone who was in France was afraid. But itâ€™s how they show it on the face that made the difference between a strong youth and a weak man.

Ted Francis

And itâ€™s in those few minutes that weâ€™d look at each other before we go over the top and wonder if theyâ€™ll ever get through it. And they are visibly shaking. And I was not so bad as some of them, but I was wondering what we was in for, and of course when the whistle went we had to scramble over.

Ted Francis

What caused most casualties was the fact that the Germansâ€ [Coughs] the Germans had got machine guns fixed up on the top of your trench and if you got up too quickly youâ€™d receive several bullets, and that was a cause of a lot of casualties in that leap over the trench to goâ€to cover those three-four-500 yards. Fortunately they was covered with shell holes and thatâ€™s what we made for.

Interviewer

Did you see this happen? Did you see somebody climbing up over the top and getting shot?

Ted Francis

[Laughter] Oh, yes, manyâ€

Interviewer

And once you see that, what makes you continue?

Ted Francis

Ah. [Laughter] Well, duty, for a start.

Interviewer

Okay. Start fromâ€”what do you see? What does it look like?

Ted Francis

What does what look like?

Interviewer

When youâ€™re waiting to goâ€”is it up a ladder, are you scrambling over a ditch?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes, well, we did have a ladder and help to get over. But the point is, it was foolish of the officers behind, and you must imagine in those daysâ€”it wasnâ€™t like the Army of todayâ€”there was terrible discipline there; say the wrong word and you was in for it or theâ€”even if you walked the wrong way you was in for it.

Ted Francis

And when you went over, a few yards behind you, the officer also had a whistle to blow and he also had a loaded revolver in his right hand and anyone was a bit slow to go over the top would receive a shot by his foot, just to remind him that he was there and what about it over. But that was onlyâ€”

Interviewer

One moment. The problem thereâ€”try not to lean forward because the mic is pointedâ€”

Ted Francis

Itâ€™s I canâ€™t hear, you see?

Interviewer

Right. So you know what? Iâ€™ll lean forward and then wait for me to sit back before you answer. So ifâ€”can you hear me like this? Yeah?

Ted Francis

Yes.

Ted Francis

Good. So describe that for me again. What would happen, what made you go over the top? Just, again, what you just told me.

Ted Francis

Well, youâ€™ve got to understand that the line to take this trench would probably be no less than 20 miles long, all along our line. Not just our few; it was a big assault, 20 miles long. And if you didnâ€™t get over quickly, which was foolish because to order men to go

over the top where itâ€™s been cut in with machine gun bullets is ridiculous, and thatâ€™s why I and many of the men hesitated to let machine gunâ€”which passes over, goes away from you, you take the time as when that machine gunner is off your particular trenchâ€”thatâ€™s the time to go over and dash for the nearest shell hole for protection.

Interviewer

So what encouraged people to goâ€”did you ever see anybody get shot through the head as they were going over the top?

Ted Francis

Oh! [Laughter]

Interviewer

Well, describe that for me and whatâ€”how it makes you feel and what makes you keep going?

Ted Francis

Well, when you seeâ€”you must understand that in the moment of going over, youâ€™re not looking at other people. You only learn later on if you takeâ€”if you take the trench which we went over to capture, we got time to rest and time to talk, and one says to the other, â€œWhereâ€™s Bill so-and-so?â€ â€œOh, heâ€™s got it; heâ€™s killed.â€ And so-and-so and so-and-so, and then theyâ€™d talk about it; you can see these friends of yours or people you knowâ€”missing. And some are wounded and some are killed.

Ted Francis

You could talk to a man in the trench, and while youâ€™re talking he accidentally looks over the top of it, and in that few seconds the German snipers, which were the best in the world, they had the finest rifles, telescopic sites, glasses, never misses. And to show your forehead for a few seconds means youâ€™re dead, and youâ€™ll fall to the bottom of the trench and in three minutes, youâ€™re dead.

Ted Francis

My brother had exactly the similar thing, although, of course, Iâ€™m speaking of 1918 now when weâ€™d been there for years. He was talking andâ€”to some pals of his in the trenchâ€”and accidentally raised his head just a shade and in that moment he had the bullet, but fortunately for him it was half an inchâ€”half an inch saved his life. Because he had a great scar from his forehead to his back, which bled profusely, and they thought itâ€”he would die.

Hell on Earth in the Trenches

Interviewer

So were there often, you mentioned that the soldier would fall back into the trench. Were you often in the trenches with dead soldiers all over?

Ted Francis

Oh, did I! In the later years of â€™17 and â€™18, you could hardlyâ€”well, youâ€™dâ€”whether you believe this or no, itâ€™s truth. We put dead bodies in the bottom of the trench so that we could stand on them forâ€”forâ€”to keep dry. If we

didn't, we got up to our knees in water, and a dead man is no good once his particulars—name and number and all that to take—was put out. And in some occasion dead bodies was put on the top of the trench to make it higher so that we could walk a bit better instead of crouching.

Interviewer

Were these friends of yours? Were these people that you had—how do people deal with this?

Ted Francis

Well, in an action like that, over the top, you must remember that on the left side and the right side is different regiments altogether from you, and of course in the dash for this German trench, lots of people got mixed up together. The idea that we was all together is wrong. And sometimes one would get there and the next man would be six or seven yards away and it wouldn't be in your battalion at all. He had wandered from another battalion and the main thing was to get cover and keep alive.

Interviewer

So one additional question about going over the top. Knowing that you could get killed by a bullet very easily, was there—how did they get you to do it? Was it the fear of getting shot—back by your officer, or did they—did the rum ration help? Which—what was it that made you go over the top?

Ted Francis

Believe me in those days, as I have said before, the discipline was so great that if you moved an eyelid the wrong way you was—for a charge. You see, if you was charged with anything in those days it meant a month in prison, this is in France, and in that month you was tied to a wagon wheel, probably in the sun, or you was put—you would have to carry a kit of about 60 or 70 pounds and made to run up and down 100 yards, and if you fell down, you'll get kicked up the back to get up.

Ted Francis

That was the—the—the kind of action you'd get from the Military Police and if a man—I had an occasion, I was in the trenches at Passchendaele, and we was due to come out; we'd done our seven or eight days, when a young fellow, younger than me, he said he was only 17, and he was trembling from head to foot, his face was contorted, he said, "Where's the communication trench?"

Ted Francis

Well, that's the trench the way out, you see; two or three miles long, but it's the way out. And I said, "What do you want that for?" He said, "I can't stand it anymore; I'm going out." I says, "You damn fool," I says, "if you go out there, you'll be shot." He says, "If I go the other way I'll be shot," he says so I—so there he went.

Ted Francis

And in three weeks time when we was out we had to parade in a four-square, and a very high officer comes galloping in the middle of this charger and read out that private so-and-so was found guilty of cowardice in front of the enemy and shot on such-and-such a date.

That was the discipline in those days. You had to be very careful. And very early on three of our men from college, three of Oxford College pals they was they was in our battalion and they all they was advised to put in for an officer. Well, one says yes and two says no. They wouldn't have promotion like I had said; they'd stay as privates, thank you.

