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SF PERUSALS

THE WIPERS TIMES

IAN HISLOP & NICK NEWMAN

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THE WIPERS TIMES
By Ian Hislop and Nick Newman

First presented at The Watermill Theatre on
22nd September 2016 with the following cast:

Kevin Brewer – Henderson/Optimism Doctor/Chaplin/MC/
Doctor Supitup

Eleanor Brown – Kate Roberts/Secretary/Smith/Bobbing Bobby/
Nurse/Madame Fifi/Lady Somersby

Sam Ducane – Lt Colonel Howfield/MC/Churchill/Photographer

James Dutton – Captain Fred Roberts

George Kemp – Lieutenant Jack Pearson/Bellory Helloc

Peter Losasso – Dodd/MC/Higgins

Jake Morgan – Barnes/Optimism Patient

Dan Tetsell – Deputy Editor/Tyler/Mitford/Teach Bomas

Director **– Caroline Leslie**
Designer **– Dora Schweitzer**
Lighting Designer **– James Smith**
Sound Designer **– Steve Mayo**
Composer **– Nick Green**
Musical Director **– Paul Herbert**
Movement Director **– Emily Holt**
Dialect Coach **– Mary Howland**
Assistant Director **– Chloe France**

A Trademark Touring Ltd & Watermill Theatre Ltd Production

For the original production, archive stills and film were
used to illustrate the action. These are not essential to any
future production.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

IAN HISLOP

Ian Hislop is a writer and broadcaster and has been editor of *Private Eye* since 1986. He has been a columnist for *The Listener* and *The Sunday Telegraph*, and TV critic for *The Spectator*. As a scriptwriter with Nick Newman, his work includes five years on *Spitting Image, Harry Enfield and Chums,* and *My Dad's The Prime Minister*, and the film *A Bunch of Amateurs*. He has written and presented many documentaries for TV and radio including: *Radio 4s The Real Patron Saints, A Brief History of Tax, Are We Being As Offensive As We Might Be, Lord Kitchener's Image, The Six Faces of Henry VIII* and *I've Never Seen Star Wars*; and presented TV's *Great Railway Journeys – East to West, Scouting for Boys, Not Forgotten, Ian Hislop Goes Off The Rails, Ian Hislop's Changing of the Bard, Age of the Do-Gooders, When Bankers Were Good, Stiff Upper Lip: An Emotional History of Britain, Ian Hislop's Olden Days* and *Victorian Benefits: Workers and Shirkers.* He has appeared frequently on *Question Time* and since 1990 has been team captain on BBC's *Have I Got News For You* which has won many awards, including the BAFTA for Best Comedy 2016.

Most recently he and Nick Newman wrote the critically acclaimed 2016 Radio 4 comedy drama *Trial By Laughter*. In 2014 their play *A Bunch of Amateurs* was premiered and had a successful run at The Watermill Theatre.

NICK NEWMAN

Nick Newman is a cartoonist and writer who attended Oxford University where he began selling cartoons to *Yachting Monthly* magazine in 1976. By 1981 he was working regularly for *Private Eye,* where he has drawn gags and written jokes ever since. In 1989 he became Pocket Cartoonist for *The Sunday Times* and his cartoons and strips have appeared in many other publications including *The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, Punch* and *The Spectator*. The Cartoon Art Trust voted him Pocket Cartoonist of the Year (1997) and Gag Cartoonist of the Year (1998 and 2005). He won the Sports Journalists' Association's Award for Sports Cartoonist of the year in 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2012. In 2013 he edited the humour-bestseller *Private Eye: A Cartoon History*.

His writing career began at school, working on revues with Ian Hislop. It continued at Oxford and after working as a journalist on *Management Today* magazine, Newman worked with Hislop on *Spitting Image*, before writing for Maureen Lipman and co-writing several episodes of *Murder Most Horrid* for Dawn French. Radio credits include several series of Dave Podmore for Radio 4 with Christopher Douglas and Andrew Nickolds as well as *Gush, News*

at Bedtime, What Went Wrong with the Olympics? and *Greed All About It* with Ian Hislop. Television credits also include *Clive Anderson Talks Back*, the Screen One film *Gobble*, two series of *My Dad's The Prime Minister* for BBC 1 and sketches for *The Harry Enfield Show* – with the creation of one of its most memorable characters, Tim-Nice-But-Dim. In 2008, their film *A Bunch of Amateurs* starring Burt Reynolds was chosen for the Royal Film Performance. Their 2013 BBC 2 film *The Wipers Times* won the Broadcasting Press Guild award for best single drama, and was nominated for a BAFTA.

THE WIPERS TIMES – FROM PAGE TO STAGE

"No one is interested in the First World War". That's what we were told when we first pitched the idea of *The Wipers Times* to a film company nearly fifteen years ago. Now that the play is on the stage, we hope that's wrong.

The story of *The Wipers Times* has been a hundred years in the telling. What has ended up as a stage play began as a TV film but originated in the spring of 1916, when a group of soldiers of the 24th Division of the Sherwood Foresters, led by Captain Fred Roberts, discovered a printing press in the bombed-out ruins of Ypres – or as it was known by the Tommies unable to pronounce it – Wipers. Aided by their civvy-street printer sergeant, Roberts and his Lieutenant, Jack Pearson, decided to use the press to print a newspaper – but not a journal of record; instead, they produced a journal of jokes. It was, by turns, subversive, mawkish, groaningly punny – and incredibly funny. It satirised the press, poked fun at the high command and saluted fallen comrades, using spoof advertisements, agony aunt columns and cod music hall routines.

