



The Spire Sentinel



**The Newsletter
of The
Branch of The
Front**



**& Magazine
Chesterfield
Western
Association**

ISSUE 121 - March 2026

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the
Great War'.



Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2026

Meetings start at 7.30pm and take place at the Labour Club, Unity House, Saltergate, Chesterfield S40 1NF

January	6th	. AGM + Tim Lynch - “Huns on the Run” Tim explores the often overlooked experiences of German POWs held in Britain during and immediately after the First World War
February	3rd	Ross Beadle - Sarajevo 1914 This talk examines the sequence of chance events of the preceding 36 years and, even, on the day of the killing.
March	3rd	Andy Rawson - Malta...Nurse of the Mediterranean against the Germans and Italians during WWII. However, over 125,000 casualties from the 1915 Gallipoli and 1916 Salonika campaigns were cared for on the island during WWI.
April	7th	Mick Byrne - Shot at Dawn Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial arms, However, only 346 were executed with 37 of these having committed capital crimes such as murder. The remainder become the centrepiece of our talk.
May	5th	Christina Holstein - - Verdun. What was the plan behind the German offensive of February 1916? A thundering opening bombardment brought early success but the German advance soon slowed and the French refused to give up.
June	2nd	Scott Lindgren The Admiralty dispatched two dreadnought battlecruisers to the South Atlantic to eliminate the threat of the German East Asia cruiser squadron. This talk explains the events and consequences of the Falklands battle, along with some of the strategic and tactical lessons.
July	7th	John Wilson The action at Sheikh Sa'id November 1914. The opposed landing that nobody has ever heard about! .
August	4th	Ian Castle - Gotha Raids. The talk traces the sequence of raids made by the deadly Gotha and massive 'Giant' bombers, and the development of the world's first in depth, integrated aerial defence system. Based on his book London 1917-18: The Bomber Blitz
September	1st	Roy Larkin - Where the Money Went. Following the success of the original 'Where the Money Went', the Sequel explores the financial costs of the Great War. Fully illustrated
October	6th	Peter Hart Welsh Warrior at Ypres, 1914: The thrilling memories of Captain Hubert Rees who ended up in command of the 2nd Welsh Regiment during the fighting at Gheluvelt.
November	3rd	John Horner 'In the care of St Dunstons : Private Richard Horners story'
December	1st	Neil Taylor....”Winston`s Little Army...Aspects of the Royal Naval Division”

Issue 120 list of contents

- 2 Branch Meetings Calendar 2026
- 3 Contents - issue 120 + Chairman`s Notes + March Speaker
- 4 & 5 Andy Rawson + Secretary`s Scribbles
- 5-8 Secretary`s Scribbles + February Meeting
- 8- 13 Douglas Haig Fellowship AGM
- 14-18 Branded Goods
- 19-20 Sister Catherine Brooke
- 20-21 Pierre Leclerc
- 22-23 Sister Margaret Hartley

Chairman`s Ramblings



First of all, last month saw a quick AGM as normal so thank you to all who have supported myself, and your committee. We will continue to work on your behalf to make things go well over the year and to hopefully grow the branch so it may continue for many years ahead. A great presentation in February to kick things off for the year ahead albeit a month late because of January's meeting cancellation because of the weather. Ross Beadle gave a great talk, was well-presented and very informative and well researched and a few good questions at the end. Our next presentation is by Andy Rawson which I am sure will be very well received as he is a regular at the branch and has always given interesting talks in the past. I

look forward to seeing everyone on the 3rd of March. Thank you again for your continued support for the branch so any ideas for anything come and have a chat to anyone in the committee or drop us a message

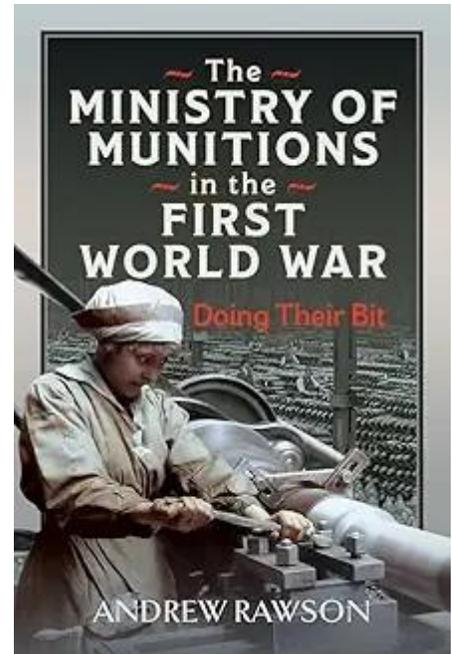
Jon-Paul Harding

Andy Rawson - March Speaker

Andrew is author of over 40 books, nearly half of them on the First World War, including a ten part series on covering the Western Front, published during the centenary years.