Ted Francis

Well, this one boy went away, came back in a fortnight as an officer, and when they met up they laughed and joked and started pulling his uniform a bit, took his hat off and marching up and down and laughing. What they didn't know was one of the high officers was just passing and he reported that, and the two privates was hauled up and narrowly missed a prison sentence, was given a [Inaudible], and the officer, he was said if anything like that happens again he wouldn't be an officer, he'd be a private again.

Interviewer

Did you feel trapped in the trenches? If you could describe the reality of that battlefield for me.

Ted Francis

Well, it was, of course, the first winter we had, and we saw what the snow and ice and rain could do to the trenches would amaze at us. And how we got from one place to another was always terrible, although they did issue long rubber boots, they was practically no good because most of them was punctured and made it filled up with water. But everywhere everywhere you looked for miles was great holes full of water and mud, and the trench, you see, to go up to the firing line is one main trench called a communication trench, and that with constant shelling was broken in in lots of places. And when it came to the trench, when you'd been walking with your head right covered by the trench, you'd come to where it's been blown over, you've got to be very careful and go on hands and knees because if you don't, you'll be picked up by the snipers.

Ted Francis

And that the work that you had to do in ground coverage like that was absolutely unbelievable what you could do. In the first place, they didn't think about you or what you suffered or whether you was thirsty or whether you were drinking. One question only: Is your rifle clean?

Ted Francis

If it wasn't you was very likely put on a charge and mud and mud was everywhere, so you had to look after your rifle; that was the main thing. That must work, that must have mud on there. And

Interviewer

How dangerous was that mud?

Ted Francis

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer

How dangerous was that mud?

Ted Francis

It was dangerous for those who got a small wound. Or a leg wound where they couldn't stand up. Therefore they couldn't they got to wait for the Red Cross men to pick them up and take them back to the first aid. But, you see, they was sitting on the ground near a great big shell hole as deep as this room. And they couldn't get up themselves; they felt their selves slipping into this hole, and all the shouts in the world, although there was men passing a yard away, such was the order we couldn't even give them a hand. We couldn't they was yelling for help because I was slipping in this hole, and once the water, which was poisoned with gas and god knows what, got into the wounds, it was death.

Interviewer

Stay sitting back like you are; that's good. And describe for me what it was like to come out of the trench after a week's time, when you're hungry, and what that walk is like with all the mud filled trenches describe that for me and

Ted Francis

Well the worst I had was at Passchendaele. Most terrible engagement, I think, in all of France. We had eight days of that but we shouldn't have done because they the regiment who was there to relieve us couldn't get up because only to the ground and being shelled a lot they was a day late. However, the ground was so bad that the engineers tried to put a long a broad white tape along a path that they thought would be best to walk that's for us to walk out of the trenches.

Ted Francis

Because the actual communication trench was blown to bits and it was full of water and mud anyway, so we had to risk walking on the top as we called it and that was risk because machine guns were still going and shells was going, and if you thought they was coming near you, you had to drop in the mud, whether you liked it or no, but we did manage to walk and it took two and a half hours for us to get out and crawl to our rest outside.

Interviewer

What did it look like when you passed shells shell holes what did it look like when you passed shell holes filled with mud, and what was the danger of slipping in like? Describe it for me; it's very difficult to picture.

Ted Francis

Yeah, well, people were wounded in all places, not only the trenches, but practically the whole part of the grounds for half a mile. At any time you could have a shell come a few yards for you either kill you or badly wounded.

Ted Francis

And it was almost impossible for these people who was badly wounded and had lost the use of one leg to get down to walk towards the rear. They couldn't. And I say that the danger was that they was they was too badly wounded to get their own little dressing out (each soldier carries a little dressing but not big) they

couldn't have got the strength to do that. And you might be wounded in the leg, but if the water out of the trench touches that it wasn't like the last war [WWII] where thousands could be saved, where the first war [WWI] thousands was killed with simple wounds because they'd fallen in this water, which contained poison, and eventually died. Or, had their leg or arm off.

Ted Francis

That in the first war wouldn't have occurred. Because the medical part of it was very, very well, only just started. My ankle was never X-rayed.

Ordered to Ignore Friends' Pleas
Interviewer

Were you allowed to stop and help somebody who had fallen into a shell hole filled with mud?

Ted Francis

[Laughter] That was the usual thing to do. On the first one or two engagements we had, naturally, if you saw a fellow was hit and you'd been with him since you'd joined up as a friend and a comrade, and he was shrieking for help, and you was a yard away, naturally you'd go to them and pull him to the driest spot you could find and do what he asked you to do.

Ted Francis

And his plea was, "Help me down to the, out of the trenches," you see. Well, a lot took that helping the wounded out, and of course what happened, they'd take their friends out to the dressing station and they'd be given a cup of tea for their help, and they'd sit on the grass where it was, and the inevitable was, they went to sleep. Because one of the things we never had enough of was sleep. And that man was woke sometimes, perhaps oh, four or five hours later, and who was waking him but the Military Police and he says, "What are you doing here?" "Oh, I came to bring my friend down; I must have fallen off to sleep."

Ted Francis

But no, that's no good. He's arrested and charged with deserting. So, you see, that stopped everyone giving a help to a wounded man, even if it was your brother.

Interviewer

So were there orders? Were you ordered? You told me describe for me (as you did once before) what it was like to leave to leave the trench, and not be able to stop and help somebody who'd fallen into a shell hole?

Ted Francis

That was exactly what they brought the order out for. You see so many people so many soldiers was doing that, seeing their pals couldn't walk; naturally their cry was because so many was killed and injured that the few men on the Red Cross was absolutely outworked and in any case it was far too dangerous in some places for the Red Cross men to get to them, because to try and get to them they'd be killed themselves. It was too near the enemy.

Interviewer

So describe that walk for me. Itâ€™s winterâ€”remember you told me once before, you described the walk from the trenches, in the winter, when the shell holes were filled with mud. Can youâ€”

Ted Francis

Oh, yes, that was an occasion I saw above ground.

Interviewer

Right. Tell meâ€”describe that for me. So that I can see it, too.

Ted Francis

Yeah. Well, it was the end of our trench eight days and we was relieved by another one, another regiment. But the walk out, which was two to three miles, and as Iâ€™ve said before theyâ€”the real trench, the communication trench, was absolutely blown to pieces, so we had to walk on the top.

Ted Francis

And there was only a short space between the big shell holes, only a yard or so, and donâ€™t forget itâ€™s pitch dark. Thereâ€™s fairy lights, which the English and the Germans put up at night so they could see anything. And walking along there, I heard a chap crying for help in a big shell hole, deep; heâ€™d fell in thereâ€”slipped in, you see, and with his kit and rifle weighted, pulled him down.

Ted Francis

Well, his hands were scarping the edge and he was crying to everybody passing, including me, for help. Well, I couldnâ€™t stand that. So I got my rifle and I said, â€œHold this.â€ And we pulled and pulled and billed, and he was only one of many that was saved from drowning.

Ted Francis

Because it cameâ€”it came a practice for men who passed pals in these shell holes drowning, couldnâ€™t get out of the hole, what with what they was carrying, and nothing to hold, to pull their selves out. They offered their rifles and in a lot of cases, most every case, the man in the water was the strongest and he pulled him in. And instead of one death, it was two deaths.

Ted Francis

Then the next day the stern order came in on no account, under no circumstances, would anybody stop to help a wounded man.

Interviewer

So then whatâ€”

Interviewer

Excuse me; tape.

