



The Great War

by **David Greenwood**

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The centenary years of the First World War prompted renewed interest in that conflict. As the major engagements were commemorated one by one over four years, there developed a deeper understanding of the War and its pervasive impact on British society both at the time and in subsequent generations. We came to realise that we continue to live with its effects. No community, and scarcely any family, came unscathed through the Great War, as it was called at the time.

As with many other communities, this interest led our congregation to carry out detailed research with the aim of finding out as much as possible about each man named on our War Memorial. The result of this research may be examined in a bound set of PowerPoint sheets kept by the Memorial at the east end of St. George's Chapel in the south aisle.

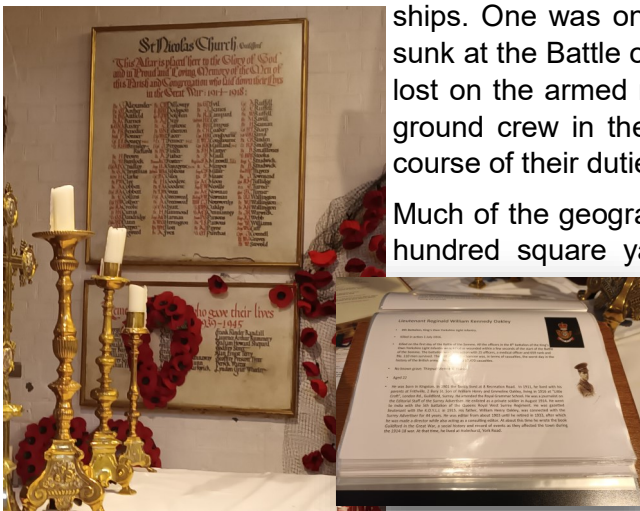
A particularly positive result was a recognition that each man who died was an individual and not a statistic. The diversity of age, experience, walk of life and cause and location of death of 120 men was extraordinary and argued against the rather lazy and patronising view of them as so much hapless cannon fodder. The closer one got, the more one realised that each of them had a story to tell: concentration on the horror and scale of the slaughter, while understandable, simply got in the way of seeing these men clearly. They were each of them ordinary men caught up in something extraordinary. The War was a catastrophe, their fate was tragic, to be sure, but they were deserving of our respect, people who did their duty because, for the most part, they thought it was the right thing to do. In this, they were not delusional, they were not jingoistic, they were not duped. They were just like us, doing their best, how we might hope to behave in similar circumstances.

When we consider the Great War, our minds tend to focus on France and Flanders, Passchendaele and the Somme, and it is certainly true that many were lost in that theatre. Four men remembered on our board were killed on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, four of 57,470 casualties, the worst single day in the history of the British Army. From the early days of 1914 to the final weeks of 1918, the death toll on the Western Front was constant with periodic bouts of extreme slaughter as each side tried to break the stalemate.

We should remember, though, that this was a world war, fought in many places. The Balkans and the Middle East were major theatres. One of the many unforgettable experiences of our church's pilgrimage to the Holy Land a few years ago was our visit to the War Cemetery in Jerusalem. This cemetery, as with nearly all of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's sites, is beautifully maintained, and we were able to pray at and lay poppies on the graves of three of our fellow parishioners who are memorialised in our church. Others, however, were interred in cemeteries in Basra, Baghdad and Gaza: their fate is more problematic.

The Army was not the only armed service involved. Several Royal Navy personnel went down with their ships. One was on board the armoured cruiser, *Black Prince*, when it was sunk at the Battle of Jutland with the loss of 857 officers and men. Two were lost on the armed merchant cruiser, *Viknor*, torpedoed off Ireland. And four ground crew in the Royal Flying Corps, the infant RAF, were killed in the course of their duties.

Much of the geographical impact of families' loss was concentrated in a few hundred square yards. Households in Walnut Tree Close, Denzil Road, Guildford Park Road and Ludlow Road were particularly badly hit. The psychological impact on that small area can only be guessed at. Families could be affected disproportionately, victims of a macabre throw of the dice. Four households lost two members. And how can one begin to imagine the grief of the Ruffell family of





*From the Memorial Museum Passchendaele 1917
Museum in Zonnebeke, Belgium*

Walnut Tree Close or the Wallingtons of Guildford Park Road, both of whom lost three sons in the War ?

