## HSTCMP 202 Digital World Wars – Read for Thursday October 8

For Thursday’s class, read and compare these three short accounts of the first days of the First World War:

1. Excerpts from the diaries and letter order book of **Lt. Col. Charles Walter Barton** a British officer with the King’s African Rifles, who was stationed in East Africa when WWI began. This document is from the archives of the National Army Museum in London. I transcribed this diary in January 2019 as part of my research – it retains the spelling, grammar, and organization of Barton’s original handwritten diary. (Pages 1-4)
2. Selected letters written by **Captain Julian Grenfell**, an Oxford-educated soldier in the British Army who enlisted in 1910, four years before WWI began. He was killed in May of 1915 – days later, his poem “Into Battle” was published in *The Times* (London). (Pages 4-5)
3. Selected letters to his parents written by **Private Franz Blumenfeld**, an enlisted German soldier from Freiburg who was later killed on the Western Front. (Pages 5-7)

In all three documents, comments that appear [in brackets like this] are editorial interjections, not the words of the original author.

## **1. Lt. Col. Charles Walter Barton’s account of the beginning of the war in East Africa[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Sept 9th Wednesday [1914]

Marched off at 4am by the light of a good moon and reached the Lufera? River by 6am, the guide had brought us to a point on it some 3 miles from the main read instead of 2 as I had wished.

With a probably long day before us the getting of everyone food was of the utmost importance and as the vegetation by the river was thick we were able to conceal the column and all the carriers

Food had barely been cooked and eaten when the distant boom of a gun in the direction of Karonga warned us that the enemy had like ourselves moved forward to attack

No 3 Column under Captain Griffeths[?] (23 Europeans and 175 natives) were sent off to march on Karonga with all speed their baggage and reserve ammunition being left behind with the whole body.

Carriers picked up their loads and moving a quarter of a mile from the dense cover along the bed of the LaFere[?] River they were formed up in store[?] Order and lay down in the long grass No 1 Column covering their front and flanks.

No 2 Column were across the river holding the far bank but just as they were ordered back so that the force might march back to Karonga their scouts became engaged with a few of the enemy on the North side of the river and it took some ¾ of an hour to recall them and get them back through the tangled undergrowth to the south side. Meanwhile a small party of the enemy had shown themselves on the east side of our position but a few rounds from our flankers drove them off, grass and bush hid most of the proceeding.

As soon as No 2 Column were back its Angoni Company formed a rear guard and its Alonge company joined the right of the front company

A small stream delayed our carriers for a time, the fighting troops forming a wide hollow sphere in which the carriers moved.

Again small parties of the enemy were seen in the bushes to the east in the direction of the main road but were dispersed by the Hanley[?] Company under Captain Stevens and the fire of the maxims. The carriers were kept well in hand, one of our native soldiers was hit. It was reported that a small party of the enemy with machetes had been seen going down the main road and also what looked like a group taking off a wounded German officer.

Then we moved on again and two parties of the enemies irregular spearmen and followers ran into us crossing our front from west to east. Did not realize we were British until they were disarmed, thus we bagged some 30 of them as prisoners with two donkeys one saddled.

Again we had to cross a small stream, the leading fighting troops were across and the carriers starting to struggle over down a steep bank, through undergrowth and pools of water. Some 100 yds beyond the enemy opened fire from a large patch of dense jungle, and another party from some 300 yards to our front, the leading company opened and hearing fire at the bushes ahead thought the men firing at us could not certainly be seen, then bullets came whistling overhead and their fire was very high however one or two more of our men were hit. Our native soldiers fired rapidly and wildly, officers had to walk up and down the line barely keeping control and the waste of ammunition was great, the European volunteers were firing steadily at the general line of bush in front but could get no definite target was visible.

But the enemy would not shift their fire through the carriers with confusion who threw their loads down by or into the stream and bolted though only two were hit

The situation was now that we had in our immediate front an enemy of unknown strength that would not give ground, between us and Karonga some 5 miles away, and as we heard no more guns in that direction it looked ominously as if Karonga and our supply base was in the hands in the enemy while our baggage and ammunition had become immobile through the desertion? Of the carriers.

Nothing further had been heard from No 2 [?] Column

Things looked very ugly –

Unable to dislodge the enemy by fire bayonets were fixed and portions of the line made rushes forward, the enemy fire ceased.

