We shall remember them!

The war to end all wars finished its deadly drama at 11am on the 11 November 1918. The total number of military casualties in World War I was about 40 million; estimates range from 15 to 19 million deaths with around 23 million wounded military personnel, ranking it among the deadliest conflicts in human history. To those of us reading these figures a hundred years later, I am sure all of us will have relatives who were affected by this human sacrifice. For myself it’s 61988 Private Thomas A. Jones of the Suffolk Regiment, a grandfather I never met, his death hastened by being gassed during trench warfare.

The battalion was the standard operational unit of all British Infantry during The Great War. In 1914, an infantry battalion was manned by 30 officers and 977 other ranks, making a total of 1,007. These numbers were halved by the Battle of Passchendale. Every battalion had a medical officer assisted by at least 16 stretcher-bearers. The medical officer was tasked with establishing a Regimental Aid Post near the front line. From here, the wounded were evacuated and cared for by men from a Field Ambulance in an Advanced Dressing Station. Once treated, casualties would be moved rearward several miles to the Casualty Clearing Station. This might be on foot or by a horse drawn wagon, motor ambulance, lorry or in some cases by light railway.

Once admitted to a Base Hospital, a soldier stood a reasonable chance of survival. The establishment of a General Hospital included 32 Medical Officers of the RAMC, 3 chaplains, 73 female nurses and 206 RAMC troops acting as orderlies. The hospitals increased their bed capacity to as many as 2,500 in 1917.

The tale of Gunner Towers

In 1917, Gunner William Towers, Field Artillery, was blown off his horse after casualty evacuation had started. (One of two he had charge of, each horse carried eight shells!) Landing on the floor, he was sure that the shrapnel wound to his knee wasn’t too bad. A blightly wound to get him home.

Two RAMC found him, tipped a bottle of iodine into the wound and wrapped a field dressing pad around the knee. The pain was horrific!

He was carried over the barren land until he was eventually passed down into an ex German underground hospital. Surrounded by hospital staff, his journey to theatres was swift: "A white mask over my face, the anaesthetic hit me and the next thing I knew, I was waking up on a train." The train was heading for Etaples Base Hospital.

"Here they fitted me into a Thomas splint, a round wooden ring with iron bars on a footrest. The pain in my knee was becoming terrible. When the nurses took the bandages off, the surgeon said ‘Oh, there’s fluid on the knee. We’ll tap that tonight.’ Off to theatre again, thank God for that! But when I woke up in the early hours of the morning, I thought, ‘Oh my God. My leg’s gone!’ They’d guillotined it off without saying a word. That day I prayed to die."

Finally home, via a lengthy evacuation route to Stockport General Hospital, met by his family, friends and future wife, William’s stump, now infected, was saved by nature, nurture, care and a certain Mr Fenwick.

"A surgeon who specialised in amputations who made me a proper stump. He did it and it was perfect! Everybody seeing it said: ‘What a beautiful job’.

100 years on, a death in theatres (Rodger & Atwal 2018), is considered a risk.

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