30 June 1916 (A day before)

A suffocating cloud of apprehension filled the camp tonight. The air is deathly still, thick with an agonizing silence that feels far heavier than the freezing, putrid mud clinging to our boots. They tell us tomorrow is the catastrophic day—the day of the ultimate push. We are a Pals battalion, just ordinary, boisterous lads who used to laugh on the same cobbled street corners, now huddled together in a bleak, claustrophobic trench in northern France, waiting for the dreaded sound of the whistle. I look into the hollow, terrified eyes of my closest friends, everyone desperately trying to mask the paralyzing dread tearing at our fragile souls. We try to joke, but the laughter dies quickly in our throats, sounding thin and hollow against the distant, rhythmic thud of the artillery bombardment.

My heart aches with a devastating weight that I can barely carry. Just hours ago, I watched the brave HGS OLD Boys pass by our trench line, marching resolutely toward their forward positions. I saw them pass one by one, their young faces pale and ghostly under the rim of their steel helmets, and then they were gone into the swallowing darkness. They were all frightened by the sight of the war zone They were the bright stars of the camp, lads who should be studying or playing cricket, yet here they are, marching toward a cruel destiny. A terrible, dark certainty whispers to me that many of them will never return to see the school gates again. To steady my trembling hands and quiet the howling panic threatening to overwhelm my mind, I pulled out my worn notebook and scratched these bleeding lines into the stained margin:

The clock ticks down to morning light,
We wait beneath a heavy sky,
In shadows of a brutal night,
Where young men learn how fast they die.

The ground is torn, the wire is deep,
The trenches whisper of our fears,

We pray for peace but cannot sleep,
And drown our troubles in our tears.

The darkness offers no comfort, only an endless expanse of time to think about home, about the worried mothers waiting for letters that may never be written. Every shadow seems to hold misfortune, and every gust of wind sounds like a sigh from the earth itself. We are trapped in this narrow ditch of earth and timber, caught between the lives we left behind and the unimaginable horror that awaits us at dawn.

Tomorrow, when the sun breaks over this ruined landscape, we must plunge over the top of the hill into the merciless, churning jaws of despair . I look at the sky one last time before the madness begins, and I desperately pray that we will all live to see the sunset.

Noel Hodgson

Walter

7 Galahad

1 July 1916 (The First Day)

07:30. The whistle blew. A sharp, piercing shriek that took our last link to sanity.

We scrambled up the rough timber scaling ladders, boots slipping on the rungs, and stepped over the parapet straight into a wall of absolute, mechanical fury. The grand promises of the week-long bombardment vanished in a heartbeat. The German wire wasn't cut. Their deep dugouts had protected them perfectly. The moment we stepped into No Man's Land, the air tore apart with the relentless, deafening chatter of guns. It wasn't a battle; it was a harvesting of men. The front ranks of our beloved Pals battalion were cut down instantly, collapsing into the mud like cut wheat.

I ran. Blindly. Through the dense smoke. My boots felt like lead in the putrid, churned soil, my heart hammering violently against my ribs. The world narrowed to a terrifying blur of flying earth, screaming iron, and the thick, blinding fog of gasoline and smoke that turned the back of my throat. To my left, I caught a fleeting glimpse of the brave HGS Old Boys going forward. Their bayonets caught the glint of the morning sun for a second before the chaos swallowed them whole.

In mere minutes, the dark certainty that had haunted me the night before became an undeniable, horrific reality. I saw them fall. One by one. Dropping into the cratered wasteland. These were the boys who should have been studying in quiet libraries or laughing on sunlit cricket pitches. Their young lives were extinguished in a sudden flash of fire and lead.

The weight of the slaughter was paralyzing. Trapped in a shallow, waterlogged shell hole halfway across the field, I pressed my face deep into the freezing muck. Machine-gun fire stitched the earth mere inches above my helmet, spraying grit onto my neck. All around us, the agonizing cries of the wounded rose and fell—a heart breaking, unending chorus cutting through the heavy smoke. There was no glorious charge. No heroic advance. Just a desperate struggle to survive in a ruined, chaotic landscape.

As the hours dragged on, the intense heat of the day gave way to a chilling dusk. The relentless fury of the midday assault gradually slowed into a tense, sporadic exchange of rifle fire and distant, rhythmic shelling. Somehow, against all human odds, I am still breathing. I am huddled back in a battered, blood-slick section of the frontline trench. But the boisterous lads who shared stories on cobbled street corners just yesterday are gone, scattered across a field of absolute devastation. The sun is setting over a landscape transformed into a vast cemetery, and my soul is permanently broken by the sheer, unimaginable scale of what we lost on this first, catastrophic day.

Noel Hodgson

Walter Form 7 Galahad

18 November 1916 (The Last Day)

It is over.

One hundred and forty-one days of unadulterated, relentless cries of agony have finally brought us to this bitter, freezing dawn. It is the final day of this catastrophic push, and the northern French countryside we entered in the height of summer is now entirely unrecognizable. The green fields and rolling hills have been chewed into a vast, cratered wasteland of freezing, putrid mud, choked with stagnant water and surrounded by the shattered, skeletal remains of trees. The hopeful Pals battalion that marched so proudly into battle four months ago exists now only in memory, replaced by a tiny handful of hollow-eyed, exhausted survivors who move through the freezing muck like ice.

A strange, suffocating silence has settled over the line today, a heavy quiet that feels profoundly unnatural after months of non-stop, earth-shaking artillery bombardment. The grand autumn offensive is grinding to a halt in the bitter winter sleet. We didn't receive the order to plunge over the top today; instead, we simply sat huddled together in the freezing ditch of earth and timber, staring blankly into the grey mist. New weapons, like the massive, lumbering steel tanks that promised to break the deadlock earlier this autumn, now sit abandoned and half-submerged in dirt to rot. .

The official reports will say the Allies have captured a few miles of stained earth and pushed the line forward, but the true cost of those gains sits like a devastating weight upon all our chests. To steady my trembling, frostbitten hands, I pulled you out , my battle-worn notebook, one last time, looking at the bleeding lines I scratched into the margin so many lifetimes ago on the night of June 30th. There are no words left to describe the emptiness that fills the trenches now, only an overwhelming ache for all the mothers back home who will soon receive the final, devastating letters.

As the pale winter sun begins to dip below the horizon, bringing an end to this long, agonizing campaign, I look out across the quieted battlefield through a blur of tears. The endless sea of crude wooden crosses stands

as a silent testament to the thousands of ordinary lads who gave everything for this patch of earth. I weep silently in the dark for my closest friends, for the bright HGS Old Boys who died on the very first morning, and for all those brave, beautiful souls who went over the top into the jaws of death and never came back.

Yet, as the cold bites through my uniform, a fragile, stubborn spark refuses to be extinguished within me. Through the gloom, I look to the sky and pray that this immense, unbearable sacrifice will not be in vain—that from this scarred and blood-soaked earth, a lasting peace might someday bloom. I must believe that the memory of our fallen brothers will guide tomorrow's world toward a gentler dawn.

Noel Hodgson

Walter

Form 7 Galahad