

HENRI BARBUSSE

Under Fire



BELOW French *poilus* in the trenches of 1915. *Poilu* was the common term for an ordinary infantryman, the equivalent of the British 'Tommy'.

Published in 1916, it became France's most successful literary evocation of the realities of the trenches. **Matt Leonard** explores the background to Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* (*Under Fire*).

Image: WPL

When Henri Barbusse penned *Le Feu* in 1916, he struck a chord with many in France who had tasted war since 1914. His book not only brought home the horrors of trench warfare, but also the stark and visceral realities of modern conflict.

It was a fictional story, lent verisimilitude by the knowledge that the author had served his own time in the squalor of the French lines, both in Soissonnais and the Artois. It was read by men in the trenches, many of whom wrote to Barbusse to congratulate him. Within a year it had sold over 200,000 copies and to this day remains the best-selling French book on the First World War.

POILU BARBUSSE

When war was declared, Barbusse was 41 years old, yet he immediately volunteered for the Army. Joining the 231st Infantry Regiment, he spent 18 eighteen months at the Front as part of the 55th Division.

During his time in the trenches, he experienced the full trauma of modern industrial warfare. In January 1915 he found himself stationed near Crouy, where in less than a week over half his unit were killed.

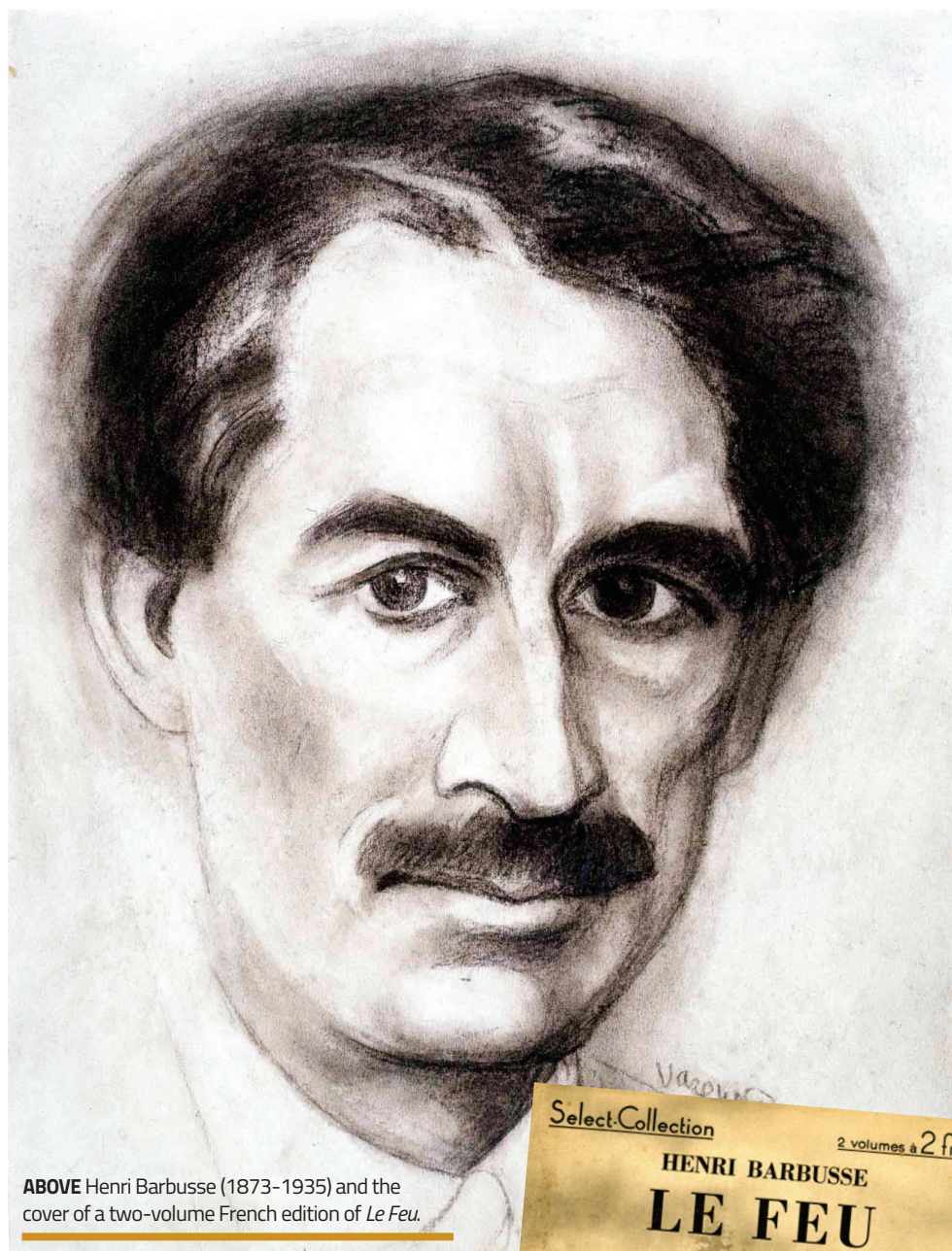
He was twice cited for bravery, on one occasion receiving the Croix de Guerre for bringing in wounded from no-man's-land. Like many, he was eventually wounded in action and never really recovered. He was invalided out of combat duty and formally discharged in 1917.