Often edited under enemy fire, The Wipers Times became an instant hit with the troops on the front line. It ran from 1916 until just after the end of the war – a remarkable twenty three issues. Twelve years after the end of the war, a compilation edition was published, which included a foreword by the former editor, Fred Roberts. After that, nothing. History had a very different view of the war from that of the editors of The Wipers Times, who celebrated the camaraderie, absurdity and tragedy of life in the trenches – often on the same page. There was no place for the Wipers Times in accounts of the Great War which focused on death, futility and incompetence – all of which The Wipers' editors experienced, but which they recounted in their unique, satirical way.

Contemporary poetry and literature too were predominantly heartbreaking accounts of loss. As books such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and plays such as *Journey's End* captured the public imagination, The Wipers Times was quietly forgotten. There's a fleeting reference to the paper in *Oh! What A Lovely War!*, but otherwise public interest in the trench newspaper was limited to keen historians of the Great War. Roberts and Pearson died in

obscurity, and neither received an obituary anywhere – let alone the London Times.

Then, fifteen years ago, Ian came across The Wipers Times while working on a documentary for Radio 4. Through the paper, you could hear the clear voice of troops on the front line coming through. Here was an account of the Great War written not with hindsight, nor from the vantage point of history, but there at the time, and under enemy fire. And unlike all other accounts we had read, the story was told with immense wit and humour. It didn't matter that some of the jokes were terrible – the important thing was that they were making jokes at all. It portrayed the quintessential British characteristic of using humour as a coping mechanism. Not making fun of the war – far from it – but finding light in what was otherwise unremitting gloom.

And so we began trying to work out what The Wipers Times story actually was – encouraged by our producer friend David Parfitt (who produced the TV film and this stage version). What emerged was a story of survival, endurance and indominability – told with a gallows humour that sounded as fresh as it did a century ago. We had never seen anything like it before.

For ten years we were rejected continually and – despite (or perhaps because of) the success of shows such as *War Horse* – we eventually abandoned all hope of ever seeing *Wipers* on the screen, and began writing it as a play. We instinctively believed it would work on stage – after all, The Wipers Times relentlessly spoofed music hall acts and was full of sketches (some of which were attributed to the *Journey's End* author RC Sheriff). A third of the way into writing the stage play, however, a call came out of the blue from the head of History at the BBC. Our ten-year-old treatment had finally arrived on his desk. The BBC was preparing its 2014 Great War anniversary programming, and realised the tone was all very similar. That of *Wipers* was decidedly different. Suddenly we were commissioned to write a ninety-minute film.

So began the challenge of bringing the words on the page to life on the screen. The jokes, we turned into sketches, while the music hall parodies became actual music hall routines – with poems becoming songs. We tried to imagine the joke-writing process – of

which we have some experience, though not with bombs falling on our heads. It required some judicious editing and re-writing, to eliminate the more incomprehensible jargon, but wherever possible we tried to use the authors' own words rather than our own – so that full credit could go to Fred Roberts and Jack Pearson.

Research took us to Flanders, still a fractured landscape where farmers are regularly blown up by unexploded bombs, and to France where the river Somme glides through Amiens with a tranquility it's hard to equate with events of a century ago. On the way we discovered fascinating new pieces of information – such as Michelin preparing guides to the battlefield while war was still waging. With the expert help of the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are* we discovered what had happened to Pearson after the war (hitherto a mystery). This put us in touch with his family – and led to the unearthing of exciting new source material – the unpublished memoirs of Roberts and Pearson, provided by their descendants.

It was with some trepidation that we read the personal accounts of our heroes – but were relieved to find their voices exactly matched our image of them gleaned from The Wipers Times. Roberts was a larger-than-life adventurer and gambler. He was immensely loyal to his friends and his memoir is full of wry humour. But infuriatingly, whilst recording his first meeting with "Long" Jack Pearson, he makes no mention whatsoever of The Wipers Times. Perhaps he felt he had said all he wanted to on the matter.

Jack Pearson's brief memoir, on the other hand, wrote: "One of my most pleasant recollections of that time is the birth of 'The Wipers Times', a publication which eventually attained a certain fame". Pearson's account is a masterclass in understatement and reinforced our impression of the importance of alcohol to the men at the front. Describing a visit to a friend who was encamped near the Menin Road – the scene of some of the most relentless shelling, and now the location of the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres – he said, "I don't mind walking up the Menin Road if I go with Johnny Walker". On returning to Ypres in 1917 for that year's offensive, he wrote: "It was never quite the same, though it maintained its reputation of being a very warm corner". This was

his description of the most hellish war zone on the Front Line.

And so, after years and years of plugging away, we found ourselves at Ballywalter Park near Belfast, which was turned into the HQ at Arras, the editorial den in Ypres and the trenches of the Somme. The whizz-bangs and gas gongs whizzed, banged and chimed. "You've come to the right place," said one of our Belfast film crew, "We're good at blowing things up!" Thankfully the resulting film resonated with the viewers – and was applauded by the critics who kindly voted us Best Single Drama in the 2014 Broadcasting Press Guild Awards. A BAFTA nomination was further acknowledgement, at last, for Fred Roberts and Jack Pearson.