Interviewer

Okay. We have to change the tape again.

Interviewer

This is a continuation of the Edward Francis interview, and it's Tape 261.

Interviewer

So when the orders were issued that you couldn't help anybody, did that mean that you would walk by people in—?

Ted Francis

Exactly, yes.

Interviewer

Tell me about this. How did that make you feel?

Ted Francis

Well, some of course didn't attempt to do the order. They thought it was too bad, and of course they got into trouble. They were—they had a small prison sentence that just—but actually, you got to remember it's pitch dark at night. And everyone had learned that it was dangerous to offer your rifle to the drowning man, because it happened nine cases out of ten they pulled you in, you see. So they got to ignore it, and it was just a case of one death instead of two. It was a right thing to do, but it seemed very, very harsh, as all the orders was in those days.

Ted Francis

But the officers in those days were not people you could talk to. You almost had to get a permission to speak to an officer and, as I say, the discipline was terrible.

Shells, Bones, and Screams: Sights and Sounds of the Trenches

Ted Francis

But describe the scene for me. What then did it sound like? Could you hear these men in the shell holes?

Ted Francis

Oh, not very well, because don't forget: at all times of the day, from morning 'til night, there's a huge sound of machine guns, bombs, planes in the air, and shells of all sizes still going on. The shelling practically never stops, and you never know at what part—they go—it may be a yard from you; it may be a hundred yards from you. But that's—when you get out on the top from the trenches and you're going out, it's a risk you had to take.

Ted Francis

Your experience told you, when shells are coming over, if they're coming near you or away from you; and that was the only way in which a lot of people saved their own lives. Because like us then had been out some time and knew all these little sounds and things

which, simple as it sound, would save your life.

Interviewer

I want to stop this banging outside.

Interviewer

Wait one moment. Thereâ€™s a noise. So what was that experience like, to come out of the trench? Not having had much to eat, how did you get food, and then what was expected of you?

Ted Francis

Yes, well, when weâ€™d been in the trenches and it had been nothing but shells and bombs practically from dayâ€™morning â€™til night, as it often was, with noâ€™the Germans wasnâ€™t preparing to come over, but they was just giving us all theyâ€™d got in the way of shells, and after seven days, it was reason to believe that the party who was supposed to come up and bring your food and water never got there.

Ted Francis

They was either killed or injured and the food scattered all in the mud. So fortunatelyâ€™or unfortunatelyâ€™itâ€™s hard to believe, but we had to search for dead bodies who had some food on them, and more than that, had perhaps a flask of water. Other than that, I donâ€™t think we could have stood up to the conditions that we was forced to fight in.

Ted Francis

And we did do fairly well becauseâ€™on the dead bodies, some of them had food which had been sent by relatives from England, and of course they carried it in the trenches. That was a godsend to about three or four of us who was looking. And we felt no qualm at all at the fact we was robbing the deadâ€™nothing at all. As Iâ€™ve told you before, they treated the dead as nothing, like a piece of wood. Itâ€™s got to be useful. That is why they was put in the trenches where we got to stand, and we stood on them because, by doing so, it made us dry.

Ted Francis

Of course, these bodies were recovered later, but if they left it too long, they found the body, but the head was a skeleton because the rats had chewed them. And to see a body with just no face but a skeleton would shock the most modest of men.

Interviewer

You saw this?

Ted Francis

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer

You saw this? Did you seeâ€™?

Ted Francis

Did I see it? [Laughter] I saw skeletons galore. If you left a body in a place where it was dangerous for four, five nights; the whole lot, their clothes is torn to pieces and thereâ€™s a perfect skeleton there; all the flesh the rats have ate. And there are many books showing thatâ€™ war books and official books that I have read. That was one of the most terrible things to see.

Interviewer

Did you ever have to buryâ€™? Was it ever your job to bury the dead?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes, on Christmas morning above all, I was called out; because I havenâ€™t told you, but Harry and I had volunteered for night experiences to go to the German trench and view their wire and how many men they had behind it.

Ted Francis

In other words, it was a dangerous quest, and because of that, we hadâ€™we was saved for going over the top twice, and it was worth that. It was a dangerous job, but that was the reward.

Interviewer

But now tell me about Christmas day.

Ted Francis

Yes. I was called out with several others that a sergeant was gathering together. And I says, â€œWhatâ€™s the job?â€ And he says, â€œYou better have this first.â€ And he gave me a stiff drink of the British rum, and obviously once you had a drink of that, youâ€™d take on the German Army. And at headquarters about a mile away had been hit by several shells and killed everyone.

Ted Francis

Not only killed everyone, about 20, but blown them to bits. Now, a light little job was to gather up the bits in a sack and take all the particulars that every soldier carries round his neck. It took about an hour or so, but that was our Christmas morning job.

Interviewer

And where does the strength to do such a task come from?

Ted Francis

Where does what?

Interviewer

The strength to do a task like that.

Ted Francis

Well, Iâ€™d been out some time. My brother and I, for some reason, weâ€™d grown, whatâ€™used to bullets and bombs, and weâ€™d goâ€™especially my brother; he didnâ€™t care for two hoots for hundreds of Germans, and although he was my brother, he was the

bravest man on that field. And together, I think we never felt afraid or anything as much as the other people did.

Interviewer

Why not? Why did other people panic and you didnâ€™t?

Ted Francis

Well, in the first place, most of the exhibitions, the things we had to do, which they made people didnâ€™t do, we were on the list, top of the list, the brothers Francis, anything dangerous. And one night we proposed to take the Sentry, the German Sentry, and bring him back alive to our line. It was about 15 of us on that occasion.

Ted Francis

And we got near the wire as possible. We had to cut a little passage to get round, and we saw there was only a young fellow, a German, who was walking up and down the German trench, and three of our strongest men leaped onto the trench, picked him up, and literally thrown this little German, only about my own age, out.

Ted Francis

And of course we had to slap our hands over his face because he was screaming and screaming. But fortunately we brought with us a chap who did a little German, and he told him to be quiet and he was luckyâ€”the war for him was over, and weâ€™d treat him very good, and he was quiet.

Ted Francis

But by this time the Germans had missed the Sentry and all hell broke loose, because the exit for us across the trenchesâ€”some 200 yardsâ€”was absolutely pounded with bullets and bombs and shells. And we had to find, with the German prisoner, we had to find the deepest hole we could, and we stopped there for over an hour, â€™til all this firing stopped, and then it was safe to creep back to our own lines.

Interviewer

Which were people more fearful ofâ€”the bullets or the shells? What was the difference?

Ted Francis

Not much. Either things kill you, so they was all the same. Bullets was slightly preferable because they was clean and not like shells, which battered a lump out of you or give you fearful, fearful wounds. And of course the wounds were so bad thatâ€”in those days if a wound was bad, they didnâ€™t bother to try andâ€”they took the leg off.

Interviewer

Did you ever see a friend of yoursâ€”a close friend of yours, get wounded?

Ted Francis

Ah. The closest friend ever, next to my brother. We three always went together. And he was about six or seven yards in front of us on â€”we was made to take a village which was about two or three hundred yards ahead. And of course it was a very hot timeâ€”bullets

and bombs and shells everywhere, and this friend of ours got a very bad wound in the leg, and he screams. Honestly, sometimes at night I can still hear themâ€”absolutely scream. His leg was nearly off, where he got a terrible wound there. Of course he couldnâ€™t stand, and he kept screaming and screaming and screaming â€”til that got slower and slower and quieter and quieter. Of course, in the space of about 20 minutes he was dead.