Through the efforts of Mr Duff[?], political officer, Bruce, and the Volunteers told off to look after transport ?? amongst whom was the Rev. M? Napier of the Blantyre Mission driving some with a thick stick and plunging into the water to save others, the greater part were rounded up and advancing the troops a short distance. I ordered the transport to come up and the march to be resumed.

Then the enemy fire opened again from some thicker bush further to our front but still no enemy could be seen – a roar of fire burst out all along our line, then from one part we saw puffs of blue smoke following in quick succession – told the men to fire at them. We advanced a short distance, still they clung to the thick bush while we had several patches of open ground to cover.

Collin’s Angoni came up on the left reinforcing Stevens while in the centre was Muirhead[?] With his Yaos and further to the right Portat’s[?] Alonge. The Angoni flung themselves down the ridges of a patch of native cultivation, then on to its further edge, we were getting to within 70 yds of a clump of very dense bush, and found ourselves up to the main road. Then came into view one of them light field guns firing in the opposite direction, passing the word the charge officers and Volunteers dashed forward leading on the native troops.

Feeling a smack from behind I turned to ask a Volunteer following if he had let off his rifle into me but found that one of the enemy in the bush close to my right had sent a bullet through the seat of my trousers making 4 fair sized holes, the Volunteer following turned out to be Mr. Larkins of Blantyre[?] Who in the past I had asked to work up ‘first aid’ classes for Volunteers as he had taken prizes in that line and he send[?] The Bugh Corporal Lijande[?] Who followed me like a faithful dog, some? Had bandages on Caldecott the Governor AOC? Passed no safe in hand, cheering on the men only to fall with a bullet in the heart a few yards away, Baxton the Staff Officer, Stevens, Collins and others led on; then more of the enemy reinforced those in the bush and our column fell back slightly, ammunition was running short.

Both the Volunteers of our Maxims were down, Muirhead[?] While working a maxim (one of my old Jidbulli ones) got a bullet through the arm and another through the leg. Across the hail of the gun lay two dead Germans, now ammunition was running short, the carriers of the boxes had bolted, men began to stream back to get more, by now I was on my feet again for the wound was not at all painful and shouting to Volunteers to hold their ground and keep the natives steady, sent a few back for ammunition boxes, fearing we should lose the gun or rather guns for there were two

I ordered the bugler to sound the charge and again a dash was made forward, Stevens and Manning (resident of Kote Kote) got into the bush beyond the gun when a German native shot Manning through both legs at the distance of barely a yard, the native falling to Stevens revolver discharge so close as to set on fire the coat of the man who died at once.

Again there was a lull and ammunition came up and men were able to fill bandoliers.

Then a few more sniping shots from the reeds near the lake from which we were only ¼ of a mile – Steven and Collins led more men in that direction then the fire ceased and the fight was over.

[2 pages missing – had also been a raid on Karonga]

….

The Casualties counted by us were:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | British | German |
| Europeans: |  |  |
| Killed | 5 | 7 |
| Wounded | 7 | 2 |
| Natives: |  |  |
| Killed | 8 | 51 |
| Wounded | 42 | 23 |
| Prisoner | - | 4 armed, 42 following [he means porters] |

It is unknown how many of the enemys wounded escaped but they must have been a large number

We also took

2 Maxims

2 krupp, 1 pr quick fires

57 rifles

7200 rounds of ammunition

The victory was of course tinged with sadness by the loss of the good fellows who had laid down their lives for the Protectorate:

Captain Caldecott the Governor’s AOC

Lt Garnett of the Kings African Rifles

Mr Manning Resident of Kote Kote

Mr Ascott a planter near Zomba

Mr Morrison ditto

All men most popular and liked by everyone.

As we were 5 miles from Karonga and the day was far spent we were unable to search the battlefield thoroughly, brought back our own wounded and two wounded German officers and the few of the enemy’s native wounded we could carry, the German doctor coming back with us.

The base hospital at Karonga was all ready for the reception of the wounded, Dr Leys being assisted by Miss Empson. Miss Pallot the trained nurses sent up ready from Zomba and Slantyre.

10 Sept Thursday

Burying party with British and German Doctors went out to the scene of yesterday’s fight and brought in one or two of the enemy’s wounded found in the bushes, the remainder had got away during the night.

