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Over 500 first-hand accounts of the Battle of the Somme are revealed in a new IWM collection.

A collection of documents donated to Imperial War Museums (IWM) has revealed over 500 first-hand accounts of the Battle of the Somme, the majority of which have never been seen before.

The accounts form the early stages of research by Martin Middlebrook for his ground-breaking book 'The First Day on the Somme', first published in 1971. Middlebrook appealed for first-hand accounts in over 90 local and national newspapers and, in response, 526 British and 20 German veterans gave Middlebrook their personal recollections of having fought in one of the key battles of the First World War. Their stories reveal the experiences and thoughts of the men who waited to go over the top into action on 1 July; explore what it was like to sustain wounds from bullets and shrapnel; and reveal the harsh reception that met British troops from the German trenches.

One such story is that of Private George Richard Stephen Mayne of the Royal Fusiliers. George was 19 years old when he went over the top on 1 July 1916. He was in the first wave of attack and recalled *'it was misty and I could not see far ahead, but above me I could feel the hot sun. The ground underneath my feet was like powder... my state of mind was of bewilderment and I felt woolly headed and it seemed as if I were on my own'*.

Miraculously George managed to get across No Man's Land unscathed and proceeded into the German second line trench where he came across a wounded German soldier lying with a bayonet, *'I saw his putty coloured face which convinced me he was mortally wounded. This German, lying, brought up an arm and actually saluted me. All fear of him had gone from me, and all fear of me had gone from him. I understood no German language then, but the poor chap kept muttering two words, 'wasser, wasser' and 'mutter, mutter'. It took me a minute or so to realise he wanted a drink of water. The second word I could not have cottoned on to. I am glad to this day that I gave him a drink from my precious water'*.

For Charles Bartram, a Lance Corporal in the Infantry aged 23, the battle had a huge effect. He recalls the last conversation with his officer: *'my officer then handed me a torch and said if I got through I was to take it home as a souvenir, I took it home and have still got it. My officer then had another look over the top, it was his last, an explosive bullet blew half his head off'. On making his way back to the reserve trenches later that day he tells how they went 'most of the time on our hands and knees over dead and dying, from that moment on all my religion died. After that journey all my teaching and belief in God had left me – never to return'*.

Other accounts reveal the tense atmosphere of waiting in the trenches; George Anderson was a Sapper with the Royal Engineers. While waiting to advance into No Man's Land, he recalled how amongst the *'murderous continuous machine gun fire ... the man in front of me started screaming that he was hit. I heard no bullet and his haversack was hard on my chest. I said "shut up you silly ____ (sic) do you want to cause a panic?" But a bullet had entered his chest and it killed him. Somewhere in his body it was deflected for it didn't come out of his back. And I had sworn at it – I couldn't take it back and I couldn't help him. God forgive me'*.

Anthony Richards, Head of Documents and Sound at IWM says that *'These papers were one of the first attempts made by an academic to crowd source information from the men who had lived through the first day of the*

Battle of the Somme. They reveal the acts and the regrets of the men who proceeded over the top on 1 July 1916 in their own words, offering an unprecedented account of what went on in the minds of those at the front line.'

Over the coming month, these accounts will be added to [Lives of the First World War](#), IWM's permanent digital memorial to all those who served in the First World War for Britain and the Commonwealth, where people can discover more about the men and women who took part in the Battle of the Somme and find out about their own First World War ancestry.

The papers were donated to IWM by the Felix Fund in memory of Holly Angharad Davies, who passed away in 2014 and was awarded a British Empire Medal for her work with the charity.

Friday 18 November marks a century from the last day of The Battle of the Somme.

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For further information, additional case studies, images and interviews please contact Faye Jackson fjackson@iwm.org.uk /020 7416 5420.

Notes to Editors

IWM

IWM (Imperial War Museums) tells the story of people who have lived, fought and died in conflicts involving Britain and the Commonwealth since the First World War.

Our unique Collections, made up of the everyday and the exceptional, reveal stories of people, places, ideas and events. Using these, we tell vivid personal stories and create powerful physical experiences across our five museums that reflect the realities of war as both a destructive and creative force. We challenge people to look at conflict from different perspectives, enriching their understanding of the causes, course and consequences of war and its impact on people's lives.

IWM's five branches attract over 2 million visitors each year. [IWM London](#), our flagship branch, marks the Centenary of the First World War with new permanent First World War Galleries and a new Atrium with iconic large object displays. Our other branches are [IWM North](#), housed in an iconic award-winning building designed by Daniel Libeskind; [IWM Duxford](#), a world-renowned aviation museum and Britain's best preserved wartime airfield; [Churchill War Rooms](#), housed in Churchill's secret headquarters below Whitehall; and the Second World War cruiser [HMS Belfast](#).

About the First World War Centenary

2014 - 2018 marks the centenary of the First World War, a landmark anniversary for Britain and the world. IWM is marking the centenary by leading a vibrant, five year programme of cultural activities across the world. For more information visit www.1914.org.