Men met their deaths in different ways and their service records are precise. Relatively few were recorded as actually “killed in action” - a somehow reassuring end, involving a bullet or explosion and being found on the battlefield and recovered for burial. More troubling were those who “died of wounds”, a euphemism in many cases for gangrene in the days before effective antiseptic treatment. For the families, the worst were those who were recorded as “missing in action”, those who simply disappeared, blown to bits or drowned in the mud, whose remains are still to this day being unearthed by farmers in the fields of Picardy and West Flanders. No closure for their loved ones: just names on memorials like that at Thiepval or Tyne Cot. Or they simply succumbed to disease or freakish accidents. There were many ways to die: the War wasn't choosy.

Perhaps the most striking thing, the insight that most emphasises their individuality, was the diversity of occupations, ranks and classes.

There were career soldiers, such as Brigadier-General Francis Aylmer Maxwell, veteran of the Boer War and holder of the Victoria Cross, or Captain Eric Dolphin, a member of Britain's small but highly professional expeditionary force that was destroyed in the early months of the War.

There were journalists, like Roland Brinsley-Richards of *The Times* or Reginald Oakley, son of the longtime editor of the *Surrey Advertiser*. Many had connections with the railway, a major employer in Guildford. There were skilled artisans - a basketmaker, a bookbinder, a musician, a furniture polisher, a telegraphist and a taxidermist. There were professional men - a solicitor, an architect, a police officer, a farmer, a land agent.

The majority were, of course, the so-called ordinary men - labourers, errand boys, shop assistants, domestic servants - but there was a kind of equality on the battlefield. The classic distinction between officers and men fell away in death. That wonderful organisation, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, was established to ensure that all war dead were treated equally in their graves, regardless of rank, religion, or race. The simple headstones to be seen in cemeteries around the world and in British churchyards bear testimony to that.

They all had some kind of connection with St. Nicolas', although in some cases that is difficult to discern. Many, however, were baptised or married here and, in the case of the relatively few who died in the UK, their funerals were held in our church. Their families were left to mourn and many did so as long-standing members of St. Nicolas', some well into the years following the Second World War. Their story, the tale of those left behind, is yet to be told.

The First World War was a catastrophe, a disaster of immeasurable proportions, one that was repeated even more destructively in a subsequent generation. But our understandable tendency to dismiss it in our thoughts as a uniformly horrific time with no redeeming features is tempered when we look at the individuals caught up in it.



The word “futile” is sometimes used in connection with the First World War and, in many ways, particularly the mess the statesmen made of its aftermath, that might be a good description. But those in Belgium and Northern France, grateful to be liberated in 1918 from four years of German occupation, did not think it was futile. Nor should we. The men on our War Memorial deserve better from us than pity; they deserve our respect.

Let us join together in offering to God our grateful thanks for the sacrifices made by these courageous men and by their grieving families, and let us also pray that never again will young people in future generations find themselves placed in a similar situation.

May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

Surviving D-Day

by **Catherine Ferguson**

We knew my father had been a soldier in Europe in World War II but it was a surprise in 1994, when he suddenly said he had landed on D-Day. Not a secretive person, it felt odd that he had kept this from us. As the 50th anniversary of D-Day approached, he expressed a desire to visit the special exhibitions in France to understand better what he had been a part of. So as a family we went to Normandy in the summer of 1994.

He contacted his regiment, 61st Super Heavy Regiment, to ascertain he had landed on Sword beach. I asked him what D-Day had been like. His curt reply, 'Hell' and the look on his face prevented any further discussion. What I didn't know then, was that the ensuing battle afterwards through Normandy had been just as grim.

