

Courage

Tales from the Great War

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the men and women of our armed forces past present and future. Those who are currently serving across the globe; the engineers helping to rebuild communities in the wake of natural disasters, those fighting piracy on the high seas, and those trying to bring peace where chaos once reigned.

It is dedicated to those who gave their today for our tomorrow, the men who fought in the trenches of the great war, and those who fought in the air, on the sea, and on the beaches and fields of Europe for a second time, a little over twenty years later to free the continent from the grip of an evil dictator.

To all of them we give our thanks...

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Introduction

As long as there have been human beings on this planet there has been conflict. Our individual differences, beliefs, and values bring variety, debate and discussion. Sadly, these very same differences that make life interesting can also lead to conflict. Reasonable people can often resolve these conflicts through negotiation and concession. Every now and again though, a person comes along who can never be reconciled, and will stop at nothing to achieve their aims.

Napoleon Bonaparte was one such person who was unflinching in his ambitions for European domination, and had he not been defeated on the battlefield, he may not have been satisfied with mere European domination. Adolf Hitler, another who had such conviction in his misguided beliefs that negotiating a satisfactory outcome for all parties was all but impossible from the start. War was inevitable. It is easy to argue that Neville Chamberlain was naïve to believe that Adolf Hitler wanted peace, when it was obvious to some that he was merely stalling the British while he picked off his neighbours one by one. He did the same with Russia, as Bonaparte had done before him.

A word I often associate with war is fear, and a man who goes into war without any fear must be a rare thing indeed. Most, if not all of us have fears. For some it is spiders, some people suffer from vertigo, and others from agoraphobia. Fear is our response to something that our brain perceives to be a threat, it is what kept us safe in the past, when danger lurked around every corner, and humans did not occupy the top spot in the food chain.

Our brain identifies what it sees as a threat and releases a burst of adrenaline into our blood stream, heightening our senses and reflexes, and prompting a fight or flight response, where we either stand and fight the threat, or run away from it. The problem with this response is that many things our brain perceives as a threat pose little, if any danger at all. Take the common house spider that invades our homes every winter. Some of these may be the size of the palm of your hand, but if we think rationally about it, what harm can they do? They are not venomous, and they are many times smaller than we are; they are far more afraid of us than we are of them, yet some people climb on the furniture at the mere sight of the eight-legged beast.

Despite this, in times of war we hear stories of men throwing themselves on top of a live grenade to save the lives of those around them or running into a hail of enemy bullets and artillery shells to recover the wounded. Whichever way you look at it, or however you try to rationalise things, a bullet is designed to do you harm, that is its sole purpose. So, what is it that makes people fight, and not take flight when faced with such obvious danger?

Some claim they were doing it for king and country, for others it is for the men around them, and for some it is a natural reaction; they simply follow their training and act on instinct. Whatever the reason may be, history is full of tales of extreme heroism; of people who charge the enemy knowing that they would probably not be coming back. For some it is a choice between dying where they stand, hiding in a bunker waiting for the enemy shells to hit, or dying trying to stop them, a hateful decision for any man to make.

The Great War in Europe lasted from the 28th of July 1914 to the 11th of November 1918. Hundreds of thousands of men fought over land, which was taken by one side, and then taken back by the other.

Sitting in mud filled trenches full of rats and disease, throwing artillery shells at each other and shooting at the first sign of movement before their massed columns would 'go over the top' and charge the enemy at the point of a bayonet. There were also the horrors of poison gas, which would leave men choking and blind.

There is no doubt the horrors the men faced in the trenches and the battlefields of mainland Europe, yet in their thousands they answered the call of duty, volunteering in their thousands to ship off to foreign fields to fight for king and country. It was not all glory and heroism, the threat of being shot for cowardice if they refused to go over the top left men with the choice of certain death at the hands of your own side, or likely death at the hands of the Germans. Faced with such an inhuman choice, most chose to take their chance with the enemy.

The tales in this book are of individual deeds of heroism carried out on the battlefields of the great war of 1914 to 1918. In the muddy trenches and blood-soaked fields of France and Belgium, on the North Sea and the vastness of the Atlantic Ocean, even deep beneath the waves. Tales of men who saw danger and charged head long into the fight.

Some would go on to have long and distinguished military careers, while others would not live to receive the honours bestowed on them.

Some, tragically, would later be forgotten by their country, and face a struggle to earn enough to feed themselves and their families, forgotten by their political leaders who sent them off to fight.

The First Great Escape

So far, we have talked of heroic acts by military men, those who volunteered to take up arms and fight the enemy on land and sea. This tale is a little different. At the outbreak of war, the Germans interred civilians of allied nations in an internment camp at Ruhleben on the outskirts of Berlin. Amongst the prisoners were footballers, journalists, artists and tourists, all of whom happened to be in Germany when war was declared.

Among the inmates at Ruhleben was Geoffrey Pike, a war correspondent who had travelled to Germany via Denmark on a false passport. He had spent the months leading up to the war travelling around Germany gathering information on Germany's preparations for war, listening to conversations amongst locals and witnessing first-hand Germany's mobilisation for war against Russia.

It was during his internment that Geoffrey met fellow Englishman Edward Falk. Despite the lack of success during previous escape attempts, Falk agreed to plan a breakout, the two men set to the task of gathering information and planning their escape.

