

FIRST WORLD WAR

PART THREE: THE TRAGEDY OF CONSENT

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**A MONTHLY 12-PART
SERIES TO MARK
THE WAR'S
CENTENARY**

➤➤➤ **PIERRE
PURSEIGLE**
How civilians were
agents of destruction

➤➤➤ **KATE ADIE**
A landmark time
for women as vital cogs
in the war machine

➤➤➤ **PATRICK
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Humour as soldiers' first
line of self-defence

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WELCOME

One hundred years on, with the benefit – and incredulity – of hindsight, the images of soldiers and supportive crowds cheerfully waving at train stations, and of proud mothers pushing their sons to be soldiers, are haunting and hard to comprehend.

How could entire nations have bought so readily into the idea that war was a good thing? And once war was in full flow, and news of its grim reality began to filter back home, what maintained that morale and sense of patriotism?

Professor Pierre Purseigle, who has written our lead piece in this issue, describes this complicit support of the home fronts as “the tragedy of consent”. And that is the theme we explore here – the third of a 12-part series that will appear each month in *The Sunday Telegraph*, right up until the centenary of the First World War.

We also look at how war was a landmark time for women, who went from being excluded from much of public life to becoming an essential cog in the war machine.

Plus we bring you all the regular features, including war poetry, art and letters from the front with commentary by IWM.



Zoe Dare Hall
Series editor



TOP PHOTO

➤ THE SPONSOR Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC

Inside the First World War, a 12-part series, is sponsored by Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC, an international businessman, philanthropist and military historian. Lord Ashcroft is sponsoring the monthly supplements because he wants to promote a greater understanding of the First World War and

to remember those who gave their lives in the conflict. Lord Ashcroft has established himself as a champion of bravery, building up the world's largest collection of Victoria Crosses (VCs), Britain and the Commonwealth's most prestigious award for courage in the face of the enemy. He has also written four books on bravery: *Victoria Cross Heroes*, *Special Forces*

Heroes, *George Cross Heroes* and *Heroes of the Skies*. In each of the 12 new supplements, Lord Ashcroft will tell the incredible stories behind First World War VCs from his collection. Lord Ashcroft purchased his first VC in 1986 and currently owns more than 180 of the decorations. Three years ago, he began collecting George Crosses (GCs), Britain and the Commonwealth's most

prestigious award for courage not in the face of the enemy. He currently owns 11 GCs. Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collections are on display in a gallery that bears his name at IWM London, along with VCs and GCs in the care of the museum. The gallery, built with a £5 million donation from Lord Ashcroft, was opened by HRH The Princess Royal in 2010. Lord Ashcroft has been a successful entrepreneur

for the past four decades, launching, buying, building and selling companies – both private and public – in Britain and overseas. He is a former Treasurer and Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party. In September 2012, he was appointed a member of the Privy Council and was made the Government's Special Representative for Veterans' Transition. He is Treasurer of the International Democratic

Union (IDU) and one of Britain's leading experts on polling. Lord Ashcroft has donated several millions of pounds to charities and good causes. He founded Crimestoppers (then the Community Action Trust) in 1988. He is the founder of the Ashcroft Technology Academy and Chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University. His numerous other charity roles

include being Vice-Patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, a Trustee of Imperial War Museum, an Ambassador for SkillForce and a Trustee of the Cleveland Clinic in the US. For information about the Lord Ashcroft Gallery, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For information on Lord Ashcroft, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft

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CONSENT
Cover: children cheer Queen Mary on munitions works visit, Coventry, November 17, 1917. Left: a public shrine in London

PEOPLE AT WAR



BRIGHTON



MUNICH



LONDON



DEVON



LONDON



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The demonstration that took place at Munich's Odeonsplatz on August 2 1914 – to celebrate Germany's declaration of war with Imperial Russia – has achieved iconic status in the memory of the First World War. Thanks in no small part to the photograph showing a youthful Adolf Hitler in the boisterous crowd, it has come to encapsulate the enthusiasm with which European populations were deemed to have welcomed the outbreak of the Great War.

Hitler later confessed that, "overpowered by stormy enthusiasm, [he] fell down on [his] knees and thanked Heaven [...] for granting him the good fortune of being permitted to live at this time".

Clearly impressed and shocked by such a display of nationalist fervour, the philosopher Bertrand Russell "discovered to [his] horror that average men and women were delighted at the prospect of war".

Russell may have mistaken the attitude of a few demonstrators – often young and middle-class men – for the sentiment of the many, who dreaded the repercussions of war as much as they feared the consequences of defeat. But nonetheless, there was widespread support for the war across the nations. Many European cities saw similar demonstrations of noisy nationalism that defined, in the eyes of many commentators, the first weeks of mobilisation.

The real tragedy of the First World War is perhaps not that it was so costly in lives and treasure, but that the populations of Europe consented to war for so long and so allowed the carnage to continue.

This is what we may call the tragedy of consent. Playing it down has long hampered our comprehension of the "seminal catastrophe" of the 20th century and prevented many nations from coming to terms with the role they played in their own victimisation.

As Britain and her allies remain engaged in military operations across the world, in an age of professional soldiering, one cannot ignore the fact that the fate of those fighting and dying on our behalf remains, as it was during the Great War, our individual and collective responsibility.

From the mid-Twenties, as warring nations came to terms with the devastating human and material

The tragedy of consent



WHY DID THE PEOPLE OF EUROPE SUPPORT THE WAR FOR SO LONG? THEY BELIEVED THEY WERE FIGHTING FOR THEIR CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY, SAYS **PIERRE PURSEIGLE**

legacies of the conflict, these images of enthusiastic patriotism seemed to encapsulate the tragedy of European and imperial populations. By this reading, they were populations hoodwinked into the conflict by patriotic lies, maintained in a state of mental subjugation by propaganda and censorship, and led into battle by incompetent and callous generals.

Let's not confuse consent with nationalist enthusiasm. Despite sporadic outbursts such as those in Munich, the warring nations never fell for the nationalist frenzy that is too often associated with August 1914. But their common consent to the war accounts for the duration of a conflict of unprecedented scale.

So why were nations so quick to consent? Because the war that broke out in 1914 was not simply the result of geopolitical and strategic tensions. In the words of the French historian Elie Halévy, it was about something far more fundamental: a "quarrel between nation and nation, culture and culture" – a cause that resonated far more deeply with people.

This battle between empires and nations pitted competing visions of the European and international orders that put cultures and ideologies at the heart of the business of war. This wasn't about military strategy for the various populations; it was about their lives and futures. Most British commentators claimed Britain stood for liberal democracy and international law against authoritarian Germany. The alternative

to war – German occupation and domination – was seen as unacceptable across the political spectrum. For the French union leader Léon Jouhaux, his countrymen were "soldiers of freedom" who would rid the world of German imperialism and autocracy.

Most German intellectuals asserted their country's duty to defend its political model and ambitions, even at the expense of other nations' interests. "Have faith in us! Believe, that we shall carry on this war to the end as a civilised nation, to whom the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven and a Kant is just as sacred as its own hearths and homes," proclaimed the *Manifesto of the Ninety-Three*, the 1914 document endorsed by 93 prominent German scientists, scholars and artists, declaring their support for military action.

In the few days in which the diplomatic crisis reached its climax and mobilisation orders were published, many felt, like Winston Churchill, that this was "no ordinary war, but a struggle between nations for life and death". So a war of national defence became for many a personal battle to protect one's home – and soldiers, who were but civilians in uniform, were part of the consent. Few soldiers died for abstract ideals of nation; most risked lives to defend the safety of their friends, family and home.

Through newspapers, posters, advertisements, church sermons and socialist speeches, this language of mobilisation soon swept through nations at

war. As the *Socialist Pioneer* of Northampton put it in 1916, there could "be no peace while the frightful menace of world domination by force of German armed might looms about and above us".

Such was the strength of consent that it became difficult in Britain to show opposition to the war. Legislation such as the Defence of the Realm Act in 1914 curtailed civil liberties, while churches, voluntary organisations and individuals sought to stamp out opposition by suppressing and condemning dissenters. Keir Hardie, the Scottish socialist and labour leader who was also a staunch pacifist, routinely saw his speeches in 1914 disrupted by hecklers.

