



# The Spire Sentinel



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



**& Magazine  
Chesterfield  
Western  
Association**

***ISSUE 101 - July 2024***

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



## Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2024

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

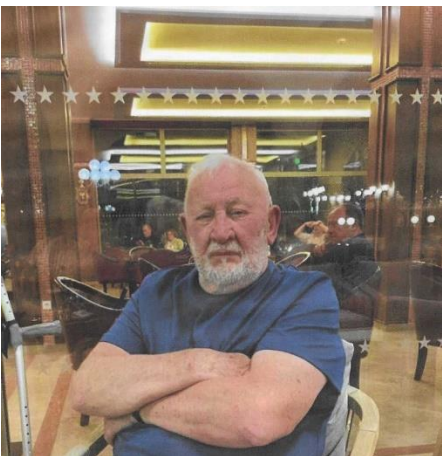
January	9th	. AGM + `Finding My Roots` Jon-Paul Harding. ..tracing his Great Grandfathers in The Great War
February	6th	<b><i>Nobody Of Any Importance: A Foot Soldier's Memoir Of World War 1</i></b> by Phil Sutcliffe - "How his dad, Sam Sutcliffe, survived his frontline WW1 - in his own Memoir's words".
March	5th	<b><i>Murphy's Law on the Somme</i></b> by Andy Rawson. The talk covers the details of the learning process during the campaign and how what could go wrong, did go wrong. We look at the problems encountered and the solutions which were used to try and solve them.
April	2nd	'From Gaza to Jerusalem: the southern Palestine campaigns of 1917" by Stuart Haddaway
May	7th	"Audregnies Flank Guard Action 1914 " by Phil Watson
June	4th	<b>1<sup>st</sup> Battalion the Wiltshire Regiment in WW1</b> by Edwin Astill
July	2nd	<b>Legend of the Pilgrimages - Wilfred Pointon, Sherwood Foresters</b> By Bill Bryan
August	6th	Roy Larkin - <b>The Invisible Corps</b> takes a brief look at the Army Service Corps during WW1 through the use of mechanical transport. A story of growth, evolution, inter-service rivalry and meddling civilians.
September	3rd	Kevin Jepson ' <b>Project Fast Dog</b> ' - from Mark IV to Whippet'
October	1st	Paul Burkitt - Barlborough and Clowne - Villages at War
November	5th	<b>Peter Hart</b> topic to be advised
December	3rd	Hedley Malloch <b><i>Left Behind</i></b> - the fate of British soldiers trapped behind German lines in Belgium and France after the Retreat of 1914

## *Issue 101 list of contents*

- 2 Branch Meetings Calendar
- 3 Contents Page & July Meeting details
- 4 Secretary`s Scribbles
- 5-8 June meeting
- 9 Orcadian visit
- 10.Stubby
- 11 - 20 The view from the Trenches by Paul Mulvey

### **July Meeting – Bill Bryan**

Our speaker for the July meeting is a well known figure at meetings Bill Bryan - always sitting in the front row with his friend Phil Gooddall



I asked Bill to come and give his talk after he presented an abbreviated version last year to my local Royal British Legion branch. Bill was aware that his maternal grandfather Wilfrid Pointon , Service number 21001, Sherwood Foresters, had been killed in the First world War, leaving 6 children when he lost his life, with a seventh being born 3 months After his death. Up until he was 20 Bill had been told by his mother and other aunts and uncles that his granddad had been killed at the Battle of the Somme. That summer, aged 20 Bill, along with a cycling friend, went to France on their bicycles to find his Granddad`s grave.



With the help of the then Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Gravres Commission and escorted by the head gardener of the four cemeteries around the village of Fampoux, Bill was directed to the grave. Bill asked the gardener if all 2000 buried in the cemetery were killed in the Somme battles - to which came the surprising reply - no - the burials there were killed, or died of wounds before, during, or after the Battle of Arras. This started Bill thinking...what was the Battle of arras all about...how was his grandad involved...and where and how did he lose his life.

This will be the story that Bill will tell us about on Tuesday and how he has been researching the First World War for over 66 years..

## Secretary`s Scribbles



Dear Members and Friends,

Welcome to issue no. 101 of our Branch Newsletter.

Well that`s us past the Summer solstice, I guess we will now see the nights getting progressively darker earlier.