As with many fictional accounts of the war, the first half of *Under Fire* introduces a number of disparate (and desperate) protagonists who one by one perish in the mud, rain, and blood, their experiences recalling those of Barbusse and his real-life comrades-in-arms.

The second half of the book becomes more graphic, leading to the description of the attack on Hill 119, known as 'the Pimple', where the charge across no-man's-land is so vividly described that the reader can almost feel the shrapnel and bullets whistling by. The book ends with a new beginning, an almost biblical washing away of the old order and a bringing in of the new.

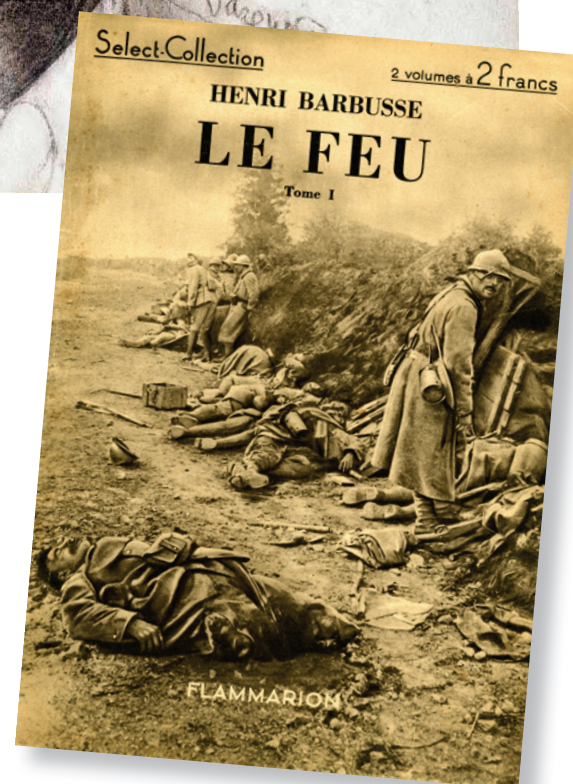
POTERLOO

The exact places that Barbusse's *poilus* find themselves in are not always made clear, a deliberate literary device that adds to a sense of battle-zone disorientation in the narrative. But several areas are specifically mentioned: »



ABOVE Henri Barbusse (1873–1935) and the cover of a two-volume French edition of *Le Feu*.

'The village has disappeared. There is no longer any shape. There is not even an end of wall that remains standing.'



Henri Barbusse

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Image: author

ABOVE A German war cemetery in the Artois. The experiences of Henry Barbusse on this battleground in 1915 inspired him to write the best-selling French novel of the First World War.

Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, Carency, Souchez, the Lorette Spur, and the Zouave Valley all feature.