Across nations and social classes, people were convinced of the necessity of war, which they justified, as the cultural historian John Horne put it, out of a sense of war as "legitimate self-defence". On August 1 1914, Georges Crassous, a French soldier and socialist activist, wrote to his parents of departing for the front "satisfied to be defending their persons and their property".

It is ironic that in asserting their opposition to other nations – and confirming their consent to war – European populations demonstrated how much they had in common. Even in Russia, where revolution had shaken the foundations of the Tsarist regime as recently as 1905, the rural masses rallied to defend the nation; 96 per cent of soldiers reported for duty.

The French and German armies encountered similarly few difficulties in recruiting. With 1.5 per cent of all conscripts unaccounted for, Germany encountered half as many draft-dodgers as it had expected. The memoirs of German soldiers in the battle of the Somme showed they were convinced that the fate of their *heimat* – homeland – and that the safety of their families rested on their capacity to defeat France and to break the encirclement allegedly sought by her Russian ally. As private Otto Riebicke put it in 1917, "Germany's guard protects the girlfriend, the wife and the fatherland". The country's best known patriotic song, *The Watch on the Rhine*, was rewritten as "The Watch on the Somme". One did not have to embrace the war to be committed to its victorious end. But as war dragged on for far

longer than anyone had expected and took its heavy toll, commitment to the war effort began to shift in 1915 as nations began to question the mounting human and material cost.

Nations' consent rested on the assumption that the state would protect and provide for the families of those who fought for the nation. Strikes and protest did not express opposition to the war but reminded employers and the state of their obligations.

Critics of military recruitment, taxation, supply and shortages of food or coal could not be altogether silenced and such issues threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the state, tearing apart each population's belief in what their country stood for.

As shortages and inflation undermined living standards, strikes and demonstrations broke out over "profiteering" and "shirking" as well as working conditions. Those who went on strike, such as workers on the Clyde in 1915, Berlin women in 1917 and Parisian metalworkers in 1918, claimed their sacrifice justified their protest. Each social group defended their collective interest and their patriotic record, standing by their consent while exposing the cracks.

But for women forced to queue for food in Berlin, the state was not living up to the standards set by their men at the front. And state authorities neglected the working classes at their peril. As German General Wilhelm Groener put it in November 1916, "the war could in any case not be won against the opposition of the workers". Populations started to equate the unprecedented level of casualties and mounting economic difficulties with the sacrifice borne of wartime mobilisation. By 1918, patriotism and citizenship had become all about sacrifice and no longer about preserving a cultural and national identity.

Conservative publications such as the *Northampton Independent* had long ceased to indulge in the myth

PEOPLE POWER

Clockwise from bottom left: Hitler joins those celebrating Germany's declaration of war on Russia on August 2, 1914; a recruiting rally in Brighton featuring injured Indian troops; crowds in Trafalgar Square rejoice at Britain's declaration of war on August 4, 1914; conscientious objectors protest on Dartmoor in 1917; Smithfield meat market workers make their point; women demand the right to do their share of war work

of war enthusiasm. "What a lot of maudlin nonsense is written and preached about war as a purifier, a toughener of moral fibre, a stimulus to wholesome discipline, etc... All this is a travesty of the tragedy of the whole ghastly business. ... Our boys [...] nurse no false heroics about it, I can tell you. Our boys frankly acknowledge what the alternative to defeat means in this war and tell you they prefer to die with honour than survive with shame."

Consent had given way to a reshaping of global nations, unleashing new political forces that saw mass movements for change – and real change across many nations and societies.

The First World War demonstrated the transformative potential of total war. As Halévy put it: "The world crisis of 1914-1918 was not only a war – the war of 1914, but also a revolution – the revolution of 1917". Beyond Russia, the war had brought down the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires and allowed the birth or rebirth of nations across Europe. From Washington to Beijing through Toronto and Berlin, social movements, often led by veterans and former war workers, challenged established political, racial, gendered and social hierarchies.

In the eyes of these protesters, progressive and redistributive social policies were expected to repay the sacrifices they had consented to during the war. French women protested unsuccessfully for the extension of suffrage. In the US, African-American veterans remained subjected to Jim Crow laws. Social and racial inequalities persisted despite the promises made in wartime.

For the Allied nations, the price of victory was, as the British historian Eric Hobsbawm put it, "bankruptcy and physical exhaustion". The war did not only blur the boundaries between soldiers and civilians. It showed warring populations were not merely victims of the conflicts; they were – through their consent – also agents of destruction.

● Pierre Purseigle is a research fellow at Yale University, associate professor in modern European history at the University of Warwick and president of the International Society for First World War Studies

“IT WAS A QUARREL BETWEEN NATION AND NATION, CULTURE AND CULTURE

GREAT WAR WOMEN

A famous First World War poster shows a thoughtful-looking mother taking her son's hand in hers. He is very young and wearing his newly-issued army uniform. From the very start of the war, women were involved in ways that were new.

The wars of the previous century had happened far away: imperial business involving men overseas. In the first few months of conflict in 1914, there was a heady rush to the colours, but there was also a concerted effort by the government to target women: "Is your 'best boy' wearing khaki? If not, don't you think he should be?" And: "If your young man neglects his duty to his King and Country, the time may come when he will neglect you". Mothers, wives and sweet-hearts were drawn into the recruiting campaign. Duty and patriotism were the priorities. Sacrifice and death were yet to be a consideration in the decision to enlist.

That women should figure in moves to recruit was, unwittingly, a small official acknowledgement that their opinion mattered. They were generally excluded from public life and without many of the rights we now take for granted.

If they worked as domestic servants, in small family business or in farming, they were frequently omitted from employment statistics; few were trade union members and many of the professions were barred to them. Others were dismissed from their jobs when they married because of the firmly held view that a husband should support his wife, and he would be demeaned if she worked.

As the war machine cranked into business, women became an essential part of it: millions making munitions, learning new skills, taking over jobs that had always been a male preserve – from clerks in the Bank of England to coke-heaving in gasworks.

None of this happened without opposition. Entrenched views were not overturned overnight, and to dispel fears that the old order might be changing, almost every advertisement and employment contract included the words "for the duration". The war was an exception to normal life, so a shift in women's status could be – temporarily – tolerated.

However, as the gates of the huge, noisy and dangerous munitions plants opened throughout the country to women eager for escape from domestic drudgery and with the prospect of better wages, another unexpected shift occurred to the status of every woman in the land.

At breakfast time on December 16, 1914, 17-year-old Hilda Horsley was on her way to work as a tailor-ess in Hartlepool. Annie and Florence Kay lived nearby on the upper floor of a house that overlooked the sea, a short distance from a gun battery. Three German warships had been creeping towards the coast under cover of early morning mist. They fired more than 1,000 shells at Old and West Hartlepool, killing 102 people, including 15 children.