Our next Branch meeting is on 4th June, the speaker is no stranger to the Branch - rarely misses a meeting - Bill Bryan - one of our oldest

members but someone who is passionate about The Great War and has spent years researching it - he still goes back to the Western Front year after year. Once again, because of the General election, we will be having our meeting in the Labour Club bar area

Once I get this newsletter / magazine off to all our recipients - there`s over 400 of you - I`ll be starting one of the busiest weekends of my year. Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> and Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> June is Armed Forces Weekend in Worksop - it`s being organised by Worksop Royal British Legion (I`m Branch Secretary) in partnership with Worksop Rugby Club at their Stubbing Lane facility. Stars of the weekend are sure to be The 16<sup>th</sup> Lancers - a display of horsemanship in true cavalry style - resplendent in Victorian style red uniforms. This is organised by Peter Bentham-Hill - one of of Chesterfield WFA Members. If you have some time on Saturday please come along...Peter`s cavalymen are doing two half hour performances - not to be missed. We have over sixty participants - bands, singers, archery, paint ball shooting, kiddies rides - something for everyone. Free admission and free parking.

Next month sees the return of popular speaker / presenter Roy Larkin who will be talking about `Ally Sloper`s Cavalry - the Army Service Corps - with particular reference to transport.

See you Tuesday.

Best wishes, Grant

Grant Cullen WFA Chesterfield Branch Secretary 07824628638

*Any opinions expressed in this Newsletter / Magazine are not necessarily those of the Western Front Association, Chesterfield Branch, in particular, or the Western Front Association in general.*

## June 2024 Meeting

Because of the recently announced date for the General Election this meeting was held in the Labour Club bar as our usual room was full of electioneering paraphernalia - posters, leaflets, noticeboards etc.

After the usual words of welcome from our Branch Secretary, Jon-Paul Harding, our speaker for the evening - branch regular - indeed one of our founder members, Edwin Astill took the floor.



Edwin really needed no introduction to the regulars at Chesterfield Branch as he rarely misses a meeting - and is always one of the first to raise his hand when it comes to the post presentation Q & A session with our speakers. Edwin comes from a military family, who settled in Wiltshire after his father became 'time expired'. Attended St Luke's College, Exeter, and subsequently received a degree from Exeter University. Edwin became Interested in the Great War through his grandfather who was an 'Old Contemptible'. First published an analysis of the War Diary of the 1st Wiltshire Regiment, published by the Regimental Museum. Edited the diaries of Brig. Gen Alexander Johnston (Pen & Sword 2007) and Lt. Col. Allen Whitty ("A Quartermaster at the Front" Reveille 2011). Edwin has been a member of the Chesterfield branch of the WFA since its inception.

The 1st Wiltshire Regiment went over to France as part of 3rd Division, and spent the whole of the war on the Western Front. They were in reserve at Mons and took part in Gen. Smith-Dorrien's holding battle of Le Cateau. After the advance to the river Aisne the battalion took part in trench warfare in Flanders. In 1915 they moved to the 25th Division, taking part in the Somme battle and achieving success in taking the Leipzig salient. 1917 saw the division as part of the Anzac Corps at the battle of Messines. 1918 proved to be particularly difficult for the battalion. They had to face the German March offensive, where they were reduced in numbers to 2 officers and 54 men. The ranks were quickly filled with fresh young men from England and they were sent to the Lys sector - only to face a fresh onslaught from the enemy. Coming out of that battle the battalion was sent to the 'quiet' Aisne region as part of a British corps under the French General Duchêne. Contrary to orders from Petain and advice from the British, he packed his troops into the forward position, thereby succumbing to the 3rd German assault. The 25th Division cadre returned to England to reform, but the 1st Wiltshire stayed on as part of the 21st Division and took part in the final advance.



Edwin's talk was based upon the battalion's War Diary, and a book he produced some years ago for their Regimental Museum in Salisbury. The battalion had some remarkable men in its ranks.



One such man was Sholto Stewart Ogilvie, a barrister by profession. He had joined the ranks but quickly received a commission. As senior officers became casualties he found himself acting as C.O. on several occasions before assuming that role permanently. He also acted for the brigade commander in his absence. He was wounded several times, earned the D.S.O. and bar and was eventually surrounded and captured during the battle of the Lys. The war diary demonstrates the strong and effective leadership he gave during very difficult times.



The battalion's medical officer, Hugh Llewellyn Glyn Hughes, was another notable personality. Joining the 1st Wilts from medical school, he likewise was awarded the DSO and was wounded. After the war he settled as a general practitioner in Devon but rejoined the army for WW2. In 1945, as a Brigadier with the R.A.M.C. he was the first doctor to arrive at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Here he was faced with number of problems-tending the sick, feeding the living and disposing of the dead. This he had to do this using the former camp guards who were quickly shown that their attitude to the inmates needed to

change. In later life Hughes was the subject of a 'This is Your Life' episode.



The officers and men of the battalion earned many decorations, including one Victoria Cross, awarded to South African born Captain Reginald Hayward. He won this in March 1918 for his leadership during the German offensive when, although badly wounded, he moved in the open from trench to trench encouraging the men's resistance.