Ted Francis

But there was a case that, although he pleaded with us and my brother to come and help him, it wasâ€”we couldnâ€™t do it. We should get ourselves into severe trouble. As Iâ€™ve told you before, weâ€™d got to stop that, and we had to walk past him.

Ted Francis

And the terrible thing is that he was one that stopped there two daysâ€”because where the position was was very dangerous for the Red Cross men to approach him. Theyâ€™d get killed themselves, so they had to leave him a couple of days. And that couple of days he was a skeleton on his head. The rats had chewed him. And the more bodies there was, the more hundreds of rats we had. You could understand that. [Inaudible] as big as rabbits, and thatâ€™s the reason. Bodies was lying out in the field all over the trenches and in the open, and you see that it was too dangerous for the Red Cross man to appose. And believing that they was dead, which they were, there was no hurry to go and get them in. But the rats see to that; theyâ€™d just come along and eat them.

Ted Francis

But I often wondered. There was a terrible death in its own, but to be eaten by ratsâ€”I wonder what the mother and father, if they knew the truthâ€”which they never did, of courseâ€”would think if thatâ€™s the way their son died.

Interviewer

Where were you when you heard your friend calling for help? Where were you? How could you hear him?

Ted Francis

Oh, practically a couple of yards, but we was advancing, you see. We was advancing towards our objective, and we couldnâ€™t, under strict orders, stop and attend to him. We should have had an officer with a drawn revolver on our heels straightaway, and we couldnâ€™t do that. It was a godsend, really, that he died as quick as he did. In todayâ€™s time and medicalâ€”he may have stood a chance, but not in those days.

Interviewer

Did you ever come into contact with any tanks?

Ted Francis

Who?

Interviewer

Tanks. Did you come into contact with anyâ€”with any tanks?

Ted Francis

Tent?

Interviewer

Tank. Tanks. It's my accent. Tanks. Let me cause I'm going to creep forward. Did you come into contact with any tanks?

Ted Francis

Tank.

Interviewer

Tanks. You know, the big armored vehicles.

Ted Francis

Oh, the tanks. [Laughter] The tanks. Yes, the book I showed you showed that I was in a tank.

Interviewer

But tell me, in your own words, what the experience was like for you.

Ted Francis

Yes.

Interviewer

Describe the scene for me.

Ted Francis

Yeah. Well, of course, when we first heard they was making tanks, and we first saw the first tanks, well, we was wild-eyed, really. They weighed approximately 30 tons, and they looked terribly, you know, good for the job. But they was good for the job in dry land. The moment they got into mud, as what we had in the winter, hopeless. They was bogged down in no time, and some of them got half way in a big hole as deep as this room in a shell, and half of their side went down, and they were stuck.

Ted Francis

But I was in the tanks. Like a fool, I volunteered to do it. They started at the bottom of a little rise, and the moment they got to the top of the hill, they was in line for German shells and bullets. And they thought of a brilliant idea, there was four tanks. They said, 'œlf we have two men on every tank with rifles fixed in the back with smoke bombs in them, and when we get near the top, we want two infantrymen to fire those bombs so that the Germans won't see what's coming, that'll be all right.'

Ted Francis

Well, they wanted eight of us, four tanks, two to a tank. In the first place, it was absolutely a ridiculous idea, and it was 20 to one in odds that no one would come back, because the moment the Germans saw a tank approaching, especially as it was a first or second attempt they'd ever seen one, they threw every shell and bomb and bullet at it.

Ted Francis

And all around that tank, remember, we was outside, not inside, pulling the rifle, putting smoke bombs in the rifle to fire it. You might just as well have smoked a cigarette for the difference it made. Made no difference at all. Only the fact that out of the eight, four got killed, two very seriously wounded with limbs lost.

Ted Francis

The man who was with me absolutely went shell-shocked, and it was terrible. I had to drag him out of there. We got stuck, of course, in the tank, and I was the only one out of that eight to come out scot-free.

Two Different Shell Shocks
Interviewer

Tell me about shell shock.

Ted Francis

Ah, shell shock. Shell shock was thousands of NCOs and privates had. Practically everyone had shell shock, but some, it was terrible to look at. Some, as Iâ€™ve told you, couldnâ€™t stand it and wanted to walk out, which inevitably they got shot; and on the official War Office records, 409 was shot. So thatâ€™s quite a number. Soâ€™

Interviewer

How could you tell that somebody had shell shock?

Ted Francis

Well, about three or four weeks later that the man was arrested, whatever heâ€™d done or not done. We was lined up the back of the trenchesâ€™when we was out of the trenches, we was lined up on a field. This is two or three mile out of the trenches. And a man on a horse, a red tem man, high man, a South African [Inaudible], old enough to be my father, he pulled out a bit a paper and read that on such-and-such a date, private so-and-so was found guilty of desertion in the face of the enemy and shot accordingly.

Interviewer

But shell shockâ€™when people just couldnâ€™t take it any more, how could you tell when a man had panicked and basically lost hisâ€™ I mean, describeâ€™

Ted Francis

Well, you could tell by hisâ€™

Interviewer

Wait â€™til I sit back, but describe for me how you knew when a man was shell-shocked.

Ted Francis

Well, you could easily see when a man was shell-shocked because, if he was a grown man even more than my age, he was crying, he was shaking, his face was absolutely a different color, and he was moaning, crying, and he, like the boy who got shotâ€™and it was

as much as we could do, in the trenches, to hold him back, even to sit on him, because once he started to get out of the trenches, he was a dead man, and that's all we could do.

Ted Francis

But to describe shell shock is one for the private and one for the officers. The officers, of course, all the officers had shelter. At the slightest sign of a trembling of the lips, the officers go down to the medical hut, and they say, "Oh, yes, we'll send you to hospital for a week." And whenever that week is done, they will send you to England to recover. And he's got shell shock the same as hundreds of privates and corporals that have got it, but when they go by, they are threatened with being shot and given a dose of medicine or whatever they got and sent back into the line. That was the difference.

A Precarious Surface-to-Air
Interviewer

Were you afraid that you would crumble under the pressure?

Ted Francis

Never. Only one soul I was—I wasn't afraid, but I was afraid of falling, and that was when I've described coming out of Passchendaele. We'd got to walk at least two to three mile, and my legs couldn't hardly carry me. I was frightened of falling in shells, because I knew if I did, I hadn't the strength—absolutely exhausted, as was the other people. That was the only time I did feel a little afraid. I was afraid for me own life, naturally.

Interviewer

And can you describe that scene for me? Describe that scene. What was so frightening about it?

Ted Francis

Ah. Well, we'd done seven or eight days in the trenches. We'd lost about 50, 60, 70 men killed and wounded. Sometimes our battalion would go in 1000 strong and come out 300, come out 300. That was when the summer started. But that walk out would take hours, sometimes three, four, five hours before you staggered into a safe place behind the lines, and you got a warm drink and some good food, which they had ready for you.

Interviewer

And what would you have to walk by on the way? What did it look like? What did it sound like?