But for us there was unfinished business. Having started to write *Wipers* as a play, we knew we wouldn't settle until we had seen it on stage – and hear a contemporary audience react to the jokes and skits we loved from a hundred years ago. The piece is inherently theatrical – and the emotional drive of the story is tailor-made for the intimacy of the theatre, reflecting the closeness of the writing and creative process (even in the context of a surrounding conflagration). The demands of the stage gave us the opportunity to include more songs, more jokes and more backstory – making full use of the newly found original sources at our disposal. The result, we hope, does justice to the remarkable story of some remarkable men.

And the story has a coda. Immediately our film was broadcast a congratulatory email arrived from the editor of The Times, John Witherow. Whilst thanking him, we cheekily replied that perhaps now was the time for The Times to set the record straight and give Roberts and Pearson the recognition they deserved. Two weeks later another curt email pinged through: "Look in tomorrow's Times". And there, on a full page, were huge obituaries of our heroes. Not only was it the highlight of our joint writing careers, but it was also a fitting tribute to the literary endeavours of an incredibly brave group of men – saluting the triumph of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Ian Hislop and Nick Newman
2016

CHARACTER NOTES

CAPTAIN FRED ROBERTS – the charismatic, larger-than-life editor of *The Wipers Times*. A former mining engineer, he's an adventurer and gambler who's not afraid to laugh at death and poke fun at his superiors while suppressing his true horror at the conduct of the war.

LIEUTENANT JACK PEARSON – Roberts's deputy and sub-editor of *The Wipers Times*. A laconic foil to the ebullient Roberts, Pearson matches him joke for joke. He has a keen interest in anything alcohol related.

SERGEANT TYLER – a former Fleet Street printer who is Roberts's Mr Fixit, becoming publisher of *The Wipers Times*. Gruff and stern – but with a dry sense of humour and a passion for printing.

PRIVATE DODD – the youngest of Roberts's men and a new arrival to the front line, he has a lot to learn about life in the trenches. He grows up fast.

PRIVATE HENDERSON – worked on tunnelling the London Underground before the outbreak of war. His mischievous sense of humour lands him in trouble.

PRIVATE BARNES – Henderson's best mate and a former coal miner. His down-to-earth soldiering belies his sensitivity – and he proves to be a natural poet.

GENERAL MITFORD – as Roberts's commanding officer he is a father-figure, and keen supporter and defender of *The Wipers Times*.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL HOWFIELD – Roberts's immediate superior who is fiercely opposed to *The Wipers Times*, and wants it closed down. Lacking any sense of humour, he fails to understand when the joke's on him.

KATE ROBERTS – Fred Roberts's wife, a teacher, who keeps the home fires burning while supplying eggs to the Red Cross. She tries to understand the reality of Roberts's painful wartime experiences.

DEPUTY EDITOR, DAILY NEWS – over-worked and over-dramatic, he is unimpressed by wartime exploits largely because he didn't fight.

LADY SOMERSBY – fierce supporter of the Temperance Movement and very close 'friend' of Lloyd George, who wants alcohol banned from the trenches – much to the horror of those fighting in them.

MADAM FIFI – alluring, seductive hostess who runs the celebrated Fifi's Bar in Amiens, where Roberts goes on leave.

CHARACTERS WHO APPEAR IN THE WIPERS TIMES JOKE PIECES INCLUDE:

HILAIRE BELLOC – the famous author of Cautionary Rhymes was dubbed Belary Helloc by *The Wipers Times* on account of his patriotic, jingoistic and wildly optimistic armchair general's account of the war in magazines back home.

WILLIAM BEACH THOMAS – the Daily Mail's illustrious war Correspondent who always seemed to write from the thick of the action – but who the men never actually saw. Mocked as Teach Bomas by *The Wipers Times*. Later knighted.

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

SECRETARY

DEPUTY EDITOR

CAPTAIN FRED ROBERTS

LIEUTENANT JACK PEARSON

SERGEANT TYLER

DODD

BARNES

HENDERSON

LT COLONEL HOWFIELD

GENERAL MITFORD

BOBBING BOBBY

CHURCHILL

NURSE

MADAME FIFI

KATE ROBERTS

CHAPLAIN

WOUNDED SOLDIER

LADY SOMERSBY

PRIVATE YATES

PRIVATE SMITH (NON-SPEAKING)

WINSTON CHURCHILL

FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE MICHELIN GUIDES

ACT ONE

Scene One

We are in a newspaper editor's office in 1931. A typewriter is on the desk. The door opens and a female **SECRETARY** *shows in* **FRED ROBERTS**, *a forty-year-old man in a cheap suit with a neat pencil moustache.*

SECRETARY Please take a seat Mr Roberts. The deputy editor won't be long.

ROBERTS Thank you.

SECRETARY Can I get you anything?

ROBERTS How about…a very large whisky? *(She looks a bit shocked)* Joke. I'm just a bit nervous.

SECRETARY *(she smiles)* I can offer you some tea.

ROBERTS No I'm fine thanks.

Silence. **SECRETARY** *looks a bit ill at ease.*

SECRETARY He's very busy at the moment.

ROBERTS What with lunch…and everything.

SECRETARY *(smiles again)* This is a very important newspaper…

ROBERTS So I read…in your newspaper.

SECRETARY *smiles again.*

SECRETARY Are you sure you don't want anything?

ROBERTS A job?

SECRETARY *exits.*

ROBERTS *sits nervously. He checks his watch, fumbles with his briefcase from which he produces a sheaf of papers. The*

DEPUTY FEATURES EDITOR *enters abruptly and in a hurry – he's in his thirties and wears spectacles.*

DEPUTY EDITOR Sorry to keep you waiting. Balloon's gone up. Total chaos, deadlines brought forward – printers on the warpath – all kinds of merry hell – but that's Fleet Street for you.