The war diary as published by the Regimental Museum yielded some interesting aspects of the battalion's life during the war. Their Roll of Honour listed the home towns of the men killed. It shows that the battalion had a majority of men from the county with a strong element from adjoining counties. It was only in 1918 that this ceased to be the case, by which time only 1 in 5 were Wiltshire residents.



The War Diary gives details of the sporting activities at the time. Football predominated for the men, although sometimes the officers played rugby, several Wiltshire officers had played at a high level. It has been suggested that by encouraging so many men to play football led to the greatly increased popularity of the sport in the years following the war. Given the rural nature of the county one 'sport' mentioned was a ploughing competition!





Yvonne Ridgeway and James Kay recently had a holiday on Orkney...here`s Yvonne`s short report.....

*There`s a lot of WW1 (and WW2) interest on Orkney. We were able to visit the Kitchener Memorial on the 108th anniversary of the sinking of the HMS Hampshire. The Orkney Heritage Society arranged a small gathering (I have attached a couple of photos). We visited the Scapa Flow Museum on Hoy, which is remarkable, plus the naval cemetery nearby where sailors from the Hampshire, Opal, Narbrough and Vanguard are buried, alongside others including the German casualties from the scuttling of the German fleet in June 1919. Various museums had material and information about the shipwrecks and the scuttling. We had a tour of Ness Battery, which was active in WW1 and WW2. The mess hut there has an interior completely covered in murals of the English countryside, painted by one of the soldiers stationed there in WW2. There`s a series of excellent leaflets all about the wartime history of Orkney, which are free and very informative.*



# Stubby



In July 1917, Sergeant Stubby was found wandering around Yale University where members of the 102nd Infantry were training. He developed a close relationship with Corporal James Robert Conroy and when it came time to ship off to France, Conroy smuggled Stubby on by sneaking him in his overcoat. While far out at sea, Stubby was brought out and won the hearts of the 26th Yankee Division. He kept morale positive and was allowed to stay at

camp, even though animals were forbidden. Stubby was taught how to military salute, as seen at his memorial.

Stubby soon became the official mascot for the 102nd and joined the front lines. During his first year, Stubby's first injury occurred from mustard gas exposure, recovering in a field hospital. After this exposure, Stubby could detect the smallest amounts of poisonous gas. He returned with a specially designed gas mask to protect him and would locate wounded soldiers in no man's land.

One early morning, the Division was attacked with mustard gas and Stubby ran through the trenches barking and biting the soldiers, signaling to sound the gas alarms, saving many soldiers from injury.

In April 1918, Stubby was wounded in the foreleg from the shrapnel of an exploded grenade. He was rushed to a field hospital where he would visit wounded soldiers while he recovered.

Later in the war, Stubby's talent for finding injured soldiers improved! He would listen for shouts for help, locate the injured, and bark until paramedics arrived or would lead them back to the trenches. Stubby even discovered a German spy near Allied trenches and bit him on the leg, keeping him down until US soldiers arrived. After this heroic feat, Stubby was nominated to the rank of sergeant.

Stubby served in 17 battles in World War I. He met presidents, was awarded many medals for heroism, and was adopted by James Conroy to live a happy retired life. He was the most decorated dog of the Great War and the only one to be promoted to sergeant.

## **The view from the Trenches by Paul Mulvey**

For over four years from the autumn of 1914 millions of men fought and died along a front hundreds of miles long which rarely moved backwards or forwards by more than a few hundred yards at a time. All wars are dangerous and unpleasant for those directly involved, but this one was bigger, longer and more concentrated than any other ever fought in Western Europe. The images of the Western Front haunt us still, a picture of carnage in a grey hell of barren mud. Films and photographs, however, tell only a part of the story - this war looked ugly, but it also sounded and smelt ugly. What was it like, therefore, for those who fought in it - what did they expect, what did they find, and why did they (usually) carry on?

Before trying to answer these questions, we mustn't forget - as we discuss the conditions of trench life - how wide ranging the experiences of different soldiers actually were, and how diverse men's reactions to the same event could be - depending on factors like personality, background and education. Physical conditions for the soldiers also varied somewhat between the different armies on the Western Front, although the particular and horrific nature of the war was shared by all of them.

The majority of sources I have used refer to the experiences of British units, but the burdens on the men that they reveal were common to all participants.

### **Why Men Volunteered**

For most French and German soldiers in 1914, and for most British troops after 1916, going to war was the unsought and inevitable consequence of conscription. For many on all sides, however, particularly early in the war, service was voluntary, and men who were not forced to flocked to the colours. Why?

Eric Leed concluded that the arrival of war in August 1914 brought an unforgettable sense of community to people - that War induced patriotism brought societies closer together, weakening the strong class differences of the time, at least for a while.

