Opening extract from

The Ghost of the Trenches and Other Stories

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The Ghost of the Trenches

and other stories from the First World War

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Introduction: War Stories

What is a story, and why do people choose to tell stories and listen to them?

Well, quite simply, a story is a description or retelling of an event that is either real or imagined, told using a set pattern of words or themes and with a beginning, a middle and an end. Ever since people developed speech they have communicated in this way – it is the natural thing to do. Stories preserve the past, reveal the present and are part of the creation of the future. The stories we choose to tell, and the stories we choose to listen to, tell people who we are.

If you asked your grandparents about things they did when they were your age, they would probably tell you in a story. Here is an example:

One day in the 1950s, when I was just a boy, I went to stay with my grandfather, Edward Victor French, on his tiny Somerset farm. I was helping to muck out the barn where my grandfather kept the mare that pulled the plough, when I noticed a tin helmet hanging on a nail on an oak beam. I asked my grandfather about it. He told me that as a young man he had joined the Somerset Yeomanry, who were posted to Gallipoli in 1915, and that the tin helmet had kept him safe all the way through the war.

I asked my grandfather what had happened to his horse while he was away. He replied that the horse had gone to war too, but had also returned safely to that Somerset farm. After that, explained my grandfather, the brave horse enjoyed many happy days of retirement, being cared for by my grandfather's four daughters – one of whom was my mother, Mary Joyce.

Beyond that, my grandfather didn't talk much of his experiences in the war as, he said, the things he saw were so terrible. I do recall him making it clear that he didn't want me to play war games wearing that old tin helmet, although he would never say why.

Storytellers like my grandfather express their feelings within the stories they tell. Young men facing

great danger and adventure as soldiers in the First World War, far away from their families and homes, would tell each other stories in their quiet moments. Telling stories helped them to deal with their fears and to try and make sense of the things they were seeing and experiencing. Other stories would give them strength by reminding them of their home country and the family and friends they left behind. Other tales would reassure them that Good must triumph over Evil, as in the stories of Jack and the Giant, or Jack and the Devil, where Jack must always win. The British soldier, often referred to as 'Tommy Atkins', was everybody's 'Jack'.

Everybody has got at least one story to tell, and that's their own story. Of those lucky few who came home from the Great War, everyone returned with a different tale. Most of these contained some element of truth, but sometimes, as they were passed on from one mouth to the next, and one generation to the next, that truth became exaggerated, moulded and blended with increasing amounts of fiction. Legends were born and stories that were once personal became lodged in folklore.

Sadly, the last surviving 'Tommy' of the Great War, Harry Patch, died in 2009, so in writing this collection, we have had to delve through a written archive of

those who have long since left us, and draw upon the memories that were passed on to the children, and even grandchildren, of those who served. So as the proverb says, ‘if we stand tall it is because we are standing on the shoulders of those that have gone before’.

Taffy Thomas

1: The Ghost of the Trenches

This tale is inspired by a ghost story from the American Civil War told by US storyteller Dan Keding. The story features two ideas which are common in legends and folk tales about war. The first involves a soldier, who is setting off to war, being given a gift from a loved one. The gift later saves the soldier's life by deflecting an enemy bullet. The second idea, a scenario in which a soldier talks to a dead comrade, has been immortalised in the poem 'Strange Meeting' by Wilfred Owen, which follows this story.

Among the officers who graduated from the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst before the war was a particularly handsome young man who caught the eye of a young debutante. As they were both only eighteen years of age, the young couple

imagined that they had many long days of courting ahead of them.

However, only weeks after they met, something happened which altered not only their lives but also the lives of everyone around them. The Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated and his murder was used as justification for war. One country after the next stepped up to stand and fight alongside its allies, and within weeks peace in Europe was shattered. The Great War had begun.

Realising that it would not be long before he left for France to fight for his country, the young lieutenant, who felt that he would need some support from home, decided to marry his debutante.

A few months later, on the day before the lieutenant marched his platoon up the gangplank of the troop ship, the newlyweds had a quiet but sad farewell. The young man hugged his wife and gave her a sealed envelope. He told her that she was only to open it if he failed to return safely from the war.