Ted Francis

Well, you must understand you couldn't—you could see a yard, or less than a yard, in front. You had to look at the ground and mind where you're standing. Remember, in the winter it's pitch black dark, and you're lucky if you don't stray away from—see, you're in a single line of men, and you touch—put out your hand and touch the back so that you know you're keeping touch with him. But if you lose that touch, you lose yourself. You can't possibly get out of that lot. You might just as well sit down and wait for the morning, because it was highly dangerous to walk, you see.

Ted Francis

Someone ahead was carefullyâ€”probably an officerâ€”carefully finding out, with a rifle butt, if it was safe to stand or near a big shell hole. And he was the leader and generally a good man at that.

Interviewer

And would you have toâ€”and did some people slip? Did people slip?

Ted Francis

Oh, many slipped, as Iâ€™ve told you. Many died, quiteâ€”it wasâ€”if we came out about three or 400 strong, it was nothing to lose 50 coming out, but what with bullets, bombs, and the waterâ€”being drowned.

Interviewer

Could you hear them in the water?

Ted Francis

What?

Interviewer

Could you hear them? In the water?

Ted Francis

They was shouting as far as they can, but all the shouts in the world didnâ€™t stop them slowly sinking. And once, of course, it covered the head, they was finished. You see, the sides of a shell hole were nothing to hold. It was just plain mud, and if you stick your fingers in it, they simply slid down. You couldnâ€™t pull yourself up in any way. Once you got in a shell hole and you sank, that was it. You couldnâ€™t get out yourself.

Interviewer

And what didâ€”do you think that the people at home understood what you were going through?

Ted Francis

They understood not a thing, I donâ€™t think. To try and tell your relations, your mother and father, the conditionsâ€”theyâ€™d look at you as if youâ€™re pulling the leg or putting it on a bit. But the truthâ€”we spared â€™em such things as rats eating bodies; of course we wouldnâ€™t mention anything like that. But at least some did, and it caused a sensation.

Ted Francis

But there was one case Iâ€™d like to remember to tell you. There was a boy 16 and a halfâ€”nearly 17. And he was in the battalion, and the parents, reading in the paper of the terrible casualties they was having, wrote to the War Office and say, â€œMy boyâ€™s only 17, and he shouldnâ€™t be in France.â€ Of course, 19 was the age to be abroad. And they wrote to the force saying they donâ€™t mind him being in the Army, but he must be sent back to England as heâ€™s not old enough to be out there. â€”Course they was frightened. The death roll calls was coming in every week.

Ted Francis

The reply from the War Office said that they examined his entry when he was first in the Army; read that he was 19 years of age when he signed on, and that we must take. And they wouldn't let the boy come back and he the 12 months he died. He was killed. That's how the discipline was.

Ted Francis

We have to switch tapes. We have to change tapes. This will be our last one.

The Infamous Battle of the Somme
Interviewer

This is Edward Francis Interview tape 262.

Interviewer

What were you told to expect at the Somme? Did you know what you were up for at the Battle of the Somme? Did you know how big that battle was going to be?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes.

Interviewer

How much did you know in advance?

Ted Francis

Hmm?

Interviewer

How much did you know in advance about the Battle of the Somme and what did you expect, and how was it different?

Ted Francis

Oh, we was told by officers that was coming off

Ted Francis

Go ahead.

Ted Francis

Long before the Battle of the Somme, which was on the 1st of July 1916 we had heard the guns going for at least 10 days, and there must be 1,000 guns if there was one. It was a terrible roar from morning 'til night. And we all thought that that alone would be enough to smash the Germans.

Ted Francis

But the reason why we lost so many, that tens of thousands was killed on the first day, was

the foolish officers who came and had the four-square, gave us a little talk beforehand, before the morning. And he said, "Tomorrow, boys, you'll be over the top and don't worry," he says. "There'll be no trenches there"our shells have blown them to pieces; there'll be no Germans there; they're blown to pieces. And there'll be nothing at all. All you have to do is to walk over and take those trenches and start building them for your own use." In fact, he says, "You can carry your rifle like a bag."

Ted Francis

And that speech alone must have killed thousands upon thousands because that's exactly what I should mention that our battalion was not on the first day. Thank god for that as I shouldn't be here today. And he said, "You'll have no opposition at all."

Ted Francis

Well, what happened on that 1st of July when our chaps, it was a 40-milea 40-mile the line was, and you can imagine there was a lot of men there all got at theat the given time, got on the top, walked along, as I said, and to the amazement of the Germans who'd been there all the time, but in 15-foot dugouts, with plenty of machine guns, plenty of ammunition, plenty of food. In a German book I've read, the officer said, "I never saw such a scene in my life of tens of thousands of British soldiers just casually walking across to us."

Interviewer

But what did you personally hearafter that first day did you hear what happened? Could youdid you find out about it? And from what you knew

Ted Francis

Well, we knew about it later for the enormous casualties and, you see, when the Germans who've got a machine gun and every 10 yards and they came out and they saw all this walking across, no attempt at firing or running or anything like that. They couldn't believe their eyes. So the officer that gave us the word to fire and they dropped absolutely like nine-pins.

Interviewer

What was the philosophy, the philosophy, of the officers, wave after wavethey kept ordering you soldiers over the top. What's the idea?

Ted Francis

The idea was a big attack. But, it was the waythey way they told it. You see they told us to get up and walk slowly over as we shouldn't have any opposition whatever. Whereas a month back, every time we went over the top the orders were, as the whistle goes you'll wait for a good opportunity and a good opportunity means there's no machine gun bullets into the top and you'll get up and dash for the nearest shell holedash.

Ted Francis

Whereas this soldier, well, I could call him be a monkey I should think, he told this big line to get up and walk past because there'd be no opposition. The trenches would be knocked down to pieces, the wire would be gone, the Germans would be all dead, and

fromâ€”for weeksâ€”the Germans had been busy making 15-foot dugouts which they stocked with food, water, ammunition and machine guns and an officer here and there.

Ted Francis

And as I have said when they saw all this crowd all walking almost shoulder to shoulder, walking across, they absolutely hesitated to open their guns but they did, and that was the resultâ€”on that day alone, we had 600,000 casualties.

Interviewer

Were you soldiers angry? Were you angry? Were you sick of the whole thing at that point?

Ted Francis

Well, when that officer had gone, my brother and I walked away. They told us to walk over, but as I say we were fortunate we were not in the first day. We started the third day, which wasnâ€™t quite so bad as the first, and of course we didnâ€™t walk over, as I said. He said, â€œDo you see that old so-and-so?â€ He says, â€œWhat does he know about trench warfare? The only trench heâ€™s ever seen is this.â€ In his whole life, and he got a row of medals out of the South African War. He says, â€œHe donâ€™t know what a trench is,â€ and heâ€™d never of course.

Ted Francis

But the moment they speak theyâ€™re off. Even a couple of three miles over the trenches thatâ€™s still too nearâ€”they live in houses 30 miles from the trenches; theyâ€™re waited on hand and foot; they have beds; they have change of linen; they have a chef in these big French houses; they have a servant to do everything. And theyâ€™d live in the days where they was in South Africa. They donâ€™t know a thing aboutâ€”and thatâ€™s why, really, in the first day alone we lost 600,000 killed.

Interviewer

And were you soldiers, who knew a thing or two about the trenchesâ€”were you angry? Were you bitter?