This feeling of social solidarity was most intense in Germany, where social stratification was particularly marked. For the more romantically inclined and typically better educated members of society, the war promised an escape from the stresses and constraints of modern, urban society. Warfare seemed to offer the opportunity for individual action and glory. The common idea of war was one of movement and heroism, perhaps best summed up in the image of beautifully uniformed cavalry charging across open countryside, an image held by most senior officers as well as potential recruits. Few thought through the implication of modern technology for the reality of war.

Men, particularly young men, looked forward to a bit of excitement, to relief from the boredom and restrictions of day to day life, and for a chance to impress the girls with a smart uniform. As Edward Spiers found in the diaries of Scottish recruits, they did not expect the war to last long, they were patriotic, they wanted to see the action and it would be shameful not to go.

And for the poorer members of the community, an Army wage was better than unemployment or badly paid work at home.

More mundanely, as Alexander Watson has pointed out in his excellent *Enduring the Great War* (CUP 2008), it seems that Germans rather stereotypically turned up to

fight because they were used to obeying orders, whilst Britons were motivated by patriotism and moral indignation at the German treatment of Belgium. In practise, motives for fighting probably didn't vary so much between nations as they did between individuals. And almost all soldiers for almost all of the time seem firmly to have believed that they were fighting in their country's national defence.

### **The Reality of War: Marching off to War**

For the conscripts and volunteers alike, the road to war literally reinforced an essentially backward looking view of war, while serving as a foretaste of the gruelling drudgery ahead, for this was the last war, certainly in Western Europe, where men marched great distances. They marched as the men of Napoleon, Wellington or Frederick the Great had marched - with heavy packs (60lb or 27kg in the British case), for hours on end - again, in the British case, for 50 minutes every hour for four or five hours a day, during which time they would cover 12 to 15 miles. German troops covered similar distances per day, and in August 1914, as part of the Schlieffen Plan, many of them had to march continuously for two-and-a-half weeks, covering the 250 miles from the German border to the Marne. And it is all this marching that we have to thank for the wonderful legacy of popular songs that the First World War, unlike later wars, has left us. But for the men at the time, in ill-fitting boots and hot weather, it was a foretaste of the discomforts to come.

### **The Reality of War: Trench Landscape**

Apart from the first weeks of the war, the reality of the Western Front proved to be very different from what most men had expected. This was not to be a war of movement and glamour, but of stasis and killing at a distance, as a result of the industrial technology of long range rifles, machine guns, barbed wire, gas, and shelling. The massive amounts of munitions required for an offensive meant that new defensive positions could be dug before an attacker could bring up sufficient guns and supplies to press home an advantage. This created an environment not seen on such a scale before, a barren 'lunar' landscape which had a depressing and disorienting effect on the men fighting in it, especially when first experienced. Leed quotes from a junior officer's memoirs: When moving about in the trenches you turn a corner every few yards, which makes it seem like walking in a maze. It is impossible to keep your sense of direction and infinitely tiring to proceed at all. ...an old battlefield, like that of the Somme, became a labyrinth of trenches without any plan.

The ensuing sense of confusion as to place, and even time, was heightened because the

soldiers rarely saw maps and, in at least the British case, were forbidden from keeping diaries.

### **The Reality of War: Trench construction**

The actual trenches themselves varied enormously in standards of construction and relative comfort - the Germans tended to make the best trenches, the French the



worst. Denis Winter has described the 'ideal' British trench design - The front-line consisted of three parallel lines of trenches - a fire trench, the travel trench 20 yds back, and the support line, close enough to bring up reinforcements in case of a raid. All trenches were built in dog-tooth shape with bays 5 paces wide separated by hiccups in the line to minimise blast damage and prevent enfilade fire should an enemy get into the trench. They were about 4 feet deep with a built up wall of sandbags at the front as a parapet to allow men to stand upright - 18 ins thick if earth, 38 ins for oak, or 7 ft of turf. The bottom of the trench had a drainage channel covered in duck boards, leading to sumps. There was a fire-step at the front. Hopefully, wire or wooded revetting stopped the sides caving in. 15 ft shafts led to caves about 5 paces square and 6 ft high. These havens were for officers mostly. They were not that safe - if the roof was an iron sheet and a foot of earth, it was just shrapnel proof - only 8 ft of earth would stop a 6 in shell. It took 450 men 6 hrs to dig 250 yds of trench system. Once built, sappers constantly maintained it. Fortunately, however, and contrary to the popular view of the war, most men did not spend much time in the trenches - only 10% of a division's men would be in them at any one time. A typical month was perhaps 4 days in the frontline, 4 in support, 8 in reserve and the remainder in rest, i.e. at barracks some miles from the front line.

## **The Reality of War: Death and Injury**

Despite the relatively short time that men spent in the front line, they were still exposed to the risk of death or injury for far longer periods than in most wars. Though, as Watson points out, 'contrary to popular perceptions, trench warfare did not increase casualty rates but actually limited fatalities... open combat was usually far bloodier than static fighting', with casualties per unit of time about twice as high.

