

The Wonder of It All

Barbara Taylor Bradford was born and raised in England. She started her writing career on the *Yorkshire Evening Post* and later worked as a journalist in London before moving to New York upon her marriage to film producer Robert Bradford. Her first novel, *A Woman of Substance*, became an enduring international bestseller and was followed by many more, including the bestselling Cavendon series and *A Man of Honour*, her prequel to *A Woman of Substance*.

Barbara's books have sold over eighty-five million copies worldwide in more than ninety countries and forty languages, and ten mini-series and television movies have been made of her books by Robert Bradford. In October of 2007, Barbara was appointed an OBE by the Queen for her services to literature. She lives in New York City.

To find out more and join the huge community of her fans, find Barbara on Facebook and Instagram and keep up to date with her reader events, latest books and news at www.barbarataylorbradford.co.uk, where you can also register for the Barbara Taylor Bradford newsletter.

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Barbara Taylor
Bradford

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of It All



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This book is dedicated to my dear friends
Geoffrey Bradfield, Vicki Downey
and Connie and Randy Jones
with my love

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THE
FALCONERS

Philip Henry Rosewood = Esther Marie
FALCONER

Maude = Matthew George Harry

THE
MALVERNS

Henry Ashton
MALVERN

Alexis Helen = James Lionel ≠ Georgiana
MALVERN FALCONER WARD
d. 1900

Rosalind = Charles
(Rossi) Randolph

Lavinia

Lionel (Leonie)
Georgiana
WARD

Marina = Clarence
VENABLES

William = Natalie

Albert = Anne

Clarence

Edward Albert = Christina
(Eddie)

Ian

Andrew

⇨ THE ⇨
CARPENTERS

Lord Reginald = Lady Jane
CARPENTER CADWALANDER

Jasmine

Lilah

Sebastian & Keir

PART ONE

The Battle of
the Somme

Picardy, France

June–July 1916

ONE

In August of 1914, when Germany declared war on France, Britain came to the aid of its ally and declared war on Germany.

At that time, David Lloyd George, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer and later Prime Minister, said, 'I felt like a man standing on a planet that had been suddenly wrenched from its orbit by a demonic hand and that I was spinning wildly into the unknown.' He was right. The storm of the Great War would be violent, merciless and destructive beyond measure.

James Falconer was in the Fourth Army, and proud of it. Tonight, 30 June 1916, he was sitting in a corner of his trench, thinking. His seat was a crate full of Fray Bentos tins of corned beef, and he smiled to himself at the very idea of this. But you made the best of it in the trenches. He knew that.

He glanced up at the sky. It was ink black, littered with stars,

and there was a full moon. A beautiful night in an awful world, and eerily quiet. No sounds of bombs exploding, or guns being fired. Odd, he now thought, and stood up.

At this moment, two of his officers, Lieutenant Stead and Captain Lister, came back down the ladder and walked along their trench towards him.

'What's it like out there?' Major James Falconer asked as the two men came to a standstill in front of him and saluted.

'All quiet on the Western front, sir,' Stead said.

'Quiet as a mouse,' Lister added.

'Some *mice* indeed,' James shot back. 'I get suspicious when there are no sounds, no noises. Anyway, did you get it done?'

'We did,' Stead answered. '*Perfectly.*'

'How did you manage that?' James asked, looking pleased.

'Very carefully.' Lister grinned. 'We cut the barbed-wire fence attached to the iron stakes at one end, using our best wire cutters. Then we took a piece of chain and slotted it through parts of the freed barbed wire. Together we then pulled the chain until we had made a big enough gap to let ten soldiers through at once. Best we could do, Major.'

'You did well. Now we're all set for tomorrow morning.'

'Zero hour,' Lister murmured, and added, 'I'll be back in a minute.' He hurried off and turned left, going down another trench amongst this maze of connecting trenches. These housed more soldiers, were used as kitchens, latrines, and for checking any minor wounds and blisters on the feet. Marching in heavy boots caused problems for Falconer's lads. He sighed under his breath at the thought of the weight his soldiers had to carry when they went out to fight the enemy. Not only a large bag over one shoulder, but a water bottle, a Lee-Enfield rifle, a haversack, plus ammunition. About sixty pounds altogether. No easy feat, but they did it well and with stoicism, and fought with precision.

