

SKY-HIGH

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The war was everywhere back then - on posters telling us to do our bit, in Waihi's local rag saying we'd be heroes. So I signed up along with all the other diggers. And because we were miners, we were sent to France - with a pick and shovel for weapons - to tunnel under the German front line. I remember rats the size of cats and bully beef and hard tack and scratching away at white chalk ... all the time eyeing the canary, in case of poisonous gas.

MAY 1916, NEAR ARRAS



I might take a break, practise my bagpipes. OK, Sarge?

Quit your joking, Charlie. This isn't the time.



We've heard Fritz on the geophones. You need to get out.



Cool heads, lads. Cool heads.

Right, leave those last sandbags. Watch the wires.



Move! We're blowing the tunnel.



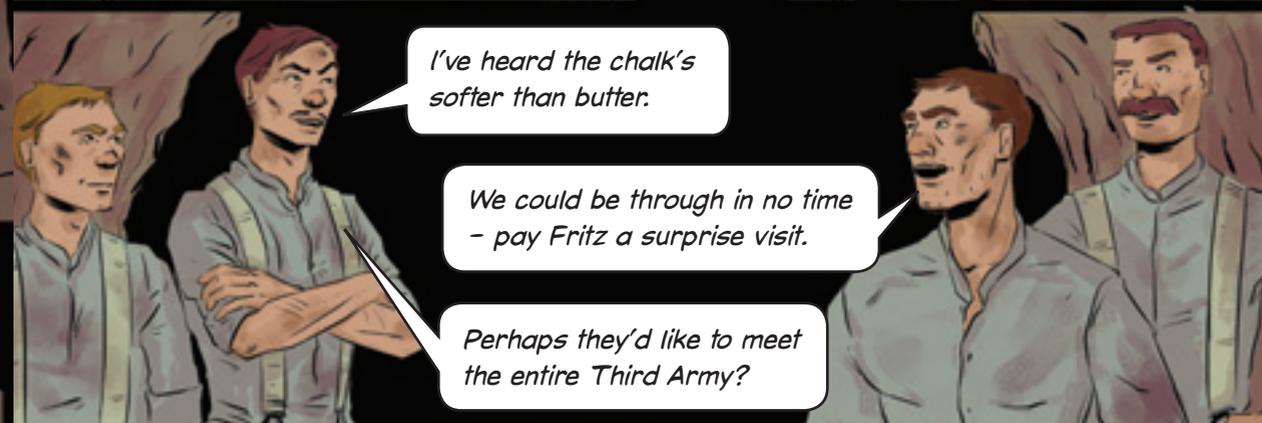
Exactly what we had in mind, Richards.

BOOM!



We'd been at the front six months, digging under the Germans and blowing up their trenches. Of course, they reciprocated. It was a game of cat and mouse. Then one day, a couple of our men found something.

Officers have confirmed that there are old quarries beneath Arras.



I've heard the chalk's softer than butter.

We could be through in no time - pay Fritz a surprise visit.

Perhaps they'd like to meet the entire Third Army?



The officers had big plans. Pretty soon, our company was to play its part in one of the greatest battles of the Western Front.

NOVEMBER 1916, ARRAS

It was all top secret of course. We were to link the old quarries underneath the town and dig tunnels that would take thousands of troops under no-man's land. We'd deliver them right to the German front line. They said it would end the stalemate, maybe even the war.

We worked around the clock in shifts. Each day, we tried to break the previous day's record.



It needs to be wider. Those wee Bantams might be able to swing their picks in here, but I can't.

How 'bout I eat your rations, then. Do us both a favour ...

It wasn't only the rations that were in short supply. We were constantly on the scrounge for timber. The army seemed to think we could build props out of thin air.



Don't ask, Sarge.

I see nothing.

In December, reinforcements arrived from the Pioneer Battalion. Even though we liked the Brits, especially the Bantams, it was great to be with fellows from home. They made jokes we could understand - and they sure knew how to swing a pick. We had trouble keeping up with them.



We had a good Christmas that year. We put down a hāngī. Some of the Pioneers even managed to find a couple of chickens ...



Now where on earth -

Don't ask.

We had a lot of laughs. One time, a soldier brought in a German prisoner and some of the Pioneers did a haka. They rolled their eyes, stuck out their tongues ... the full works. We almost felt sorry for poor Fritz.



22-11-16: Today the men dug 239 feet. The best to date. 🍌🍌



Come on, Sarge. We'll keep him as our mascot.

The fun didn't last. The Pioneers were transferred to another place, and we carried on digging.

APRIL 1917

By April, we'd built an entire city underground. It was kitted out with running water, a ventilation system ... the works. There were even a couple of operating theatres down there, all rigged up with proper lighting. We were ready to blow the Germans sky-high. Then there was a last-minute hitch ...



Gas shell.

How bad is it?

We need to tarp the tunnel.

Masks on.



One of our own shells had fallen short and landed in a tunnel. It was bad news, and the tarp was like putting a bandage on a bleeding artery. We would have to work all night, opening the tunnel at the far end to clear the gas.

Right, the lights are out. Someone find candles.

Brilliant.