Captain Stevens took over temporary command of the Field Force on my going into Hospital

## **2. Captain Julian Grenfell’s letters from the beginning of the war on the Western Front[[2]](#footnote-2)**

[Flanders] October 24, 1914

[To His Mother]

I *adore* war. It is like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic. I have never been so well or so happy. Nobody grumbles at one for being dirty. I have only had my boots off once in the last 10 days, and only washed twice. We are up and standing by our rifles by 5 a.m. when doing this infantry work, and saddled up by 4:30 a.m. when with our horses. Our poor horses do not get their saddles off when we are in the trenches.

The wretched inhabitants here have got practically no food left. It is miserable to see them leaving their houses, and tracking away, with great bundles and children in their hands. And the dogs and cats left in the deserted villages are piteous…

[Flanders] November 3rd, 1914

[To His Parents]

I have not washed for a week, or had my boots off for a fortnight…It is all *the* best fun. I have never never felt so well, or so happy, or enjoyed anything so much. It just suits my stolid health, and stolid nerves, and barbaric disposition. The fighting-excitement vitalizes everything, every sight and word and action. One loves one’s fellow man so much more when one is bent on killing him. and picnic-ing in the open day and night (we never see a roof now) is the real method of existence.

There are loads of straw to bed-down on, and one sleeps like a log, and wakes up with the dew on one’s face…The Germans shell the trenches with shrapnel all day and all night: and the Reserves and ground in the rear with the Jack Johnsons, which at last one gets to love as old friends. You hear them coming for miles, and everyone imitate the noise; then they burst with a plump, and make a great hole in the ground, doing no damage unless they happen to fall into your trench or on to your hat. They burst pretty nearly straight upwards. One landed within ten yards of me the other day, and only knocked over me and my horse. We both got up and looked at each other and laughed…

We took a German Officer and some men prisoners into a wood the other day. One felt hatred for them as one though of our dead; and as the Officer came by me, I scowled at him, and the men were cursing him. The Officer looked me in the face and saluted me as he passed; and I have never seen a man look so proud and resolute and smart and confident, in his hour of bitterness. It made me feel terribly ashamed of myself…

[Flanders] November 18th, 1914

[To His Parents]

They had us out again for 48 hours trenches while I was writing the above. About the shells, after a day of them, one’s nerves are really absolutely beat down. I can understand now why our infantry have to retreat sometimes; a sight which came to a shock to me at first, after being brought up in the belief that the English infantry cannot retreat.

These last two days we had quite a different kind of trench, in a dripping sodden wood, which the German trench in some places 40 yards ahead…We had been worried by snipers all along, and I had always been asking for leave to go out and have a try myself. Well, on Tuesday the 16thm the day before yesterday they gave me leave, only with great difficulty. They told me to take a section with me, and I said I would sooner cut my throat and have done with it. so they let me go alone. Off I crawled through sodden clay and trenches, going about a yard a minute, and listening and looking as I thought it was not possible to look and to listen. I went out to the right of our lines, where the 10th were, and where the Germans were nearest. I took about 30 minutes to do 30 yards; then I saw the Hun trench, and I waited there a long time, but could see or hear nothing. It was about 10 yards from me. Then I heard some Germans talking, and saw one put his head up over some bushes, about 10 yards behind the trench. I could not get a shot at him, I was too low down, and of course I could not get up. So I crawled on again very slowly to the parapet of their trench. I peered through their loop-hole and saw nobody in the trench. Then the German behind me put his head up again. He was laughing and talking. I saw his teeth glistening against my foresight, and I pulled the trigger.

## **3. Private Franz Blumenfeld’s letters from the beginning of the war on the Western Front[[3]](#footnote-3)**

At this moment we are sitting in the train. Where we are going we are not told, but we take for granted that it is Belgium. We are supposed to be in for a thirty hours’ journey. Now we are north of Treves, I think in the Eifel, in most beautiful country. The sun is shining too and everything looks so peaceful. The contrast to the desolation in Lorraine, with all the military activity and the incessant rain, is incredible. But even yet one can't realize the war in earnest, and I keep catching myself simply enjoying all the novelistic impressions.