Nonetheless, the trenches were very dangerous, for as well as the obvious dangers during an attack, the closeness of the front lines meant constant exposure to sniping, shelling, gas attacks or trench raids. Casualty rates, though varying considerably at different periods and at different parts of the front were, overall, very high: Audoin-Rouzeau quotes death rates for those who served in the main armies on the Western Front as 16.5% for the French, 15.4% for the Germans and 12.5% for the British. He estimates that up to 40% of French soldiers who served were wounded at least once. Perhaps surprisingly, high casualty rates did not correlate consistently with collapses of morale, though there were times when they contributed considerably to unrest or demoralisation amongst the troops, most notably in the French 'mutinies' of 1917 following the bloody Nivelle offensive, when a significant proportion of the French army refused to renew the attacks, and over 23,000 men were subsequently found guilty of mutinous behaviour.

While most acute during battle, the dangers of trench life were always present. For not only could a man be killed 'going over the top' or in a bombardment, but also in quieter periods, on a trench raid or, more passively, by a sniper or random shell. It was this day-to-day haemorrhaging that the men found hardest to take.

Death and injury came in a number of ways - via machine guns, rifles, grenades, gas, mines, mortars, flame-throwers and shells - though most commonly via bullets

(about 40% of casualties) or shells (50+%). Bullets couldn't be heard until they had gone past. There was often little bleeding from the wound they caused, just a bluish aperture as the bullet cauterised as it went. Ricochets and short-range bullets did much more obvious damage. The wounds of such bullets [15 square inch gapes] could break the nerve of onlookers. While men with ½ their heads shot off might take an hour or two to die - and be conscious all the time.

## **The Reality of War:**

### **Gas**

It wasn't bullets, however, but gas and shells that scared men most. The Germans led in gas development. Their first gas, Chlorine, was relatively inefficient - it was easily smelt and seen, and it sank to the bottom of the trench as a green fog. It caused coughing and, in large doses, asphyxiation. Phosgene was 18 times stronger, invisible and killed in the same way, except that it didn't kick in for several hours. The inventor of the gas went to a late night party before succumbing to the effects of his first sniff. Mustard gas (a form of ethylene) was designed to disable rather than kill. It looked like dark sherry and smelt like onions or garlic. It attacked the skin and eyes, causing temporary blindness, severe blistering, headaches, fever and pneumonia. Severe exposure destroyed lungs, genitals and skin. Despite the horrible effects of gas, however, effective counter-measures - essentially masks and warning systems - were soon introduced, and from 1916, when proper records started, 93% of gas casualties recovered sufficiently to return to active service, though many of them were never the same men again.

## **The Reality of War: Shelling**

### **Passchendaele - before and after**

While defence mechanisms were soon developed against gas, no new methods were developed to alleviate the terrors of being shelled. Unlike a bullet, which its victim never heard, the noise of shelling was deafening, the vibration unnerving, while deep seated fears of dismemberment and being buried alive ran through men's minds whilst under bombardment. There was nothing they could do except lie where they were and wait for it to end. The shelling could continue for days - the Battle of the Somme in 1916 started with a week's bombardment of the German positions. It was shelling above all other things that could trigger psychological collapse. The skilled ear could tell the type of gun, path of shell and likely landing spot - as Denis Winter remarked, 'the strain of listening for all these sounds did something to the brain. A man could never be rid of them.' It was not without good reason that the assortment of psychological ailments induced by combat was known as shell shock. Shells injured and killed in a number of ways - a man might entirely disappear - vaporised.

He might be blown to pieces. Or he might appear entirely uninjured, except that the shock-wave had ruptured his kidneys and spleen, so killing him. And if only wounded by fragments of the shell, the wound, in those pre-antibiotic days, would almost inevitably go septic because of the dirt blown into it along with the flying metal. There was no defence against shelling except to call in your own

artillery to retaliate, and that was literally a 'hit or miss' affair, as such a response could be as likely to prompt further enemy shelling as it was to destroy the source of the problem.