However, his recent interest has been industry in war time. He had a book published on First World War industry last summer and has one due this summer on Second World War industry. He has also been looking at wartime industry in France and Germany during WW1.

This month's talk is about the island of Malta's medical role in the First World War, when it became known as the Nurse of the Mediterranean.



Secretary`s Scribbles

Dear Members and Friends,

Welcome to the March 2026 edition of the Branch Newsletter and magazine. Hopefully the weather will be a bit kinder to us compared with January and February - a few of us had quite a nightmare journey getting back home after the February meeting. Thanks to all who turned out for Ross Beadle`s excellent presentation - what a

climax...your Branch Secretary and Branch Treasurer being `shot`!

Mark Macartney is a busy man - he handles all the Branch`s publicity - making sure the Newsletters are posted on the main WFA website - it`s been revamped - well worth a visit and keeps the Facebook page up to date. Hopefully we`ll see Mark at a meeting in the summer when we have the lighter nights. Mark is of course a WFA Trustee and looks after all the Associations Branded Goods and can be found with his display at WFA events around the country.. He`s contributed an article to this month`s edition telling the story of how he got involved and how he developed it to the setup it is today. He also took time to travel to London for the AGM of the Douglas Haig Fellowship - read Mark`s report elsewhere in this issue.

I`ve a busy month coming up, starting Friday 6th March giving my Quintinshill talk to the Retford Probus Group. Later in the month I`m off to Nottingham to deliver a new presentation - Industry in The Great War - obviously with a bit of a slant towards Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. Thanks to Andy Rawson for giving me a few pointers on this. Speaking of Andy, he is of course or speaker on March 3rd, when he will tell the story of Malta in WW1..."The Nurse of the Mediterranean" where so many casualties from Gallipoli and Salonika were treated before either being returned to active service or repatriated back to the UK for further treatment and, in many cases, discharged from further service. Andy, a prolific writer, covers so many aspects of history - not just WW1 - quite amazing. I finish my month at West Bridgford Library, Nottingham, with my talk "Women Won The War"...the role of women in WW1. Amazingly it`s been a sell out since first advertised before Christmas.

Next month we have a first time visitor to the Branch - Mick Byrne with a presentation entitled **Shot at Dawn** Between 1914 and 1920, more than 3,000 British soldiers were sentenced to death by courts martial for desertion, cowardice, striking an officer, disobedience, falling asleep on duty or casting away arms However, only 346 were executed with 37 of these having committed capital crimes such as murder. The remainder become the centrepiece of the talk.

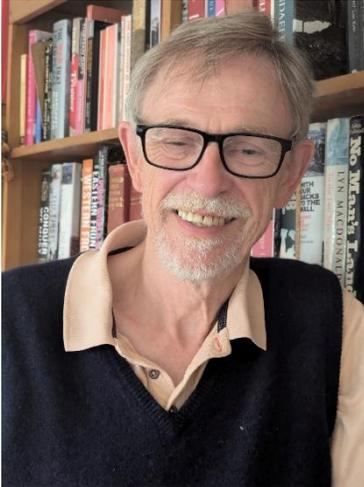
Best wishes, Grant grantcullen@hotmail.com / 07824628638

February Meeting

Branch Chair, Jon-Paul Harding welcomed everyone to the meeting on another wintry night and thanked all for their understanding when the Committee made the decision, on safety grounds, for the cancellation of the January meeting.

With the January meeting off, it meant that the Branch AGM had to be held at this meeting. Jon-Paul reminded all that should there be any votes, only paid up members of the Western Front Association were entitled to vote. The year end (2025) accounts for the Branch had been circulated with the Newsletter and with no questions for the Treasurer, the accounts were approved. The three Branch Offices, Chair, Treasurer and Secretary were open for election and as the three incumbents, Jon-Paul, Jane Lovatt and Grant Cullen, had indicated their willingness to stand for re-election and their being no other nominees, all three were duly elected.

The business part of the evening over Jon-Paul then welcomed our speaker for the evening, Ross Beadle -



Ross has been a popular lecturer on the WFA circuit for over 10 years. He specializes in strategy notably the Schlieffen Plan and the March to the Marne. However he also covers set piece battles like Neuve Chapelle and Cambrai where there are important strategic lessons for the history of the war.