Ted Francis

Oh. I put the blame on, and I said they wasnâ€™t giving an order, they murdered those men, because they just sent them into a certain death by telling them to walk and not using their rifles or anything like that. You canâ€™t blame the Germans for taking advantage of it, but they of no doubt wereâ€”Iâ€™ve read books that they was more amazed than anything.

Interviewer

How could you listen to your officers after that?

Ted Francis

Ah, but this was a very high man. Who lived, as I say, 40 mile away from the trenches. We very rarely sawâ€”only once or twice in a month heâ€™d come to us and give us a bit of a lecture. Then gallop back very quickly or get in his car and go quickly back home.

I had no time for the officers, small or large. And of course I fell out with the Military Police

only once when I was wounded in the hand and they put me some food, which was supposed to be my lunch; I said, 'I wouldn't give my dog that,' and unknown to me a police sergeant at the door, Military Police, heard it. And he followed me to the canteen where I bought some decent food'this is one of the few times we was out'well out to a village where it's shops was open. And 'when I came out, he, 'Hey, you name, number, regiment.'

Ted Francis

I said, 'What's all this about? What's the charge?' He says, 'Telling lies about the Army food.' He says, 'You'll appear before the colonel tomorrow morning. Be here at nine o'clock.'

Ted Francis

Well, I came there and an old man'well, he was old enough to be my grandfather at the desk, he pulled out a bit of paper, and filled the place with smoke and he says, 'Six weeks pay stopped.'

The Frontline Wasteland
Interviewer

Can you describe for me the difference between how you lived on the front line with what most of you were used to? How different was it?

Ted Francis

Well, it was so different there's'you couldn't get a comparison because it was so different. I mean we were issued with hard biscuits (and they were hard). You could get a hammer and you'll run several blows to break them. But they was supposed'and when we'd eat our ordinary food that we treated didn't before we went to the trenches, I would soon eat that because we were always hungry. We had to try these biscuits, which was terrible. And lots of my friends there was saying, 'Oh, for so-and-so a Sunday lunch,' they said, 'that we used to have.' They thought of the good meals they had at home, naturally.

Ted Francis

But food, you see, in lots of times they couldn't get to us because to send about ten men with food in sandbags was highly dangerous, especially in the daylight. If they came at night they lost their way. And more often than not they were so wet and muddied that they simply dumped all the food and went back again.

Interviewer

And what did No Man's Land look like? Describe it to me. Describe it to me'who's never seen a battlefield.

Ted Francis

Well, if you've seen pictures of the American conquest of the moon, it was something like that only worse. Imagine the pictures you saw of the moon all dug up and wet through with mud'that was what it's like. You could only crawl up to where you was going in lots of places. Impossible to walk; if you stood on your feet you would slip and you'd slip in the mud and you'd get more mud on your body. It was almost impossible to

walk. And to get one mile would take a couple of hours.

Interviewer

And whatâ€™s living amongst the corpses in the trenches or the dead on the battlefield, can you remember what it smelled like or what itâ€™s

Ted Francis

[Laughter] To smell like, we had the first month, I think, of the dead bodies, and horses as wellâ€™horses got killed. And that, to us, was just like a seaside breath of air after weâ€™d had months of it. We took no notice of it. Itâ€™s for a person just coming there, it would stink to high heaven. But to us, who was used to it every day, we didnâ€™t think a lot of it. It was a stench but weâ€™s stood for it and we stood up to it. We knew it wouldnâ€™t go away and we knew weâ€™ve got to work by there, so we might as well made up their minds to take no notice of it.

Interviewer

And how about the noise? Was that something that you could take no notice ofâ€™the noise?

Ted Francis

No. The noise was always on. Always guns and bombs; machine guns and bullets were flying around. And when youâ€™d been as long in the trenches towards 1918 as Harry and I was, you could almost say for sure if a shell was coming whether it was going to drop by you. And if you thought it was going to drop by you, youâ€™d flatten yourself in the mud however deep it was.

Ted Francis

But you gotâ€™get so used for the shells breaking here and there that you think oh, is one coming and it would be 20 or 30 yards away. And it was. You get an expert in knowingâ€™when you hear a shell roaring for the German side, especially the large ones, 5.9s, you know to a very rough guide where those have got to stop, because most people killed by shells never hear it coming; it comes splash right at their feet and theyâ€™re blown to pieces.

Interviewer

And did you ever get religious or superstitious or was thereâ€™did you have faith that you would get through this?

Ted Francis

Well, towards 1918 you must understand, Februaryâ€™January Monday and Februaryâ€™we had no idea that in a few more months the war would beâ€™the war would be over. And a friend who I knew, we were speaking to us, we had just come out of a raid on a trench, and of course lost a good many men, and he says, â€™You and I must be lucky, Ted.â€™ He says, â€™You, above all,â€™ he says, â€™youâ€™re calm, you go in, you attack, you come back without a scrape.â€™

Ted Francis

I said, â€™Yes,â€™ I says, â€™the good Lord must be looking after me.â€™ And I said,

“Oh,” he says, “You’re a Christian then?” I says, “No.” I said, “I’ve only been to church once in me life when I was married.” And he laughed.

Ted Francis

But I said, I says, “From now on,” I said, “I’ll say a little prayer every morning: thank you, Lord, for this day.” That’s all. And I did so. And funnily enough—not funny, there’s nothing funny about it—but I come out ‘til the last two weeks of the war. I didn’t know it was the last two weeks. But I got this ankle blown up then, and no one was more amazed than me when I was in hospital in England when the bells started ringing the war was over. In any case, I shouldn’t have gone back because I was on crutches for about two months.

Interviewer

Did you ever see any Americans? Did you ever see the Americans when they got there?

Ted Francis

Well, of course they didn’t come over until ‘17 and it was early ‘18 before they started to attack, but we was, oh, 40 or 50 mile away from them so we didn’t come in close contact with them.

Ted Francis

I saw one or two officers talking to our officers and getting some information about this and the other, about trench warfare. But I think the Germans, and they—Americans—attacked in March, I think. March, 1918, and from then onward ‘til the end of the war. Then they did a hell of a good job.

Interviewer

What do you think won the war?

Ted Francis

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer

What do you think won the war?

Ted Francis

Well, it certainly was no country by itself. Remember that besides us and the Germans and French, there was a lot of little countries with us. And it was all shared with great relief when it was over. Because as I’ve said before, we was coming to the end of our men. And when the Germans—the Americans, decided to have a go, I was absolutely—I could have said “Hooray.” Because I liked the Germans, I liked their discipline, I liked their free and easy officers, and the idea I saw—I heard, rather—I was told that a private, sort of a civilian, wanted to talk to their head man. And this private came up to a tent he was in and said, “Jack, there’s someone here to see you.” Now if you’d have said that in British you’d have been in prison.

Interviewer

I have to interrupt because I think you accidentally said German and you meant American.

Ted Francis

Yes, I meant American.

Interviewer

So why don't you very, very briefly tell me how the Americans were different than the British "very" and very briefly.

Ted Francis

Yeah. Well, the American soldier had much more to his self than the British soldier. There was not so much discipline there, which I found very good. And I applauded the Americans for having such an Army that seemed to be on friendly terms, not only the officers but the men themselves.

An Uncivil Welcome Home

Interviewer

Okay. Is there anything that happened, any experience that you had in the war that still affects you to this day? That to this day you still feel?