On a Summer afternoon in July 1915 the two men crept into a shed used for storing sports equipment and hid under some tennis nets until nightfall. As darkness fell the two men crept out of their hiding place and managed to scale the perimeter fence. They hid nearby that night and then travelled to Berlin by Tram. In Berlin, the pair managed to purchase some clothes and disguise themselves as tourists.

Later they took a train to Bielefeld and from there, given the risks involved in passing through train stations, and using public transport, decided that they would walk the rest of the way to the Dutch border. Walking by night to avoid being spotted by German patrols and navigating by compass the two men made their way across western Germany towards the border with the Netherlands.

On many occasions the evening brought Summer thunderstorms, and the two men were regularly soaked to the skin at the start of their night-time trek. They would survive by eating potatoes and any other root vegetables they could find. They avoided roads wherever possible and crossed muddy fields and dark forests in order to avoid detection. The journey would take them two weeks.

At one point in their journey, they accidentally walked right through the grounds of a German powder factory, managing to walk right by the sleepy German night guard, consisting of local militia men. Had they been caught here; they may have been shot as spies. On another occasion they found that their resting point was right in the middle of a German cavalry exercise, but by luck more than anything else they avoided detection once more.

As the men approached the Dutch border, they agreed that when they came across any German border guards, they would make a run for the Dutch side and hope for the best. After crossing a patch of boggy ground, which was desperately hard going, they calculated that they must by now be within a short distance of the border. As they looked around, they spotted a figure that they believed to be a German soldier behind them.

The soldier was eyeing the two men curiously, and they felt certain that the game was up, what they failed to realise was that they had travelled several miles further than they thought, and the soldier was in fact Dutch. At first the soldier had taken the two men for smugglers but after listening to the two men's story he welcomed them warmly.

They were taken to an inn where they were fed and watered and given a bed for the night, before being handed over to the British Consul in the Morning, who arranged for their safe passage back to England.

George Chafer: Small in Stature, Big in Heart

George William Chafer, a man of not much more than five feet in height and of slight build, was born in Bradford on the 16th of April 1894. He was orphaned at an early age and in 1901 aged 7 he was living with his Grandparents in Epworth, Lincolnshire. He later moved back to Yorkshire, living with his Aunt Leah and Uncle Joshua in Sowerby Bridge, where he found work as a spinner.

George later found work as a weigh clerk at Silverwood Colliery, a coal mine between Thryberg and Ravenfield near Rotherham. He had to move out of his aunt and uncle's home in Sowerby bridge to be closer to the mine, and he found lodgings with a colleague and his wife in Rotherham.

In 1915 aged twenty George surprised his friends by stating that he was going to join the army. He was ridiculed for this because of his size and told that there was no way he could become a soldier.

This only served to strengthen his resolve and, undeterred, he signed up with the East Yorkshire Regiment and was posted to the 1st Battalion as a Private.

At Christmas, following his initial training with the regiment he was sent to France. As he was bidding farewell to the Daughter of a Mr and Mrs Reed, with whom he was living at the time, he joked that the next time she saw him he would probably be hopping around on crutches, a frighteningly accurate vision of George Chafer's future.

The fighting in France was fierce, but George Chafer was as brave and determined a man as any other in his unit. In June 1916, his battalion was being bombarded heavily by German artillery and facing constant attacks on their trenches. George was down in the trench when a messenger ran towards his location, just then a German shell hit nearby rendering the man unconscious and half burying him.

George knew that the message must be important, and without hesitation he grabbed the note from the unconscious man and leapt up onto the damaged parapet, running as fast as he could under heavy fire, he made his way towards the officers of his battalion.

Despite suffering serious leg wounds and choking on poison gas he managed to deliver the vital message, just as he handed it over, he collapsed from his wounds.

George was immediately evacuated, first to the coast and then back to England. He was treated at the Stobhill Military Hospital in Glasgow, where unfortunately his leg wound became infected. There was nothing more the doctors could do to save the leg and George was taken into surgery to have it amputated. He spent some time in hospital recovering before being demobilised in 1918.

George's heroics did not go unnoticed. He was awarded the Victoria Cross in August 1916, and in the same year he was awarded the Cross of St George by Imperial Russia. The small man with the big heart, who was mocked by his friends when he said he wanted to join the army had proved his doubters wrong. Sadly, his premonition that he would be hopping around on crutches on his return home had come true.

After demobilisation George showed that his disability had not affected his determination to succeed, and despite only having one leg he was determined to work in agriculture, as many of his family members had done before him.

To make himself more efficient in agriculture he attended several technical courses at agricultural college, harbouring hopes that he could become a farm bailiff on a large estate. When his disability prevented him from achieving this goal, he took over a milk round in the colliery area of Bramley in Rotherham.

The milk round was reasonably successful for a time, bringing George a modest income, but adversity was to strike once more. In 1926 there was a General strike; coal production was at an all-time low, and wages were falling as fast as the coal prices were. The strike led to a coal stoppage, and George's customers were struggling to pay for their milk.

George could shift the milk, but the lack of income meant that he was unable to buy supplies, and the business quickly became unviable. His next enterprise saw him use the small amount of capital retained from his milk round to become a poultry farmer. He later found work with the Ministry of Labour and National Service for 35 years, as well as serving as a local councillor and chairman of the Bramley Parish Council until his retirement in 1959.

George spent his life proving people wrong and showing that whatever happens in life it is possible to face it down with courage and determination.

He faced adversity on numerous occasions and faced it with a steely determination and a smile on his face. George William Chafer died in 1966 at Rotherham General Hospital. His medals are on display in the York Castle Museum.