He has a degree in history from Hull, but it was a course on the First World War run by the historian and author Robin Neillands at Kellogg College Oxford in 2001 that he now realizes re-directed his life. Since then far too many of his waking hours have been devoted to the history of the war. He is a frequent battlefield tourer, particularly the Somme and the Isonzo.

Ross`s topic for the evening was **Sarajevo 1914** This talk examined the sequence of chance events of the preceding 36 years and, even, on the day of the killing of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, events which precipitated the start of The Great War. Copiously illustrated by slides, Ross left the best until near the end when he set up four chairs to represent the car in which the Archduke and his wife were riding in and where they met their ends. Grant Cullen represented the Archduke, Jane Lovatt his wife, with Peter Chamberlain-Hill the Governor of Sarajevo and Pete Ackerman the driver. Ross took us along the fatal route, how the driver took the wrong turning straight into Gavrilo Princip`s line of fire. Ross, then acting as Princip, then pulled out a toy gun and `fired` off the requisite rounds....surely the only time a Branch Secretary and Branch Treasurer have been `killed` at a Branch Meeting.

Two very interested attendees at the meeting were Max and Patricia Kerley. They had visited Austria last year and saw, in a museum, the very car in which the Archduke and his wife met their ends. Max and Patricia took some photographs and thanks to them they are reproduced here.

Automobil von Sarajevo
Österreich-Ungarn

Type:	28/32 Doppelphaeton
4 Zylinder-Motor	
Hubraum:	5.880 cm ³
Leistung:	32 PS
Hersteller:	Wiener Automobilfabrik A.G. (vormals „Gräf & Stift“)
Baujahr:	1910
Zulassungsnummer:	A III-118

In diesem Automobil wurden der österreichisch-ungarische Thronfolger Erzherzog Franz Ferdinand von Österreich-Este und seine Gemahlin Herzogin Sophie von Hohenberg in Sarajevo am 28. Juni 1914 ermordet. Der Wagen gehörte Franz Graf Harrach, der ihn als Angehöriger des k. k. Österreichischen Freiwilligen Automobilkorps dem Thronfolger für die Manöver in Bosnien-Herzegowina im Juni 1914 zur Verfügung stellte und selbst an der Fahrt am 28. Juni 1914 teilnahm.



Being a member, WFA Trustee and Branch Publicity Administrator Mark Macartney joined other Members and guests of The Douglas Haig Fellowship, in attending The Annual General Meeting of the group. Those attending included quite a few WFA Members.

Lord Astor, Patron of Douglas Haig Fellowship (and Grandson of Field Marshal Douglas Haig) was not in attendance due to attending a funeral with Brian Curragh (Honorary Secretary) was unwell, so Vice Chair and Events Secretary Kathy Stevenson chaired the AGM, welcoming all present. All reports were read out.

All existing Committee Members had previously stated their willingness to stand for Office for another year as follows,

1. Lord Astor of Hever (Patron of the Fellowship)
2. Kathy Stevenson (Vice Chair & Events Secretary)
3. Alex Campbell
4. Brian Curragh (Honorary Secretary - brian.curragh@me.com)
5. Paul Harris
6. John Spencer (Editor of *Records* - john_spencer2010@live.co.uk)

A point brought up at the AGM was that subscriptions had not increased from 2013, and members present were asked for their opinion on this being increased due to the Fellowship's financial situation. An increase was agreed with a figure yet to be set. Some stated that they couldn't remember what they were doing away back in 2013. Current Membership fee is £25 per year, or £30 for joint member.

So to put the record straight (for 2013) some noteworthy events:-

- (a) Margaret Thatcher died,
- (b) Election of Pope Francis
- (c) Nelson Mandela died
- (d) Andy Murray won Wimbledon
- (e) Birth of Prince George.

The AGM business was then followed by lunch after which a talk was given by DHF member Major (ret'd) Phil Watson, The title of his talk was "Haig's Command (and Control Philosophy) - Leadership isn't Likership".