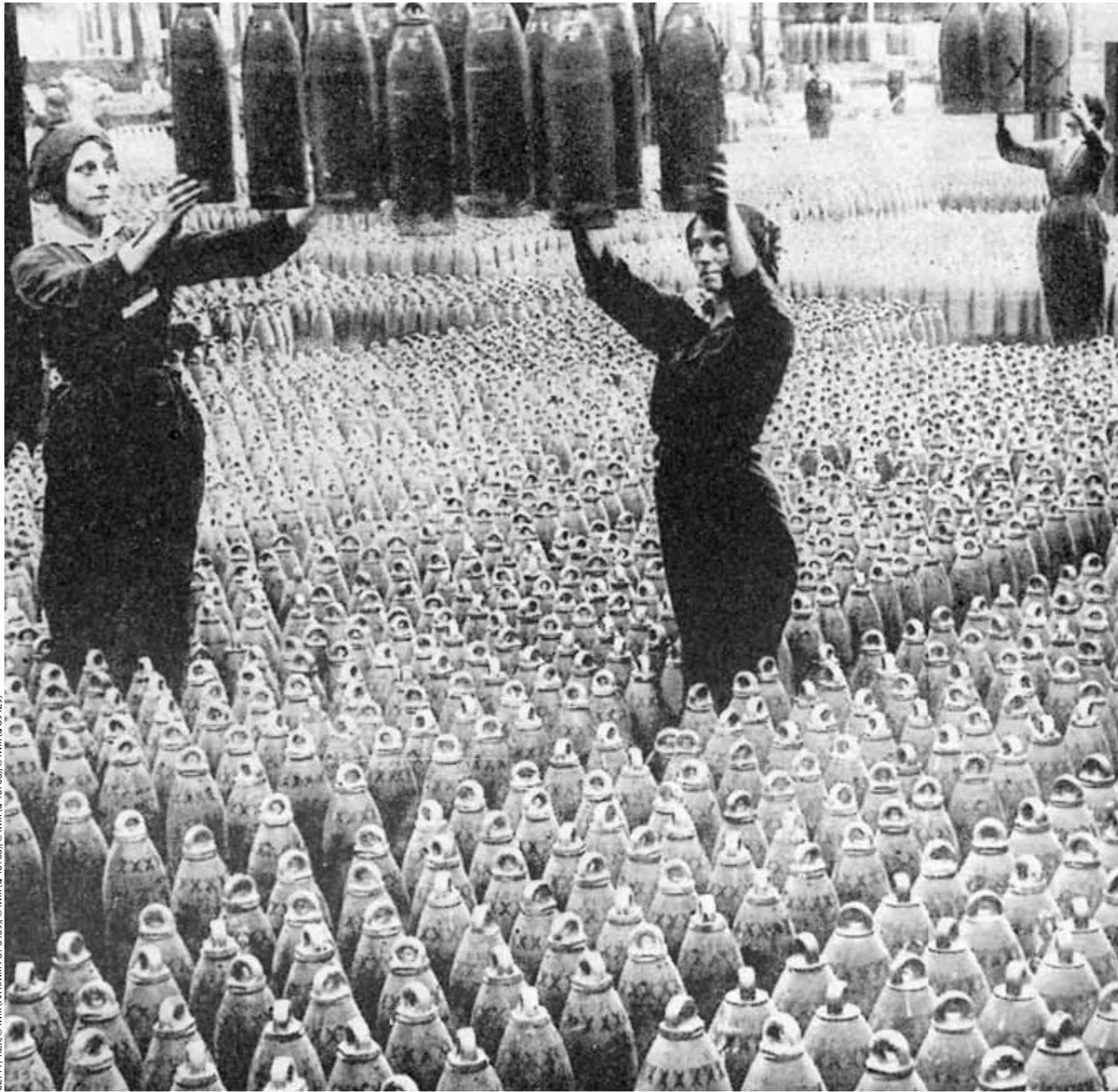
Hilda was killed by falling masonry, and the *Hartlepool Gazette* described the Kays' fate: "Two maiden ladies... one of them was in the passage making for her sister's bedroom, possibly disturbed by the noise outside. The shot struck one sister, inflicting terrible wounds in the chest and killing her instantly. When neighbours went, after the bombardment, to search for the second sister, they did not find her. Careful exploration of the wreckage showed later she had been literally blown to bits."

The three women were the first female civilians to be killed by enemy action on British soil.

Shortly after, Scarborough was bombarded, with 18 people killed. War had come to the Home Front. The impact nationwide was immense, with Scarborough – a fashionable resort – seized on as a rallying cry against the "beastly Hun".

Posters appeared urging people to "Remember Scarborough" and the local recruiting campaigns urged: "Men of Yorkshire, Join the New Army and avenge the death of innocent women and children". It is hard to estimate the shock that was caused by women being killed. Civilians were not part of the conventional equation; men went to war to shield their wives and families. Suddenly, women had become victims of the same violence the men were facing. It became a little more obvious that they had had no say in going to war – they had no vote – yet they were dying in it.

Across society, the lives of ordinary women were inextricably entwined with the war machine. The upper and middle classes deployed all their experience as charity organisers and voluntary workers, many seizing the chance to form themselves into formidable organisations that looked after the welfare of millions. Canteens for troops at stations and ports, refugee settlements – several hundred thousand arrived from Belgium – and social clubs for young female workers. Knitting became almost a national duty, with Queen Mary and her Needlework Guild encouraging the production



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Meet the munitionettes behind the military



WAR WORK CHANGED WOMEN'S LIVES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION WAS KEY TO THE ALLIED VICTORY, SAYS **KATE ADIE**

of millions of garments for the troops. Nicely brought-up young women were released from the conventional round of tea parties and tennis. With rudimentary first-aid skills, many joined the Voluntary Aid Detachments and were confronted with the horrors of battlefield injuries, as thousands of men filled hospitals, nursing homes and convalescent centres in almost every town and scores of country houses.

Many served abroad alongside the YMCA volunteers and the redoubtable women of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry who drove ambulances to the front line. Shellfire and aerial bombardment became part of their lives.

Working-class women endured 12-hour shifts in engineering works. It was dirty, noisy and sometimes dangerous; we have forgotten the filthy conditions taken for granted in industry then. Shovelling fuel in gasworks, road-mending, cleaning train engines – the notion that women could not do this kind of work was pushed aside. Censorship blanked out many of the smaller "blows" at munitions plants in which people were horribly maimed, but huge explosions could not be covered up and the chemicals poisoned many and turned "munitionettes" yellow.

Yet there were extraordinary gains for many. Brought up in an Edwardian world, with Victorian views of weak and silly females unable to make decisions or shoulder responsibility, there was the opportunity to show that they could do the work.

The munitionettes earned wages that enabled

them to have some fun, buy trinkets and tasty food, and get a whiff of a brighter, more independent life. A chaperoned young lady got out from under her mother's gaze, learnt there was a wider world and that education was more than French conversation and needlework. Seasoned suffrage campaigners emerged to push down barriers – and remarkable individuals became famous for their efforts.

Flora Sandes, a vicar's daughter from Yorkshire, went to Serbia to nurse – and put down her bandages during a rout, exchanging them for a soldier's rifle. She was accepted into the Serbian Army as a private, fought continuously, was severely injured, highly decorated, and retained femininity and a matter-of-fact attitude throughout. In one of her letters home, she wrote: "I am sitting in a hole seven feet by four feet... with two officers of my company... We can't stir out of it from dawn to dark, as it is not healthy, as there are always stray bullets, which though not aimed at you, may prove just as annoying."

Mabel St Clair Stobart commanded the Serbian Relief Fund's Front Line Field Hospital and accompanied the Serbian Army as it retreated over the mountains to Albania. She led her staff safely through blizzards and bandit raids for 12 weeks, spending 18 hours a day on horseback. Nationally famous, she addressed thousands at meetings in Britain, declaring that not only could women potentially be part of a country's defence, but they already were.

Maudie Royden, a noted suffrage campaigner and devout Anglican, took on the Church of England. Its

TAKING IT ON THE CHIN

Clockwise from left, British women working in a munitions factory; the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) attend to their cars and unload an ambulance in February 1918 at St Omer, France; Mrs Mabel St Clair Stobart; a 1914 recruiting poster



pews, choirs and pulpits had been emptied of men, and in most parishes, women were not allowed to take collections, ring the sanctus bell or be a churchwarden, never mind read the lesson or preach. Four years of campaigning finally led to her addressing a congregation from the pulpit – a victory that still bothers some today.

Maude was a pacifist but most suffragettes and suffragists threw themselves into war work, agreeing with Emmeline Pankhurst's view that there was no point campaigning for the vote if there was no country left in which to vote.

Elsie Inglis was proving that not only could women work under difficult conditions as doctors – she undertook battlefield surgery – operating with all-female teams with the Scottish Women's Hospitals in France and the Balkans. Perhaps the most telling quote of the war came from the War Office official who declined her offer in the first week of war to supply 1,000 female doctors and nurses for any foreign theatre of war: "Dear lady. Go home and sit still."

These names rarely appear today. The war is usually seen through military eyes. However, it could not have been won without the efforts of millions of women. They proved what they could do – what took a great deal longer was to convince everyone that they should do it.

● Fighting on the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One by Kate Adie is published by Hodder & Stoughton

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FROM IWM'S ARCHIVE - LETTERS HOME

'I never want to see such a thing again...'

Serving as a VAD nurse at Harrogate Auxiliary Hospital, North Yorkshire, Colina Campbell was 23 years old in December 1914. Writing to her mother from the village of Grosmont, near Whitby, Colina describes her personal experience of the shocking events of Wednesday December 16, 1914. A German naval bombardment of the Yorkshire coast would bring the war to the very doorstep of English homes.

