DULCE ET DECORUM EST

Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares\(^2\) we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest\(^3\) began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots\(^4\)  
Of tired, outstripped\(^5\) Five-Nines\(^6\) that dropped behind.

Gas!\(^7\) Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets\(^8\) just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime\(^9\) . . .  
Dim, through the misty panes\(^10\) and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.  
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering,\(^11\) choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud\(^12\)  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest\(^13\)  
To children ardent\(^14\) for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est  
Pro patria mori.\(^15\)

8 October 1917 - March, 1918
1. DULCE ET DECORUM EST - the first words of a Latin saying (taken from an ode by Horace). The words were widely understood and often quoted at the start of the First World War. They mean "It is sweet and right." The full saying ends the poem: Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori - it is sweet and right to die for your country. In other words, it is a wonderful and great honour to fight and die for your country
2. rockets which were sent up to burn with a brilliant glare to light up men and other targets in the area between the front lines (See illustration, page 118 of Out in the Dark.)
3. a camp away from the front line where exhausted soldiers might rest for a few days, or longer
4. the noise made by the shells rushing through the air
5. outpaced, the soldiers have struggled beyond the reach of these shells which are now falling behind them as they struggle away from the scene of battle
6. Five-Nines - 5.9 caliber explosive shells
7. poison gas. From the symptoms it would appear to be chlorine or phosgene gas. The filling of the lungs with fluid had the same effects as when a person drowned
8. the early name for gas masks
9. a white chalky substance which can burn live tissue
10. the glass in the eyepieces of the gas masks
11. Owen probably meant flickering out like a candle or gurgling like water draining down a gutter, referring to the sounds in the throat of the choking man, or it might be a sound partly like stuttering and partly like gurgling
12. normally the regurgitated grass that cows chew; here a similar looking material was issuing from the soldier’s mouth
13. high zest - idealistic enthusiasm, keenly believing in the rightness of the idea
14. keen
15. see note 1

To see the source of Wilfred Owen's ideas about muddy conditions see his letter in Wilfred Owen's First Encounter with the Reality of War.
Notes copyright © David Roberts and Saxon Books 1998 and 1999. Free use by students for personal use only. The poem appears in both Out in the Dark and Minds at War, but the notes are only found in Out in the Dark. Copyright © 1999 Saxon Books.