

August 1914

November 1914

I am Mairi Chisholm. I'm 18 years old. I live in Dorset, England. My parents met in Nairn, where my grandparents live. This is a photograph of me on my motorcycle. My older brother Uailean has one too. We ride around the streets together in Dorset and Nairn.

My Father enjoys watching us. He believes I should follow my heart. But my Mother wishes I would play tennis, ride horses, or find a husband. She says I don't behave like a young woman should, but I want an adventure.

I met my best friend Elsie Knocker in Dorset, when I was out on my motorcycle. She is 13 years older than me and seems to know about everything. I was to go to a women's motorcycling event with Elsie this week, but she wrote and changed the plan.

You see, war has broken out! She writes, "there is work to be done."

I'm packing right now to go and meet her. Mother is shouting at Father; "It's quite out of the question, she is not going anywhere, I will not give her a box!" Well, I'm using a bandana handkerchief to put my spare underclothes in, and I shall get my bike out of the stables and ride to Fordingbridge to meet Elsie. Goodbye home!

We have been in Belgium for three months, serving with the Flying Ambulance Corps. I didn't change clothes or wash for the first few weeks. When I finally removed my vest my skin came off with it.

We felt helpless at the sight of row upon row of piles of dead men, jaws blown off and limbs mutilated. We felt we needed to get closer to the action, to tend to the men without delay. Elsie and I have found a ruined building that will serve as our station. We have piled sandbags outside.

We are now only 100 yards away from the trenches at Pervyse. We are the only women here. Elsie is a trained nurse and is teaching me first aid. Bullets and shells fly by us all the time, but one gets used to it. We share our compound with our pet cat Chink.

** This account is based on real events but written for the purposes of learning **



January 1917

We have a trip home soon to raise money for our cause. I don't like leaving. What will happen to the men who need us when we are gone? However, I will enjoy a good, British meal, a welcome break from sardines and tomatoes. Running water, what a treat!

We've had to move 'house' quite a few times now. The blasted shells have turned our shelter to rubble on more than one occasion. The authorities are worried and want to move us. We are determined to stay where we are. In quieter moments, between the blasting, shooting and shelling, we bring the soldiers tea and soup. They enjoy our visits.

Friends write to us saying we have become 'poster girls' for the war, whatever that means.

Apparently, we are known as the 'Madonna's of Pervyse'. I am to be awarded some medals for bravery. I don't feel brave. I just want to help.



January 1920

The war is over. I survived two gassing attacks, one lasted 48 hours. I can still hear the noise when I close my eyes.

My lungs are damaged forever. My Doctor wants me to move out of the city to the countryside. I have set my heart on driving racing cars, but I fainted at my first race. The fumes belching out of the motor cars became too much for my weak chest.

I am writing to my friend May Davidson in Cawdor, Inverness, to see if I can stay with her for a time. I don't talk about the war much, it's not the done thing. We all need to carry on and put it behind us. But how can I ever forget what I saw and heard?

Things to think about:

- Do you think Mairi should have gone off without her Mother's permission?
- If you had to live in poor condition like Mairi and Elsie with no heating, running water and only tinned foods, what would you miss the most?
- Do you think Mairi and Elsie were just looking for an adventure or were they keen to help the war?
- Do you think it was hard for Mairi when she came home and couldn't do the things she wanted to?
- Would you have found it hard not to talk about the things you saw and did during the war?

