

This is a condensed version taken from the diary written by a young WW1 Canadian private in a trench in France while he and his fellow soldiers await the command to “move up” to replace fallen comrades in the front line.

He titled it:                   **“Moving Day”**  
                                  “imus ad Bellum”.....Cicero

The autumn golden twilight---the drowsy old-fashioned farm all so peaceful and still in the early eventide. Nothing here to tell of the struggle---the death-agony---nothing to remind one of the war save for a few big balloons swaying in the purpling air like prehistoric animals basking on their prehistoric shores. Nothing savouring of war save these---and a few hundred men laughing and joking in the yard below.

Then the “FALL IN” from the lordly bugler—and soon the long line of pack-carriers wind slowly over the old sunset trail. Like some pageant, the procession passes the old medieval castles and towers of the golden days of France—through the rich fields, made richer in the deep warm tints of evening.

Far off, at the head, the skirl of the pipes and the flash of the Royal Stewart kilt—then in their wake, the darker heavily-laden figures and the steady, never-ceasing tramp, tramp of multitudinous feet.

The last fading golden light dissolves in the deep purple of night—and the four-deep line elongates itself like a snake into a two-deep one. The flashing pipe band slowly disconnects and stands on the grassy side of the road ‘til the long, drawn-out battalion winds past.....

On goes the line past the long-snouted guns pointing at the diamond-studded sky. A few staggering groups of men—unshaven and coated with mud—come hobbling down the narrowing road, their faces white and set as men having looked on unspeakable things. Here on the roadside the big Red Cross flag. Down in the roomy cellar of a former chateau, whose position is only marked by piles of broken white limestone, is the dressing station. Within are those who have “got it”—in all manner of ways—but lucky in their own eyes and in the eyes of the passing line outside...

Now the route is flanked by yawning shell-holes—and in the blinding flashes of the heavies, a rifle and equipment torn and broken—the passed-down words “STEP OVER” tell their own story. The line is nearing the area of the lighter guns now. Their flashes pass like lightning from gun to gun. The vicious barks snap back defiance from the muddy open positions. The whee-e-ee-ee-e of a “5.9”—nearer and nearer—CRASH!! The line ducks for a moment then on and on.

The flairs seem much nearer now, and in their glow the broken old brick walls and torn tree stumps stand out black against the sky. The RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT of machine-gun punctuates the death-like hazy stillness—and is answered by another farther off- Rat-tat-tat.

Down into the evil-smelling communication trench, perfumed with high explosive and the breath of recent “minnies”—through the winding mud and mud-lined walls—tripping over telephone wires and blown-in dirt and debris—at last the long-wearied procession arrives, silent in the torn and hastily repaired front line. Silently the different sections take up their posts and wait for dawn....

The long faint beams from the east mark the approaching dawn. The water-filled shell-holes take on a livid, lurid light. “Get ready” – Two Minutes to Go—comes softly along the line. The seconds crawl wearily along—two minutes and after that, the dark – two minutes and half the silent earth-covered inhabitants of this weird and desolate place will know their fate. The death-like silence is unbroken.....

C-R-A-S-H!!! A hundred iron mouths burst forth in one mad thunder-clap of crashes. Beyond the wire is one living sheet of bursting flame! The air seems solid with whizzing—whirling machine-gun bullets. Backwards-- the ceaseless, steady, remorseless storm of spitting, sputtering, innumerable guns. Over the low-browed parapet the dark scurrying figures go—not in a mad dash but with slung rifles—slowly as if in a remorseless tidal wave behind the creeping, banging, smoking, crashing barrage in front. O-H-H, that human flesh should have to stand that storm of flying steel.

The frenzied s.o.s. rockets of Fritz are being answered now. The big wheezing shells crash unnoticed. On goes the advancing sheet of

flame. On goes the long extended line of men. On they go—save for those who falter- fall-torn and bleeding. CRASH!!! A big black coalbox hits the line—the smokey breath of Death slowly rises – a gap – then on and on they go—over the shattered dead—over the blown and twisted trenches. A yawning dug-out entrance—the ringing challenge to come out—then down the un-pinned bombs go—bump on the wooden stair—BUNG!!! the dugout closes with its dead....

The barrage has lifted now far back in Fritz's reserves, far back toward the old front line go the prisoners—carrying stretcher cases or plowing fearfully through the blood-stained shell-holes. The long extended line halts—and soon the long trail of connected shell-holes assumes the dignity of a new front line—and the drizzling day wages on in the high noon.

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The author was Private David Fraser Marshall who later became the Reverend David Fraser Marshall.

Read by Barbara Marshall on November 11, 2012 at our  
Remembrance Day Service  
(Barbara was Rev. Marshall's daughter-in-law)