Phil (who has presented at Chesterfield Branch) looked at what Douglas Haig thought, wrote and said about leadership before and during the Great War. It aimed to show how Haig's own command philosophy was in accordance with the Army's decentralised doctrine. However, the talk also demonstrated that as the Army grew, and personalities changed, Haig had to apply different levels of control to ensure subordinates delivered his intent (plans) and was prepared to 'send home' those who did not. Haig was a practitioner of the decentralised command philosophy, but as the Army expanded and coalition operations became more complex, it was clear that at times a greater level of centralisation was required to ensure Allied aims were met. This caused John Charteris to observe that Haig *'had a very real generosity in mind and in dealing with others, a generosity that was limitless until it impinged on the 'cause' as he saw it. Then it was cut off as by a guillotine.'*

Phil joined the Army as a boy soldier in 1977 and served with the 9th/12th Lancers as a reconnaissance soldier. In 1998, he was commissioned from the ranks and eventually commanded HQ Squadron. Phil, like many soldiers of his generation, participated in his fair share of operational tours, which included the Gulf War 1 in 1991. Phil left the Army in 2012 and worked at the Regiment's Home Headquarters until April 2025, when he retired after a total of 48 years of service to his Regiment.

In 2019, he studied his MA in military history at Wolverhampton, winning The Western Front Association's 'Derek and Esther Smith Award' for his dissertation. In 2023, Phil returned to Wolverhampton to study a PhD in the development of British military doctrine and was supervised by Dr Spencer Jones. It is from Phil's PhD studies that he has examined the command philosophy of Douglas Haig, especially its growth and development from his studies under Colonel George Henderson at Staff College to its practical application during 1914-1918.

Phil has published three works: *The Last Charges, Audregny: The Flank Guard Action and the First Cavalry Charge of the Great War, 24 August 1914* and *Their Greatest Hour: The Rearguard Action of the 12th Lancers, Dunkirk 1940*. Phil was most fortunate in that Her Late

Majesty Queen Elizabeth wrote the Foreword for his last book, which included her father's wartime service.

This talk (to a good interested and enthusiastic audience) was absolutely fantastic, and the discussions before, during and afterwards proved this.

Just mentioning that Phil started by saying that he does not have an Agenda and does not use a lectern. We all laughed on a statement when Phil said “tell me what to do, not how to do it.” (wife won't listen) I may not make myself popular. A following statement was to follow “Remember, behind every husband who thinks he wears the pants -is a wife who told him which pants to wear.”

Delegate tasks not, responsibilities. I'm not here with the intention to change your minds or thoughts.

If a subordinate in the absence of a superior neglects to depart from the letter of his orders, when such departure is clearly demanded by circumstances, and failure issues, he will be held responsible for such issues.



John Spencer and Kathy Stevenson



John Spencer introduces Phil Watson



Phil Watson



Field Marshall, Sir Douglas Haig

On 29 January 1928 Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig died at 21 Prince's Gate in London. He was aged 66.

Having been commissioned as a lieutenant into the 7th (Queen's Own) Hussars on 7 February 1885 he had served in the army for 43 years (Field Marshals technically never 'retire').

At his death, Haig's reputation was intact, but it came under attack in the following years and again in the 1960's.

It was only relatively recently - with books by John Terraine (for instance 'Douglas Haig - The Educated Soldier') that a balanced approach to Haig was suggested.

Terraine, taking his cue from Haig's "Final Despatch" of 1918, argued that Haig pursued the only strategy possible, given the situation the armies were in: that of attrition which wore down the German army and delivered the coup de grâce of 1918.

More recently, Prof Gary Sheffield has stated that although Terraine's arguments about Haig have been much attacked over forty years, Terraine's thesis "has yet to be demolished".



21 Princes Gate, London. The house where Sir Douglas Haig died 28th January 1928



The Earl Haig Memorial, Whitehall, London



The graves of Sir Douglas Haig and his wife in the grounds of Dryburgh Abbey in the Scottish Borders

Branded Goods Shop

When was the last time that you had a look at The WFA shop? There are some wonderful items to purchase and the profits help support the Association.

Report by Mark Macartney (Branded Goods Trustee)



Branded Goods History.

Prior to me taking over as Branded Goods Appointee/Trustee in 2015, the last time “Branded Goods” (then known as WFA Commodities) were advertised of its availability was in Bulletin 93 July 2012

The Western Front Association *Bulletin* 93 July 2012

WFA NEW BRANDED STOCK NOW AVAILABLE

Ypres British mapping 1914 - 1918

Gallipoli Military mapping 1914 - 1918

General Haig's Maps-1 British mapping 1914 - 1918

Somme Reserve HQ & HQ British mapping 1914 - 1918

Official History of the War British mapping 1914 - 1918

Polo Shirts, Rugby Shirts, Oxford Shirts, Ties, Lapel badges, Tie bars (boxed or loose), Cuff links (boxed or loose), Binders for Stand To and the Bulletin, Mapping the Front DVDs

