

Forgotten bravery of tragic hero who took his own life

First World War captain's heroism is uncovered after his medals are found by granddaughter

By Roz Laws



Captain John Osborn Walford and (left) his war medals

These are the forgotten medals that hold the secret to a tragic tale of [First World War heroism](#) – and cruel prejudice.

They belonged to Captain John Osborn Walford, a brave Brummie who battled through the war's bloodiest battles.

He survived Passchendaele and Fromelle, fought in France and Italy, and was awarded the Military Cross and bar.

An inspirational officer, he led his troops in a series of daring actions; he was shot and suffered shellshock.

But bravery took a terrible toll. When he finally returned home, he was a troubled man, haunted by what he had seen.

Captain Walford, who had volunteered to fight at the age of 45, shot himself dead on February 21, 1922.

As a result his name does not appear on any war memorial, and he had to be buried outside the church graveyard walls.

The sad story has been uncovered by a woman who knew nothing of how her grandfather fought so bravely in the Great War but then suffered a mental breakdown and took his own life.

Pam Brooking – herself an Army widow – only discovered the truth as she was clearing out her mother’s flat. “When my mother died we cleared out her flat and found a small cardboard box,” she said.

“We just put it in the garage with the other belongings and didn’t look at them until five years ago.

“We opened the box and the medals fell out. I had no idea whose they were, but that’s what started it all.”

With the help of nephew Nicholas, Pam set about researching Captain Walford’s history.



It was a revelation.

“My father was 22 years old when his father died and was serving in the army in India,” she said.

“He never spoke about Captain Walford because the stigma of suicide was so huge at the time. It was the big family secret.

“I never knew my granny, who died when I was five, and my father died when I was 24. There the story might have ended if it hadn’t been for those medals.”

They soon discovered that her grandfather had been [born in Edgbaston](#), and went to King Edward’s School from 1880 to 1887. He married Margaret Scott from Bromsgrove, Worcestershire, and they [lived in Kings Norton](#).

After spending years on the Gold Coast – now Ghana – he returned to [Tardebigge, near Bromsgrove](#), and joined up to fight at the outbreak of war in 1914.

A former territorial army officer, he was appointed Captain and Company Commander of the 2nd/8th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment.

“They crossed to France in May 1916, shortly before the Battle of the Somme,” said Pam.

“Grandfather was involved in most of the major actions between June 1916 at Fromelles and the Third Battle of Ypres in August 1917. It was known as Passchendaele for its appalling conditions, and he contracted trench foot there.”

After recovering, Walford was transferred to the 1st/8th Battalion and posted to northern Italy.

From October 5 to November 4, he was in almost constant action, leading C Company, and won the Military Cross twice.

On October 18, the battalion started their advance on Selle in thick mist. Walford found a horse and undertook a personal reconnaissance.

He then led the assault with Lewis machine-guns being fired from the hip, capturing the village and a complete German artillery battery. Records show he displayed “conspicuous courage and skill”.

The 1st/8th Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment was tasked with crossing the Sambre Canal on November 4 and capturing the town of Landrecies. Walford organised the crossing on rafts made of petrol tins, pulling the rafts with ropes under fire.

He was shot and injured, and awarded a bar to his Military Cross.

“He spent time at a shell-shock hospital in 1919,” said Pam. “Then he shot himself on February 21, 1922.

“My grandfather was a very brave man, who volunteered to fight when he didn’t have to. He suffered from what we would now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and shot himself.

“He gave his life for his country and it’s only right that his war record should be recognised.”

At the time of his death Captain Walford was living [in Feckenham, Worcestershire](#) and was a candidate for the forthcoming county council elections. He had just addressed a political meeting [at Crabbs Cross, Redditch](#).

A report of the time revealed: “He appeared in his usual health early yesterday morning and talked cheerfully and rationally to a workman on the estate named Ernest Reeve, who shortly afterwards found him lying dead in the orchard adjoining the Court with a six-chambered revolver in his right hand, one of the cartridges having been discharged through his mouth.

“He leaves a widow and one son, who is at present serving with the 3rd Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment in India.”

The district coroner’s inquest finding was that Captain Walford “committed suicide by shooting himself whilst temporarily of unsound mind.”

The inquest had heard from his GP, Dr E P Davies, who agreed that “shell-shock sometimes left a man in a state of mental derangement. He thought that deceased had felt one of these attacks coming on though he might not have shown it, and was suffering from one when he killed himself.”

Captain Walford’s son John later played cricket for Worcestershire. His widow lived next to Warwick Castle until her death in 1946.

Research and sheer luck led to the discovery of the Birmingham hero’s heavily eroded gravestone in the Worcestershire village of Hanbury. No words can any longer be seen on the stone.

Because of the stigma of suicide, vicars did not usually allow victims to be buried in consecrated ground, so Captain Walford – so brave in action – was buried just outside the wall of the graveyard. His brother was buried on the other side of the wall.

But, in a twist of fate, they are now together – because the wall was knocked down to allow for an extension of the graveyard.