

## THE DESERTER

We'd been in the trench a lifetime, it seemed,  
then we were joined by new recruits.

Most of them were very young,  
still getting used to their army boots.

'How old are you?' The Officer asked.

'Seventeen, Sir,' came the reply.

'Don't you mean *eighteen*? *Eighteen*, son?

No harm done telling a little white lie...'

Thousands were recruited this way,  
their secret safely shared.

Who knows how many were underage?

Nobody knew and nobody cared.

This lad, only with us for about two weeks,  
complained all the time he was bored.

Showed me a photograph of his girl  
whom he loved and truly adored.

A beautiful girl! He missed her so much.

'How long do you think we'll be here?

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

How long? - Well, that wasn't clear...

The German trench was a hundred yards.

Our orders were: 'Just say put.

We'll let the enemy make the first move.

Top Secret: So, keep your mouths shut.'

Then out of the blue, a change of plan.  
'Tomorrow, the Hun we'll defeat!  
He's nearly finished, chaps! On his last legs!  
When we attack, he'll soon retreat!'

It was pitiful, now, to see the lad...  
No longer bored, just scared.  
No comfort to him, knowing how  
his fear was widely shared.

The night before seemed endless, now,  
him sobbing by my side.  
Of course, we'd heard about The Somme,  
the thousands there who had died...

When we attacked, went over the top,  
we thought he'd been killed that day,  
but they found him hiding in a barn,  
less than a mile away.

Sunday. The battalion stood on parade,  
watching the lad made to stand all alone,  
regimental insignia and cap torn off  
for all to see – disgraced and disowned.

Soon, the Council verdict was read out aloud.  
'*To be shot at dawn,*' it said.  
Lots were drawn in my platoon  
for the six men to shoot him dead.

Tied to a post, he refused the blindfold,  
stared ahead, with eyes full of tears.  
There's no escape. His face won't fade.  
It haunts me down the years.

He was just a young lad who'd lost his nerve.  
'*Died in action.*' The telegram would say.  
I heard his old man joined the army too,  
to avenge his son, make those Germans pay.

Melville Lovatt

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 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 Post Traumatic 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.