WFA Commodities
after 6pm please

Now available online
www.westernfrontassociation.com/wfa-commodities-buy-online.html

Payment only by card or cheque is acceptable

When Fiona McGrath ceased to carry out the function in late 2013 it was not possible to purchase WFA items. From early 2014 I had been having contact with various WFA Trustees about this situation and offering suggested items as requested by the Trustees

While attending a WFA seminar at Milton Keynes in September 2014 I had a chat with Jane Backhouse (then assistant WFA Honorary Secretary) about the situation, offering my involvement and assistance if required. Soon afterwards I had an email from Jane stating that she had passed up my comments and interest to the (then) Chairman (Bob Patterson) and he was interested in my offer of assistance and would get in contact with me which he did, explaining that the intention was now not to hold stock but look at buying direct from the supplier on an `as and when` required basis, and we would start off with a very limited number of items. I then gave the Chairman a suggested list of items. My list was passed to the trustees, during all this a survey had gone out asking members what they felt were the items that they would be interested in purchasing, the top 5 in the league table revealed the following items: Polo shirts, Mugs, Ties, T-shirts and Rugby shirts. Then it was decided that Colin Wagstaff (the WFA Vice Chairman at the time) would be the Trustee in charge of this. Prior to all this, although I had shown an interest in assisting an official appeal had gone out in the Bulletin and various Newsletters asking for volunteers to assist in this. As I was the only volunteer it was decided that I would take the leading role in the re-launch of selling a small, tight range of WFA Branded Merchandise. After talking to Colin Wagstaff it was decided to start with sweatshirts, polo shirts, and t-shirts, and possibly also look at ties, lapel badges and mugs. I was asked if we could go for French Navy Blue colour if possible. I contacted five suppliers, one firm did not respond, one could not do with the required logo, one would only do with a minimum order of 12, the fourth supplier could supply but cost was unacceptable and did not do the required colour. That left me with West Coast Embroidery in Liverpool, (now West Coast Workwear) who fulfilled all our requirements and agreed on every question I put their way, so it was decided that the clothing would sell at £16 for a sweatshirt, Polo's for £15 and £13 for t-shirts. This was inclusive of postage. I went for quality and type of material opposed to low cost. The first time I had any "Branded Goods" on display was at WFA AGM at on 18th April 2015 at Salford University. Since then I have tried to have a display at as many Events that I was able to attend. (Including the Presidents Conference at Tally Ho on 27th June)

I also looked at the opportunity of acquiring mugs, it was agreed that we would need to hold stock of these; my suggestion that I would hold these was agreed.

I contacted six suppliers, this was their responses,

1. Would only do a minimum of an order for 72 mugs.
2. On a par with the No 6 but wanted a set up cost of £25 plus £15 postage plus VAT and a minimum of 36 mugs.
3. Did not respond
4. On a par with No 6 but Vat and postage would need adding.
5. Again on a par with No 6 but again postage and VAT would have had to be added.
6. This is the supplier I eventually went with -Transform Images in Retford, Nottinghamshire. They were local to me so I could personally sort out any problems. Price was very reasonable & Inclusive of VAT also the owner would deliver free of charge directly to me.

(So Mugs sold at £10 (including postage) or if bought at a venue £7) I have since changed to Iron Tree Designs in Retford who do for the same price, but do a maximum of 36, so the price has literally not changed since 2015. (Note see updated price for all items under) Lapel Badges, these are still selling at £3.00 each and are available on the Branded Goods Shop or at venues where I attend in person.

I then proceeded to have ties produced, and these still sell well. From info as stated above the very limited number of items has now expanded immensely and is detailed under: Please note that we have a new Website and up to date prices are included there <https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/about-the-wfa/branded-goods-shop/>



BRANDED GOODS SHOP Availability

Branded Goods are split into two areas, “**Branded Items**” which WFA supply direct, and “**Branded Clothing**”, which is supplied by a Third Party “West Coast Workwear. Please check the Shop for both areas or use this single URL for purchasing

<https://www.westernfrontassociation.com/about-the-wfa/branded-goods-shop/> Prices quoted for **Branded Items** are inclusive of Vat and Postage, prices quoted for **Branded Clothing** is inclusive of Vat but Postage will be added during checkout.,

