



To Fight Alongside Friends: The First World War Diaries of Charlie May

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'I do not want to die. The thought that we may be cut off from each other is so terrible and that our babe may grow up without my knowing her and without her knowing me. It is difficult to face. Know through all your life that I loved you and baby with all my heart and soul, that you two sweet things were just all the world to me'

Captain Charlie May was killed, aged 27, in the early morning of 1st July 1916, leading the men of 'B Company', 22nd Manchester Service Battalion (the Manchester Pals) into action on the first day of the Somme.

This tolerant and immensely likeable man had been born in New Zealand and – against King's regulations – he kept a diary in seven small, wallet-sized pocket books. A journalist before the war and a born storyteller, May's diaries give a vivid picture of battalion life in and behind the trenches during the build-up to the greatest battle fought by a British army and are filled with the friendships and tensions, the home-sickness, frustrations, delays and endless postponements, the fog of ignorance, the combination of boredom and terror to which every man that has ever fought could testify.

His diaries reflect on the progress of the war, tell jokes – good and bad, give details of horse-rides along the Somme valley, afternoons with a fishing rod, lunch in Amiens, a gastronomic celebration of Christmas 1915 and concerts in 'Whiz Bang Hall'. He describes battles not just with the enemy, but with rats, crows and on the makeshift football pitch – all recorded with a freshness that brings these stories home as if for the first time.

The diaries are also written as an extended and deeply-moving love letter to his wife Maude and baby daughter Pauline. 'I do not want to die', he wrote – 'Not that I mind for myself. If it be that I am to go, I am ready. But the thought that I may never see you or our darling baby again turns my bowels to water.'

Fresh, eloquent and warm, these diaries were kept secret from the censor and were delivered to his wife after his death by a fellow soldier in Charlie's company. Edited by his great-nephew and published for the first time, these diaries give an unforgettable account of the war that took Charlie May's life, and millions of others like him.

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