

The Last Fighting Tommy

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This year our links with the First World War grew that one step more remote with the death of Harry Patch at 111, who was the last surviving soldier to have fought in the trenches of the First World War. In 1916, he was conscripted as a private into the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, serving as an assistant gunner in a Lewis Gun section. Patch arrived in France in June 1917 in time to fight at the Battle of Passchendaele. It was one of the most terrible battles of a ghastly war. Siegfried Sassoon wrote about it in a poem "I died in hell - (They called it Passchendaele)". When the Allies attacked in four months they captured a mere five miles of new territory at a cost of 140,000 combat deaths, a ratio of roughly two inches gained per dead soldier. The fighting was awful, with tanks getting stuck in deep mud, and soldiers even drowning in it. Patch was injured in the groin when a shell exploded overhead on 22 September 1917, killing three of his comrades. "The Last fighting Tommy" his autobiography called him. So today we honour him and that whole generation of young men who went through hell in Flanders all of whom are now gone.

And that being the case, if you will forgive me being personal, I want to honour another soldier my grandfather, Lionel Clowe. Patch spent a year at the front; my grandfather spent more than three years. He was served in 24th London Battalion, LR (The Queen's). They were part of the Territorial Army, and were raised not far from here, in Lambeth. They arrived in France in March 1915, as part of the 47th London Division, one of the first Territorial divisions to enter the fighting. They arrived just in time for the Battle of the Somme in July 1915. For the 24th battalion the central moment of the fight was the capturing of High Wood. Their first attempt with tank support had failed but the attack resumed and after a bombardment of German positions by mortars in which 750 bombs were fired in 15 minutes, High Wood fell. In four days of fighting the division suffered over 4,500 casualties. Its commander Major General Charles Barter was relieved of command for "wanton waste of men." In the first world war that took some doing.

Lionel Clowe stayed with his regiment till the end of the war. By then only one officer and a handful of the many who had gone out three years before were still serving. What he saw, what he endured, we have little idea, because he would almost never speak of it. He did talk of how British trenches were often full of water. He himself got trench foot and had bad feet for the rest of his life. What a relief he said when we captured a German trench, because they were always better than our. One they captured had a piano in it. And once he spoke of a soldier whose nerve broke and who they tied to a gun carriage.

The war was to have other unexpected consequence for Lionel Clowe. A mate of his, Percy Beavis, died at the Somme. Unlike my grandfather who somehow lasted till the end Percy died almost as soon as he arrived. Next time he was on leave my grandfather took Percy's personal effects to his widow, Beatrice at Watford. They met again and eventually married and had one daughter Sybil, my mother.

My grandfather I think would like to be remembered today. My grandmother I know would be proud to have his name mentioned. So today I want to honour Lionel Clowe, Harry Patch,

Percy Beavis and those others who are now separated from us but are in the eternal remembrance of God.

And thought they called that war, *the war to end all wars* it was of course nothing of the sort. Conflict after conflict has followed – right up to this day.

Harry Patch did not have much use for Remembrance Sunday. "Just show business" he called it. I think he went to the wrong services. It would be intolerable if on day like this we glamorised war. If we told again the old lie that Wilfred Owen mocked, – **Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori** - it is sweet and right to die for your country. But for me this day is a chance to remember with gratitude those who have no right ever to forget. And a chance to remember what war is really like and what it costs in human lives.

Sadly this week there are yet more names to add to that list who a week ago were living. The war in Afghanistan is turning for the worse. As the Afghan government is more and more seen to be corrupt and incompetent moral justifications for the war are harder to find. And the cost in lives grows greater.

So there are others we must honour today along with Harry Patch and all the others.

Staff Sergeant Olaf Schmid, 30 years old, Royal Logistics Corps
Acting Corporal Steven Boote, 22, Royal Military Police
Nicholas Webster-Smith, 24 Royal Military police
Warrant officer 1st class Darren Chant, 40 years old, 1st battalion the Grenadier Guards.
Sergeant Matthew Telford, 37 years 1st battalion the Grenadier Guards
Guardsmen Jimmy Major, 18 years old, 1st battalion the Grenadier Guards
Sergeant Philip Scot, 30 years old, 3rd battalion the Rifles

In a moment of extreme danger, each of these men reached deep within their own hearts and decided to risk life itself, to give everything any one of us has to give, for friends, family, nation. It is a good and holy moment to be able to say thank you to God for them.

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we shall remember them.

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