Branded Items

1	Fridge Magnet	(£5.55)
2	Fridge Tile Magnet	(£3.55)
3	Mousemats	(£7)
4	Bookmarks	(£2.87)
5	Baseball Caps	(£8.55)
6	Ties	(£14.55)
7	Lapel Badges	(£3.50)
8	Mug	(£10.50)
9	Messenger Bag	(£28.20)
10	Despatch Bag	(£36.20)
11	Shoulder Bag	(£28.20)
12	Record Bag	(£28.20)

Branded Clothing

13	Unisex Polo Shirt	£21.46
14	Ladies Polo Shirt	£21.46
15	Unisex Oxford Shirt	£35.88
16	Ladies Oxford Shirt	£35.88
17	Unisex Sweatshirt	£25.66
18	Ladies Sweatshirt	£26.34
19	Unisex T-Shirt	£13.20
20	Ladies T-Shirt	£14.40
21	Unisex Rugby Shirt	£33.48
22	Ladies Rugby Shirt	£35.95
23	Unisex Breathgable Jacket	£108.96
24	Ladies Waterproof Jacket	£96.00
25	Unisex Fleece	£27.48
26	Ladies Fleece	£27.48



Despatch Bag



Record Bag



Shoulder Bag



Messenger Bag



Cap



Coffee Mug



Mousemat



Classic Tie



Fridge Tile Magnet



WFA Fridge Magnet



WFA Bookmark



Lapel Badge



UNISEX POLO SHIRT WITH LOGO S69M



LADIES POLO SHIRT WITH LOGO S39F



UNISEX SHORT SLEEVE OXFORD SHIRT WITH LOGO K109



LADIES SHORT SLEEVE OXFORD SHIRT K701



UNISEX SWEATSHIRT WITH LOGO 762M



LADIES SWEATSHIRT WITH LOGO 2H030F



UNISEX T-SHIRT WITH LOGO 180M



LADIES T-SHIRT WITH LOGO 180F



UNISEX RUGBY SHIRT WITH LOGO FR100



LADIES RUGBY SHIRT WITH LOGO FR101



UNISEX BREATHABLE JACKET WITH LOGO S10M



LADIES WATERPROOF INSULATED JACKET R0043



UNISEX FLEECE WITH LOGO RC122



LADIES FLEECE WITH LOGO RC123

Sister Catherine Brooke



For four consecutive nights—from November 12 to November 15, 1916—twenty-eight-year-old Sister Catherine Brooke crawled through no man's land between the British and German trenches, alone, in complete darkness, carrying wounded soldiers on her back one at a time back to the British lines, and Catherine rescued 23 soldiers over those four nights—23 men who would have bled to death in the mud of no man's land if Catherine hadn't crawled out to get them—and no one knew Catherine had done it for forty years because Catherine never told anyone, never reported what she had done, never asked for recognition, and the 23 men she saved most of them never knew who

had carried them back to safety because they had been unconscious or delirious when Catherine found them.

Catherine had been a nurse at a field hospital behind the British lines near Ypres since 1915, and Catherine had heard the wounded men crying out from no man's land—heard them screaming for help, heard them crying for their mothers, heard them begging someone to come get them—and the British commanders had forbidden rescue attempts because no man's land was being shelled constantly and anyone who went out there would be killed. Catherine had listened to men dying in the mud for months—listened to them scream and cry and beg and slowly go silent as they bled to death—and Catherine had felt something inside her break, something that said "I cannot listen to this anymore. I cannot hear men dying and do nothing."

On the night of November 12, 1916, Catherine crawled out of the British trench alone—no one knew she was going, no one gave her permission, no one accompanied her—and crawled through the mud of no man's land toward the sound of a man crying out for help. Catherine crawled on her stomach for 200 yards through mud that was ankle-deep in places, past craters filled with dead bodies, past unexploded shells, through darkness so complete she could see nothing and had to navigate by sound alone—by the sound of the wounded man calling out. Catherine found him—a young soldier, maybe nineteen years old, shot through both legs, bleeding heavily—and Catherine wrapped a tourniquet around his legs and lifted him onto her back and crawled back toward the British trench, dragging the wounded man through the mud, moving as quietly as possible so the German guns wouldn't notice, taking forty minutes to cover the 200 yards back to safety.

Catherine carried that first soldier back to the trench and handed him to a stretcher bearer and went back to the field hospital and no one questioned where she had been because it was 3:00 AM and no one was paying attention. The next night Catherine went out again—crawled through no man's land and found two more wounded men and carried them back one

at a time—and the night after that Catherine carried six men back, and the fourth night Catherine carried fourteen men back, moving faster now, knowing the terrain, knowing where the shells were likely to land, knowing which routes were safest. Twenty-three men total over four nights. Twenty-three men who would have died in the mud. Catherine never told anyone what she had done. Catherine never reported the rescues. Catherine never asked for a medal or recognition or even acknowledgment. Catherine simply went back to her regular duties at the field hospital and continued nursing wounded soldiers who arrived through official channels, and the 23 men she had rescued from no man's land were listed in military records as "recovered from the field by unknown parties" and no one ever investigated who had recovered them.

