

First World War for a Digital Age

First World War Diaries Go Online to Mark Centenary

EMBARGOED UNTIL Tuesday 14 January 2014, London, 00:01 GMT – Today The National Archives is making the first batch of digitised First World War unit war diaries from France and Flanders available online* via its [First World War 100](#) portal. Once complete, it will comprise more than 1.5 million pages, opening them up to a global audience for the first time. Also launching today is *Operation War Diary*, an innovative online crowdsourcing partnership project between The National Archives, Imperial War Museums (IWM) and Zooniverse, which aims to unearth the details from within the diaries.

The First World War unit war diaries are the most popular records from The National Archives' First World War collection (file series WO 95) and the first in a series of First World War records to be digitised as part of The National Archives' centenary programme – [First World War 100](#) – which spans a five-year period from June 2014 to June 2019.

William Spencer, author and military records specialist at The National Archives said: “Making the First World War unit diaries available online, allows people across the world to discover the daily activities, stories and battles of each unit for themselves. It also creates opportunities for the public, history enthusiasts, family historians and researchers worldwide to explore the official records which may lead to some new discoveries and perspectives of this important period of history.”

With some surprising revelations and astonishing stories, this first batch of unit war diaries reveals the real-time account of the first three cavalry and the first seven infantry divisions who were part of the first wave of British army troops deployed in France and Flanders. They cover the entire period of the units' involvement in the war, from their arrival on the front to their departure at the end of the war.

In this first batch of 1,944 digitised unit war diaries is the daily account of the First Battalion South Wales Borderers in 1914 (WO 95/1280/3), providing insight into the anxiety and terror of the opening days of the war with the First Battle of Marne and Aisne, right up until June 1919 with an account of sporting events, such as tug of war and rugby, and even farewell dinners marking the end of the war.

Other unit war diaries included in the first batch are:

- The 4th Dragoon Guards who fired the first shots in Mons. (WO 95/1112/1)
- 5th (Royal Irish) Lancers who saw action continuously from 1914-18, were in some of the bloodiest battles and included the last British soldier to die in the First World War, Private George Edwin Ellison, shortly before Armistice came into force. (WO 95/1134/2)

- 9th (Queen's Royal) Lancers who were in the final "lance on lance" action of the First World War. (WO 95/1113/2)

Read alongside other records in The National Archives' First World War collection, such as the [Prisoner of War interview reports](#) (file series WO 161), the pieces of the jigsaw can be put together to form a catalogue of first-hand official accounts of the First World War.

Further batches of the unit war diaries will be released throughout the course of The National Archives' centenary programme.

Operation War Diary – Your Archive Needs You!

As part of the digitisation of the Unit War Diaries and to engage people in the centenary, The National Archives is teaming up with Imperial War Museums (IWM) and Zooniverse to launch [Operation War Diary](#). IWM's expertise in citizen history and Zooniverse's citizen science technology, previously used to map the stars, is combined in this innovative crowdsourcing history project which will enable the public to capture information from The National Archives' unit war diaries.

We are encouraging volunteers to sign up to [Operation War Diary](#) who will be assigned a segment of a unit war diary and asked to tag key details from the pages, such as names, places and events. The data inputted by volunteers will be collected and used to enrich The National Archives' catalogue descriptions for the unit war diaries, enabling family historians around the world to trace their army ancestors and providing academics and researchers with a better understanding of how the war was fought.

Information gained through *Operation War Diary* will also be incorporated into IWM's *Lives of the First World War* project, which will launch in late Spring 2014. *Lives of the First World War* is an innovative, interactive platform that will inspire people across the world to discover, remember and share the life stories of those who served in uniform and worked on the home front. By the end of the centenary it will become the permanent digital memorial to more than 8 million men and women from across Britain and the Commonwealth, saving their stories for future generations

We have made 100 unit war diaries available on *Operation War Diary* in the first instance, with more diaries to be added over the coming months and as they are published on The National Archives' website.

Volunteers wishing to take part in *Operation War Diary* can join the project here: www.operationwardiary.org.

Luke Smith, Digital Lead for IWM's First World War Centenary Programme said:

"Operation War Diary will uncover new first-hand information about day to day life in the First World War – information that may not have previously been communicated through letters home or covered in traditional history books. This project will also be an invaluable source for IWM's *Lives of the First World War* as it will help today's generation to discover even more about the full life-stories of the people they choose to remember."

Chris Lintott, Founder of Zooniverse and primary presenter of the BBC series *The Sky at Night* said: "History is an amazing and rich topic that many people love. We're

hoping to bring it onto people's desktops and tablets in a new and amazing way. This will be our first pure history project and we're excited to tell our Citizen Scientists that they now be Citizen Historians too!"

Maria Miller, Culture Secretary, Maria Miller, said:

"The National Archives' digitised First World War unit diaries will allow us to hear the voices of those that sacrificed their lives and is even more poignant now there are no living veterans who can speak directly about the events of the war. This new online vehicle gives a very public voice to some of these soldiers, through which we will be able to hear their thoughts and feelings. Using Operation War Diary, we can follow in their physical shadow as they fought across the Western Front.