Stead, leaning against the side of the trench, cleared his throat,

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and said, 'I'll be glad when tomorrow comes and we start fighting. Get it over with, sir.'

James nodded. 'Not so sure it will be *over* quite so quickly, Lieutenant.'

Jack grimaced. 'I know.' He fell silent, then took out a packet of cigarettes and offered one to Falconer.

'Thanks, but not right now, Stead.'

A silence fell between them, and James studied the lieutenant's uniform. Comfortable to wear, and the khaki wool was ideal camouflage in the field. The four pockets on the tunic held lots of personal items, plus a soldier's pay book, and an inside pocket at the end of the tunic contained a first-aid kit.

We've got the best designed uniforms in the world, he decided, believing his own tailored khaki jacket, double-breasted, riding breeches and polished brown boots to be elegant as well as practical.

He also carried a large bag, a water bottle and a baton. His Webley revolver, the Mk VI, was in a holster on his left hip. This was a standard side arm for British troops. His rank insignia of a major was on each sleeve, and also on his steel Brodie helmet.

The sudden return of Captain Lister carrying a brown basket brought James out of his reverie. 'What's in that basket?' he asked, his surprise apparent.

'Some bread and cheese, sir, and sausage, brought up from the village by one of the women. A treat for us all. Sergeant Cox just handed it to me. She was still there, explaining what they were.'

James nodded, a smile touching his mouth. 'How very nice those village women have been to us all these weeks. I hope you thanked her, showed your gratitude on our behalf.'

'I did, Major, and in *French*,' Lister answered.

Grinning, Jack Stead murmured, 'Boasting again, Captain!'

Ignoring this comment, made in jest, Lister took the cotton

cloth off the top of the basket and showed the food to them. 'Plenty for the other lads, you know. Let's dig up a few.'

As far as James Falconer was concerned, the British Expeditionary Force, as it was in 1916, was the most remarkable military formation ever created. Especially the Fourth and Third Armies, which had already taken the field here.

When the Fourth Army had moved up from Amiens, they occupied both sides of the River Somme. A large piece of flat land on the right side of the river, an enormous field, in fact, became home to a big part of the British Army. They instantly made it their own territory and, once ensconced, James had organized the task of digging the trenches.

The Royal Engineers and the Territorials, plus seasoned Regulars, helped to build the intricate network where the soldiers lived, rested, ate, slept, and fought.

On the Somme, the trenches were well made. Food was sent up from the nearby villages; the chaplain was there to comfort those in need, and military doctors were at the ready for the wounded. And there was a great deal of camaraderie between the Tommies and their officers.

The French troops were living in their trenches nearby. The Germans, the enemy, had three lines of defence opposite the British.

By the beginning of the month, James Falconer and the other officers knew that the great attack was coming. Plans were being made; messages were coming in from General Haig, and the infantry began to drill incessantly. For the men, exhausted and ground down by over two years of war, single combat had ceased to be an option. There were only three sorts of encounter on the field of the Somme: artillery versus artillery, artillery versus infantry, and infantry versus infantry.

When he had first joined up, James had been swiftly spotted by his superiors as a leader – an intelligent, efficient and educated man. Officer material, in fact.

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James became an extraordinary soldier and led his men well. He cared about them, just as they admired and cared about him and his welfare.

Deep down, James did not care whether he lived or died.

At 7.30 a.m. on the morning of 1 July 1916, Major James Falconer went up the ladder and out of his trench, accompanied by Lieutenant Jack Stead and Captain Allan Lister. These two seasoned soldiers were always close by, ready to help him in any way they could, and had been with him since 1914.

James was taken aback as he walked over to the barbed-wire fence. There were already thousands of British troops massed together, leaning forward slightly, as they all did when heading into battle. With bayonets fixed on their rifles.