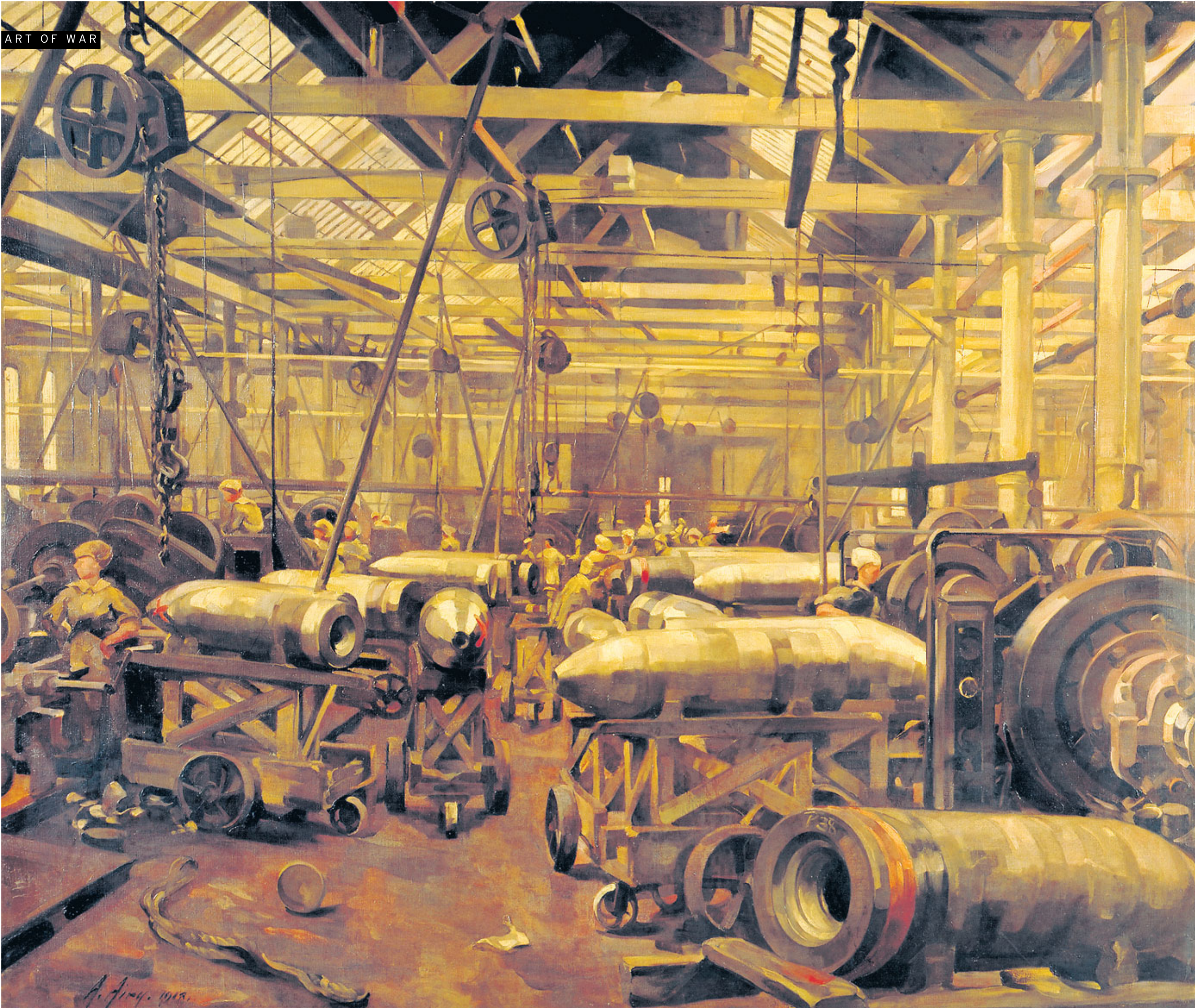
Suddenly at 9.10am we heard what the children thought was blasting, only very near, the windows rattled and the house shook again and again. I said "I am sure it's firing off the coast"... I can tell you the sound was pretty terrifying but it only lasted 10 minutes, the car was ordered and away we flew to Whitby. We were there about three-quarters of an hour after the two German cruisers had gone but the houses they had wrecked were awful. When we got near Whitby we saw streams of people with panic stricken faces trying to get away. I never want to see such a thing again... Telegraph wires hanging like threads all snapped, huge gaping holes in the side of houses, roofs off, glass smashed everywhere and old women shaking with fright and sobbing. We picked up lots of bits of shell. I have one in my pocket as I write.

The two German cruisers fired at the coastguard station, shot that to bits and killed one coastguard; we saw the stretcher being carried. Some of the coastguards said the cruisers came in so close they could see the men working on their decks. We hear that these cruisers have visited Scarborough and other places and damaged them, but as all wires are out of order it is difficult to get news.

In one street the venetian blinds had been blown right across the street, lamp post upturned and I saw a pool of blood in front of a house so went in to see if anyone was hurt. We found that an old woman had been hit by a shell and was bleeding badly and was removed to the hospital. The extraordinary thing was so few were killed or even badly hurt. Portions of furniture, doors and windows were lying about the streets, and in the fields just outside the town are large holes about 5 or 6 feet square. If the shells had been fired earlier when people were in bed I should think hundreds would have been killed as so many of the bedrooms were struck.

The intention of the German High Seas Fleet had been to isolate and neutralise small parts of the British fleet while testing the English coastal defences, perhaps to capitalise on invasion fears which were prevalent. Inflicting 137 deaths and almost 600 casualties among the populations of Whitby, Scarborough and Hartlepool, the German naval bombardment led to criticisms of the Royal Navy's failure to prevent the assault while generating public outrage against Germany for having attacked a mostly civilian target. German air raids by Zeppelins were to be launched only weeks later, but the naval bombardments would be remembered by many as the key moment that the war came to Britain.

● Commentary by Anthony Richards, IWM head of documents



SHOP FOR MACHINING 15-INCH SHELLS (1918)

This was one of four large-scale canvases by Anna Airy (1882-1964), each highlighting a key area of British arms manufacture. Commissioned in June 1918 by the Munitions sub-committee of the Imperial War Museum, Airy's paintings were intended to stress the impact of 'total war' on British industry and the huge production effort required to wage war. The appointment of the Greenwich-born Airy was perhaps a recognition of the crucial role played by British women in war production and suggested a degree of enlightenment on the part of her commissioners. Yet the artist's experience of

official patronage during the conflict proved anything but edifying. Despite at the time being one of Britain's most successful female painters, Airy endured indifference and distrust at the hands of official bodies. Her painting for the grandiose British War Memorials Committee art scheme was rejected - she was the only artist employed to suffer such ignominy - and the Munitions sub-committee subjected her to a contract more stringent than that of any of her male peers. Regardless, Airy applied herself to her commission with determination, visiting major factories and forges throughout

Britain. This often meant placing herself in harm's way. During one visit to the shell forge at Hackney Marshes, the extreme heat of the shop floor burnt through the soles of her shoes. Preparation for this canvas brought Airy to the massive Singer sewing machine factory at Kilbowie, Clydebank - the factory having converted entirely to munition production during the First World War. However, conditions there were basic for the mainly female workforce, to which Airy's painting made telling allusion, picturing chaotic production lines and crude handling equipment for the enormous shells.

Airy finally delivered her four paintings in 1919. Each provided a remarkable insight into the diversity of Britain's wartime production and, as one, captured the vast scale, the noise, the heat and energy of the nation's industrial effort. ● Richard Slocombe, senior art curator, IWM ● Shop for Machining 15-inch Shells: Singer Manufacturing Company, Clydebank, Glasgow will feature in IWM's Truth & Memory: First World War Art exhibition, opening in July 2014, along with new First World War Galleries. www.iwm.org.uk

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WAR POEM

'May Morning', Vera Brittain (1916)

In *Testament of Youth* (1933), Vera Brittain wrote what is still probably the most profound and moving account of one individual woman's experience of the First World War. Born in 1893 into a middle-class family, Vera broke convention in 1914 by winning an Exhibition to Somerville College, Oxford. Expecting to go up with her brother Edward, the outbreak of war changed everything. Edward and his two closest friends, Victor Richardson and Roland Leighton, all became officers, leaving Vera to go up alone. She and Roland began a romantic friendship and Vera fell deeply in love. Roland went to France in April 1915 and five months later they were engaged. Roland's death on December 23 stunned Vera, now a VAD nurse. By 1918, Victor and Edward were also dead, as well as Edward's new wartime friend, Geoffrey Thurlow. Vera was bereft. Looking back she reflected, "I could have married Victor in memory of Roland, and Geoffrey in memory of Edward, but the war took even the second best." During the 'Twenties and Thirties, Vera Brittain became well known as a feminist, writer and pacifist. She died in London in 1970.

