

## Any Soldier To His Son

What did I do, sonny, in the Great World War?  
Well, I learned to peel potatoes and to scrub the barrack floor.  
I learned to push a barrow and I learned to swing a pick,  
I learned to turn my toes out, and to make my eyeballs click.  
I learned the road to Folkestone, and I watched the English shore,  
Go down behind the skyline, as I thought, for evermore.  
And the Blighty boats went went by us and the harbour hove in sight,  
And they landed us and sorted us and marched us "by the right".  
"Quick march!" across the cobbles, by the kids who rang along  
Singing "Appoo?" "Spearmant" "Shokolah?" through dingy old Boulogne;  
By the widows and the nurses and the niggers and Chinese,  
And the gangs of smiling Fritzes, as saucy as you please.  
I learned to ride as soldiers ride from Etaps to the Line,  
For days and nights in cattle trucks, packed in like droves of swine.  
I learned to curl and kip it on a foot of muddy floor,  
And to envy cows and horses that have beds of beaucoup straw.  
I learned to wash in shell holes and to shave myself in tea,  
While the fragments of a mirror did a balance on my knee.  
I learned to dodge the whizz-bangs and the flying lumps of lead,  
And to keep a foot of earth between the sniper and my head.  
I learned to keep my haversack well filled with buckshee food,  
To take the Army issue and to pinch what else I could.  
I learned to cook Maconochie with candle-ends and string,  
With "four-by-two" and sardine-oil and any God-dam thing.  
I learned to use my bayonet according as you please  
For a breadknife or a chopper or a prong for toasting cheese.  
I learned "a first field dressing" to serve my mate and me  
As a dish-rag and a face-rag and a strainer for our tea.  
I learned to gather souvenirs that home I hoped to send,  
And hump them round for months and months and dump them in the end.  
I learned to hunt for vermin in the lining of my shirt,  
To crack them with my finger-nail and feel the beggars spirt;  
I learned to catch and crack them by the dozen and the score  
And to hunt my shirt tomorrow and to find as many more.  
I learned to sleep by snatches on the firestep of a trench,  
And to eat my breakfast mixed with mud and Fritz's heavy stench.

I learned to pray for Blighty ones and lie and squirm with fear,  
When Jerry started strafing and the Blighty ones were near.  
I learned to write home cheerful with my heart a lump of lead  
With the thought of you and mother, when she heard that I was dead.  
And the only thing like pleasure over there I ever knew,  
Was to hear my pal come shouting, "There's a parcel, mate, for you."  
So much for what I did do - now for what I have not done:  
Well, I never kissed a French girl and I never killed a Hun,  
I never missed an issue of tobacco, pay, or rum,  
I never made a friend and yet I never lacked a chum.  
I never borrowed money, and I never lent - but once  
(I can learn some sorts of lessons though I may be borne a dunce).  
I never used to grumble after breakfast in the Line  
That the eggs were cooked too lightly or the bacon cut too fine.  
I never told a sergeant just exactly what I thought,  
I never did a pack-drill, for I never quite got caught.  
I never punched a Red-Cap's nose (be prudent like your Dad),  
But I'd like as many sovereigns as the times I've wished I had.  
I never stopped a whizz-bang, though I've stopped a lot of mud,  
But the one that Fritz sent over with my name on was a dud.  
I never played the hero or walked about on top,  
I kept inside my funk hole when the shells began to drop.  
Well, Tommy Jones's father must be made of different stuff:  
I never asked for trouble - the issue was enough.  
So I learned to live and lump it in the lovely land of war,  
Where the face of nature seems a monstrous septic sore,  
Where the bowels of earth of earth hang open, like the guts of something slain,  
And the rot and wreck of everything are churned and churned again;  
Where all is done in darkness and where all is still in day,  
Where living men are buried and the dead unburied lay;  
Where men inhabit holes like rats, and only rats live there;  
Where cottage stood and castle once in days before La Guerre;  
Where endless files of soldiers thread the everlasting way,  
By endless miles of duckboards, through endless walls of clay;  
Where life is one hard labour, and a soldiers gets his rest  
When they leave him in the daisies with a puncture in his chest;  
Where still the lark in summer pours her warble from the skies,  
And underneath, unheeding, lie the blank upstaring eyes.

And I read the Blighty papers, where the warriors of the pen  
Tell of "Christmas in the trenches" and "The Spirit of our men";  
And I saved the choicest morsels and I read them to my chum,  
And he muttered, as he cracked a louse and wiped it off his thumb:  
"May a thousand chats from Belgium crawl under their fingers as they write;  
May they dream they're not exempted till they faint with mortal fright;  
May the fattest rats in Dickebusch race over them in bed;  
May the lies they've written choke them like a gas cloud till they're dead;  
May the horror and the torture and the things they never tell  
(For they only write to order) be reserved for them in Hell!"  
You'd like to be a soldier and go to France some day?  
By all the dead in Delville Wood, by all the nights I lay  
Between our lines and Fritz's before they brought me in;  
By this old wood-and-leather stump, that once was flesh and skin;  
By all the lads who crossed with me but never crossed again,  
By all the prayers their mothers and their sweethearts prayed in vain,  
Before the things that were that day should ever more befall  
May God in common pity destroy us one and all!

Anonymous poem contributed by Alick Lavers (e-mail)