ROBERTS I wouldn't know about Fleet Street. But I'm familiar with merry hell.

DEPUTY EDITOR Of course, of course. The War. Very good. I couldn't go of course. Eyesight…

ROBERTS I'm sorry. You missed quite a show…

DEPUTY EDITOR Really? It must have been hell. From what I've read.

ROBERTS We had some bad times, but – well we had some good times too…

DEPUTY EDITOR I'm sure… Now I see you have impressive references here from both Mr Gilbert Frankau and Mr RC Sherrif.

ROBERTS Yes I knew them back then. When we were all working on Tenth Avenue.

DEPUTY EDITOR Tenth Avenue? In New York?

ROBERTS No. In Flanders. It was a trench. There was Oxford Street, Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square…

DEPUTY EDITOR *(interrupting)* Yes…

So perhaps you could tell me about yourself… Mr *(checks CV)*

ROBERTS Roberts. Fred Roberts. You do have my curriculum vitae?

DEPUTY EDITOR Yes – but I want to hear about you…in your own words.

It is clear that he has not bothered to read **ROBERTS***'s CV and they both know it.* **ROBERTS** *recites it to him whilst* **DEPUTY EDITOR** *scans it.*

ROBERTS Frederick Roberts. Formerly of the North Midlands,

Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire regiment otherwise known as the Sherwood Foresters…

DEPUTY EDITOR *looks a bit bored so* **ROBERTS** *moves on.*

A mining engineer by profession – I worked in the Kimberley diamond mines in South Africa until friend Fritz kicked off the firework party.

DEPUTY EDITOR I see, so you have mining qualifications…

ROBERTS Jolly useful in a pioneer battalion charged with trench repair and maintenance…

DEPUTY EDITOR Though less useful in a newspaper office.

ROBERTS Oh I don't know – digging up all that muck…

DEPUTY EDITOR *beginning to be impatient.*

DEPUTY EDITOR Yes Mr Roberts, my problem is that what we need here at the Daily News is men with relevant experience. So tell me, do you **have** any relevant experience?

ROBERTS *hands over a copy of a yellowing A5 pamphlet. It is* The Wipers Times.

(Disdainfully) The Wipers Times?

Suddenly a big explosion on stage.

Scene Two

When the smoke clears we are in a derelict basement in Ypres. On the backdrop we see a photograph of the remains of the Cloth Hall against the Ypres skyline. We hear constant shell fire. Offstage we hear it is raining. A group of dripping **MEN** *enter the shelter of the bombed-out building. It is a patrol of Sherwood Foresters for salvage.* **PEARSON**, *a lieutenant in his 30s, leads the troupe of pioneers comprising Privates* **HENDERSON**, **SMITH**, **YATES**, **BARNES**, *and* **DODD** *who is new to the unit. They are soaking wet and exhausted.* **PEARSON** *lights a cigarette.*

PEARSON Oh to be in Flanders! Now that spring is here!

BARNES It's February, sir.

PEARSON Is it, Barnes? I find it frightfully difficult to tell.

PEARSON *turns to* **MEN**.

Usual drill, search the place for anything we can use – preferably of the metal or timber variety. And be sharp about it. Yates, Smith – check out the back.

YATES Sir!

YATES *and* **SMITH** *exit. We hear the noise of more shell fire.*

HENDERSON 4.2s sir.

PEARSON That's a relief. I thought for a minute they were 5.9s.

An even louder bang.

HENDERSON Now those are 5.9s, sir.

Enter in a shower of dust the young **ROBERTS**, *the captain in charge of the platoon, with* **SERGEANT TYLER**.

PEARSON Hot for the time of year, sir?

ROBERTS Yes… Fritz's love-tokens seem to be arriving with disturbing accuracy.

TYLER That's how we know the artillery's not our own sir.

ROBERTS Thank you sergeant. Now Lieutenant Pearson. Have the boys found me anything?

PEARSON Slim pickings I am afraid.

DODD *in background looks scared and suddenly draws his bayonet.*

DODD Boche vermin!

ROBERTS What the hell are you doing Dodd?

DODD Surrender or die!

ROBERTS Just put your bayonet away before someone gets hurt!

DODD But it's a rat, sir.

ROBERTS I am familiar with the species Dodd. We have encountered one or two since we have been in Ypres.

DODD "Ypres", sir?

ROBERTS It's what the Belgians call Wipers.

DODD Oh, right, sir. Funny lot the Belgians. It's like the Napoo rum they have over here. I never seem to get any.

PEARSON Napoo is from the French, Dodd. *Il n'y en a plus.* There is no more.

DODD Well why don't they just say that sir?

BARNES *returns.*

BARNES Nothing here, sir.

DODD *(cheerily)* Napoo salvage, sir.

ROBERTS Very good Dodd, we'll make a sapper of you yet. Carry on, lads, there must be something.

PEARSON *and* **MEN** *continue searching.*

HENDERSON What about this sir? Boxes of paper.

PEARSON Excellent. Exactly what we are looking for to reinforce Trench 132.

DODD Really, sir?

ROBERTS No Dodd. You'll find when you've been out here for a while that paper doesn't offer much protection against crumps and whizz-bangs.

PEARSON Unless you're a red hat in HQ with a cushy job and then the paper stops you getting anywhere near the shooting gallery at all.

ROBERTS Your cynicism could become wearying Lieutenant Pearson except fortunately I find it quite amusing.

HENDERSON There's some tarpaulin here sir.

