

# The boy soldiers of the First World War

More than a quarter of a million under-age British boys fought on the Western Front in the First World War.

Tommo in Michael Morpurgo's **Private Peaceful** is typical of many of these boys. He's not yet 16 when he tells his family he wants to enlist – and his brother Charlie tells him: "You've got to be 19 to serve overseas, Tommo, they don't want boys."

At the outbreak of war in August 1914 the minimum age for recruits to the army was 18 – and to serve overseas a soldier had to be 19.

But, within weeks, boys as young as 13 were serving at the front.

In his book **Boy Soldiers of the Great War**, the author Richard Van Emden dispels the myth that this was a story of innocent young lads "being sent as cannon fodder to the front by uncaring generals and politicians".

Many young boys were eager to join up – and often had the support of their parents. In 1914 their view of war was shaped by stories of Britain's old colonial conflicts far away. They pictured marching bands, heroic deeds, glorious battles fought by soldiers in scarlet uniforms. They could never have anticipated the scale of the horrors of the modern warfare that was about to erupt just across the Channel in France and Belgium.

The thought of fighting for King and Country sounded like a great adventure compared with the drudgery of work and the pressures of adolescence at home.

As in **Private Peaceful**, recruiting officers were often happy to ignore a boy's obvious youth and put their age down as 19. The recruiting sergeants were rewarded with two shillings and sixpence for every new man they enlisted so there was an incentive to turn a blind eye.

And just as with the toothless old lady who taunts Tommo in the marketplace, many under-age boys who signed up said they had felt the pressure of those around them and the attitudes of women young and old.

Frederick Broome was only 15 when he joined the army and went off to fight in France at the outbreak of war in 1914. After surviving several battles he caught a fever and was sent home to London, where his father produced his birth certificate and got him discharged for misstating his age.

Frederick said: "I got a job in Civvy Street and a few months afterwards I was walking across Putney Bridge when I was accosted by four girls who gave me three white feathers. I explained to them that I had been in the army and had been discharged, and that I was still only 16 years of age, but they didn't believe me. By now several people had collected around the girls, who were giggling. I felt most uncomfortable and awfully embarrassed."

He said: "I finished the walk across the bridge, and there on the other side was the 37th London Territorial Association of the Royal Field Artillery. I walked straight in and rejoined the army."

The stories of the boy soldiers come vividly to life when you hear veterans talking about their wartime experiences in recordings kept by the Imperial War Museum.

Richard Van Emden also captured the boys' stories when he interviewed First World War veterans over many years – and published their accounts in his book.

One of them, Cecil Withers, describes just how many boys were in the trenches in the early years of the war:

"Lots of boys of 15 and 16 said they were 18 and 19, you know, young boys, and the army took them as 19, they didn't ask any questions, no birth certificates, no identity required at all. You knew they were that age, they told you on the sly you see; we'd be getting ourselves cleaned up, talking about one thing or another, and they'd say, 'Well, I'm only sixteen.' To my eyes it was obvious; they hadn't started shaving; they just had a

whisker here and a whisker there; but you would never tell tales on each other, never betray each other.”

Charlie Parke, a corporal in the Gordon Highlanders, never forgot one young-faced lad he encountered during the Battle of Loos in September 1915.

British soldiers had managed to break through the German first and second lines – but follow-up reinforcements were slow in coming and the Germans reorganised and launched counter-attacks.

The 2nd Gordons came under heavy bombardment in the line they were holding – and, as it built to a deafening crescendo just before 10pm, the troops knew it would be minutes before the German infantry charged. They were ordered to get up from the trench floor and mount the ledge to be ready to meet the German attack.

Suddenly Charlie remembered a black-haired 16-year-old boy he'd taken pity on earlier and allowed to rest in a small recess dug in the rear wall of the trench.

“How the hell could the kid sleep amidst all that din?’ I asked myself. ‘Hey kid, get out here at the double!’ I screamed, using every decibel at my command. Still no movement from behind the sandbag material; I stepped down quickly from the ledge. ‘The lad’ll be in trouble if he doesn’t move fast,’ the thought flashed through my mind as I reached for the coarse curtaining.

“The sight I saw I just couldn’t take in and for a split second was dumbstruck and, whatever I was, I was rarely at a loss for words. The lad was on his knees, his back to me, frantically tunnelling with his bare hands into the earth in a futile attempt to escape from the mayhem that was developing all around us. ‘C’mon lad!’ I shrieked, tugging at his tunic. The young soldier resisted with strength born of fear and all the time his two hands were clawing feverishly at mother earth. Blind panic, so terrifying to behold for even a hardened soldier, had not even allowed his common sense to select his entrenchment tool for the purpose. I forcibly grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him back into the trench.

“The sight of that brave under-age boy lying on the duckboard shook me rigid. In less than half an hour, his entire head of hair had changed from close to black to virgin white; the horrendous sight was well-nigh unbelievable ... The ravages of fear and terror had bleached his young looks in minutes and turned the boy into a frightful sight of half old and half young. Everyone in the front line knew fear – but to see it, visually, so stark and unhidden, was horrible.”

By 1915, as the full extent of the losses on the Western Front started to appear in the British newspapers, parents began to have second thoughts about having allowed their children to go abroad – and some MPs took up the cause, calling on the Government to do more to stop under-age boys fighting on the front line.

The boys themselves had long forgotten the visions of glory in serving King and Country.

In 1914, at the start of the war, Rupert Brooke wrote the patriotic poem *The Soldier*, in which he declares that if he should die “there’s some corner of a foreign field that is for ever England”.

In September 1918 a 17-year-old soldier, Reginald Kiernan, scribbled some notes as he was preparing to fight at Epéhy.

“What I’ve thought of most today, and it has been running in my mind all the time for we had to learn it by heart, is Rupert Brooke’s *The Soldier*. I cannot feel like that. I do not want my body to rot away under this field, with its yellow earth and thin, pale grass. Perhaps Brooke could feel like that because he’d had something in this world. He’d been to Berlin, and he’d had lovely warm afternoons in Cambridgeshire, beside decent, quiet rivers; and he’s had time to think and enjoy things.

“I have never had time to think. I have had nothing, nothing. I want to get back from all this, back out of it – and sit and think, and look at clean things, and hear my people’s voices again ... Rupert Brooke had longer than I’ve had to see things and enjoy them. He was ten years older than I am now.”

As Van Emden says, Reginald was endlessly reminded of how short life could be by the dead all around him:

"It's the lying like those fellows we've passed – on your side with a fixed grin on your face, or on your back with your eyes turned up – and no one caring! And it's the thought that you don't die a hero. That would help. There are no heroes here. No one cares."

**NOTES TO EDITORS:**

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**Performances:**

*Songs From A Shropshire Lad* 22-26 Aug 6pm

*Private Peaceful* 14-19 Aug 9.55am, 21-26 Aug 4.35pm

**Venue:**

theSpace@NiddryStreet Venue 9 EH1 1TH