

Private Peaceful - The Trenches

Our trench and our dugouts have been left in a mess by the previous occupants, a company of Jocks from the Seaforths, so when we're not on stand-to at dawn, brewing up or sleeping, we're set to clearing up their mess. Captain Wilkes – or "Wilkie" as we call him now – is **meticulous** about tidiness and cleanliness, "because of the rats," he says. We find out soon enough he's right again. I am the first to find them. I am detailed to begin shoring up a **dilapidated** trench wall. I plunge my shovel in and open up an entire nest of them. They come pouring out, skittering away over my boots. I recoil in horror for a moment and then set about stamping them to death in the mud. I don't kill a single one, and we see them everywhere after that. Fortunately we have Little Les, our own professional rat-catcher, who is now called upon whenever a rat is spotted, whatever the time, day or night, he doesn't mind. He jokes that it makes him feel at home. He knows the ways of rats, and kills with a will each time, tossing their corpses up into no-man's-land with a **flourish** of triumph. After a while the rats seem to know they have met their match in Little Les and leave us be.

But our other daily curse, lice, we all have to deal with ourselves. Each of us has to burn off his own with a lighted cigarette end. They **inhabit** us wherever they can, the folds of our skin, the creases of our clothes. We long for a bath to drown the lot of them, but above all we long to be warm again and dry.

Our greatest **scourge** is neither rats nor fleas but the unending drenching rain, which runs like a stream along the bottom of our trench, turning it into nothing but a mud filled ditch, a stinking gooey mud that seems to want to hold us and then suck us down and drown us. I have not had dry feet since I got here. I go to sleep wet. I wake up wet, and the cold soaks through my sodden clothes and into my aching bones. Only sleep brings any real relief, sleep and food. God, how we long for both. Wilkie moves among us at dawn on the firestep, a word here, a smile there. He keeps us going, keeps us up to the mark. If he has fear he never shows it, and if that is courage then we're beginning to catch it.

The first snow of winter sees us back in the trenches. It freezes as it falls, hardening the mud – and that certainly is a blessing. Providing there is no wind we are no colder than we were before and can at least keep our feet dry. The guns have stayed relatively silent in our sector and we have had few casualties so far: one wounded by a sniper, two in hospital with pneumonia, and one with chronic trench foot – which affects us all. From what we hear and read we are in just about the luckiest sector we could be.

1. Find the definition of the following words, which are in bold in the extract:

meticulous: _____

dilapidated: _____

flourish: _____

inhabit: _____

scourge: _____

2. Where are 'Jocks' from? _____

3. List the key focus of each of the first three paragraphs

4. What is the name for the home of a group of rats? _____

5. How is the mud personified in the third paragraph? Find the quotation: _____

6. Which two things bring relief? _____

7. Why is the snow surprisingly a good thing for the soldiers?

8. How many casualties have they had in the sector so far? _____

9. Find out what 'chronic trench foot' and 'pneumonia' are:
