

Originally published on the *Line of Fire* blog, the book's translator, Sarah Ardizzone, tells the secrets of the diary revealed to her through the process of translation. From the publishing decisions taken over the title of the book, to a change in the French army's uniform, to Barroux's artistic techniques; and Barroux's long kept secret about how he transcribed the original diary...

Uniform or Camouflage?

Did you know that French soldiers wore bright red trousers and a blue jacket for the first year of the First World War? These bright colours dated from Napoleonic times. They also made the soldiers an easy target. The Germans simply had to aim twenty centimetres above the splash of red that was visible, and they could be sure of hitting their target in a critical place. So the French army uniform was switched to blue-grey in 1915.

The Butcher's Pencil

The illustrations for *Line of Fire* look as if they're drawn in charcoal. In fact, Barroux's line drawings are made using the thick greasy pencils supplied to him by his local butcher! Usually, the butcher tucks one of these pencils behind his ear, when he's not using it to scribble the price of the meat on its wrapping paper. The pencils contain a thick triangular-shaped lead, which is extremely soft. If 6H is the hardest pencil lead available, and HB – or medium hard/soft – is the average pencil lead used in schools, then Barroux's lead is the equivalent of 6B, which is the softest kind of lead produced.

Varnishing the Truth

Because Barroux's pencil lead is so soft, it is also smudgy. So Barroux uses wood varnish to "set" or fix his pictures. This, in turn, results in the yellow-ish sheen on the illustrations, which gives them an older or period glow. Fitting, for a diary that is seeing the light of day again a hundred years after it was penned.

Monochrome

The yellow aged-effect produced by the wood varnish is a helpful hint of colour, since Barroux deliberately chose to work in black and white for this book. He thinks colour is very difficult to get exactly right, and was worried about making the illustrations for the diary look too "crude" in a colour version. Also, his main focus was the challenge of producing approximately 200 illustrations. By contrast, when he's working on an original children's book (such as *Mr Leon's Paris*), Barroux would usually produce twelve to fifteen

“spreads” (or double pages).

Deciphering Handwriting From the Past

The soldier’s handwriting, in the diary found by Barroux, is very old-fashioned and the words are tightly packed together. With its curling, slanted letters it is perfectly formed, but it is not the kind of handwriting we are used to reading nowadays. Barroux had to get the handwritten diary typed up for him, before he was able to read it properly. You might expect the person who typed up the diaries to be a historian and a handwriting expert. In fact, it’s Barroux’s own mum! She is from a generation that feels more comfortable deciphering old-fashioned handwriting. But she is also a retired librarian, so she brought her expertise to bear as well.

Title Trouble

The title of the original French edition is: *On Les Aura! Carnet de Guerre D’un Poilu* (which roughly translates as: *We’ll Get ‘Em! War Diary of an Ordinary French Soldier*). The phrase “*On Les Aura!*” used to be chalked on departing train carriages filled with soldiers setting off for war, by the encouraging crowds waving them off from the platform. In the late summer of 1914, the French, like the British, were convinced that the war would all be over by Christmas. So, a hundred years later, *On Les Aura!* still resonates for a French readership.

But it doesn’t chime in the same way for an Anglophone readership. Particularly given negative associations that we might have after *The Sun* newspaper splashed a not dissimilar phrase – the headline “*Gotcha!*” – across its front page on 4th May 1982. This followed the controversial torpedoing of the Argentine battleship the *General Belgrano* by the British Navy, during the Falklands War. The resulting loss of Argentine life accounted for just over half of the total Argentine losses sustained in the Falklands conflict.)

So, when we were thinking about how the title might work in English, we already knew that “*On Les Aura*” was a tricky phrase. Also, that the characterful word “*poilu*” would be impossible to translate, given that we could hardly use the English equivalent (“*Tommy*”) in the title of a French soldier’s diary.

That’s why Phoenix Yard Books publisher, Emma Langley, thought it might be a good idea to look to the words of the diary itself to inspire us for the title. And we landed on our soldier’s final diary entry: *Sometimes I’m sorry I didn’t stay **in the line of fire**.*

Truth is Stranger than Fiction

When Barroux first began working on turning the diary into an illustrated book, he was tempted to re-write diary entries – to “improve” the quality of writing, and even to change elements of the narrative to make it read more dramatically. But he soon realised that this would be a betrayal of the diary, and that it would be missing the point. What is extraordinary in this humble, detailed account of one soldier’s reality during the first weeks of the First World War is that the small, seemingly trivial stuff – in which boredom and restlessness play a key part – is allowed to play out against the epic backdrop of world history in the making.

And of course there is the mystery of the ending – why does our soldier stop writing his journal entries? Why does he carry on writing out French *chansons* or popular songs for over a year after the diary stops?

The first editor to whom Barroux showed his work-in-progress also suggested that he re-write much of the narrative, and give it a “happy” ending. Barroux felt that this wasn’t the editor for him!

Hurray for Collage

It was only by chance that Barroux came across the diary, inside a cardboard box tied up with a shoelace. When he walked past an apartment clearance in the Bastille district of Paris, back in winter 2009, the first thing he noticed was the collection of old magazines from the 1960’s being tipped into the skip. This was what attracted him to the dusty mounds of someone else’s belongings: he thought he’d be able to cut out images from the magazines to use for a vintage collage-effect in some of his illustration work. It was only after making a pile of these magazines that he noticed the cardboard box. In the end, he walked away with the diary and forgot all about the magazines. You can see an example of how Barroux likes to use collage on page 18, and again on page 34-35 – in the latter example, he cuts out copies of the soldier’s handwritten French songs, from the back of the journal.

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