These once peaceful villages and swathes of countryside become characters in themselves, mirroring the fate of the tale's protagonists. At one point, Poterloo, a soldier who before the war had lived his whole life in the village of Souchez, ventures back there once the Chasseurs have retaken it. What he finds is nothing like he remembers:

The village has disappeared, nor have I seen a village go so completely. Ablain-Saint-Nazaire and Carency, these still retained some shape of a place, with their collapsed and truncated houses, their yards heaped high with plaster and tiles. Here, within the framework of slaughtered trees that surrounds us, as a spectral background in the fog, there is no longer any shape. There is not even an end of wall, fence, or porch that remains standing; and it amazes one to discover that there are paving stones under the tangle of beams, stones, and scrap-iron. This – here – was a street.

The confused and broken Poterloo cannot even identify the house he lived in for most of his life, such is the utter destruction:

It's there – no, I've passed it. It's not there. I don't know where it is – or where it was. Ah, misery, misery!

Barbusse paints man and the shattered landscape of the Front as being one image, entwining the two together. Souchez and Poterloo become indistinguishable from each other,

the fate of each framed through the oblivion of endless mud, utter destruction, and the hopelessness of war. Indeed, mud is a recurring theme, portrayed as a sentient monster covering everything it touches in death. Men fade into the landscape, almost becoming one with it, their suffering dissolving them into the very earth.

ARTOIS

Verdun and the Chemin des Dames are often seen as the major French battlefields of the war; the Artois is frequently overlooked. Yet during the first months of the conflict the

French suffered huge losses attempting to stop the Germans capturing Arras. The plateau of Notre Dame became a charnel house as a salient formed around Carency, Souchez, and Ablain-Saint-Nazaire.

The relentless French attacks failed to capture the high land and slowly the area was ground into the mud. These attacks culminated in a concerted effort that became known as 'the Second Battle of the Artois'. Barbusse had a front-row seat at this apocalypse.

The battle began on 9 May 1915. Within three days Notre Dame had not only fallen to the French, it had also fallen into ruins. Despite the capture of the Lorette Spur, Vimy Ridge was not taken, and the death toll was monstrous: the French estimated their losses at 102,000 killed, wounded, or missing.

Nevertheless, it was a victory of sorts, in a war where victories were in short supply, especially for the war's main host – a victory the soldiers of France shared with the Foreign Legion, Polish and Czech soldiers, and Moroccan Zouaves, all of whom had been in the thick of the fighting.

MOROCCANS AND POLES

Barbusse's narrator describes the Zouaves' attack of 16 June 1915 as 'one of the finest of this war or any other'. The Africans gallantly

BELOW The shattered landscape of Vimy Ridge today.



Image: author

'The worst hell of the war ... the suffocation of the underground passages that constantly close in on you.'

Henri Barbusse

charged headlong across their now eponymously named valley and took their objective. Despite this courageous act, the Zouaves' efforts were unsupported and they soon found themselves at the mercy of the enemy's guns, their bright red fezzes doing little to camouflage them amongst what was left of the verdant Artois fields.

The Polish and Czech efforts on the battlefield are memorialised, too, astride the main road from Neuville St Vaast to Souchez. The Polish memorial was destroyed by the Germans in 1940, but later rebuilt, only to be storm-damaged in 1967. Repaired again, the impressive structure carries the motto 'For our freedom and yours', reminding those who pay their respects that not all who lost their lives under the Tricolour heralded from the motherland.

Under Fire ends in December 1915, a mere two months before the main French effort switched to Verdun. Barbusse's battlefield would continue to burn for years, but the

French would not be involved – British and Commonwealth troops would replace them in this sector.

VIMY RIDGE

Despite their failure to take Vimy Ridge in 1915, the French had pushed the Germans back to the very edge of the high ground, leaving their line perilously vulnerable to a sudden push. To counteract this, and because they could no longer defend in depth, the Germans began digging an impressive series of tunnels and galleries designed to protect their lines from attack. The French had responded, but their often-crude tunnels were quickly abandoned by the British, thereby removing the last vestiges of the French effort at the top of the ridge.