Ted Francis

Funnily enough, what affected me more was a silly thing that we was told we had done, and I said, "What's that?" That they said to have two brothers in the same regiment and how right he was.

Ted Francis

Because when my brother was in the trenches he detested these steel helmets and every chance he had when nobody was looking, he'd take it off, and he was on Sentry duty at a quiet part of the line, quite quiet. In other words, it was quiet as concerned with an attack and joking and talking with his pals in the trenches he accidentally put his head an inch too high and he got a bullet from the front of his head to the back.

Ted Francis

Now half an inch this way would have killed him, absolutely. And it was one of the few misses that the German snipers made because they was trained with special rifles, and what worried me, you see, I didn't know anything about that. It was quite a distance from me.

Ted Francis

And the first thing I knew was some soldier of our lot, he was absolutely a ragamuffin, he came and he "and in his Birmingham dialect he said to me, "Your kid's had it." I says, "What?" He says, "Your kid's had it." I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "One straight to the head," and he walked on. And I thought, "One bullet straight in the nose killed him." And I didn't know, and I asked permission to go to the First Aid post to see if that was true and they said he'd had a terrible wound but he'd recover.

Interviewer

So was it difficult to be in the same battalion as your brother?

Ted Francis

It was aâ€”

Ted Francis

Wrong to be.

Interviewer

Whatâ€”Iâ€™m sorry. Start again.

Ted Francis

Yeah.

Interviewer

Now tell me.

Ted Francis

It wasâ€”everyone said it was wrong to have brothers in the same battalion. If heâ€™d have joined a battalion he might have been across the sea doingâ€”and you wouldnâ€™t know anything about that. To have a brother always by you and to sleep with him and to go up the trenches with him, they said was foolish because youâ€™re bound to worry about each other especially if youâ€™re apart like I was on that particular day, about 100 yards apart, and youâ€™ll get a chap with no brains come and tell you your brotherâ€™s had one straight to the head. Of course I thought, naturally, he was killed. And I could onlyâ€”I did thank goodness that he was killed outright and not terribly wounded.

Interviewer

And it soundsâ€”the whole experience sounds so dreadful, is there anything that still pains you to this day? Do you still think about your friends that died there or do you still see these scenes at all?

Ted Francis

No, I donâ€™t really.

Interviewer

What? Iâ€™m sorry, go ahead.

Ted Francis

Sometimes I go to bed at ten and Iâ€™m thinking about the war two or three oâ€™clock in the morning. I canâ€™t go to sleep. And itâ€™s of those things, my brother being hit, my best friend being killed, and all the others that I think about. And I wonder while Iâ€™m lying in bed, â€œHow is it that Iâ€™m lying here and theyâ€™re all dead?â€ But it gets me down a bit where it shouldnâ€™t be, because I suppose in one word Iâ€™m lucky to be alive.

Interviewer

Did you return to Birmingham as a hero?

Ted Francis

Well, so they say in the papers, but I'd been out in France about 12 months. I drove straight away to home to my father of course as I've told you my mother has died. And no response until I got a letter from a man who took over my father's pub and

Interviewer

But I'm sorry to interrupt. But the soldiers in general all the the boys coming back, in general, were they treated as heroes?

Ted Francis

Not at all. If we had one word they was treated as mugs.

Interviewer

I'm sorry; start again.

Ted Francis

In one word they was treated as mugs.

Interviewer

Who? My question won't be there so you begin.

Ted Francis

What was that?

Interviewer

Go I keep interrupting you. You go ahead and begin and tell me my question won't be there, so start with the soldiers.

Ted Francis

To answer what? Oh, yes. But I couldn't it was many years because we used to meet in clubs as I started to forget the soldiers where they reached an age and died

Interviewer

I'm sorry to interrupt again. The soldiers, when you came back from the war, were you treated as heroes? Tell me what happened when you got back the soldiers in general.

Ted Francis

They were treated as fools and mugs. Serve you right for joining the Army; that's all we got. We got a small pension; it was run out in a post office in about six weeks; a few pound each.

Ted Francis

After that money had gone, there was no out of work pay or any other pay whatsoever. All the churches had locked the doors there was so many going begging there. People inâ€”from the Army with one leg and one arm were up to get to selling matches to get a few coppers to live! And that wasâ€”the Prime Minister at the time when the war was over he said, â€œWelcome home, boys; youâ€™ve come to a land fit for heroes.â€ And I altered that, I says, â€œFit for mugs.â€ And I was up and down for five years before I really started work.

Interviewer

So looking back, this war was not what you expected?

Ted Francis

No, no. Theâ€”whatâ€”my experience in getting a job and going back to my old firm was repeated at oh, a thousand times over throughout the country. Youâ€™d go there; theyâ€™d look at you and say, â€œWhat do you want?â€ I said, â€œI used to work here.â€ â€œWell, what about it?â€ I said, â€œI want me job back,â€ and theyâ€™d laugh. They said, â€œWeâ€™re sacking them, not taking them on.â€

Ted Francis

â€œOut,â€ and theyâ€™d push me out. That was my firm that I worked for. And that happened all over the country, and for yearsâ€”not weeks, for years, half the soldiers who returned couldnâ€™t find a job.

Interviewer

So a question thatâ€™s jumping back a bit, what did you know about what Birmingham was doing for the war effort?

Follow Orders or Stay Alive

Interviewer

This is the Edward Francis Interview tape 263.

Interviewer

Iâ€™d like to ask you when you were telling me about the tanks, you mentioned that you had been inside a tank.

Ted Francis

Yeah.

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s it like inside a tank?

Ted Francis

An ordinary tent?

Interviewer

No, a tank.

Ted Francis

Oh, a tank. Oh, yes, wellâ€™

Interviewer

What was it like inside of it?

Ted Francis

Terrible. If you could imagine a large oven which had spilled paraffin and oil on, and it was getting hotter all the time, thatâ€™s what it was like. And we had to sit down on the floor, which was covered with oil, but we was inside the tank and not outside and that saved our lives, myself and my friend who was with me. Thereâ€™s no doubt about that.

Interviewer

And you mentioned, I mean you told us that everybodyâ€™ everybody expected the war to be short, and you expected to be back by Christmas and for it to be over.

Ted Francis

Yeah.

Interviewer

Was there a point for you in the trenches that you realized that this was going on and on and on?

Ted Francis

Weâ€™d been out there, I donâ€™t know after about five or six months and he came to me when he was out in the trenches and he said to me, â€™Ted, if weâ€™re going to get out of this alive, no promotion.â€™ I said, â€™No promotions?â€™ â€™Donâ€™t accept promotion.â€™

Ted Francis

â€™And Iâ€™ve not accepted it; Iâ€™ve been talked to now and youâ€™ll be the same because youâ€™re on this list as a good man, you see.â€™ But sure enough I was offered a one-stripe and they was partly annoyed because I refused it and Harry refused it. But we know and I knew it was the best because those who had the one stripe it was like a ton weight on their left arm and not only that, theyâ€™d been to a school, a modern school, and learned how to boss over their fewâ€™ about eight friends, mind youâ€™ who they would be in charge of while a lance corporal.