In *Verses of a V.A.D.*, published in 1918, Vera noted: "At Oxford on May 1st a Latin hymn is sung at sunrise by the Magdalen choristers from the top of the tower". It is a deeply moving and uplifting moment, offering a sense of hope and rebirth. In her diary on May 1, 1915, Vera wrote: "As they sang the sun gradually rose higher & threw a golden glow over the slender grey tower. The voices of the singers sounded very pure & sweet in the clear morning air."

Vera's feelings for Roland intensified at the end of 1914. In *Testament of Youth* she noted: "I was more deeply and ardently in love than I had ever been or am likely to be". On May Morning, she was very conscious of their separation, writing to him: "I could quite easily have wept at the beauty & pain of it. I couldn't help thinking how different everything is from what we pictured it would be, & how you had meant to be here, & how you would have loved it if you had been."

By May 1, 1916, Vera had been working at the 1st London General Hospital for over six months. Recovering from scarlet fever and tired, she wrote in *Testament of Youth*: "At the beginning of May, a Times paragraph describing the ceremony on Magdalen Bridge brought back to me the cool, sweet ride through Marston just after dawn a year ago, and all at once the impulse to put what I felt into verse... sprang up with overwhelming compulsion."

Vera Brittain's overwhelming sense of loss for Roland, her brother and their friends, never left her. After this poem, in *Testament of Youth*, she confessed: "The concluding speculation is answered now - not only for me but for all my generation. We have never recaptured that mood; and we never shall." After Edward was killed in 1918, Roland's father observed: "Dear Vera. Not many women have suffered more than she has suffered in this war."

MAY MORNING

THE RISING SUN SHONE WARMLY ON THE TOWER,
INTO THE CLEAR PURE HEAVEN THE HYMN ASPIRED
PIERCINGLY SWEET. THIS WAS THE MORNING HOUR
WHEN LIFE AWOKE, WITH SPRING'S CREATIVE POWER,
AND THE OLD CITY'S GREY TO GOLD WAS FIRED.

SILENTLY REVERENT STOOD THE NOISY THRONG;
UNDER THE BRIDGE THE BOATS IN CLOSE ARRAY
LAY MOTIONLESS. THE CHORISTERS' FAR SONG
FADED UPON THE BREEZE IN ECHOES LONG.
SWIFTLY I LEFT THE BRIDGE AND RODE AWAY.

STRAIGHT TO A LITTLE WOOD'S GREEN HEART I SPED,
WHERE COWSLIPS GREW, BENEATH WHOSE GOLD WITHDRAWN
THE FRAGRANT EARTH PEEPED WARM AND RICHLY RED;
ALL TRACE OF WINTER'S CHILLING TOUCH HAD FLED,
AND SONG-BIRDS USHERED IN THE YEAR'S BRIGHT MORN.

I HAD MET LOVE NOT MANY DAYS BEFORE,
AND AS IN BLISSFUL MOOD I LISTENING LAY
NONE EVER HAD OF JOY SO FULL A STORE.
I THOUGHT THAT SPRING MUST LAST FOR EVERMORE,
FOR I WAS YOUNG AND LOVED, AND IT WAS MAY.

NOW IT IS MAY AGAIN, AND SWEETLY CLEAR
PERHAPS ONCE MORE ASPIRES THE LATIN HYMN
FROM MAGDALEN TOWER, BUT NOT FOR ME TO HEAR.
I TOIL FAR DISTANT, FOR A DARKER YEAR
SHADOWS THE CENTURY WITH MENACE GRIM.

I WALK IN WAYS WHERE PAIN AND SORROW DWELL,
AND RUIN SUCH AS ONLY WAR CAN BRING,
WHERE EACH LIVES THROUGH HIS INDIVIDUAL HELL,
FRAUGHT WITH REMEMBERED HORROR NONE CAN TELL,
AND NO MORE IS THERE GLORY IN THE SPRING.

AND I AM WORN WITH TEARS, FOR HE I LOVED
LIES COLD BENEATH THE STRICKEN SOD OF FRANCE;
HOPE HAS FORSAKEN ME, BY DEATH REMOVED,
AND LOVE THAT SEEMED SO STRONG AND GAY, HAS PROVED
A POOR CRUSHED THING, THE TOY OF CRUEL CHANCE.

OFTEN I WONDER, AS I GRIEVE IN VAIN,
IF, WHEN THE LONG, LONG FUTURE YEARS CREEP SLOW,
AND WAR AND TEARS ALIKE HAVE CEASED TO REIGN,
I EVER SHALL RECAPTURE, ONCE AGAIN,
THE MOOD OF THAT MAY MORNING, LONG AGO.

Nigel Steel is principal historian for IWM's First World War Centenary Programme

VC BRAVERY

The modest hero who ‘only did his job’



BILLY LEEFE ROBINSON VC WAS THE FIRST MAN TO DOWN A ‘ZEPPELIN’. **MICHAEL ASHCROFT** TELLS HIS STORY

The Great War was the first conflict in which British civilians came face-to-face with indiscriminate death and destruction on a regular basis while the nation’s fighting forces were absent at the Front. This was because of the regular use by Germany of Zeppelin airships and Gotha aircraft for bombing raids, often at night.

The Zeppelins in particular were much feared and initially, after being switched from reconnaissance to bombing missions, they seemed invincible. In fact, they eventually caused more psychological damage to the civilian population than they did physical damage. Largely because of the limited attack capability of early military aircraft, shooting down a Zeppelin became a formidable challenge for the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), forerunner of the RAF.

One of those given the task of defending his fellow countrymen from Zeppelin attacks was William Leefe Robinson. Leefe Robinson, known as Billy, was born on his father’s coffee estate in Tollideta, South Coorg, India, on July 14, 1895. At school he was never particularly academic but he was sporty. In December 1914, he was commissioned into the Worcestershire Regiment and, in March the following year, he joined the RFC in France as an observer.

However, he was invalided home after being wounded over Lille. By September 1915, he had not only recovered but had qualified as a pilot and this led to postings to various Home Defence Squadrons. In a letter home, he explained his passion for flying: “You have no idea how beautiful it is above the clouds... I love flying more and more every day, and the work is even more interesting than it was.”

Lt Leefe Robinson had his first chance to shoot down a Zeppelin in April 1916 but could not get his aircraft into position for an effective attack. However, on the night of September 2/3 he was given another chance, after taking off from Sutton’s Farm airfield in Essex in his BE2c 2963 aircraft at 11.08pm on a routine “search and find” operation. Leefe Robinson’s first two hours in the air, flying at around 10,000ft between the airfield and Joyce Green, were uneventful. But at 1.10am he saw a Zeppelin caught in two searchlight beams over Woolwich, south-east London, and he set off in pursuit but lost it in the thick cloud.

Searchlights over Finsbury in north London had spotted another airship – one of 16 that night on a mass raid – and anti-aircraft guns opened fire. By this point, Leefe Robinson was beginning to run low on fuel but he gave chase and was joined, in another aircraft, by lieutenants Mackay and Hunt. Anti-aircraft fire lit up the sky but the airship unloaded its bombs, which enabled it to gain height.

As Leefe Robinson closed in on his target, he emptied two drums of ammunition into the airship, but it flew on unhindered, still seemingly indestructible. He broke off but then made another attack from astern, firing his last drum into the airship’s twin rudders.

At last, his secret new incendiary ammunition took effect. First a reddish glow appeared inside the airship, then, moments later, it burst into flames. Thousands of Londoners looked up and cheered as the airship plunged from the sky, eventually crashing into a field in Cuffley, Hertfordshire. (In fact, Leefe



HEROIC STORIES

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a Tory peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story behind Billy Leefe Robinson’s VC appears in his book *Heroes of the Skies*. For more information visit: www.heroesoftheskies.com. Lord Ashcroft’s VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information visit: www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For more information on Lord Ashcroft’s work, visit: www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter: @LordAshcroft.



GETTY. © IWM (Q 6946A)



Robinson had shot down one of the German army’s wooden-frame Schütte-Lanz machines – not strictly a Zeppelin – but the technicality was lost on both the public and politicians.)