Forty years later—in 1956—a historian researching World War I nursing found Catherine's personal diary in the archives of a Liverpool museum, and the diary contained detailed entries for November 12-15, 1916, describing every single rescue Catherine had made, every wounded man she had found, every yard she had crawled through no man's land, and the historian was stunned because the rescues Catherine described matched perfectly with military records showing 23 soldiers recovered from no man's land during those four nights. Catherine had saved 23 lives and had never told a single person. Catherine had died in 1941—fifteen years before her diary was found—and had gone to her grave carrying the secret of what she had done.

The historian published Catherine's story in 1958, and in 1962 the British government posthumously awarded Catherine the George Cross—the highest civilian decoration for gallantry—and Catherine's niece accepted the medal at a ceremony and said "My aunt crawled through no man's land four nights in a row and carried 23 wounded soldiers to safety on her back. She never told anyone. She never asked for anything. She did it because men were dying and she was a nurse and nurses save lives. She carried that secret for twenty-five years until she died. She never knew anyone would ever know what she did. She did it anyway. That is what courage looks like when no one is watching and no one will ever know."

XX

Pierre Leclerc, age 63, returned to his farm near Verdun in May 1919, six months after the Armistice. The farm had been in no man's land for three years, fought over repeatedly, abandoned since his family evacuated in 1916. Pierre came back alone, his wife had died during the evacuation, and his two sons had been killed fighting at Verdun defending the very land Pierre was now reclaiming. The farmhouse was destroyed, just rubble and burned timber. The fields were cratered, barbed wire everywhere, unexploded shells scattered like deadly mushrooms. But Pierre had nowhere else to go, no other life, so he began the impossible task of reclaiming his land from war.

On May 12, 1919, Pierre hitched his surviving plow horse to an old plow and began turning the soil in what had been his wheat field, planning to plant a late spring crop. The plow blade hit something solid thirty feet into the first furrow. Pierre dug with his hands and uncovered a human femur, then a skull, then more bones—the scattered remains of a soldier, French or German impossible to tell, buried in the soil Pierre had farmed for forty

years. Pierre sat in the dirt, holding the skull, and wept. His land had become a graveyard. Over the next three hours, plowing that single field, Pierre's plow unearthed remains of seventeen soldiers, along with rifles, helmets, unexploded grenades, and shell fragments. The field wasn't farmland anymore—it was a mass grave.

Pierre couldn't plow without uncovering bodies. He couldn't plant crops in soil mixed with human remains and explosives. He spent three weeks walking his entire farm, marking locations where he found bones, ammunition, or unexploded ordnance. By the end, over sixty percent of his land was marked as contaminated with either human remains or dangerous explosives. French Army disposal teams came to remove explosives but said nothing about the human remains—too many bodies, too widespread, impossible to recover them all. "Just plow around them or bury them deeper," an officer told Pierre. "The dead are past caring." But Pierre cared. These were someone's sons, lying unnamed in his wheat field. Maybe one of them was his own son Henri or Louis, never found, and listed as missing in action.

Pierre Leclerc farmed that land for eleven more years but never with the same heart. Every harvest mixed grain with rust from buried weapons. Every plowing risked uncovering more bones. Pierre found pieces of soldiers every season buttons, identification tags, bones, boots with feet still inside them. He kept the identification tags, twenty-three in total found over eleven years, and in 1929 sent them to the French War Office hoping to identify the dead. Only four were successfully identified and their families notified. The other nineteen remained unknown soldiers scattered in Pierre's soil. Pierre died in 1930 at age 74, having outlived his wife and both sons, having farmed land that never stopped yielding evidence of the war that destroyed his family and his life. His farm was abandoned after his death no one wanted land so contaminated with death.