## **The Reality of War: Corpses and Vermin**

As if being shot and shelled were not bad enough, the front line trenches themselves offered a constant reminder of death. The men were living in a charnel house of decomposing flesh, rats and flies, and many veterans went to their graves haunted by the images of corpses. The newly dead, or those in life-like positions, had the worst effect, and tended to undermine morale, no matter how tough or experienced the observer. The unburied dead, of course, encouraged vermin, as did the inability of the front line men to keep themselves clean - there were no baths or showers in the trenches - with lice and fleas to add to the discomforts of rats and flies. Under such circumstances, parasitic illnesses were common, such as trench fever - spread by lice excreta - and scabies - caused by mites. Chest and stomach infections were also frequent, as was the incidence of venereal disease, caught by the men whilst 'resting' at base camps. In previous wars, of course, disease had usually been a bigger killer than the enemy, although this was not the case on the Western Front. This, however, was a mixed blessing, for though the wonders of modern medicine, hygiene and nutrition managed to allow a high recovery rate from illness and injury (that is, when men could be swiftly got to an aid station), that very success also ensured that enough fit men were always available to allow the fighting to continue for over four years. As well as death, injury, disease, and parasites, men had to deal with the discomforts of living more or less out in the open. They found extremes of temperature and rain, and the glutinous mud it caused, amongst the worse crosses to bear. All of this was aggravated by tiredness. Soldiers typically spent three or four days out of every twelve in the front line. Heavy trench digging was done at night under cover of darkness, sentry duty had to be done and relaxed sleep was hard to come by in the poor conditions. Long periods of tiredness were very demoralising and sleep deprivation led to much reduced powers of concentration and perhaps even mild paranoia. So much so, that Watson cites exhaustion, with its accompaniments apathy and indifference, as one of the main reasons for the German army's collapse in 1918. Even if men survived the physical hazards of the experience, the psychological effects were all too apt to catch up with them before long. Several of the British war memoirists commented on this - Siegfried Sassoon (yes, he was British) observed that the effect of war could be traced in weeks and months, though differences of age and rank affected the precise timing. Robert Graves pinned it down more precisely. He thought three weeks sufficient to learn the ropes in the trenches, with peak efficiency reached in three months. Thereafter there would be rapid decline. Another war memoirist, Richard Aldington, concluded that after six months most front-line troops, 'were off their heads, and horribly afraid of seeming afraid.' Under such circumstances it was hardly surprising that 9% of all recorded casualties were for psychological complaints and that after the war, 65,000 British ex-servicemen were given disability pensions for neurasthenia - the catch-all phrase for severe mental problems caused by the war. Interestingly, the new volunteers in the British

Army seem to have suffered less from mental illness than the older professional soldiers. Perhaps age was a factor, or that the new men were better trained for trench warfare than the older ones were. It was also the case that the volunteers were on average more intelligent and better educated than pre-war squaddies - both factors which seem to raise an individual's ability to cope with extreme stress.

## **The Invisible Enemy and the fog of war**

The essentially defensive nature of trench warfare was in itself stressful. The British generals at the time certainly thought that their men would become demoralised unless they regularly attacked the enemy. Men geared themselves up to attack, they envisaged war as an essentially aggressive endeavour and when for long periods this turned out not to be the case their whole view of themselves could begin to be undermined. Despite the imminent increase in the risk of death or injury, troop morale rose ahead of an offensive, as men saw themselves as active and purposeful rather than passive and bored. During the attacks themselves, though, soldiers were often confused about what they were doing, or why. The primitive communications technology of the time meant that even the generals had very little idea of what was happening in a battle and the troops themselves were in the deepest part of Clausewitz's fog. The recollections of Somme survivors collected by Martin Middlebrook describe the battle scene as one of almost indecipherable chaos - too much noise to shout, too many bullets to stand up and signal, and too many shells for telephone cables to survive.

## **Officers and Men**

The sense of powerlessness in the face of circumstances could be made worse by the way the armies were run. The armies of the time, like the societies they existed in, were highly class bound. Upper class senior officers did not feel obliged to explain what was happening to their juniors or to the men. The remoteness of staff officers bred contempt for them in the men who were expected to do the dying. At a more immediate level the difference in background between officers and men often led to mutual incomprehension, due to wide differences in educational levels and the strong regional accents and dialects that still existed in pre-radio and TV world. These differences between officers and men were greater in some armies than others. The Germans, for example, were generally more class bound than the British. Nonetheless, whatever their faults in modern eyes, junior officers - alongside NCOs - were the backbone of a successful army. The men were literally lost without them. They simultaneously acted as managers, teachers, coaches and father figures, and if they didn't seem to care, or to know what they were talking about, they would wreck the morale and effectiveness of a unit.

## **Insignificance**

The brutal randomness of death, the industrial wasteland of the front line and the lack of control over or even knowledge of their own circumstances often gave men a



feeling of acute helplessness in the face of a huge, remorseless machine - particularly as the war dragged on and seemed increasingly no nearer an end. A man was individually wholly insignificant in the face of the "monstrous glacier" of the war. The realisation of how unimportant an individual's ideas, emotions or actions were came as a shock to those who had gone to war with idealistic visions of self-sacrifice and the road to a better, more united society. Instead, it turned out that going to war was like having a really tough, boring industrial job - except with people trying to kill you all the time. So - for the more sensitive types (like war poets and memoirists at least) - disillusionment set in as they realised that the mass of men did not share their high ideals and that in the meat-grinder of the front it did not matter very much anyway. The sense of powerlessness and isolation often continued when men went home on their rare but keenly anticipated bits of leave (an average of about two to three weeks a year, but very unevenly distributed): '...those who returned from the front were often bewildered about where they fitted in the society of their origins, or were convinced they no longer had a social place to which they might return.' [Leed] These feelings were aggravated by the naïve jingoism of civilians and their ignorance of the real conditions at the front. And, in the British case at least, by finding that munitions workers, often female ones, were earning up to ten times what they were.