Leefe Robinson landed back at Sutton’s Farm at 2.45am after a gruelling patrol of more than three and a half hours. He was lifted shoulder high to the edge of the airfield but, despite being exhausted and numb with cold, was then ordered to write his report. His fitters were alarmed to see that part of the aircraft’s central top wing and machine-gun wire guard had been shot away. After finishing his report, the pilot collapsed on his bed and fell asleep but, as he dozed, the ecstatic scenes of “Zepp Sunday” were already under way all over London.

Leefe Robinson’s exploits quickly made the headlines and for many people it was the finest moment in the war. Photographs of the pilot appeared in newspapers and magazines and he became instantly recognised all over the country. Britain’s wartime leaders realised that the shooting down of the first “Zeppelin” over the UK had massive propaganda potential and the opportunity should not be wasted. Such was the acclaim that, on a wave of public enthusiasm, he was awarded his VC in record time: little more than 48 hours after the event. Furthermore, he was the first man to be awarded a VC for an action in – or to be precise over – the United Kingdom. His VC was one of only 19 awarded to airmen during the Great War.

Leefe Robinson also received many honours and rewards, but his most cherished moment came when he was invited to Windsor Castle, where King George V presented him with his VC on the same day that the 16 crew members from the airship he shot down were buried. His VC had been gazetted just two days after his actions and he was presented with his decoration a mere three days after that. On the day that his award was announced, the *Evening News* had bills all over London proclaiming: “The Zepp: VC for airman”. Leefe Robinson was delightfully modest about his courage, telling well-wishers: “I only did my job.”

The report by Leefe Robinson, who had been flying with 39 Squadron, to his commanding officer on his historic flight was later made public. He wrote of the moment that he succeeded in downing the airship: “Remembering my last failure [minutes earlier], I sacrificed height (I was at about 12,900ft) for speed and nosed down in the direction of the Zeppelin. I

SKY’S THE LIMIT

Clockwise from far left: Billy Leefe Robinson; a German navy Zeppelin in flames during an air raid; the escape tunnel at Holzminden prison camp through which 29 officers escaped in July 1918; Leefe Robinson’s service medals

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saw shells bursting and night tracers flying around it. When I drew closer I noticed that the anti-aircraft aim was too high or too low; also a good many shells burst about 800ft behind – a few tracers went right over. I could hear the bursts when about 3,000ft from the Zeppelin.

“I flew about 800ft below it from bow to stem and distributed one drum among it (alternate New Brock and Pomeroy). It seemed to have no effect; I therefore moved to one side and gave them another drum along the side – also without effect. I then got behind it and by this time I was very close – 500ft or less below, and concentrated one drum on one part (underneath rear). I was then at a height of 11,500ft when attacking the Zeppelin. I had hardly finished the drum before I saw the part fired at glow. In a few seconds the whole rear part was blazing.”

In a letter to his parents dated October 22, 1916, Leefe Robinson reflected on his fame and told how he shot down the airship. “When the colossal thing actually burst into flames of course it was a glorious sight – wonderful! It literally lit up all the sky around and me as well of course – I saw my machine as in the fire light – and sat still half dazed staring at the wonderful sight before me, not realising to the least degree the wonderful thing that had happened!

“My feelings? Can I describe my feelings? I hardly know how I felt as I watched the huge mass gradually turn on end, and – as it seemed to me – slowly sink, one glowing, blazing mass – I gradually realised what I had done and grew wild with excitement... As I daresay you have seen in the papers – babies, flowers and hats have been named after me, also poems and prose have been dedicated to me – oh, it’s too much! I am recognised wherever I go about Town now, whether in uniform or multi – the city police salute me, the waiters, hall porters and pages of hotels and restaurants bow and scrape – visitors turn round and stare – oh it’s too thick!”

Leefe Robinson’s good looks, fame and riches – including well over £4,000 in donations from well-wishers – also meant that he was hotly pursued by many young women. However, he was sent to France as a flight commander shortly after being awarded the VC, and in early 1917, while leading six of the new Bristol fighters, encountered Manfred von Richthofen, the so-called “Red Baron”, leading a flight of five Albatros fighters.

The short, fierce encounter that followed led to four of the Bristols being shot down, including that of Leefe Robinson.

After he was taken prisoner, the Germans realised his famous identity and his life was made all the harder for it. Having tried to escape four times in as many months, Leefe Robinson was court-martialled and sentenced to a month in solitary confinement. He was later taken to the notorious Holzminden prison camp. He was one of the youngest and most brutalised prisoners and his health suffered.

On December 14, 1918, following the end of the war, Leefe Robinson was returned from captivity but by then he was desperately weak. Subsequently, he contracted influenza, his health deteriorated and he became delirious, reliving the horrors of his time in captivity. On New Year’s Eve, Leefe Robinson – one

“WHEN THE COLOSSAL THING BURST INTO FLAMES IT WAS A GLORIOUS SIGHT, WONDERFUL!”

of the greatest heroes of the war – died, aged just 23. He is buried at the cemetery extension to All Saints churchyard in Harrow Weald, north-west London.

Leefe Robinson’s achievements have been marked in several ways since his death. Among them was a monument near where the airship crashed. This was renovated in 1986 and again in 2009. Another monument was erected in 1921, in East Ridgeway, Cuffley. A road, Robinson Close, was named after him in Hornchurch, Essex (where the original Sutton’s Farm airfield was).

In April 2010, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Great Northern Route extension that connects Grange Park to Cuffley, the First Capital Connect rail company named a Class 313 train Captain William Leefe Robinson VC.

I bought Leefe Robinson’s VC at Christie’s in 1988 and his gallantry and service medals are on display at the Imperial War Museum in London. Among the memorabilia that came with his medals is a “lucky” bent halfpenny that, when in his pocket, was hit by a bullet when Leefe Robinson was shot and wounded over Lille in 1915.



WARTIME SPIRIT

The jokes that hid the terror of the trenches



PATRICK BISHOP ON HOW SOLDIERS AND CIVILIANS TURNED TO HUMOUR TO GET THROUGH THE HORRORS OF WAR

To the ordinary soldier, humour was as essential an armament as his rifle or his bayonet. It was a defensive weapon, vital to staving off the despair or descent to insanity that were the logical reactions to the surrounding hellishness.

Some flavour of it has come down to us in postcards, diaries and letters – and above all in the newspapers all sides produced for their fighting men. It was only when the soldiers themselves were directly involved in producing them that something like the real jokes emerged.

The underlying tone is often sceptical. Whatever illusions combatants might have harboured about the glory of war did not survive long in the filth and futility of the trenches. But there is also sentimentality and a cheerful resignation that, to modern eyes, seems almost incredible.

The Germans had “front newspapers” which emanated at corps and divisional level, and “trench newspapers” circulating among a single battalion and edited by soldiers. It is in the latter that you seem to hear the authentic voice of the German infantryman, cheerful and earthy, often relating salacious accounts of off-duty sexual shenanigans. French humour expressed in print and postcard seems more mordant by comparison. One cartoon advertised the variety of sports available at the front, starting with “hunting” showing a soldier crouched at a loophole. “Open season all year round,” it reads. “No permit required.”

The automatic reverence hitherto shown to authority was eroded by the experience of war. The process is evident in the pages of the *Wipers Times*, the newspaper produced by the British 24th Division between February 1916 and December 1918.

The tone is caught in a mock advertisement which asked: “Are You A Victim of Optimism?” It went on to list telltale signs of the “dread disease” including waking up in the morning “feeling that all is going well for the Allies” and believing “our leaders are competent to conduct the war to a successful conclusion”. The ad went on to propose a cure for the condition: “Two days in our establishment will effectually eradicate all traces of it from your system.”

Such satire confronted reality. Sentimentality provided an escape from it. Many of the postcards produced for soldiers to send back to their loved ones offered a rosy view of the trenches in which troubles were borne lightly and the answer to the question “are we downhearted?” was a resounding “no!” They are exemplified by the work of Bruce Bairnsfather, who was shell shocked during the Second Battle of Ypres but presented a light-hearted version of life at the front through his curmudgeonly leading character, Old Bill, and his companions in misfortune, Bert and Alf.