Shedding a tear, she in return gave him a silver hip-flask engraved with a heart, their names in the centre, telling him it was filled with brandy, but that was to be kept for a rainy day. He put the flask in his khaki battledress breast pocket, over his heart.

During the years of fighting that followed, there were many times when the lieutenant, fearing for his life and missing his wife, touched his breast pocket and traced the reassuring outline of the hip-flask with his fingers. But he never opened it or touched a drop of the brandy inside.

Then, not long after his twenty-first birthday, he led his platoon over the top into the horror that was Passchendaele. Half of his men, some of them under the age of eighteen, were butchered in the first hail of German bullets. One bullet slammed into the young lieutenant's chest, denting the silver hip-flask, which deflected it. His wife's gift had saved his life.

Two hundred yards into No Man's Land, the young lieutenant discovered the mortally wounded body of an English corporal in a shell hole. Barely alive, the unfortunate soldier had had part of his face shot away. Nevertheless, he still tried to give the makings of a salute to his superior officer.

The lieutenant knelt by the dying corporal, discovering from his thick Lancashire accent that the dying man was of a Pals regiment: friends who decided to join the army and live or die together. The corporal asked the young lieutenant to stay with him as he was

afraid to die alone. Seeing the look in the wounded man's eyes, the senior officer knew that he had to do it, even if it put himself at risk.

The wounded soldier pulled a battered envelope from his pocket and asked the officer to deliver it when he returned to Blighty. Glancing at the envelope, the young lieutenant could see that the address written neatly on the front was of a cottage in a small Lancashire mill town. He assured the dying man that he would take care of it. Then he took the dented, treasured hip-flask from his breast pocket and shared the contents with the corporal, the brandy helping him as his life slipped away.

Some months later on his return to England (one of the lucky ones), the young lieutenant did not forget that he had a promise to a dead comrade to keep. A steam train conveyed him and his kit bag to a small station in Lancashire. Then a long walk saw him standing outside a small cottage. A sharp knock on the door of the cottage, and it was opened by a pale, red-eyed woman who seemed surprised to see him there.

The young officer asked if she was the woman who was named on the envelope, and when she said she was, he handed it to her. She looked at the handwriting, and at once burst into tears. The letter contained her dead husband's last words to her.

She thanked the young officer for taking the trouble to bring her the letter, and asked if he had known her husband well. He told her that he had been there in the last moments of her husband's life, sharing a drink with him on the battlefield at Passchendaele.

The woman stared at the lieutenant, astonished. Then, in a trembling voice, she told him that she had already been informed of her husband's death, and that he had died at Serre, a full year before Passchendaele.

The stunned officer returned to Surrey to pick up his life with his young wife, with a story to tell her and a mystery that he could never solve.

Listening to the tale, the young woman was glad that her gift had saved her husband's life and eased the final moments as another brave soldier lost his. How grateful she was that, unlike the poor widow in Lancashire, she would never need to open *her* envelope.

Strange Meeting

by Wilfred Owen (18 March 1893–4 November 1918)

It seemed that out of the battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped
Through granites which Titanic wars had groined.
Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned,
Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;
By his dead smile, I knew we stood in Hell.
With a thousand fears that vision's face was grained;
Yet no blood reached there from the upper ground,
And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.
'Strange friend,' I said, 'Here is no cause to mourn.'
'None,' said the other, 'Save the undone years,

The hopelessness. Whatever hope is yours,
Was my life also; I went hunting wild
After the wildest beauty in the world,
Which lies not calm in eyes, or braided hair,
But mocks the steady running of the hour,
And if it grieves, grieves richlier than here.
For by my glee might many men have laughed,
And of my weeping something has been left,
Which must die now. I mean the truth untold,
The pity of war, the pity war distilled.
Now men will go content with what we spoiled.
Or, discontent, boil bloody, and be spilled.
They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress,
None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress.
Courage was mine, and I had mystery;
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery;
To miss the march of this retreating world
Into vain citadels that are not walled.
Then, when much blood had clogged their chariot-wheels
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells,
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.
I would have poured my spirit without stint
But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.

Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were.
I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
Let us sleep now...'