### **Why Men Fought: Faith in Cause, Survival and Victory**

Disappointed with the reality of war, with a serious risk of being killed or maimed, forced to do hard physical labour in atrocious conditions, and very often patronised or ignored by those in charge of them, the wonder is that the Great War soldiers on the Western Front actually carried on fighting at all - but overwhelmingly they did. Of the millions of men who served in the British Army during the war, for example, only 346 were executed for desertion, cowardice, mutiny or, indeed, anything else. The French, despite the 'mutinies' of 1917 - when the men didn't actually refuse to fight - but only to undertake another futile offensive - shot even fewer, and the Germans shot only 48. Execution rates are only a crude proxy for military discipline, of course - the German Army, for example, was rapidly 'melting away' by the autumn of 1918 - it is nonetheless true, however, that the armies of the Western Front showed remarkable staying power through almost the whole of their four and a quarter year ordeal - in marked contrast to the Russian and Austro-Hungarian armies in the east, which both suffered mass desertions. So what kept men going? One factor was their own underestimate of the risks involved - most men, when asked, thought that they had a better than average chance of escaping death or serious injury. Whilst this undoubtedly betrays a level of statistical ignorance (one also shared by modern car drivers apparently), it was true that most men were not actually fated to be killed or seriously wounded. They also generally believed for most of the time that the war would not last much longer - perhaps another year. Oddly enough they only started to lose this belief in late 1917, when it did only have another year to go. More importantly, the soldiers mostly believed strongly in the cause they were fighting for.

Germans were told - and believed - that they were fighting to defend the Reich from its encircling enemies. French troops were obviously fighting a war to eject an enemy from France; whilst the British saw themselves as defenders of small nations in the struggle against Prussian militarism. Patriotism was strong in Western Europe, where the concept of the nation state was well developed, and when combined with a firm confidence in ultimate victory - which both sides maintained until late in the war - it made for very resilient armies. Even in the face of defeat or bloody failure - as with the French and British offensives of 1917, or the British defeats in the Spring of 1918 - while there were increased incidents of indiscipline - such as the French 'mutinies' or the British Etaples riots - there was no serious collapse in military discipline leading to desertions or increased surrender rates, as happened to the German Army in the summer and autumn of 1918. The crucial difference was that whereas the British and French never seriously doubted that they would at least not lose the war, from the summer of 1918 any German soldier with eyes in his head knew that Germany was now outnumbered and outgunned and that victory was impossible. Consequently, the German army started to collapse. As Watson sums it up, An analysis of morale in both the British and German armies is really a history of the peaks and troughs in their men's confidence to win the war and return home unscathed.<sup>xii</sup> As well as faith in cause, victory and personal survival, formal religion may have played a part for some men, although the evidence suggests that it had little overall influence on men's willingness to fight other than at a vague or superstitious level, as with the British troops who took comfort from the alleged sighting of an angel that came to the assistance of their comrades at Mons in 1914.

### **Why Men Fought: Hatred and Revenge**

The later mythology of the war sometimes has it that the ordinary soldiers of each side saw themselves as the equally innocent victims of the imprisoning circumstances. This, however, does not seem to have been the case at the time. For while there were undoubtedly many 'unofficial' agreements that limited hostility at the front, these were not done for humane reasons, but as matters of practical survival - 'don't shoot unless fired at first' was a common rule. There was even, on occasion, out and out fraternisation.<sup>xiii</sup> There were Xmas truces and 'live and let live' agreements, but they weren't common, and whatever they said later, the Allied soldiers at the time showed an unremitting hostility to the Germans, although they also respected their fighting capabilities. This intense sense of enmity was in part the natural consequence of going to war in the first place, of the idea that our side is right and yours is wrong. And this sense of the 'other' as enemy was reinforced in the First World War because the 'other' was so rarely seen. Death almost always came at long range - and there were few opportunities to see that the enemy were men like you rather than the vindictive agents of death and destruction.