My father wanted to visit a particular Commonwealth graveyard near Tilly-sur-Seulles. The Battle for Normandy which followed the D-Day landings was ferocious and brutal for both soldiers and civilians. Tilly-sur-Seulles had been the scene of fierce fighting between the British Army and two elite SS Panzer divisions, being taken and re-taken 23 times in 10 days, by which time little of the village remained. By 1994, of course, Tilly had been rebuilt, and on the edge of the village in the graveyard of Hottot-les-Bagues, my father found what he had come for – a small group graves placed together. Here lay buried those, who with my father, formed a team on a super-heavy gun. At some point they came under intense shelling and the gun took a direct hit. When the smoke cleared, he was unharmed; he alone was left alive and in one piece; one soldier decapitated by tiles from the roof of the adjacent barn.

'Why me?' he asked. 'Why was I left to live? Why am I the one standing here now with my wife, my daughter, son-in-law and granddaughter?'

In the church there is a museum of the Battle of Tilly-sur-Seulles. I went ahead of my family to pay the entrance fees. It was not necessary. Hearing me explain that my father had been part of the liberation in 1944, the museum lady ran outside to greet him, arms outstretched, 'Mon cher vieux combatant, bienvenu', she cried, 'thank you, thank you; no charge'.

I like to think that warm, spontaneous gratitude, together with the presence of his family, brought my father some degree of comfort and healing to help assuage the dreadful guilt of the survivor.

Watching the TV programmes compiled for the 80th anniversary of D-Day (particularly the remarkable 'D-Day: the unheard tapes') has been difficult, as I cannot help but think of my father and of all those young men, damaged perhaps in body and certainly in mind, carrying that heavy load of survivor's guilt, perhaps throughout the rest of their lives.



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*Tilly-Sur-Seulles War Cemetery, from the website
of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*



*Photo from the website
of the Royal British
Legion*



Finding Freedom On Remembrance Day

by **Joanna Foat**

In 2012, I had the incredible honour of marching to the Cenotaph alongside women who served in the Women's Land Army and Women's Timber Corps during World War II. It was a deeply emotional moment as they laid wreaths to honour their service — a recognition that had been denied to these 200,000 women for over 50 years because they weren't part of the fighting forces.

Among these remarkable women, were the "Lumberjills," some 15,000 young women who rolled up their sleeves to work in Britain's forests up and down the country in the Women's Timber Corps. Armed with axes and saws, they felled giant trees, drove timber haulage trucks and braved dangerous saw mills. This was a far cry from the childcare, domestic service, hairdressing and secretarial work they had left behind.

Their stories captivated me. So I travelled the country to meet sixty of these courageous women. Their accounts of injuries and sacrifices were heartbreaking — some lost fingers in sawmill accidents, others faced life-altering injuries, and some even lost their lives. Despite the hardships, they spoke more of their frustration and hurt at being forgotten after the war, receiving no recognition for their vital contributions.

Yet, out of the forests, they found something extraordinary - freedom. The demanding work in the forests offered these women an escape from the rules of society and the expectations of women in the 1940s. In taking on this tough, physical work, they defied gender stereotypes. Their work as Lumberjills gave them strength, courage, and confidence—teaching them that they could accomplish anything. They cherished the wild freedom of the forests and the lifelong bonds of sisterhood they formed.

As we observe the two-minute silence at 11 o'clock on the 11th day of the 11th month, let us remember these forgotten women who served not only in World War II but also in World War I. In seeking their own freedom in the forests, the Lumberjills made an invaluable contribution to the war effort, helping to protect the freedoms of others around the world.



Photographs are from the collection of Doris Mary Youde (nee Stanyon)

And let us not forget the sacrifices made by nature. During World War I and II, more trees were felled from British forests than at any other time in history. Indeed, we owe so much to our precious natural world for the part it played in these global struggles.

Joanna Foat is a local author who has written the history book, Lumberjills Britain's Forgotten Army, the first in a series of novels, The Lumberjills Stronger Together, and a Lumberjills exhibition. She has given well over a hundred talks, been interviewed on BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour, BBC TV News, How We Won The War, Walking Wartime Britain and Dan Snow's History Hit Podcast among others. Alongside her writing, she works with wildlife and environmental charities to help protect nature on land and sea, precious habitats and rare species.

To find out more about her work visit www.thelumberjills.uk