ROBERTS That might be useful.

They go to inspect the salvage. **HENDERSON** *pulls the tarpaulin off to reveal a printing press. A complicated tangle of ironmongery, wheels and levers.*

TYLER Blimey!

BARNES Now what the bloody hell is that?

TYLER That, Barnes, is an Arab.

BARNES I'm not stupid, sarnt.

TYLER *caresses the machine.*

TYLER The Arab is an Anglo–American hand-fed Platen Press. Probably the finest in the world. It's a manual, pedal operated printing machine patented in 1872 by Josiah Wade, manufactured in Halifax and subsequently sold all over the world. In short, it is a work of art.

BARNES So shall we smash it up?

BARNES *gets out his sledgehammer and raises it up.*

TYLER *(shouts)* No! Look, it's even got the blocks and trays of type.

ROBERTS How on earth do you know all this Tyler?

TYLER I was a printer in civvy street, sir.

ROBERTS Good grief. You kept quiet about that.

TYLER It didn't seem relevant to fighting Fritz, sir.

ROBERTS No. But it might be now.

Pause. There is a gleam in his eye.

Can you make it work?

TYLER She's taken a bit of a knock… Had some unwelcome visitors…type's all over the countryside…

He removes some lumps of shrapnel and masonry.

But given a bit of time, yes sir, reckon so sir.

TYLER *begins to use foot pedal and the machinery clanks to life.*

You see you put the ink on the plate and the rollers come down onto the typeblock and you feed in the paper then… **don't touch it Dodd!**

He smacks **DODD***'s hand.*

PEARSON *(to* **ROBERTS***)* All very interesting but what are we going to **do** with it?

ROBERTS We are going to borrow it.

PEARSON Isn't that looting sir?

ROBERTS No it's temporary requisitioning of civilian facilities for military purposes.

PEARSON Sounds like looting to me.

ROBERTS Ever done any journalism Pearson?

PEARSON Good God no.

ROBERTS Excellent! Me neither. Because what we are going to do is produce a newspaper. Aren't we, sergeant?

TYLER If you say so sir.

HENDERSON What? Like the Daily Mail?

ROBERTS No I was thinking of something rather more accurate.

PEARSON The Times?

ROBERTS *The Wipers Times*!

We hear a song that covers the scene change. These will feature throughout the play.

MEN

TAKE A WILDERNESS OF RUIN,
SPREAD WITH MUD SOME SIX FEET DEEP;
IN THIS MUD NOW CUT SOME CHANNELS,
THEN YOU HAVE THE LINE WE KEEP.

NOW YOU GET SOME WIRE THAT'S SPIKY,
THROW IT ROUND OUTSIDE YOUR LINE
GET SOME PICKETS, DRIVE IN TIGHTLY
AND ROUND THESE YOUR WIRE ENTWINE.

GET A LOT OF HUNS AND PLANT THEM,
IN A DITCH ACROSS THE WAY;
NOW YOU HAVE A WAR IN THE MAKING,
AS WAGED HERE FROM DAY TO DAY.

Scene Three

We are in **ROBERTS'***s den, a fortified cellar in the ramparts of the medieval walled town of Ypres. We can hear distant artillery fire. There is a piano, a sofa, a few chairs, a desk and a gramophone.* **ROBERTS** *and* **PEARSON** *are drinking whisky. A sign reads "The Hotel des Ramparts – the finest accommodation in Ypres"*

ROBERTS We've got plenty of ink, plenty of paper…in fact according to Tyler the only thing we seem to be lacking is copy.

PEARSON None of us are writing men. We haven't done any journalism.

ROBERTS There's a first time for everything. It can't be that hard. I think we should aim to produce something a bit like Punch. Except with jokes.

PEARSON But what are we actually going to write **about**?

Sound of shells getting nearer and louder.

ROBERTS Damn you Fritz. I can't hear myself think. Put on the Bing Boys would you, Jack?

PEARSON *puts a record on the gramophone. We hear* If You Were The Only Girl In The World *played at full volume to cover the sound of the shells. They have to shout above the noise.*

PEARSON So will *The Wipers Times* address the big questions of the war?

ROBERTS Certainly.

PEARSON And how will we do that?

ROBERTS I propose we do so by just writing down any old thing that comes into our heads.

Enter **TYLER** *with a page proof excitedly. He has a dummy page of typeset text, a template for the future look of the paper. The page has "Title", and "Headline" printed in different typefaces and the copy itself is gobbledygook.*

TYLER Trial page proof, sir. Looks pretty good, though I say it myself. Who do I show it to, sir? Who is the editor?

ROBERTS As senior officer I am of course the editor. But I will need a sub-editor. Any volunteers Jack? Bad grammar is something which I simply will not put up with.

PEARSON *(correcting him)* Up with which you simply will not put?

Pause as **ROBERTS** *takes this in.*

ROBERTS All right Jack – the job is yours.

He clinks his glass.

Which makes you, Tyler, our publisher!

TYLER *beams at the sound of this.*

TYLER I never fancied I'd ever be a publisher, sir! Not in a pile of rubble in the middle of Flanders, anyway.

ROBERTS Well a publisher is what you are, with responsibility for the efficient production and distribution of *The Wipers Times*. Congratulations.

TYLER Thank you, sir. The only drawback to efficient publication of *The Wipers Times* is that we are short of "y"s.

ROBERTS Just as well we are not based anywhere called "Ypres" then.

PEARSON *laughs.*

TYLER Now sir, what about some copy?

