

# YOU ARE A TRENCH RUNNER

Words by **TOM PALMER**



men will die and it will be your fault. Oh ... and you have to run out into no man's land in a hail of bullets and bombs to deliver the message.

What I've described above is the job of a trench runner in the First World War. Trench runners had to deliver

messages between different areas or command units at the front line. In order to do so, they had to have a great memory and be extremely fit, able to run in full army kit, with a rifle and other items weighing them down.

My new book, *Armistice Runner*, tells the story of a fictional First World War trench runner called Ernest Darby, whose story is rediscovered by his great-great

granddaughter Lily.

Imagine it is dark. You're in France towards the end of the First World War. It's been raining for six days and there is no cover overhead. Your clothes are soaked

through and heavy. Your feet are drenched with mud. If

you stick your head out of the trench, you are likely to be shot dead. And, even if you don't, there's a chance a shell or bomb will fall on you and kill or severely injure you. You

can hear explosions. And gunfire. The November cold

Now your commanding officer calls you over. He gives

you some important information. You have to remember

every word he says and repeat it to another officer a mile

away. You can't afford to make any mistakes. If you do,





When I am writing about a character who has lived a very different life to me, I need to do what you've just been doing. I have to imagine I am that character. So, while writing *Armistice Runner*, I went out at night onto the moors where I live and ran in the dark. I fell over a lot. I was scared too, even though no one was shooting at me and lives didn't depend on my actions. But it helped me understand a tiny bit more what it might have been like for a trench runner.

I also did research. A lot of research.

I read about trench runners. I also listened to interviews with them. You might have been to the Imperial War Museum in London. It was founded during the First World War to help us understand how war affects the people who are involved in it and how such terrible events have shaped the world we live in today. There is a small reading room there where you can go and listen to interviews of soldiers from several conflicts.

One interview I listened to was with a trench runner called Private G. Pointing, who spoke about what he had done during the First World War. His job was to head out into no man's land, the area between the British and German trenches, to find the secret groups of British soldiers who were hiding in shell holes and monitoring what the enemy were doing. Then he had to remember what they told him and relay it to his own commanding officer. What he told the officer would affect what the British Army chose to do next, and their chances of winning the war. Pointing did all this with bullets whizzing around him and bombs falling near him.

Pointing recalled that one time he found a group of men in a shell hole and just as he was about to open his mouth and ask them for an update he realised they were a group of Germans out looking for British soldiers to kidnap and torture for information. Pointing realised his mistake just in time and got away.

As well as giving an account of Ernest's bravery in the First World War, *Armistice Runner* also tells the story of his great-

granddaughter Lily, who lives in the present day. Lily is a runner. She does track and cross country, but her great love is fell running. If you've ever been to the Lake District, you'll know what a fell is: one of those huge hills that huddle round lakes Ullswater, Windermere and others.

In *Armistice Runner*, Lily visits her grandparents in the Lake District. She finds her grandmother is suffering from dementia, a frightening illness where an older person loses their memory and can even forget the names of their grandchildren.

A strange effect of dementia can be that long-forgotten memories emerge. I have witnessed it in my own family, so I had a good idea about how to describe it in my book.

During Lily's visit, her grandmother remembers that her own grandfather was a fell runner, just like Lily. She takes out his old diaries and it's from these diaries that Lily learns the story of Ernest's actions during the war. Lily feels a connection to Ernest through their shared love of running and this inspires her to do her best during a famous race that Ernest won a hundred years ago.

For me, *Armistice Runner* is more about memory than it is about war.

You may have people in your family who now or in the future will begin to lose their memory. Lily was lucky in *Armistice Runner* that she had the diaries of her great-great-grandfather, so she could hear his story in his own voice. For me, sadly all my grandparents and even my parents were dead by the time I was 25. I know so little about their lives and I think one of the reasons I

wrote about family and memory in the book is because I feel a bit sad about that.

I know this magazine is aimed at children who like to read and often like to write. So my challenge to you is to talk to members of your family and find out their memories. It might inspire you to write a story about them. ☺

Tom Palmer's book *'Armistice Runner'* is available now (Barrington Stoke, £6.99).