The First World War centenary is all about remembrance, recognition and understanding. Yesterday informs today. The National Archives' initiatives are at the heart of the Government's First World War centenary programme to forge lasting connections between the past, present and future as we commemorate the lives and bravery of all those who served in the First World War."

For media enquiries please contact Rebecca Simpson, Press Officer at The National Archives on 0208 392 5277 or by email: press@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Notes to Editors:

*Searching the records on Discovery, our online catalogue, is free. A small fee applies to download digital copies. Visitors to our reading rooms can view them free of charge.

Spokespeople available:

William Spencer is the Principal Military Specialist at The National Archives where he has worked since 1993. He served in the Royal Navy, including operational service in the Falklands in 1982, and holds an MA in War Studies from the prestigious Department of War Studies at King's College London. William is the author of the bestselling books *Medals: the Researcher's Guide*, *Army Records*, *Air Force Records* and *Family History in the Wars*.

Luke Smith, Digital Lead, First World War Centenary Programme, Imperial War Museum

Professor Richard Grayson: Head of History & Professor of Twentieth Century History, Goldsmiths, University of London and Chair of IWM's Academic Advisory Group

Dr Chris Lintott, Zooniverse PI, Astronomer and founder of both Galaxy Zoo and Zooniverse that grew from it. He is also primary presenter of the [BBC](#) series [The Sky at Night](#).

Images available:

Image of unit war diary First Battalion South Wales Borderers in 1914 (WO 95/1280/3)

Screen shot of *Operation War Diary*

All available via Flickr [here](#)

More on the Unit War Diaries (file series WO 95)

The unit war diaries are arranged by front, then by division, then by the units within each division. We have digitised the most popular segment of the unit war diaries to allow researchers around the world to access the diaries as never before. We hope to be able to digitise more war diaries, particularly those beyond the western front, before the end of our centenary programme.

First World War 100 - The National Archives First World War Centenary Programme

[First World War 100](#) - a new digital platform - has been created to guide people through the vast collection of historic records, letters, wills, maps, photographs, illustrations and artworks held by The National Archives.

Adding content throughout the five year programme, [First World War 100](#) will be the central hub for the public to search and view official First World War records. There will be links to video, podcasts and multi-media applications, such as the All Pals Together online videoconference for schools, to fit with anniversaries, themes and lesser known stories in First World War history.

The National Archives First World War collection and resources

The National Archives' unique collection documents 'the road to war' from the high level strategy and orders through to the 'troops on the ground' with the unit war diaries and medal cards of the regiments. The collection covers a large number of government departments, and incorporates many notable documents, including the UK's official copy of the Treaty of Versailles. The National Archives also has a series of [online education resources](#) for secondary school students and teachers focused on original documents from the First World War.

About The National Archives:

For the record, for good...The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). As the official archive of the UK government and England and Wales, we look after and make available to the public a collection of historical records dating back over 1,000 years, including records as diverse as Domesday Book and MI5 files. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk www.legislation.gov.uk

About IWM

The Imperial War Museum (IWM) was established in 1917 while the First World War was still being fought, to ensure that future generations would understand the unprecedented scale and impact of the war, and to record the contributions of the men, women and children who played their role.

2014 - 2018 marks the centenary of the First World War, a landmark anniversary for Britain and the world. IWM will mark the centenary by leading a vibrant, four year programme including [Lives of the First World War](#) and the opening of brand new First World War Galleries at IWM London in summer 2014 and a major exhibition at IWM North. For more information visit www.iwm.org.uk

For information about IWM's Lives of the First World War, please contact Lucy Donoughue, IWM on 020 7416 5311 or by email ldonoughue@iwm.org.uk

About The Zooniverse

The Zooniverse is a collaboration between universities and museums, led by the University of Oxford and the Adler Planetarium in Chicago, which creates citizen science and humanities projects. To date, nearly a million people have used Zooniverse websites to discover planets, transcribe ancient papyri and keep an eye on plankton. The war diaries project builds on the team's experience with the award-winning Old Weather project, which has mined more than a million pages drawn from 19th and early 20th century ship's logs in order to find information of interest to climate scientists and historians.

First World War Centenary Partnership, led by IWM

The National Archives is a member of the First World War Centenary Partnership, established in 2010 and led by IWM. The First World War Centenary Partnership is a network of over 2,000 cultural and educational not-for-profit organisations from 37 countries, who are producing a collective programme of events, activities and resources from 2014 – 2018 to mark the centenary. www.1914.org

Government's First World War Centenary Programme

On 4 August 2014 it will be 100 years since Britain entered the First World War. Within government the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is leading plans to build a commemoration fitting of this significant milestone in world history. As the Prime Minister made clear when he launched the programme in October 2012, the main theme will be remembrance with a particular focus on bringing the centenary alive for young people. There will be a number of national events across the four years, as well as cross-Government programmes to help deliver this. Further details can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/first-world-war-centenary>