ROBERTS Dammit Tyler, haven't you heard of writer's block?

TYLER Only every day, sir, come deadline time for the newspaper.

ROBERTS Oh very well Tyler. But you're very annoying!

TYLER *(cheerily)* Very good sir!

PEARSON You know he's right Fred.

ROBERTS Et tu Pearson?

ROBERTS *makes a dramatic move…for the pen.*

Well I'll hold the pen and let's see what happens. Something's bound to turn up.

There is a silence.

PEARSON Fred, you are an incorrigible optimist.

ROBERTS *writes down the word "Optimism".*

ROBERTS Optimism. Now there's a dangerous thing. Particularly in a war. Jack – do you suffer from optimism?

The lighting changes to indicate that this is a surreal comedy sketch sequence inside **ROBERTS** *head which will appear as an article in* The Wipers Times. *We see* **ROBERTS** *carrying on writing whilst two of the* **MEN** *(***BARNES** *and* **HENDERSON***) appear as* **DOCTOR** *and* **PATIENT**. **DOCTOR** *in a white coat holds a stethoscope which he puts to the head of* **PATIENT**.

DOCTOR *(to audience)* Men! Are you suffering from optimism? Many are and don't know the tell-tale signs.

PATIENT Is it serious doctor?

DOCTOR I just need you to answer a few questions. Do you wake up in the morning feeling that all is going well for the Allies?

PATIENT Yes doctor.

DOCTOR Do you sometimes think that the war will end sometime in the next twelve months?

PATIENT Absolutely doctor.

DOCTOR Do you consider our leaders are competent to conduct the war to a successful issue?

PATIENT I should say so doctor.

DOCTOR Oh dear this is the worst case of cheerfulness I've encountered.

PATIENT Oh good.

DOCTOR No it's terrible. But don't worry, I promise I can cure you of optimism within two days and effectively eradicate all traces of it from your system.

PATIENT Really doctor. How are you going to do that?

DOCTOR I'm writing something for you now which should do the trick.

PATIENT Is it a prescription, doctor?

DOCTOR No it's your orders. I'm sending you to the front line.

PATIENT Thank you, doctor!

Blackout. We come out of the sketch. The lights come back up on **ROBERTS** *and* **PEARSON** *reading a page proof of the Optimism article.*

There is a back projection of the original Optimism piece from The Wipers Times. **TYLER** *is in the background stooped over type blocks composing pages letter by letter. There are printed-out pages of typeface alphabets, fonts and characters hanging up. We hear as ever the sound of artillery shells in the background.*

PEARSON I'm not sure about this piece about optimism.

ROBERTS Are you questioning the judgement of a superior officer, Pearson?

PEARSON Er…yes.

ROBERTS Good. Though, as a superior officer, of course I shall ignore you.

PEARSON Seriously Fred, you don't think you are going a bit far?

ROBERTS How can you accuse me of going too far – when the entire 24th Division has gone precisely ten yards in the last six months?

TYLER And that was sideways.

PEARSON Thank you, sarn't. I'm just saying we have to be careful.

ROBERTS OK. You are right. We must be responsible. As will be made clear in my editorial.

PEARSON You haven't written an editorial.

ROBERTS How's your shorthand?

PEARSON Non-existent.

ROBERTS Good – take this down!

PEARSON *grabs a pen and a notebook and starts taking dictation.*

Editorial: having managed to pick up a printing press – slightly soiled – at a reasonable price…

PEARSON *coughs.*

…we have decided to produce a paper. There is much we would like to say in it, but the shadow of censorship enveloping us causes us to refer to the…

(taps side of nose) war…which we hear is taking place in Europe…

PEARSON Careful…

ROBERTS ...in a cautious manner. We apologise for any shortcomings in production of our paper on account of… on account of… *(Searches for word)*

PEARSON Editorial Inexperience?

ROBERTS Quite so. We hope to publish *The Times* weekly despite the attentions of Messrs Hun and Co…

PEARSON ...our local rivals.

ROBERTS Excellent!

PEARSON *continues writing what has become a collaborative effort.*

We take this opportunity of stating that we accept no responsibility for the views expressed…

TYLER **We**?

ROBERTS ...and **we** dissociate ourselves from any statements in the advertisements.

PEARSON Well that bit's true. We haven't got any advertisements.

ROBERTS Oh. Why not?

PEARSON There is a slight problem with potential advertisers such as shops, theatres, restaurants, small businesses etcetera…

ROBERTS What problem?

PEARSON There aren't any. They've all been blown to buggery.

ROBERTS Is that anywhere near Poperinghe?

PEARSON *(laughing)* No it isn't. You didn't hear that did you, sergeant?

TYLER No sir. But it was most amusing.

ROBERTS You're the expert, Tyler. We can't be a proper newspaper without advertisements can we?

TYLER No sir. That's what the front page is for.

PEARSON So what do we do?

On the backdrop screen we see we see a fake advertisement from The Wipers Times. *The copy reads: "TAXIS! TAXIS! TAXIS!"*

We are in a comedy sketch. Jaunty music. One of the **MEN** *as* **TOMMY** *tries to hail a taxi.*

TOMMY Taxi? Taxi? I say taxi?

ROBERTS *(voiceover)* Are you having trouble getting home? Not any more with our fleet of handsomely appointed taxi cabs!

TOMMY But how will I recognise your taxis?

ROBERTS *(voiceover)* Easy! They have a Red Cross painted on each side!