You can't imagine the purely artistic, marvelous fascination of this constantly chaning, unaccustomed picture. Last night, for instance, the scene round a big table in the living-room of a peasant’s house in Lorraine; infantry and artillery all mixed up together in the wildest confusion, one in a helmet, another with his cap on the back of his head or half over his face, all more or less unshaved, smoking, eating, and sleeping. Round the walls two or more; others sitting on the floor asleep. And in the midst of all this, two old peasant women busy cooking a little coup and making coffee, poor and humble and delighted with the few coppers which they afterwards got from the soldiers for all their trouble. I learn more about the people like this than from all my lectures and touring-companies.

*In the train, September 24th, 1914*

My dear, good, precious Mother, I certainly believe and hope that I shall come back from the war, but just in case I do not I am going to write you a farewell letter. I want you to know that if I am killed, I give my life gladly and willingly. My life has been so beautiful that I could not wish that anything in it had been different. And its having been so beautiful was thanks above all to you, my dear, good, best of Mothers. And for all your love, for all that you have done for me, for everything, everything, I want to thank you and thank you. Really you can have no idea how keenly I have realized just lately how right you were in your way of bringing me up – I was not entirely convinced of the wisdom of some things before, for instance as regards the importance of physical training - how absolutely right and good.

But not only for the way in which you have brought me up do I thank you, but for everything, everything – for the life you gave me, and above all for being just what you are. Oh, but you know, without this letter, and much better than I can write it, how I feel.

Then I want to write to you about something else, which, judging from bits in your letters, you haven’t quite understood: why I should have volunteered for the war? If course it was not for any enthusiasm for war in general, nor because I thought it would be a fine thing to kill a great many people or otherwise distinguish myself. On the contrary, I think that was is a very, very evil thing, and I believe that even in this case it might have been averted by a more skilful diplomacy. But, not that it has been declared, I think it is a matter of course that should feel oneself so much a member of the nation that one must unite one’s fate as closely as possible with that of the whole. And even if I were convinced that I could serve my Fatherland and its people better in peace than in war, I should think it just as perverse and impossible to let any calculations weigh with me at the present moment as it would be for a man going to the assistance of somebody who was drowning, to stop to consider who the drowning man was and whether his own life were not perhaps the more valuable of the two. For what counts is always the readiness to make a sacrifice, not the object for which the sacrifice is made.

This war seems to me, from all that I have heard, to be something so horrible, inhuman, mad, obsolete, and in every way depraving, that I have firmly resolved, if I do come back, to do everything in my power to prevent such a thing from ever happening again in the future…

*October 14th, 1914 (in Northern France)*

One thing weighs upon me more from day to day – the fear of getting brutalized. Your wishing you could provide me with a bullet-proof net is very sweet of you, but strange to say I have no fear, none at all, of bullets and shells, but only of this great spiritual loneliness. I am afraid of losing my faith in human nature, in myself, in all that is good in the world! Oh, that is horrible! Much, much harder to bear than being out-of-doors in all weathers, having to get one’s own food, sleeping in a hay-loft – I don’t mind any of those things. It is much harder for me to endure the incredibly coarse tone that prevails among the men here.

The sight of the slightly and dangerously wounded, the dead men and horses lying about, hurts, of course, but the pain of all that is not nearly so keen or lasting as one imagined it would be. Of course that is partly due to the fact that one knows one can't do anything to prevent it. But may it not at the same time be a beginning of a deplorable callousness, almost barbarity, or how is it possible that it gives me more pain to bear my own loneliness than to witness the sufferings of so many others? Can you understand what I mean? what is the good of escaping all the bullets and shells, is my soul is injured? That is how they would have expressed it in old days…

1. Excerpt from National Army Museum (London) No.1978-07-23, Microfilm copies of the diaries and letter order book of Lt Col Charles Walter Barton. Transcribed by Taylor Soja 01/2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Julian Grenfell, “War is Like a Big Picnic,” from Laurence Housman, ed. *War Letters of Fallen Englishmen* (London: Victor Gonzalez, 1930) in *Empires Soldiers and Citizens: A WWI Sourcebook* 2nd edition,ed. Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Franz Blumenfeld, “The Readiness to Make a Sacrifice,” from Philipp Witkop, ed. *German Students’ War Letters* (London: Methuen, 1929) in *Empires Soldiers and Citizens: A WWI Sourcebook* 2nd edition,ed. Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee and Frans Coetzee (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)