The final German stand came on 9 April 1917, when, during the Battle of Arras, the Canadians charged up the ridge – and into legend. They had no small amount of help from the British, however, who had

constructed the infantry subways used so effectively for the attacks: Captain Briscoe of 172 Tunnelling Company was among those killed during the battle and is today buried in Ecoivres Cemetery near Mont St Eloi.

The attack on Vimy Ridge was one of the greatest Allied successes of the war. The summit was quickly taken, exposing the Douai Plain beyond the ridge, where the Germans could be seen in headlong retreat.

THE LABYRINTH

'The Labyrinth' was the soubriquet given by both sides to an area of battlefield immediately to the west of Neuville St Vaast and Rolincourt. It was a part of the Front consumed by a vast and confusing network of tunnels, bunkers, trenches, dugouts, connected shell-holes, and mine craters. This lethal maze played a vital role in the build-up to the »»

BELOW Notre Dame de Lorette cemetery: the largest French military cemetery in the world.

Image: author





Image: author

ABOVE The entrance to a *souterrain* in Zouave Valley.

April 1917 attacks. As Barbusse described, the French lost huge numbers in this morass of mud and death during 1915, but without their sacrifice it is doubtful that the attack on Vimy Ridge would have been so successful.

By 9 April 1917, the British and Dominion tunnelling companies had constructed between 12 and 15 subways (depending on how they are counted) in order to funnel men to and from the Front Line underground and in relative safety. Many of these subways had their origins in, or on the outskirts of, the Labyrinth.

Much of the area was used by the heavy artillery that was so vital in softening up the

German defences before the battle. And by late 1917, the British also had an airfield just below the medieval abbey at Mont St Eloi, the pilots often daring to fly between the abbey's crumbling twin towers.

Barbusse describes the sheer desolation, the mud and rain, the innumerable corpses, and the detritus of war that made up the Labyrinth in vivid detail – so much so that it becomes difficult for the reader to imagine the land around Vimy ever recovering. Yet today many of the villages have been reconstructed and the fertile fields are quiet once again. Barbusse describes the place as one where the living and the dead would continue to share the same space. The Labyrinth still echoes with his prophecy.

THE LARGEST FRENCH MILITARY CEMETERY IN THE WORLD

On the heights of the Lorette Spur, near the phoenix-like village of Souchez, rebuilt from modern brick as opposed to the more traditional chalk, can be found the largest French military cemetery in the world. A statue of General Paul Maistre, who led his men to 'victory' in 1915, stands guard outside Notre Dame de Lorette, keeping watch over the seemingly endless white crosses – 'on a ground peopled with the dead', as Barbusse put it. The small museum at the top of the ossuary shows the extent of the devastation around Vimy and Souchez in 1915, and the views from the heights make it obvious why the area was so important to control.

Just to the south-east of Souchez can be found the Zouave Valley, today bisected by the A26 Autoroute. A small cemetery marks the final resting place of 178 identified bodies – yet amongst them are none of the Moroccans who made that epic charge in 1915. Rather, it is a British and Commonwealth cemetery.

The Africans rest at Notre Dame de Lorette, and a large memorial to the division can be found near the impressive Canadian monument on the heights of Vimy Ridge. The Zouave Valley cemetery was begun in May 1916 and used until June 1917, but during this period the area was heavily shelled, causing many of those buried there to be reinterred – a macabre reflection of Barbusse's notion that the dead would rise again.

BELOW The detritus of battle, as seen in Goodman Subway, explored by Durand Group conflict archaeologists.



Image: author

EXPLORING THE UNDERGROUND WAR

The extent of this shelling was revealed when battlefield archaeologists the Durand Group attempted in late 2012 to enter the Tottenham Subway that runs beneath the valley. Although we failed to gain access to the subway itself, we exposed a *souterrain* (an old subterranean quarry) that had certainly been occupied at some point by members of the British tunnelling companies: a distinct ‘T’ was found engraved on one of the crumbling walls.