We see on the screen archive footage of World War One ambulance. We then see another fake advertisement, done as a sketch in which we see a bonneted **SWEETHEART** *(one of the* **MEN** *in drag).*

PEARSON *(voice over)* Is your friend a soldier?

SWEETHEART *nods coyly.*

(voiceover) Do you know what he wants?

SWEETHEART *coyly shakes head.*

(voiceover) No? We do. Send him one of our latest improved combination umbrella and wirecutter.

Another of the **MEN** *as* **INVENTOR** *in brown coat walks on and presents device to girl. It is a ridiculous prop of cutters with an umbrella on top.*

(voiceover) No more nasty colds caught when cutting the wire! He'll be absolutely delighted with the combination umbrella and wirecutter. Just 15 francs.

SWEETHEART *hands over money to* **INVENTOR**.

(voiceover) Quite right, miss. Now you can rest assured your soldier friend will stay fit and healthy out in no man's land!

We then see another of the **MEN** *as* **SOLDIER** *using the wirecutters as* **INVENTOR** *pours a watering can over him in demonstration. He gives a cheery thumbs up.*

We go straight into another advertisement. One of the **MEN** *dressed as* **SUBALTERN** *is standing in a trench.*

ROBERTS *(voiceover)* Calling all harassed subalterns!

SUBALTERN *(adopting posh officer voice)* Who me?

ROBERTS *(voiceover)* Yes you! Is your life miserable? Do you hate your company commander?

SUBALTERN *looks around shiftily to see if anyone is looking.*

(voiceover) Of course you do. Then why not buy him one of our new patent "Tip me up" duck boards?

SUBALTERN But how does the 'Tip Me up' Duck Board work?

ROBERTS *(voiceover)* You just get your company commander on the end…

On the backdrop screen, we see in black and white silent-movie style, one of the **MEN** *as a* **SENIOR OFFICER** *walking towards a see-saw-type plank.*

(voiceover) …and the duck board does the rest.

SENIOR OFFICER *stands on one end of the duck board,* **SUBALTERN** *jumps on the other end.* **SENIOR OFFICER** *flies off camera with silly swannee-whistle sound effect.*

(voiceover) Every time a blighty! That's our promise. Remember: "If once he steps on to the end, twill take a month his face to mend".

SUBALTERN SMITH *gives cheeky wink and a thumbs up.*

SUBALTERN Thank you, "Tip Me Up" duck board!

Blackout.

Lights up on **ROBERTS** *in the den; admiring the finished blocks of type for the "Tip Me Up" duck board. We hear pouring rain outside.*

ROBERTS Excellent work, sergeant. And in case you're wondering the "Tip Me Up" duck board doesn't work for NCOs.

TYLER Of course not, sir

ROBERTS So when can we roll the presses?

TYLER Just as soon as we can get these blocks onto the printer.

PEARSON Which is situated in agreeable bombed-out premises just a short walk away…

TYLER More of a run at the moment, sir…unless it eases off a bit…

ROBERTS Surely you're not bothered by a spot of rain?

We hear the sound of an explosion.

TYLER More the shelling, sir. Fritz is getting a bit too near to the print room to be pleasant.

ROBERTS Well as soon as Herman knocks off for an evening sausage let's leg it down there and print the blighter.

TYLER Back in Fleet Street, sir, the editorial staff are not encouraged to enter the print room.

ROBERTS Why ever not?

TYLER They tend to want to change things at the last minute.

PEARSON I think the sergeant means that we as officers would be a bit of a nuisance in the smooth running of the operation.

ROBERTS So a bit like the war.

TYLER I didn't say that, sir.

ROBERTS Carry on.

Blackout. We hear a song that covers the scene change.

MEN

LITTLE STACKS OF SANDBAGS,
LITTLE LUMPS OF CLAY,
MAKE OUR BLOOMING TRENCHES,
IN WHICH WE WORK AND PLAY.
MERRY LITTLE WHIZZ-BANG,
JOLLY LITTLE CRUMP,
MADE OUR TRENCH A PICTURE,
WIGGLE WOGGLE WUMP.

Scene Four

Empty print room. We can hear shells going off and flashes of explosions offstage.

Through the door bursts **TYLER** *and the* **MEN**, *having clearly run the gauntlet through the streets of Ypres. They are carrying the printers blocks we saw in the den.* **DODD** *is blown inwards on entry and falls to the floor.*

Cut to:

TYLER Everything all right?

DODD I'm fine, sarn't.

TYLER Not you – the print blocks. Come on you lot. Look lively.

They remove the tarpaulin on the printer and assume their places around it. They know their roles and **TYLER** *begins to pedal the machine which begins clanking to life. The roller comes down on a plate covered in ink and then onto the type block, which is then pressed onto paper.* **TYLER** *removes the sheet of paper and puts in another one. The process is repeated. The* **MEN** *help with the process of folding, collating and stacking printed sheets.*

Don't get your hand caught in the plate, Barnes, or you'll come a cropper – a phrase incidentally derived from the printing presses of HS Cropper…

BARNES That's very interesting, sarnt.

It isn't. Barnes is taking the mickey.

TYLER ...as is the phrase 'mind your Ps and Qs, owing to the common mistaking of the P for the Q in the tray of type…

BARNES That's even more interesting, sarn't.

Barnes is smirking.

TYLER Whereas the expression "to get the wrong end of the stick" comes from the misuse of the compositing stick.

HENDERSON And means "thinking you're being interesting when really you're being…"

TYLER Yes, Henderson?

HENDERSON Very very interesting indeed, sarnt.

