

The men who were shot at dawn by their friends

In 2006 the British Government finally granted posthumous pardons to more than 300 men and boys who were shot at dawn by their own comrades for supposed cowardice or desertion during the First World War.

Three years earlier Michael Morpurgo published his novel **Private Peaceful**. He had been moved to write the story of one of these men after a visit to Ypres for a conference of children's writers and illustrators. He had been invited after the publication of **War Horse**, his novel which at that time had not achieved the success it went on to achieve through the famous National Theatre production.

He said: "They held this conference in one of the greatest of all war museums, In Flanders Field, so called because of John Macrae's iconic poem.

"As I was leaving, I saw up on the wall, in a frame, a typed letter with its envelope. Intrigued, I went closer. It was from a captain in the army to the mother of a soldier, informing her in just a few short lines that her son had been shot at dawn for cowardice. I read the address and name on the envelope, saw the jagged tear she had made opening it, knew at once that this letter destroyed her life, and the lives of her family. I could see her in my mind's eye, standing there on her doorstep, letter in hand. I could feel her grief and her pain.

"I knew I had to write the story of one these unfortunate men ... 'worthless men' as one had been called as he was sentenced at his trial.

On a later visit to Ypres, with his wife Clare, they stopped by chance at a cemetery. Clare bent down to look at one of the gravestones. "I think maybe I've found your soldier's name," she said. The stone read: Private T.S.H. Peaceful. Royal Fusiliers 4th June 1915.

The stories of some of the real men and boys shot at dawn are captured in tape recordings of First World War veterans talking of their memories in the archives of the Imperial war Museum.

William Holmes, a private in London Regiment, describes two inexperienced teenagers who couldn't cope with being thrown into battle for the first time in 1917:

“We were getting new recruits from London, and one day we had these two youngsters, between 16 and 17 years of age, who had only been with us for two weeks, when all of a sudden we had to do this attack. We'd been laying in reserve to a regiment in front of us, and the previous morning the Germans had come over under a barrage of smoke and captured a whole battalion. The two English battalions on either side couldn't get in touch with each other, so we were to make an attack against those Germans.

“These two youngsters, when they knew we were going to be doing this attack, were literally crying their eyes out: it was such a shock for them to go into attack so soon. When we moved up to the attack we lost sight of them, but they had actually cleared off and been caught by the redcaps about three or four miles from where the action was taking place. They were brought back and charged.

“On the Sunday the whole battalion was paraded. The two young men were brought in and stood right at the end, near the officer. Their caps were taken off, every insignia of their regiment was torn off, to disgrace them as much as they could. Then, the verdict of the council was read out, which described how these two young men had deserted and, by their desertion and for letting their mates down, they were going to be shot next day at dawn.

“Next morning the two young men were brought out to a yard and blindfolded ... The four men who had to shoot them were sick with it all. There was sympathy in the platoon for the boys – but more sympathy really for the parents. We lived with it all for days, weeks – I can see it all now.”

Sympathy for parents was something that was in the minds of the condemned men too. The last words of one soldier shot for cowardice were "Don't tell my mother."

The Rev Leonard Martin Edwards, a chaplain attached to the Royal Fusiliers during the Battle of the Somme in 1916, described spending the last night with a man who was to be shot at dawn.

The condemned man told him: “I’ve deserted five times and if I went back again I’d only desert again. I can’t face it again so I don’t mind dying.”

After the execution Edwards said: “We had the burial and, as the sergeant threw the last piece of earth on the grave, he said, ‘You know, sir, at the retreat from Mons, he was one of the bravest men in the regiment!.’ ‘It’s a bit late saying that now,’ I said, ‘why didn’t you say that at the court martial?’ ‘I never had the chance, sir,’ said the sergeant. ‘Neither had that poor devil!’ I replied and with that I went off.”

Michael Morpurgo’s **Private Peaceful** is being staged at the Edinburgh Fringe from 14-26 August in the one-man version adapted by Simon Reade. George Stagnell’s performance as Tommo Peaceful – and all the other characters – was hailed as “remarkable” in a five-star review by the arts editor of the York Press in preview performances in the city in March.

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Website:

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/fringe

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/shropshire-lad

Performances:

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

Songs From A Shropshire Lad 22-26 Aug 6pm

Venue:

theSpace@NiddryStreet Venue 9 EH1 1TH