Ted Francis

And when they came back the friends said to me, â€™I donâ€™t know whatâ€™s happened to him. He doesnâ€™t smile, he doesnâ€™t talk to us; heâ€™s a different man.â€™

Ted Francis

They learned at this school just like the officers; youâ€™ve got to be tough, youâ€™ve got to show them youâ€™re the boss; youâ€™ve got to show when you speak youâ€™re a

jump to it and none of the laughing friends as it used to be.

Ted Francis

And of course it caused a rift in those eight people that he was in charge of; it caused a rift and they didn't like it. But the sequel was that when we get over the top these newly made lance corporals was the first to shout, "Come on lads, over the top, follow me." And irrespective of bullets flying near the top of the trench he'd jump up and three minutes later he was dying at the bottom of the trench. You see, he was told in all his lectures to show these people that you wasn't afraid of the bullets, etc., etc., etc.; but it was suicide, really.

Interviewer

If you could, one last time, describe for me that moment before you go over the top, just that moment, describe what it's like.

Ted Francis

Well, most of the "most of the people" most of the old chaps beside myself "was thinking about when I get over this, if I get over, is to find a spot to bury myself in. Irrespective of rushing to where we was supposed to take a trench or a village, it's no good going over the top and rushing when machine guns are absolutely cutting you about the middle of your body. You wait until you see an opening.

And if you do that, you might live to the next day. But a lot do as they told

on the whistle you go over, irrespective of where the machine gun's firing and of course inevitably they'd drop back dead.

A Poem for Spotty

Interviewer

Okay. And why don't you go ahead and tell me "recite for me your poem, the poem you've been wanting to tell me.

Ted Francis

Oh, yes. Well, it is of the First World War. It's about two cockney regular soldiers just before the First World War, and it's called "Spotty." And it goes like this:

Ted Francis

Spotty was my pal he was; a gingerly bloke

Ted Francis

An everlasting gasbag and as stubborn as a moke

Ted Francis

He did us all up, he did, afore he came to war

Ted Francis

By sporting all his bits of French, what no one asked him

Ted Francis

for

Ted Francis

He said to me "Old son," he says "Ha! You won't stand

Ted Francis

half a chance when I gets in conversation with

Ted Francis

them demoiselles of France."

Ted Francis

I says to him, "You shut your face." "Oh," he says, "right,

Ted Francis

mon cher ami, don't hurt yourself. So long; au revoir."

Ted Francis

But when we got out of our orders, your veteran wasn't

Ted Francis

slow, a singing "Tipperary" it's a long, long way to go

Ted Francis

At sea on the transport, Spotty, with his "parlez vous" it is

Ted Francis

I nearly knocked his head off 'cause he said I'd mailed him

Ted Francis

his

Ted Francis

But when we landed what a beato; how those Frenchies

Ted Francis

laughed and cried

Ted Francis

And I sees old Spotty, swelling "ha! Fit to bust himself

Ted Francis

with pride

Ted Francis

He was blowing him a kisses and shouting, "Vive le

Ted Francis

France! "Til the sergeant major copped him

Ted Francis

But he says "Oh, quel bon chance."

Ted Francis

But we didn't get no waiting; where we went to, nobody knows

Ted Francis

And it wasn't like the fighting as you sees in picture shows

Ted Francis

We had days of hell together "til they told us to retire

Ted Francis

And Spotty's flow of language almost set the water carts on fire

Ted Francis

But him and me were very lucky; a third of us were dead

Ted Francis

with their screaming black [Inaudible] and the shrapnel

Ted Francis

overhead

Ted Francis

But every time they missed us when they'll fire oh, it was

Ted Francis

murderous hot

Ted Francis

And Spotty'd up and shout "Encore, encore!"

Ted Francis

I said, "What's that?"

Ted Francis

He says "That's French for I've been shot."

Ted Francis

We were lying down in all, yes don't with our very ends,

Ted Francis

where it gets you quick and sudden if you moves about or

Ted Francis

stands

Ted Francis

We were shooting off a Frank, yes, turn it, turn about

Ted Francis

But "I felt him move towards me, and he said, "Oh,

Ted Francis

mate. I'm out."

Ted Francis

His eyes, ah! They couldn't see me. Nor never will no

Ted Francis

more. But his twisted mouth just whispered, "So long, matey;

Ted Francis

au revoir."

Ted Francis

But there was none quite the same to me "cause him and me

Ted Francis

were pals,

Ted Francis

but if I could have him back again, ha, you could keep your

Ted Francis

fancy girls

Ted Francis

But heâ€™s talking French in heaven now, so itâ€™s no use

Ted Francis

feeling sore

Ted Francis

But God knows how I miss him. â€œSo long, Spotty; au

Ted Francis

revoir.â€

Ted Francis

That is a typical of example of how I have lost many of my friends in the war.

Interviewer

Howâ€™s that?

Ted Francis

I have said that little monologue for 75 years. I never saw it in print; I heard a man give it out twice and I remembered it since.

Interviewer

Were there many songs or poemsâ€”were there songs and poems that helped people get through this?

Ted Francis

Oh, yes, you see now and again you was allowed, oh, 40 or 50 miles back a few of you was picked out, not the regiment, and you was allowed to go to these concerts, you see; some were professionals, some were amateur, and thatâ€™s where I heard it.

Interviewer

And you had experiences like that?

Ted Francis

Yeah, well most of my friends went like that. Talking to them a few minutes, a few minutes later theyâ€™re dead in the bottom of the trench, which this monologue, Spotty, got up and got himself killed, presumably in the head, you see.

Ted Francis

But I have read that little monologue practically all over England and Iâ€™ve liked it. [Laughter] I wonder how on earth did I remember it for so far back. But I did.

Interviewer

Well, I thinkâ€”

Ted Francis

But it pulls me about a bit when I recite it because I'm thinking of the friends I had lost the same way.

Interviewer

Many friends—you have lost many friends that way?

Ted Francis

Beg your pardon?

Interviewer

You lost quite a few friends.

Ted Francis

Oh, yes it was the most common forms of death by exposing your body—for only a minute or two—and these German snipers are wonderful shots. It doesn't matter if there was 100 yards or even 200 yards, once you put your head above the trench, you were dead. And that, believe me, was a job because I was a first-class shot—they wanted to get me to shoot people in the heads—to be a sniper, more money. I wouldn't dream of it and I told them so. I said I didn't come here to murder people—they said but you'll get a better position in the trenches, you'll get more money, you won't be so hard worked, and I said, "Throw everything at me. Because I had handled an air gun—a sporting gun before, you see.

Interviewer

So you didn't personally want to shoot Germans?

Ted Francis

Not on that occasion. It was like a man coming to you and standing and say, "You were a fool, you were a so-and-so," and getting up and shoot him. That might have been because he was annoyed, but to be your full senses and not angry at anybody and to see a head pop up and you shoot and you know you've killed a man, I couldn't stand for that.

Ted Francis

And yet I could see all the other horrors of the war without turning a hair.

Interviewer

So you didn't hate the Germans; you didn't want to personally—

Ted Francis

Not at all. The Germans was good fighters and some of the finest in Europe; there's no doubt about it. They do things while we're thinking about it and even their tanks, when they brought them out was better than ours. But of course I blame the Germans for absolutely listening to a man like Hitler, which ruined their country.

Interviewer

A different war.

Ted Francis

Yes, a different war.

Interviewer

Well, I want to thank you.