

WWI soldiers expressed personality and emotions in bureaucratic battlefield diaries, analysis shows

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Daily record keeping was introduced during World War One in the British Expeditionary Forces (BEF), designed to record the bare minimum of facts. However, soldiers were also able to express the trauma and chaos of war.

The records, designed to provide information to allow the army to wage war more effectively, were kept by every branch. The study, by Dr. Debra Ramsay, from the University of Exeter, shows they were not just a "neutral space for data." Close reading of the entries—often scribbles made as battles unfolded—show they could also be a space for individual expression.

The majority of reports conform to the limits of official language, which demands that soldiers condense difficult moments into terse, dispassionate accounts. An entry from the 5th Bn Notts and Derby's Diary for 28 April 1917 says, "Artillery duel from 4.30am-5.30am. Trench mortars & snipers gave considerable trouble. Work on Defence Line continued."

But some push at the limits of the requirements, managing to convey the desperation of the brutal conditions through the use of more descriptive language and stylistic devices such as repetition. Detailing the loss of the village of Gheluvelt, critical in the Ypres Salient, the records of the 2nd Bn Worcestershires from 22–26 October, while generally concise, nonetheless manage to convey the desperation caused by the brutal conditions. One entry, made on 22 October 1914, describes how the "furious bombardment" and "continuous" rifle fire created "a very trying ordeal." The phrase "very trying" is repeated twice more in the entry.

Dr. Ramsay said, "I'm fascinated by the fact these documents sit in a category of their own, they are not personal and they are not official. People using them have been able to express their individuality within the bureaucracy which was increasingly defining military life and procedures. They tell us something about the human experience of wars you don't find in any other documents but have been overlooked.

"Some diaries are funny, some are heart-breaking, that that's not their intention. They show tensions between soldiers and the institutions of

war."

Today the WWI War Diaries are held by The National Archives (TNA) in Kew (UK), where they constitute a prodigious source of material for historians and family researchers.

The diaries were meant to include information on weather, field works, casualties, terrain and other elements involved in a campaign, "all important" orders and decisions, matters concerning duties and administration, summaries of "[information](#) received and of all matters of importance, and reports on how organizational systems are standing up to the 'test of war.'" Decisions about what might be identified as important were left to the individual.

The completion of War Diaries was the responsibility of unit commanders, but they were often written by the regimental adjutant or other junior officers, whose names never appear.

The almost hour-by-hour account of the Notts and Derby Regiment's [experiences](#) from mid- to late September 1916 bear evidence of the impact of warfare in errors that are crossed out and occasionally messy scrawls in the otherwise neat handwriting. In some instances, fighting was so intense it made reporting impossible, and the [diaries](#) contain a line—or two at most—with after-action reports filling in for real-time observations.

Dr. Ramsay said, "The WWI War Diaries are not the reflections of poets, nor the memoirs of prominent military or political leaders, but the responses and thoughts of ordinary men attempting to parse the experiences of an unprecedented war through the medium of official military documents. Such moments offer a unique insight into the individual embodied experience of conflict."

The study is published in the journal *Media, War and Conflict*.

More information: Debra Ramsay, 'Scribbled hastily in pencil': The mediation of World War I Unit War Diaries, *Media, War & Conflict* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/17506352211033210](https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352211033210)

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