

## THE DESERTER

By

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We'd been in the trench for what seemed a lifetime  
when we started getting some new recruits.

Most of these recruits were very young.

Sixteen. Seventeen. *Nineteen* was rare.

'How old are you?' The recruitment officer would ask.

'Seventeen.'

'Don't you mean, nineteen, son?'

So many of them were recruited this way.

Encouraged to tell a lie to get in.

God knows how many were under age...

Well, nobody knew and nobody cared.

This particular boy had been with us two weeks,  
complaining all the time he was *bored*.

Well, it *was* bloody boring, stuck in a trench.

But at least it hadn't rained. Hadn't rained for three weeks.

'How long will we be here?' He kept on asking.

He was missing his girlfriend. Missed her so much.

He showed me a photograph. Lovely looking girl.

'How long do you think we'll be stuck in this trench?'

The German trench was a hundred yards away.  
So close, you might say, and yet so far.  
Our orders had been to *hold position*.  
Stay put. Let the Germans make the first move.  
Then, out of the blue, a sudden change of plan.  
'Tomorrow's the day, men! Tomorrow, we attack!'

It was pitiful, to see how this boy changed.  
He was no longer bored. Just very scared.  
We were all very scared. No doubt about that.  
The night before seemed endless. I couldn't sleep at all.  
He was sobbing and crying in the trench, by my side.  
Of course, we'd all heard of the slaughter on the Somme...

When we moved to attack, went over the top,  
we lost sight of him. Thought he'd been killed straight away.  
Men were falling like flies. But, no, he'd cleared off.  
They caught him, three miles away, hiding in a barn.

On the Sunday, the whole battalion was paraded.  
The boy was made to stand apart, on his own.  
His cap and regiment insignia were torn off  
to disgrace him for all the battalion to see.  
Then the verdict of The Council was read out.

A forgone conclusion. To be shot at dawn.

He was part of my platoon which meant lots were drawn  
to find six men to shoot him. I was one of the six.

**We marched him to the woods and tied him to a post.  
He refused the blindfold. Tears in his eyes, he stared straight  
at us as we fired. His face never leaves me. It won't go away.  
His eyes...they've followed me down through the years.  
He was just a young lad who lost his nerve.  
'He died in action.' The telegram would say.  
I later heard his father had joined the army  
to avenge his son on the Germans.**

#### **HISTORICAL NOTE.**

**306 British Empire Army soldiers were executed  
for desertion in WW1.**

**British policy changed during the war.**

**Initially, next of kin were informed of the circumstances  
surrounding a deserter's death.**

**Later on, instead, they were simply informed that the  
executed had died in action.**

**Informed or not, next of kin would soon discover  
the nature of the death when they did not receive  
the pension for those killed in action.**

**Shell Shock, now known as combat stress or Posttraumatic  
Stress Disorder was prevalent in many cases of desertion.**

**After nearly 90 years, following many long campaigns,  
all 306 men were pardoned in 2006 by Labour's**

**Defence Secretary, Des Browne.**

## The Shot at Dawn Memorial, Staffordshire

