

COURAGE

Charlie volunteered to fight for King and Country in 1916. His 3 older brothers had done so at the outbreak of war and now he decided it was his duty to follow them and, having worked on the farm, he was strong, fearless, and looked much older than his 16 years on this Earth. He was also eager for adventure. 3 months later he arrived on French soil. 2 weeks later he was dead, together with 2 of his brothers in the blood stained mud of the Somme. His remaining brother, Arthur, was shipped back home, his visible wounds patched up and was back out in France within a few short weeks despite being barely able to string 2 words together. He was killed the first time he was sent over the top again. There was no courage in what any of them did. Just the innocence of youth mixed with sheer terror followed by perpetual silence.

Otto was a schoolteacher and together with his wife and 2 small children, was living in rural Southern Germany when the war started. Although he didn't want to leave his family, he was convinced by the propaganda that he should step up and defend his country against these foreigners who, it was said, would invade their land and their culture, changing it forever. When he arrived in France he was already weary beyond description. He wasn't a fighter and had never lifted a finger in anger against anyone in his life. Just 2 days before, on Xmas day, they'd laid down their weapons and played football with the British troops as if they were brothers, which, in reality, they were. Now, all that was forgotten as he looked into the frightened and crazed eyes staring out from the mud stained visage charging towards him and raised his own rifle, bayonet fixed, and charged screaming. Within seconds both young men lost their futures and lay bleeding in the mud, their bodies never returning home. Neither of their deaths made a scrap of difference other than to their grieving families. He hadn't felt courageous at any time that he was at war, but he had felt scared and lost all the time since he'd left home – except for that brief time on Xmas day.

Ursula came from an upper middle class family and her brothers and male cousins had all been officer class before the war started, meaning she felt compunction to do something to help the war effort and support the lads on the front who were fighting for her freedom. Factory work or staying at home knitting warm socks wasn't her thing so she volunteered to help out at a field hospital a few miles back from the front line in France. After all, she could bandage wounds as well as the next girl she thought and she could drive an ambulance. Nothing could have prepared for what she saw on that first day; no cuts, scrapes and splinters here but young men, barely out of school, screaming with pain from limbs blown off, gunshot wounds, shrapnel and the sheer horror of what they'd witnessed happening to their mates around them. By the end of her first day she was numb with tiredness and shock, covered with blood and worse, and still the ambulances came and stretchered the broken bodies and souls into the tents. She wasn't at all sure she had the courage to face another day.

Ruth had waved her husband off from the station just 6 months after they were married on a bitterly cold February day when the world was still at peace. Of course, he hadn't need to volunteer but, the clever War Department orchestrated peer pressure meant that he felt obligated to do what the rest of his mates in town were doing, despite the fact that Ruth was carrying their first child. He was, he told them, fighting for the future of his unborn baby. He had only been gone for 3 months when she got the letter saying that he had been killed in action and that he had died a hero trying to save his fellow soldiers, his friends, his schoolmates. There was a medal for bravery. 2 weeks later a letter arrived from France, stained with mud. It was from her husband, written just after he'd arrived in France, telling her of his hopes for their future together, telling her that he couldn't say where he was going next, telling her that he was terrified. He also told her that he loved them both. She went upstairs and sat next to the cot where their newborn baby lay asleep and read the letter to him, telling him that his Daddy had loved him. She didn't know where she would get the courage to carry on.

Albert didn't volunteer when war broke out in 1914 despite most of his family and friends having done so. He wasn't comfortable with the idea of killing people, even those that were threatening him and his country as, surely, killing just begets killing. He had 2 years to think over his decision, defend it numerous times when questioned by family, friends and colleagues, until eventually almost no-one spoke to him. Conscription started in 1916 when the armed forces started to run out of volunteers and Albert received his call-up papers to which he declared that he was a conscientious objector resulting in the rest of his war being spent in prison. There he was treated worse than the 'real' criminals and, when he was released in 1918, he was disowned by family and friends alike. He'd needed the courage of his convictions to keep going whilst in prison and knew now that he'd need even more courage to move on with his life. And so, he left Britain behind him and went to live in the USA where no-one, he hoped would know him or judge him.

Gordon had worked down the coal mine since he was 13 years old alongside his Father who'd had to give up work when his lungs failed. He was 30 when war broke out and he secretly hoped he'd be called up to fight so that he could escape his life down the pit, as well as watching his Father cough up blood every day. So, he was devastated when he was told he was registered on the list of Reserved Occupations and would serve his country best by breaking his back and destroying his lungs daily mining the coal. If he'd have had the courage that his younger

brother had had then he'd have moved away years ago, but now he had no courage left. He cried himself to sleep that night to the sound of his Father's coughing.

Edwin had lived a long life albeit filled with horror and regrets and now, at this great age, he had nothing much else to do all day but sit and imagine how things might have been. He'd survived the First World War, unlike most of his friends who he'd left behind, dead in that hell-hole, and had gone on to marry his childhood sweetheart who'd waited for him to return as she'd promised. It wasn't long before she wished she hadn't. They'd had 4 children, and he'd outlived them all as he had all his friends and colleagues – he really was the only one left. He returned from the war a very different person but everyone thought that he just needed time and understanding to recover. However, no-one understood him and now it was too late. He couldn't bring himself to talk of the horrors inside his head and the guilt he felt for being one of the few who'd survived. There was no-one left to tell of how he would drink all the household money away of an evening and then return home to beat his wife, and children if they protested or simply got in the way. As they got older they learnt to hide but could never forgive him and when they left, his wife left too and he never saw or heard from them again. He had medals in the back of his drawer saying how courageous he'd been on the battlefield whereas all he felt was shame and hatred for what it had done to him and those whom he should have loved and cared for.

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