In a war with so many casualties, revenge too played a part, as close comrades were killed or maimed. But beyond 'personal' revenge for friends lost, units could be motivated by more general feelings of vengeance. Canadian troops, for instance, were incensed by the probably apocryphal story that a Canadian officer was crucified by German troops on a barn door. While even more personally remote,

Edward Spiers reported that Scottish troops wanted revenge against the Germans for atrocities in general, for torpedoing civilian shipping and for using weapons such as poison gas and flame-throwers. And the wish for revenge did not always end with the battle, as one Scottish officer, Major John Stewart, wrote to his wife: 'The Black Watch [a Scottish regiment] took very few prisoners'. Though taking revenge on prisoners, whilst personally satisfying to the men involved, was counterproductive to their own aims to win and survive, for by making the act of surrender a dangerous lottery, they deterred it and possibly prolonged the war (the Eastern Front in WW2 gives an even starker example). Allied propaganda emphasised (not always correctly) that German prisoners would be well treated, but it was not until very late in the war, when death or serious injury in a lost cause seemed ever more likely, that they started to surrender to the Allies en masse, with 385,000 surrendering between 18th July and 11th November. Similarly, desertion was rare on all sides throughout most of the war - around 0.5% of soldiers went AWOL for one reason or another - until the last few months, when absconding from the German army, particularly from troop trains behind the lines, became endemic.

### **Why Men Fought: Excitement**

Denis Winter, in his book *Death's Men*, writing about the experience of going into battle, noted that the impression he formed from old soldiers' memoirs was that, 'after the initial moment when men advanced head down, wincing and blinking in dread of a bullet and in a spirit of dogged hopelessness, they were often affected by two moods successively' - first, complete abstraction, and then euphoria because they hadn't been hit. After which they began to positively enjoy the battle. Winter interpreted this reaction as a sort of naturally induced anaesthetic - the brain's way of making an unbearable situation bearable. Although we should not ignore the fact that many men simply liked fighting - either in itself, or as a relief from the uncomfortable monotony of trench life. And that whatever aggressive instincts the men had were fuelled by the alcohol they were given before going into battle - in the British case, 1/8 pint (about 7cl) of over-proof rum - or roughly the equivalent of two English pub doubles.

### **Why Men Fought: 'Frontsoldier'**

For a few, the very technological nature of the war, which for many was a depersonalising and alienating experience, provided the opportunity to create a pride and identity in mastering the skills needed to succeed in this most deadly of industrial environments - in becoming the elite of a new industrial class. For the German storm trooper and novelist, Ernst Junger, whose books chronicled the deeds of such men, the trenches had produced a new Gestalt, a 'technological man' who was as 'hard, callous, and unfeeling as the machinery of the war itself.'

## Why Men Fought: Comrades

Few men, however, thought of themselves as professional killers in the way that Junger did. At a day to day level they fought with and for their immediate mates, and had a strong sense of team loyalty with their platoon, battalion or regiment (i.e. units varying in size from a dozen or so men to a few thousand). As Watson puts it, 'Battalions (full strength 1000)... were the visible communities and tactical units in which soldiers on both sides lived, fought and died.' Regiments, which consisted of two or three battalions, were idealised units of ceremonial and tradition, and regimental loyalty became almost a religion - especially for the British. Indeed, it was when regiments were broken up and men reassigned that morale tended to plummet and indiscipline rise. It was at this level that men could have a sense of belonging - a sense that they mattered, and that they were cared for. That they did not fight alone. In fact, fighting with their mates, ...actually strengthened men's will, if not their ability, to endure. The experience of combat could cause men to hate the enemy, seek vengeance or strengthen endurance through the belief that the sacrifice of one's friend had to be justified before fighting could stop. The unwilling were dragged along in the wake of the majority prepared to see the war through to its end. Discipline and personal pride hindered their retreat rearwards. The hatred, distrust or indifference of the enemy made surrender highly dangerous. Supported by living comrades, owing a debt to the dead and lacking any reasonable chance of escape, men continued to fight until death or exhaustion laid them low. Or, we might add, until it became obvious that victory was no longer possible and that carrying on merely risked death in a lost cause.

The First World War on the Western Front has lived on at least in the memories of the British and French as being a particularly ghastly experience. It was Europe's first large scale, industrial war. The men going into it in 1914, and their leaders, did not foresee the nature of such a war. Reality could not have been more different from their preconceptions as the war bogged down in a bloody stalemate which involved death, boredom and hard physical work. The conditions of the front were uniquely bad in the history of western European warfare. Technology had evolved far enough to ensure that millions of men could be killed over an unprecedentedly long period in a poisonous, destroyed landscape but it had not yet developed to the point where it could provide a means of breaking through into a war of movement, or of giving men much protection against the 'storm of steel' that raged around them. Men lived a troglodyte existence unlike any seen before or since. Filth, vermin, exhaustion, long periods of exposure to the risk of death or injury put men under a degree of stress not typical of many other wars. And yet, believing in the justice of their cause and confident of ultimate victory, most men seem to have got through the days by relying on the loyalty and companionship of their mates - and most survived, not unscathed, but at least with their sanity and humanity intact.