

It's cold on the Wall. That's the first thing everybody tells you, and the first thing you notice when you're sent there, and it's the thing you think about all the time you're on it, and it's the thing you remember when you're not there any more. It's cold on the Wall.

You look for metaphors. It's cold as slate, as diamond, as the moon. Cold as charity – that's a good one. But you soon realise that the thing about the cold is that it isn't a metaphor. It isn't like anything else. It's nothing but a physical fact. This kind of cold, anyway. Cold is cold is cold.

So that's the first thing that hits you. It isn't like other cold. This is a cold that is all about the place, like a permanent physical attribute of the location. The cold is one of its fundamental properties; it's intrinsic. So it hits you as a package, the first time you go to the Wall, on the first day of your tour. You know that you are there for two years. You know that it's basically the same everywhere, as far as the geography goes, but that everything depends on what the people you will be serving with are like. You know that there's nothing you can do about that. It is frightening but also in its way a little bit freeing. No choice – everything about the Wall means you have no choice.

You get a little training but not much. Six weeks. Mainly it's about how to hold, clean, look after and fire your weapon. In that order. Some fitness training, but not much; a lot of training in midnight awakening, sleep disruption, sudden panics, sudden changes of order, small-hours tests of discipline. They drum that into you: discipline trumps courage. In a fight, the people who win are the ones who do what they're told. It's not like it is in films. Don't be brave, just do what you're told. That's pretty much it. The rest of the training happens on the Wall. You get it from the Defenders who've been there longer than you. Then in your turn you give it to the Defenders who come after. So that's what you arrive able to do: get up in the middle of the night, and look after your weapon.