In 1982, a French film crew documenting the Verdun battlefield interviewed an elderly man who had been Pierre's neighbour. He said: "Pierre never recovered from coming home to find his farm had become a cemetery. He was a devout man who believed the dead deserved proper burial and respect. But his land held hundreds of bodies, maybe thousands, buried too deep or scattered too widely to ever recover. He farmed for eleven years knowing he was plowing over the dead, growing wheat in soil mixed with human remains. It destroyed him spiritually. He believed he was desecrating graves every time he planted or harvested. His last words to me before he died were: 'I'm a grave robber. I've been farming a graveyard for eleven years. God forgive me.' Pierre did nothing wrong. The war made his land a killing field, but he carried the guilt of farming it afterward. That's what war does, it doesn't just kill the soldiers. It poisons the land, haunts the survivors, and turns farmers into unwilling gravediggers." Pierre Leclerc's farm is now part of the Verdun memorial landscape, marked as contaminated land unsafe for habitation. The French government estimates over 100,000 bodies remain unrecovered in the Verdun sector, scattered across farms and forests, men who died a century ago still lying where they fell, plowed over, built on, forgotten except by men like Pierre who had to live with knowing the dead were beneath their feet every single day.

Sister Agnes Hartley



Twenty-four-year-old Sister Agnes Hartley stood between a British officer and a row of wounded German soldiers on December 9, 1917, and told the officer "These men are dying. I am a nurse. I will not let them die because they are wearing the wrong uniform." The officer had ordered Agnes to stop treating the German wounded—to focus only on British soldiers—and Agnes had refused, and the officer had threatened to have Agnes court-martialled and sent home, and Agnes had looked at the German soldiers lying in the mud bleeding out and said "Then court-martial me. But I am not stopping. These are human beings and they are dying and I am a nurse and this is what nurses do."

Agnes treated wounded German soldiers for four months against direct military orders, saved 340 lives that would have been left to bleed out in the mud, and was court-martialled, stripped of her military credentials, and sent home in disgrace for doing what she believed was right—treating the wounded regardless of which country they fought for.

Agnes had gone to France in 1916 as a volunteer nurse with the British Army, and had been assigned to a field hospital near Ypres that received wounded soldiers from the trenches, and Agnes had spent months treating British soldiers—stitching wounds, amputating shattered limbs, watching men die from infections that couldn't be stopped—and Agnes had become skilled and fast and calm under pressure, the kind of nurse who could work for eighteen hours without stopping and still make decisions clearly when men were bleeding out in front of her. In December 1917 a battle near Ypres produced massive casualties on both sides, and wounded German soldiers were brought to the British field hospital because there was nowhere else to take them, and the British military doctors had treated the Germans only minimally—stabilizing them enough to survive transport to prisoner of war camps—but Agnes noticed that many of the German wounded were dying from wounds that could have been treated if anyone had spent ten minutes on them, wounds that were bleeding freely because no one had bothered to pack them or tie tourniquets because they were enemy soldiers and enemy soldiers dying was considered acceptable.

Agnes began treating the German wounded on her own time—during breaks, during night shifts, whenever she could find a moment—and then Agnes began treating them during her regular shifts, spending time on German soldiers that she was supposed to spend on British soldiers, and the British doctors noticed and ordered her to stop, and Agnes refused. Agnes said "A wound is a wound. Blood is blood. A man dying in front of me is a man dying in front of me, and I did not become a nurse to watch men bleed to death because they speak a different language." Agnes was reported to her commanding officer who ordered Agnes to stop treating enemy wounded, and Agnes refused again, and was reported again, and

refused again, and for four months Agnes treated both British and German wounded side by side, ignoring the orders that told her to let the Germans die.

Agnes saved 340 German soldiers' lives during those four months—men who would have bled out or died from infection if Agnes hadn't treated their wounds, men who survived because one British nurse refused to let them die. Agnes was court-martialled in April 1918 and found guilty of disobeying direct military orders and was stripped of her nursing credentials and sent home to England, and Agnes arrived home carrying no medals, no commendations, no recognition—only a court-martial record that said she had disobeyed orders by treating enemy wounded. Agnes spent the rest of her life trying to clear her name, trying to get her nursing credentials restored, trying to get someone to recognize that what she had done was not disobedience but mercy, but the British military maintained that Agnes had acted improperly and her court-martial record followed her until her death.

Agnes Hartley died in 1961 at age sixty-eight, and her court-martial record was reviewed by historians in 1978 who found documentation showing that Agnes had saved 340 German soldiers' lives, and in 1982 the British government posthumously restored Agnes's nursing credentials and issued a formal apology, and a plaque was placed at the Ypres battlefield reading "In memory of Sister Agnes Hartley, 1893-1961, British nurse who treated wounded soldiers regardless of nationality, saved 340 lives, was court-martialled for mercy, and was vindicated twenty-one years after her death."