TYLER Correct.

TYLER *is tolerant about being ribbed by the two* **MEN**.

The printed issue comes out of printer. **DODD** *hands it to* **TYLER** *who holds it up proudly.*

DODD Here it is, sarn't.

TYLER The end result, though I say it myself, is a thing of beauty.

Beat.

Unlike any of you.

Enter **ROBERTS** *and* **PEARSON** *with knapsack. The* **MEN** *all stand to attention.*

PEARSON At ease.

ROBERTS Don't worry, sarn't, I'm not going to change a word – but I simply couldn't wait to see the fruit of our labours.

PEARSON No. Didn't want to miss our first press day! Hold the front page! Read all about it and so on!

TYLER *is amused by the attempts at jargon and hands the two* **MEN** *copies of the paper.*

TYLER What do you think, sir?

ROBERTS I think…this calls for champagne!

ROBERTS *fishes out a bottle from bag.*

PEARSON Where on earth did you get that?

ROBERTS I had a bit of luck at cards with some of the brass hats billeted at the chateau. Frightfully good cellar as it turned out…

MEN *laugh.* **ROBERTS** *is performing a launching ceremony.*

Thought it might come in handy to launch our new venture. In the absence of Her Majesty Queen Mary, you will have to make do with me!

Pause.

God bless this printer, and all the jokes who fail in her!

He looks as if he is going to break it on the side of the printer like a ship.

TYLER Be careful with the printer, sir!

PEARSON Be careful with the champagne more like! You can't waste that. There's a war going on.

ROBERTS Is there? I had no idea. Well in that case we'd better make sure that the Germans don't get hold of it.

He pops the cork and pours it into various tin mugs which are laid out on a tray and hands them out to the assembled **MEN, DODD, BARNES** *and* **HENDERSON** *who are thrilled to be drinking it.*

To *The Wipers Times*!

ALL *The Wipers Times*!

We hear the song to cover the scene change.

MEN

THROUGH TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS,
AND DISASTERS EVERY DAY,
NO CAUSE FOR CELEBRATIONS,
THE CAPTAIN'S GOING GREY.

LIFE IS FULL OF DISAPPOINTMENTS,
DAYS ARE NEVER FREE FROM CARE,
FOR IN SPITE OF USING OINTMENTS,
THE COLONEL'S LOSING ALL HIS HAIR.

Scene Five

Divisional HQ in Arras. The office of **GENERAL MITFORD**. **MITFORD** *is sitting at his desk reading a copy of* The Wipers Times, *when a young gung-ho staff officer* **LIEUTENANT COLONEL HOWFIELD** *enters angrily.* **GENERAL MITFORD** *is the older, more tolerant officer – he puts away his magazine.*

HOWFIELD Have you seen this poppycock, sir?

Howfield slams The Wipers Times *down on the desk.*

MITFORD Yes I think I have. I hear it's becoming very popular.

HOWFIELD It's downright insubordination.

MITFORD That may be why the men seem to like it.

HOWFIELD The men also like the ladies of the Poperinghe Fancies but neither are exactly conducive to winning the war.

MITFORD Really? Have you seen the ladies of the Poperinghe Fancies?

HOWFIELD Of course not!

MITFORD Well I'd say they are doing their bit…jolly buxom girls. They can't sing and they can't dance but no-one seems to care particularly. I believe the chaps call them Glycerine and Vaseline, I have no idea why…

HOWFIELD We're getting off the point here, sir which is surely that some of the material in this publication is not merely unsuitable but is downright treasonable.

MITFORD Like what in particular?

HOWFIELD Like this…

HOWFIELD *passes* **MITFORD** *the magazine.*

MITFORD Ah yes…the answers to correspondents…

HOWFIELD Whoever wrote this should be court martialled.

MITFORD *studies page.*

MITFORD The item advising young officers not to wear turned up slacks and shoes when going over the top?

HOWFIELD What!

MITFORD Perfectly sound advice. A chap wearing turned up slacks on the battlefield not only looks bloody silly but advertises the fact that he is an officer to any half-awake sniper.

HOWFIELD *snatches the paper back and reads it out.*

HOWFIELD That's not the offending article. I am referring to this reply to a supposed query from a junior officer.

(He reads out) "Dear Subaltern – no, the death penalty is **not** enforced in the case of murdering a senior officer as you will always be able to claim extenuating circumstances".

MITFORD *cannot disguise his amusement.*

MITFORD It's a joke.

HOWFIELD It's an incitement to mutiny. I'll have him shot.

MITFORD **Not** if he shoots you first.

Pause.

That is also a joke.

HOWFIELD The war is not funny, sir.

MITFORD I think the authors are aware of that. I've a feeling that may be the point. And it's not **all** cocking a snook at the General Staff.

MITFORD *flicks through magazine.*

Although admittedly quite a lot of it is. No, some of it is deadly serious. Words from the heart.

HOWFIELD Such as?

MITFORD *takes magazine back and quotes aloud.*

MITFORD "People we take our hats off to: the French of Verdun…the British Navy at Jutland… The Canadians at Ypres". Saluting our fallen comrades is hardly sedition is it?

HOWFIELD They also take their hats off to the officer in charge of the costume department of the Poperinghe Fancies.

MITFORD *laughs.*

You see – they are just a gang of backchat comedians deliberately undermining morale with this impertinent, unpatriotic rag. Can you think of anything more likely to produce discontent amongst the men?

MITFORD Yes. Banning it.

Large explosion signals scene change. When smoke clears, we are in a trench.

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