

Here is a story!

The Battle of Tannenberg was fought at the start of World War I between the armies of Germany and Russia. The battle is at its height when a czarist officer announces to his company: "The moment has come! We're going to charge the enemy. It'll be man against man in hand-to-hand combat." A Jewish soldier in the company piped up: "Please, sir. Show me my man! Maybe I can come to an understanding with him."

Soldiers will always find humour in the strangest of places! I wonder, you know, what the joke was that the writer refers to in this epitaph to his soldier son KIA in WW1.

FROM Epitaphs of the War (1914-1918)

*My son was killed while laughing at some jest. I would I knew
What it was, and it might serve me in time when jests are few.*

We call it the First World War, but for quarter of a century it was known as The Great War. Not because it was admirable, but because it was immense. It came as a terrible shock to the millions who took part in it (on the sea, on land and in the air) and to the many more whose lives were affected by it at the time and long after it was over. War on such a scale, and involving so many countries, was new. Weapons of such power were new. Killing in such large numbers was new. And in Britain the need to force men as young as 18 to fight, by law, was new. This new kind of war filled people with awe-struck horror.

The war officially ended at 11.00 am on November 11, 1918 (Armistice Day). As the same date approached in 1919, a recently returned High Commissioner told the British prime minister how during the war people in South African had stopped what they were doing for a few minutes at noon every day, to think seriously about the war and what it meant.

The prime minister liked the idea of a countrywide silence as a sign of respect. So the newspapers published a request from King George V that 'at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month' people all over the country should pause for two minutes to remember in silence the British soldiers who had been killed in the war. The Daily Express said, 'it is our duty to see that they did not die in vain: there must be a truce in domestic

quarrels, an end to industrial strife'. But the Daily Herald said, 'Swear to yourself this day at 11 o'clock that never again shall the peace and happiness of the world fall into the murderous hands of a few cynical old men'.

Vulnerable humanity had been lined up to die. Men like
Private J Bell Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders Battle of Loos 1915
Private W Knight, Lancashire Fusiliers (Battle of Lys 1918)
Whose relatives are here today.

Thankfully, for us and for future generations, many of their stories have been recorded: and they are heartrending.

Paul Daley writes in the Guardian of John Francis Naughton, a young baker from Australia, who enlisted in September 1914 just after war's outbreak.

He was big for his day, standing five foot ten, and weighing 11 stone, dark complexioned with blue eyes and fair hair. It sounds like he was a spirited bloke: in January 1915 he was sentenced to 14 days' detention in Egypt, for what we don't know but can well imagine. Naughton was among the first wave who landed at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 and was wounded less than a fortnight later. He was less fortunate the second time he was wounded during the allied August offensive; a bomb exploded in his hands, shredding both and badly injuring his knee and thigh.

A full day passed before Naughton could be evacuated to a hospital ship, during which time his hands became gangrenous and fly-blown. Eventually he arrived in England. A note on his file reads: "Bomb exploded in his hands necessitating immediate amputation both hands."

For the next 15 months Naughton was moved from hospital to hospital in London, while back home his mother and brother were left to ponder his fate. In November 1916, he died of kidney disease at Fulham military hospital. His pain was over. But his indignity was not. Naughton was among many Australian troops who were buried in mass graves after dying in English hospitals. *It's a story that has not been told before, but one that*

should be for all that it says about the empire's treatment of the men who supposedly "sacrificed" themselves for it

By 1919, 2135 Australian soldiers of the first world war were buried in 343 graveyards across Britain, a good number in common graves. In 1921, what remained of Naughton was exhumed and individually buried in a special plot that was established in Kensal Green cemetery. A simple wooden cross marked it.

It's fair to assume that, a world away in Australia, his mother's private commemoration of her son would have had as its focus his few possessions: a photo, hairbrush, autograph book, four handkerchiefs, a collar, tie, tie pin, four cigarette holders, a cigar holder, a pipe, rosary beads, a safety razor, a cigarette lighter, some letters and a "Lock hair".

Daley concludes:

The real stories of the men who died and survived are harrowing. The men themselves deserve more than to have their reality shrouded in distracting, quasi-religious hyperbole. The truth is that politicians and generals, both British and some obsequious Australians, sacrificed antipodean troops. Yes, the men followed orders, sometimes knowing that doing so would lead to death. But that is not the same thing as actively renouncing life.

We rely on written memories to keep fresh in our minds the true horrors of war - and it is right that we should remember. Siegfried Sassoon brought to life the fear and terror that was the daily experience of the men in the trenches of Flanders. This poem is called 'Attack'.