The chalk in the valley had been violently shattered by the relentless bombardments that took place during the war, making the *souterrain* so unsafe that our efforts were quickly abandoned. Nevertheless, along the bank of the sunken lane that runs parallel to the cemetery, the now-collapsed entrances to subways could be clearly identified, hinting further at the secrets that lie beneath the heights of Vimy Ridge.

Further south from Souchez is the village of Neuville St Vaast, a place central to the fighting during Barbusse’s time. The village sits in an area containing no less than eight *souterrains*, some initially occupied by the Germans during the 1915 battles of the Artois.

The Goodman Subway, one of the major tunnels dug for the 1917 attacks on the ridge, had its entrance on the outskirts of the village. Goodman is not accessible to the public, but a section of the Grange Tunnel can be visited and this subterranean warren demonstrates well enough the efforts in engineering and planning required finally to evict the Germans from Vimy Ridge.

HIDDEN BATTLEFIELD

The Front Line described by Barbusse has changed beyond all recognition since the end of 1918. But it is still there, hiding beneath a modern skim. The area’s almost ubiquitous cemeteries and memorials speak of the trauma Barbusse’s squad suffered, the rebuilt villages, so clearly modern in character, narrate the destruction of early 20th-century civilisation, and the shattered chalk beneath the fields of the Zouave Valley recall the bombardments that almost drove Poterloo and the others insane.

Finally, the warren of unseen tunnels and *souterrains* that still exist demonstrate the lengths that armies were driven to just to seize one locally important tactical feature. Barbusse described the tunnels of the area as the ‘worst hell of the war’, recalling ‘the suffocation of the underground passages that constantly close in on you’.

The final chapter of *Under Fire* is entitled ‘Dawn’. To many, it is the most powerful chapter of the book, a figurative piece of writing comparing a deluge of rain after a battle to



Image: author

the great biblical flood, forever washing away the old world.

During the conflict, Barbusse vociferously claimed the war should be fully prosecuted: Germany had to be defeated. But afterwards he became an ardent pacifist, and that final chapter came to stand for this new beginning.

CORPSES FROM THE DEPTHS

The utter hopelessness of the *poilus* occupying the Artois trenches is revealed in a passage

ABOVE Goodman Subway.

describing a time after the main battle has ended. The heavens have opened and the gaunt and skeletal remains of men emerge from the mud:

You cannot determine the identity of these creatures, not from the clothes buried under a layer of mud, not from their headdresses – they are bare-headed or swathed in wool under their liquid, »»



ABOVE *Flanders*, 1936, by Otto Dix.

'They do not have their guns, or else their hands are sliding across something which they have dragged here, a shapeless, sticky lump like some variety of fish...'

Henri Barbusse

stinking balaclavas – nor from their weapons – they do not have their guns, or else their hands are sliding across something which they have dragged here, a shapeless, sticky lump like some variety of fish... It is the end of everything.

This image of the muddy hell of the Front, of humanity and landscape being simultaneously destroyed, and of men being reborn from the slime, is a common theme of First World War writing and poetry. It was also the inspiration for Otto Dix's *Flanders* (1936).

Both the final chapter 'Dawn' and *Flanders*, despite their harrowing content, are actually visions of hope, representing the start of a new world, and, indeed, Barbusse's work brought hope to many people, not least the women of France.

Historian Leonard Smith noted how important *Under Fire* was to many French women, who otherwise had little idea of the trials of their men-folk and the reality of life

in the trenches. As Smith puts it, they turned to Barbusse to act as a mediator between their own suffering and those at the Front.

Yet Barbusse's book did not impress everyone. Writer Jean Norton Cru famously set out after the war to devise a system that could identify the legitimacy of men's tales of the trenches. According to Cru, Barbusse could not have seen the trauma he chronicled because his descriptions were so different to the majority of others.

Yet Barbusse was there. He did experience the horrors he describes. And like his visions of landscapes reborn and the living sharing the earth with the dead, in the archaeology of the Labyrinth the veracity of his story finds its confirmation. ●

Matt Leonard is an active modern conflict archaeologist and a member of the Durand Group, which researches the underground war on the Western Front. More of his work can be found at www.modernconflictarchaeology.com