Masks are to stay on at all times.



You right there, Tommy?

I'm OK thanks, Sarge.

Don't worry - we'll be back in plenty of time to watch the show.



We were used to repairing cave-ins, but working in a gas leak was something else.



The gas always found a way in. Our eyes were soon streaming.

We could only dig in short shifts. We'd have a break, then take another turn.



Come on, lad. We're nearly done.



We were heading back ...



... when another shell hit.



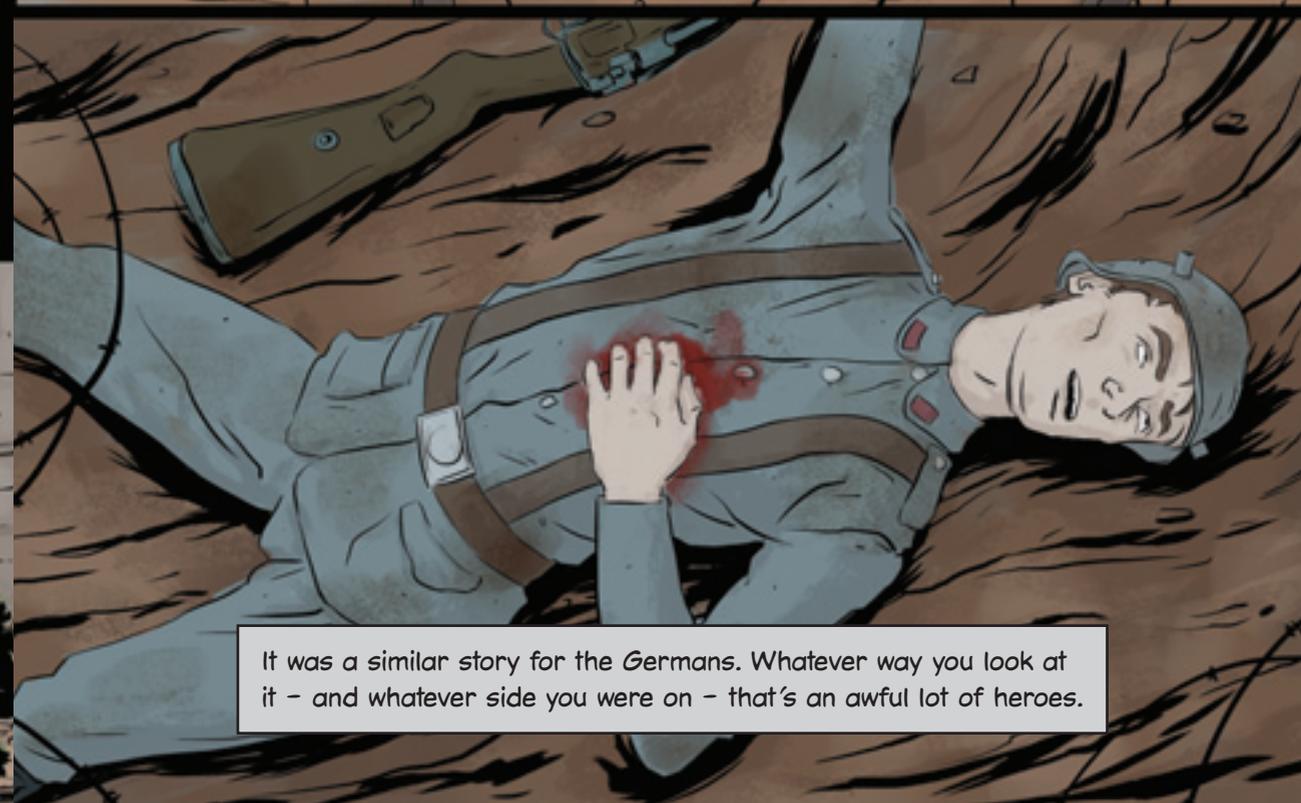
Sarge!



Where's Sarge? We need to get him.



The Battle of Arras lasted just over a month. Some said it was a victory for our side. But we heard later that over 150 000 of our men were killed or injured.



It was a similar story for the *Germans*. Whatever way you look at it - and whatever side you were on - that's an awful lot of heroes.



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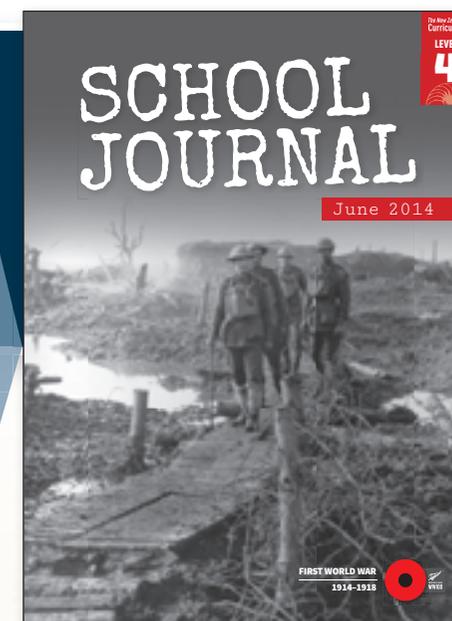
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