*At dawn the ridge emerges massed and dun
In the wild purple of the glow'ring sun,
Smouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud
The menacing scarred slope; and, one by one,
Tanks creep and topple forward to the wire.
The barrage roars and lifts. Then, clumsily bowed
With bombs and guns and shovels and battle gear,
Men jostle and climb to meet the bristling fire.*

*Lines of grey, muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. Oh Jesus, make it stop!*

We cannot begin to imagine what went through the minds of those men as they were sacrificed for our sakes, their children and their grandchildren.

*After the Battle there is an eerie, awesome, silence.
The silence deafens,
after all the screams and roars,
the din of the battle has died.*

*A sudden stillness
descends like a curtain
that envelopes all left on the field;
its weight sits like a heavy cloak
on the shoulders of men.*

*There's nary an echo
of those who'd held fast
under the fire,
there's now just a hush
from the lost and the dead.*

*Where are the notes of
the fanfare of victory?*

*Who'll play the dirge
of the lament of defeat?*

*No medals are pinned,
no sword touching shoulders,
no glory is honoured,
no victory declared.*

*There is only the quiet
of the spirits ascending,
the noiseless retreat
of those who've paid
the price for this silence.*

Silence on the battlefield

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After the Battle of Calvary a dark silence fell over the hill, rich in meaning. It was in the darkness on that battlefield that the Centurion recognised the hand of God. Vulnerable humanity had been sacrificed on at cross with cries of

- I don't want to do this
- Forgive them, they don't know what they're doing
- Look after my mother
- I'm afraid
- God help me

Then when the darkness lifted and the silence broke the New Creation asks the question of us all **what do you do with the peace in this** new dawn: "what do you do with the peace"

But, the silence continues for so many survivors of battlefields in this so-called peace.

"I think, though, that another shame of war is that when it's over, a soldier don't get to leave it behind where he fought it. He's gotta carry it right back home with him, in his head, and in his heart."

— Sandra Kring, Carry Me Home

And ultimately, what would the people who were not there actually want to hear? Do they really need to know about bodies being blown to pieces and are there any words to describe the horrendous earthmoving destruction of artillery?

John Brophy wrote in 1965: 'for the men who survived it, it became in retrospect an experience to be thrust out of memory most of the time, an experience impossible for the mind to digest, and, for many, tolerable only

when some of the less distressing events were selected for recall and dressed up with sentimental emotions’.

We who have seen war will never stop seeing it. In the silence of the night we will always hear the screams. (Barry Perry as Joseph Galloway in “We were Soldiers” 2002)

Silence is the prerequisite for inner stillness, and only inner stillness enables us truly to listen to God, to hear His voice, and to commune with Him in the depths of our being. Yet silence and stillness are, like prayer itself, gifts that God bestows upon us. The greatest truth about us is that God has created us with a profound longing, a burning thirst for communion with himself as he reaches out to embrace, to forgive and to heal all that is broken, wounded and wasted. He reaches out to restore within us the sublime image in which we were made.

Let me leave you with part of a letter written in an opportunity of silence on the Somme in August 1916:

We’re having beautiful weather here, which is some compensation for not being able to get home. If it were possible for me to come across and see you all, I could not fix on a better spot to return to. Sea, hills, dunes, bathed in a flood of sunshine. I have perfect health to enjoy, yet being selfish and deprived of what I desire, I allow my eyes to become clouded. I cannot see clearly that God is good. To see for myself how nobly my Mother bears her share, if possible to comfort her, to see my sisters, to receive some ray of happiness from their simple faith, would be Heaven indeed! How happy I was when with you! How wonderingly now I sound the depth of your love for me! How cold is the world without it! Love is the beginning, as it is the end, of all things, nothing is without love. Here the world seeks it’s little pleasures, it’s self-gratification. Love flies away, we wonder at the emptiness, the hungry cry of our souls. We question the wisdom of God in allowing this hideous War to be, was such an upheaval necessary? Only the man whose whole life has been spent in the service of God could answer such a question. It is not a question of mathematical deduction or history: – the history of the soul in man is the only basis from which we can see light. Amidst such upheavals as we have seen, as we experience, men cry “Give

us a Prophet"! It is a blind and feeble cry. To every man God gave a portion of His divinity, this for him to develop. If we refuse this divine gift, if by ordering our lives such that we leave out this light, this birth of a soul, can we hope for light from a prophet? Is it not very feeble? With the truth in our possession we weakly ask for a medium to show us ourselves. So, by War, by that very force God reveals himself to us, says "sacrifice self and kindle that tiny spark of a soul, let it grow until it becomes a living force, a Pharos for future generations". So develops the soul, by such gigantic upheaval receiving a forward bound, by a mighty leap bringing nearer the day when we will see the soul in it's perfection.

The Personal Letters & Poetry of Robert William Moss, 1891 - 1986