It is difficult at this distance in time to know to what extent the recipients of these cards believed the image that was being portrayed. Some of the imagery is accurate. A private in the Royal Fusiliers, Fergus Mackain, depicted humorous situations at various stages of the soldiers’ tour – Training, Up at Base, Up the Line and Out on Rest. The locations are fairly faithfully portrayed, with flooded trenches and shattered trees. Unsurprisingly, there are no decaying corpses or well-fed rats.

At home, cartoonists acknowledged some of the realities of the Western Front. They were careful, though, to portray the soldiers’ existence as hard but cheerfully borne. WK Haselden produced a strip cartoon series in the *Daily Mirror*, a paper aimed at the modern woman, called “Trials of a Wounded Tommy”. It shows the adventures of Bill and Tom,

HAVING A LAUGH

Clockwise from top left: the ‘School of Destruction’ in 1916; poster for a play based on Bruce Bairnsfather’s cartoons; Major Mick Mannock VC, French postcard captioned ‘The Kaiser’s Last Soldiers’; French troops impersonating Germans; cheer in the trenches and a dog dressed as a German



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The Hebridean crofter who went to war and saw hope and courage in a skylark

Donald MacDonald grew up speaking Gaelic on the remote Hebridean island of South Uist and knowing nothing of Britain. Yet when the guns of August 1914 began to boom, he lied about his age to fight for an empire to which he felt no real ties of loyalty or kinship. He served from the first days of the war to the last, and was wounded three times.

MacDonald left behind a wonderfully observed account of the experience of war, seen through the eyes of a man who had a full measure of the human qualities found in the inhabitants of the Scottish Highlands and islands. He was proud, independent, hard-working and incredibly tough. The lofty sentiments that politicians and generals invoked to justify the slaughter are nowhere to be found on his lips, or those of his comrades. The closest he comes to offering a motivation is when, while briefly stationed in Dublin, he went to Mass and was accosted afterwards by some of the congregation. “They asked where I had come from. When I said South Uist, they said: ‘That is a Catholic island. Why are you fighting for England?’ I said that I was in the war for Scotland.”

It was the spirit of adventure, though, that first drove young Donald on. In 1913, aged 15, he ran away to join the Cameron Highlanders. He was released after six months and went to sea, but when he learnt of the outbreak of war, he returned to the regiment and was disappointed when he was not in the first drafts to be sent to France.

He eventually left Inverness for the front in September, aged 16 years and eight months. “The journey to Southampton was long and weary. When we stopped at any station for food, we were cheered by crowds waving small flags and handkerchiefs. One young girl shouted ‘Kill all the bastards, they have killed my brother’. Someone replied ‘That’s what we intend to do’. At Le Havre French girls snipped pieces off their kilts.”

In mid-October, he was caught up in the battle around La Bassée as the German and British armies raced for the Channel. In a lull in the fighting, he and a friend from Lewis, Angus MacDonald, were ordered into no-man’s land to watch for an enemy attack. While waiting to be relieved, they refreshed themselves from a canteen filled with rum.

“We started drinking. It was the strongest and best rum I ever tasted and it soon began to take effect. We took our packs off and sat on them. After a while Angus said: ‘Do you know this song Donald?’ and began to sing at the top of his voice *Leaving Stormo-way Pier*. I joined in. The noise we were making was giving our position away to the enemy. I distinctly heard the order at the back of us for two men to go out there and have us shot for being drunk and giving the position away to the enemy. I sobered up as if a bucket of ice water were thrown over me... I said ‘Come on Angus, let’s get out of here.’ They rejoined their comrades and escaped punishment.

The next dawn, the Camerons attacked the German lines. A Company was in the lead supported by B Company, to which MacDonald belonged. The first enemy trench was occupied without a fight. There was no room in it for B Company who returned to the start line. “We were settling down there when there was a huge explosion in the trench and all of A Company was blown sky high,” he wrote. “The Germans had left the trench mined. The awful sight is still in my mind and when everything came down, the bushes and hedges were covered with pieces of khaki and tartan kilts.”

Then the shelling started. Angus was hit in the arm and, as Donald was bandaging it, a stretcher bearer told him he had been wounded, too. “I looked and there was the calf of my right leg blown off. I remember it was funny seeing the diamond hose top with a chunk of flesh sticking to it lying on my shoe.”

Once recovered, he returned to the regimental



COURTESY NIEL PAUL

“WHY ARE YOU FIGHTING FOR ENGLAND, THEY ASKED. I SAID I WAS IN THE WAR FOR SCOTLAND

headquarters at Invergordon where his name immediately came up to join the next draft to France. There were no volunteers any more. “Gone were the days when they only had to blow the bugle and the whole camp fell in for a draft. The wounded, as they came back, told their own story...”

Donald had a temporary reprieve when it was discovered he was not yet 18. But soon after his birthday he was back again, fighting in the Battle of the Somme. He would stay on to the bitter end, being badly wounded on two more occasions, only to be returned to the front line once he was fit for duty.

Despite the danger, hardships and vileness of trench life Donald never shirked his duty, though he had no belief in the virtue of the fight. “Almost everything is mean and rotten in war, but those responsible in the first place bear the blame,” he said.

When it came to an end, it took a full day for the news to reach the front lines. On the night of November 11, he was trying to sleep when he heard bagpipes playing. “Someone said: ‘Why did he get the rum? Maybe they are giving some for this battle tomorrow.’ Then we made out there was more than one piper. With only my tunic on, I dived for the stairs and the road in front. It was packed with troops, shouting, singing and yelling. I asked a chap what was it all about? He did not know, he was just following the crowd. I saw an officer that I knew. I asked him. He said ‘Don’t you know?’ ‘No, sir’. ‘Well, boy, the war is over.’ The moonlit night was calm and we walked, sang and yelled as an uncontrolled mob behind the pipers.”

Despite the horror he had witnessed, Donald’s optimism somehow survived. He wrote: “In a heavy bombardment with death and desolation around you, your heart pounding like a piston, thinking the next shell would be yours, you thought the end of the world had come and when the shelling stopped, the brave little skylark rose high above us with her sweet song of hope and courage, you felt there is a God.”

WHAT DID YOU DO IN THE WAR?

On the home front: Mrs Churchill and the YMCA

Few organisations were as greatly involved in the civilian war effort as the YMCA, providing a crucial and comforting link between the home and fighting fronts.

During the First World War, the YMCA helped servicemen to keep in touch with their families, sending 650,000 photos of loved ones to men on active service and providing free writing paper to all troops.

On the front line, during training and in PoW camps, YMCA huts – of which there were more than 200 in France and Flanders, many of them under shell fire – offered hot drinks, cigarettes and biscuits. The organisation also escorted the families of terminally ill soldiers to France and provided a safe place to stay, so they could visit loved ones before it was too late.

Among those who volunteered to work for the YMCA was Clementine Churchill – born Clementine Hozier in Mayfair in 1885 and later to become the wife of Sir Winston and a life peeress in her own right.

Clementine met Winston at a dinner party in 1908 and, within months, they were married. The following year, they had the first of their five children – the fourth born just four days after the war ended.

While busying herself as a mother, Clementine volunteered for the YMCA, organising canteens for munitions workers in north-east London. On occasion, she was accompanied by her husband, who, though an MP, served for several months on the Western Front.

Clementine and Winston appeared together at one such event at Enfield Lock in September 1915, where Winston addressed the crowds, telling them of the need to support munitions workers. “There is an unbroken chain,” Winston rallied, “between the lady serving at the counter and the man who is busy finishing rifles, his comrade who carries them over

the sea and the soldier reaching back to get the cartridge by which the tides of barbarism may be stayed.”

Clementine had gathered together a group of “local ladies”, according to a YMCA newspaper report at the time, to help run the huts, providing beds, baths, refreshment and recreation for exhausted munitions workers who already worked overtime and would travel for hours to get to work.

“They gave time, thought and strength without stint,” says the report of Clementine and her volunteer cohorts, dressed demurely in ankle-length blue and white uniforms. “They are all anxious to do their share for the country and they feel that here is a sphere open to them in exactly the same way as Red Cross service offers a chance of direct help.”

Mrs Churchill’s role was not just in formally declaring such recreation huts open, but in watching their progress as they were built, turning pasture land into sites that housed sleeping cubicles that volunteers would deck out with curtains and pianos. She also worked day and night shifts on the sites.