His comrades were equally surprised. James reminded them that, on General Haig's advice, one hundred thousand Tommies had been assigned to Picardy, Amiens, Champagne, and the areas beyond. Many were billeted in the local villages, looked after by French civilians.

Falconer took a deep breath, then went through the barbed-wire fence they had cut open earlier, followed by the lieutenant and captain. Immediately behind them flowed the battalions in the division.

Hundreds and hundreds plunged into the fighting with their major at the head. All around James and his men, the new Lewis machine guns ratter-tattered incessantly. Cannon boomed. Tanks rolled. The air was thick with smoke from the smoke bombs thrown by the Royal Engineers into no-man's land to screen the soldiers now entering the area. The smell of cordite, blood and human waste floated around them. But all were unaware, determined as they were to win. Defeat was not a word in their vocabulary.

Many of the men were killed instantly. Two hours into the battle, James was hit in both legs by machine-gun fire. He fell, still clutching his baton. He felt the bullets hit him and the pain was intense, unbearable. He wanted to touch his legs but couldn't sit up. He groaned, and at that moment he knew he was going to die. What a way to go, he thought . . . on a foreign field because of a useless war. He closed his eyes as a wave of agony gripped him.

Half an hour later, it was Lieutenant Stead who found him and pulled him as far away from the fighting as he could. James was unconscious, his skin clammy. The lieutenant felt for a pulse and was relieved that the major had one, weak as it was. A few seconds later, Captain Allan Lister was on the scene to assist him, along with two stretcher-bearers and a stretcher.

Together, dodging through the crowds of fighting soldiers, they carried James to the Casualty Clearing Station, a large medical tent. A team of army doctors took over at once. They could give no reassurance to the lieutenant and the captain that their major would live, despite their efforts.

James's injuries were considerable. Assessed by the doctors as at risk of dying from blood loss or losing both his legs unless he was lucky, he was sent immediately to a British military field hospital in northern Picardy. After coming to, but delirious with pain, he knew little of the waiting, or the ambulance that transported him, images of the past haunting him: memories of his parents, and his beloved late wife, Alexis, playing in his mind.

James had joined the Army for two reasons: genuine love of country and king, and an enormous sorrow. Alexis had suffered several miscarriages, and had died in childbirth sixteen years earlier. The baby, a son, had also died.

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At the field hospital they removed some of the bullets, before they decided that Major Falconer should be taken by a British military medical ship across the English Channel to Southampton. From there he was driven by ambulance straight to another military hospital in London for further operations on his legs. Drifting in and out of consciousness, James thought of his men, so many left dead on the field of the Somme. They had fallen in their hundreds around him, many killed instantly, but others enduring horrific wounds, trapped on the field or in no-man's land.

The moment the declaration of war was announced, James Lionel Falconer had dashed to enlist in the Army, along with many of the men who worked for him. So did thousands of other men across England, men of all ages and from all walks of life.

It seemed to James that it was an unheard of, even mystical, rush of eager patriotism that had never happened before.

Groups of men, who worked together, calling themselves 'pals', joined up and added the word 'Pals' to the names of their regiments. For example, there were the 1st Barnsley Pals (13th York and Lancaster, 31st Division) and the 10th West Yorks (Pals), which Falconer joined.

He had joined up despite being older than many, in his forties. He had been quickly promoted and, after two years of hard fighting in France, he had become a major, leading his own battalion by 1916. Now he wondered, as he lay awake sweating with the pain during the night, what had become of it, who was left to lead it.

James was moved as quickly as possible so that his wounds did not fester. Once he was settled in the London hospital, surgeons removed more of the many bullets and also the shrapnel, remnants of the bullets, embedded in his legs.

James endured the tricky operations as best as he could, always cooperating with the medical teams, thankful for their aid. But

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it was a strain and a huge trial for him; the pain was horrific and he knew that he might have to have a leg, or even both legs, amputated, given that the wounds were so bad. The thought that he might never ever walk again remained in the forefront of his brain. His sleep was restless from worry and the terrible memories of the war, nightmares returning night after night to haunt him.

What would his future hold now?

The other thing that his mind returned to again and again was a young woman.

His daughter.