

# Raunchy sex history of Somme revealed

A book lifts the lid on the carnal comforts sought by First World War troops  
-David Smith

The young soldier stepped into the bedroom. It was the first time he had gone to a prostitute and he felt apprehensive and embarrassed. He also found himself unable to have sex. 'I was - what do you call it? - impotent,' he said.

This type of recollection from an unnamed veteran of the First World War, 90 years after the end of the conflict, is seldom reflected in the histories, poems or services of remembrance. It is among newly discovered accounts which bring to life a hidden history of young men who, facing death daily in the trenches, sought sexual release where they could.

They came to light when historian Joshua Levine trawled the sound archives of the Imperial War Museum for his forthcoming book, *Forgotten Voices of the Somme*. The archive contains more than 56,000 hours of taped interviews, with contributions from veterans who have long since died. Along with memories of battle and the loss of comrades, some were surprisingly candid about sex and sexuality, despite the taboos of their generation.

Corporal George Ashurst of the 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, recalled visiting a French brothel which serviced soldiers behind the front line. 'We were drinking vin blanc in the estaminet [small café], and it was absolutely crowded,' he said. 'There were five women in there, and it was five francs to go up the stairs and into the bedrooms with them. The stairs leading up to bedrooms were full; there was a man on every step, waiting his turn to go in with a woman. I was sat at a table with my friend, Tom, when the padre came in. He dressed us all down. "Have none of you any mothers? Have none of you any sisters?"'

When not on duty, airmen had greater privileges than the average soldier. An unnamed officer in the Royal Flying Corps recalled travelling to meet prostitutes. 'They were always pleased to welcome les Anglais aviateurs, plenty money. There was Marguerite, the little tubby one who looked lovely. Fifi, the tall, dark one, was also a favourite. There was one with a very flat nose like a boxer who we nicknamed Pug and a very big girl with fat legs that we called Tiny. Fun ran high and we spent a lot of money on cheap champagne, which was all that mattered to the girls.'

At least one brothel offered an early equivalent of Viagra. Private Fred Dixon of the 10th Battalion, Royal West Surrey Regiment, said: 'In one estaminet a very kind old French lady was dispensing coffee from a jug and two girls in their late teens were dispensing pills which they assured us would give us additional power in our amorous exploits. Colonel Hayley-Bell was our colonel at the time. He was the grandfather of the actress Hayley Mills, and he was greedy. He took two.'

Homosexual acts were illegal and highly stigmatised. Corporal Tommy Keele of the 11th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment, told how he shared a bed with a bandmaster who had come from the trenches. He said: 'On about the third night, I woke up with a funny little movement round

my bottom. I thought, "Oh, he's having a dream", so I sort of brushed his hand away and dropped off again. A little later the same thing again; I felt a hand around my bottom again and I pushed the hand away quickly and said: "Don't you dare!"

'He sort of muttered in his sleep, or so I thought, and I dropped off again. Then he went even further and he was almost raping me. So I turned round and I hit him. I knocked him out of the bed. I stood him up and I punched him with my fist. I really battered his head and face for trying to bugger me.

'He said: "I shall report this. You'll be court-martialled." I said: "Fine! You report it tomorrow morning and you see who wins. You're a top NCO, I'm a lower NCO. Buggery is a crime in the army and it carries the death penalty. You'd be shot if I opened my mouth because you tried to bugger me."

'And he never opened his mouth, except to say that on his way to his billet he'd slipped over and got gravel rash down one side of his face.

'I was sorry for him afterwards because everybody was sex-starved. There was no such thing as real girls around. He was probably in that mood and anything was good enough. But if I was good enough, I didn't want to be.'

Levine, who spent eight months researching the book, which is to be published in October by Ebury Press, said: 'People tried to get through as they always have and one diversion was sex. Many of these men had been brought up through a strict Victorian childhood. They quite possibly went to France as virgins and were given an opportunity they wouldn't have got in England. They knew they might not live for much longer, so you think: "Bloody good on yer".'