Although Clementine’s involvement was limited to London, the YMCA’s volunteers could be found in huts and dugouts on the edge of battlefields, offering biscuits and solace to wounded soldiers. As one soldier recalled in August 1917 on missing his train, in the pouring rain, on his way back to the front: “We then had my first experience of what the YMCA really means to us out here – how we blessed it! We had a party of 50 men and 20 officers given hot coffee and a place to sleep.”

It was thanks to women such as Clementine Churchill – whose life was played out mostly on the public stage by Winston’s side for the next several decades – that troops could be reminded of such home comforts.

Zoe Dare Hall



GETTY



MUNITIONS SUPPORT

Clockwise from far left, Clementine and Winston Churchill at Hendon Air Pageant, an American soldier at YMCA ‘Eagle Hut’ on the Strand, London in 1917, making last-minute repairs at the London YMCA and YMCA volunteers at a public dugout shelter in London, 1918



POST BOX

We have received a magnificent postbag and inbox of letters, documents and stories in response to our request for readers’ First World War memories. Here are just a few of the many we would like to share with you. Please keep them coming.

Write to: First World War, Telegraph Media Group, 111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0DT or email firstworldwar@telegraph.co.uk

PIONEERING WOMEN AT WAR

Caroline Skeates from Horsham, West Sussex, writes of her mother Joan Mackern’s incredible wartime adventures, both on the home front and as a driver in France. Born in 1898, Joan (right) contracted meningitis as a baby and was too weak to attend school, but she learnt in her teens to drive, service cars and make spare parts. She was also

determined to get into the newly founded Woman’s Legion and served with them in London and France, for which she was decorated for bravery. She was one of the few women to be honoured with a military award.

“Joan was accepted into the Legion while the war was still in progress and on her first day took over a Studabaker car and drove the Inspector of Munitions all over London and the Home Counties, visiting factories and munition sites. She also collected

colonels and majors from their homes and drove them to the Woolwich Arsenal,” says Skeates

“One evening, she left the Arsenal with a messenger holding dispatches and Captain Mills as escort. As they approached Westminster Bridge, the air-raid sirens went off and the anti-aircraft guns went off in all directions and the Zeppelin came over. Joan realised her rear tyre had been blown off. She tried to change the wheel but the brace would not grip, so she pulled off the remaining bits of tyre and drove on. A bomb came down by Cleopatra’s Needle and shells burst all round them, but she continued to the Ministry of Munitions in Northumberland Avenue. She and Captain Mills had to carry the messenger, who had been invalided out of the army with shell shock and was collapsed in fear, into the Ministry with the dispatches in total darkness.

“Shortly after, Joan was asked to parade with her vehicle and other women

war workers at Buckingham Palace for King George V and Queen Victoria. The following day, she was on the front page of a Sunday pictorial saying she had been awarded the MBE, ‘for courage and devotion to duty whilst in grave personal danger.’”

As Skeates explains, that was in December 1917 and Joan promptly left for duty in France, landing in Boulogne, where “her first job was to drive an ambulance in convoy from the clearing stations and

field hospitals, taking the most severely injured to a railway siding near Aubigny. On arrival, the train was often not there. Many of the men did not make it back to England.”

Joan drove German PoWs from their camps to their workplaces and was moved to Valenciennes to drive Major Moulton-Barrett – part of the family of Barretts of Wimpole Street. She drove many miles “to inspect camps and to visit areas of temporary burial to list

those known and arrange the transport of bodies and bones to where it was hoped the permanent war grave cemeteries would be.

“More than once she had to drive to Passchendale and she described it as a place of hell on earth... nothing but a sea of mud, shell holes, dug-outs, craters, half-buried tanks, pill boxes, a nightmare area.”

After the war, Joan founded the first all-woman touring garage – the famous X-Garage – in London with three war-time colleagues, qualified as a radiographer from Guy’s Hospital in 1933, adopted a child when she was a 40-year-old single mother and worked as a radiographer under air raid conditions in the Second World War. She was, says Skeates, “a woman way before her time in everything she achieved’.

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Rowland Jepson, from Brecon in Wales, encloses pages copied from a notebook belonging to his grandmother, Margaret Brace, who worked as a



nurse at Myrtle Auxiliary Hospital in Liverpool from 1915-1918, treating wounded soldiers. “In the notebook, many soldiers wrote notes to her or drew pictures of her,” says Rowland. Here’s a cartoon (above) drawn for Nurse Brace by Private Claude F Falconer, 11th Corps Cyclist Battalion, on August 1, 1917.

➡➡➡

Eileen Fardon, from Portishead, Bristol, tells “the remarkable story of my grandmother (right)

from a little one-street village in Suffolk and her journey to France at the end of the war.

“Bessie Bloomfield ran the post office and general store in Coney Weston near Bury St Edmunds. As the postmistress, she would have taken down the telegrams herself regarding her son. We have all these telegrams. After learning John had a minor wound in the elbow, everything went quiet until after Armistice Day when the telegram informed that John was seriously ill.

“My grandmother – who had, I believe, only once been out of the village to London – then set out, in the clothes that she stood up in, for France. It was so foggy that the pony and trap could only walk to the railway station at Thetford. I believe that she was met by the Red Cross or Salvation Army and put on the boat train for Abbeville. She arrived before Uncle John died. I believe that she was a great help in the hospital.

“By great coincidence, I discovered that she was mentioned in the book

From an Abbeville Window by Marguerite Fedden. There is a chapter titled a ‘Soldier’s Burying’.

“My family had moved to Bristol and on a bus to visit me in Keynsham, my mother struck up conversation with an author, Marguerite Fedden. Visiting my grandmother in Coney Weston, my mother recounted the conversation to Bessie, who rose from the couch, crossed to the bookcase and produced the book by this person on the bus. Until then, we had

no idea of nanny’s journey. “Nanny lived well into her nineties – but I gather that she never whistled again after John died.”

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KEEPING THE SPIRIT HIGH

Hubert Allen from Hatfield has letters home from his father, Albert (right), 1889-1963, who joined the 1/5 Leicestershire Regiment in August 1914, was wounded in 1916 on the



Somme and Gommecourt, then returned to the Front in 1918.

Albert’s letters from the Front are striking in their upbeat tone. One dated August 15, 1915 is sent from The Salient, Ypres – Zillebeke.

“Dear Edith,” Albert Allen writes to his sister, “We get plenty of excitement now as we had 12 days in the trenches, then we came out to where we are now, just behind the firing line in dugouts. We are in support for if there is an attack. We go in the fire trenches tomorrow night again. We had a busy time dodging trench mortar and aerial torpedoes. We call them ‘sausages’ as we can see them coming – they are shot from the trenches and come toppling over high in the air. We have to watch... then scoot out of the way... We hold our hands over our ears to deaden the sound.”

He tells of one “sausage” that touched his arm. “You ought to have seen us move. If it had exploded as soon as it dropped, I should have been scattered about Belgium... I got off



with a few bruises and a splitting headache and my inside turned upside down, but I am all right today. “I am putting a bit of shrapnel in as a souvenir. I wondered if you could have a pin put in the copper piece and have it for a brooch,” he writes. “I got it when we went to Ypres. You could have the letters put on the spaces in the front – like this Y.P.R.E.S.1915. The other is a bit that hit me in the trenches. Of course it is only a bit. There are pieces about as large as a half a

brick, but I cannot send those in a letter.”

He remains in ebullient spirit when reporting back from Vimy Ridge on March 30, 1916. After his accounts of being knee-deep in mud in the trenches, the biting cold and the loss of fellow soldiers, Albert says: “Don’t think I’m grumbling when you read this. I am only just telling you what it’s like as I can stick it for years yet. It is the worst for the youngsters that keep joining us. There is a lot of swollen feet as standing in water day after day, it is impossible to keep our feet warm.”

And in Lens on May 21, 1917, he writes: “The weather is champion here. I often think how nice it would be to have a game of cricket away from these guns.” He adds: “There was some nice lettuce in our garden. We fetched some in at night. It is a place that was occupied by civilians not long ago. They had left a lot of furniture, chairs etc. The places round here have been knocked about. Our street has escaped very well. They have only knocked the roofs off.”

NEXT ISSUE

● It’ll all be over by Christmas, they promised. And they were wrong. Read all about Christmases throughout the First World War, from the famous truce and football match of 1914 to the battle victory in far-away fields that was considered a Yuletide present to the nation. ● Don’t forget to send us your photos and memories. Write to: First World War, Telegraph Media Group, 111 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0DT or email firstworldwar@telegraph.co.uk



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