

# The Animals' War: Personal accounts

## Canaries and mice involved in WWI

**Both sides dug tunnels so that they could explode mines under the enemy's trenches, The tunnellers took canaries and mice with them underground to warn them of presence of dangerous gases such as methane or carbon monoxide.**

**Second Lieutenant George Eager, Second Army Mines Rescue School, 1916**

*A mouse used in a cage generally crouches motionless in a corner, and apart from the fact that it passes a very small volume of air into and out of its lungs, it is very difficult to say when it is affected by small percentages of gas . . .*

*The best method of using mice is to have them thoroughly tamed and accustomed to handling. They can be carried in a button-up pocket or little pouch and pulled out in the air to be tested. If a mouse is made to exercise by making it crawl from hand to hand, it takes a great deal more of the tainted air into its lungs, and it will usually collapse more rapidly than a bird sitting on a perch will show symptoms of distress. A mouse used in this way rapidly loses the use of its legs and lies helpless on the palm of the hand.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, 137/

**Lieutenant Geoffrey Cassels, 175<sup>th</sup> Tunnelling Coy, Royal Engineers (RE), 1916**

*One night when I was in Mademoiselle's bar in Armentières, a signaller arrived with an urgent message for me to return to Erquinghem. I was drinking gin and Italian and had had a convivial evening. I mounted my motorbike and returned. There I was told that the Germans had blown in one of our galleries near Armentières and as I understood rescue apparatus I was to go in and get the men out.*

*Near the front line I met the men who had attempted rescue but were overcome by the fumes from the explosion. The MO was one of them and he whispered to me, being practically speechless, 'carbon monoxide'.*

*The gallery was about 3 feet high and 2 feet wide. It had duckboards covered by mud and water, leaving only 1 foot 6 inches to 2 feet of headroom and air space. There was a blacksmith's bellows and tubing available. This was manned and my batman and I descended, taking turns with the air supply from the tube and holding our breath in between.*

*After crawling some considerable distance we came to a junction and turned right, and there we saw a face of a man almost completely buried by sand and obviously dead. The second man lying nearer to us was also dead, by carbon monoxide as he was rigid and had the telltale pink marks under the armpits and in soft spots. Before attempting the hard effort of extricating them, I decided to obtain canaries from Armentières to test the fumes. Two in a cage were purchased from a barber's shop. He was shaving a customer when a shell fell nearby. Without stopping his shaving, he waved his razor in the air and exclaimed, 'Ecoutez, monsieur, encore une bombe.'*

*We floated the canaries on a board before us. One died and the other survived. We ourselves still shared the air tube. On reaching the first man, we found it impossible to move him with one hand; the other was needed to hold the air tube. Rigor mortis had set in and his left foot was stuck fast in the duckboard. Only one of us could work there as there was no room to pass each other. For the same reason we could not reach the face man until the first was out of the way. We reluctantly decided that it was no use risking further lives, so we tied the end of the air tube to some casing and left it there to clear the air until the next day when it would be safe and two hands could be used.*

*On my way out without an air supply I took a breath of foul atmosphere and nearly succumbed. The second canary died. I was assisted out of the shaft but bemused by gas. I had a splitting headache and was nearly deaf but got to the road and mounted my motorbike to drive home.*

Source: *Tommy's Ark*, Richard Van Emden, p139/40