

Shot at dawn... by his best friend: He fought with awesome courage at Gallipoli and the Somme - then could take no more. But the final haunting tragedy came when 'deserter' Jimmy Smith faced the firing squad

- **Jimmy Smith fought bravely for three years in some of the fiercest battles**
- **He was badly wounded at the Somme and recovered in hospital in Bolton**
- **He returned to the front in time for the Battle of Ypres in Belgium in 1917**
- **Despite receiving two good conduct medals he was branded a coward**
- **His friend Richard Blundell was ordered to form part of the firing squad**
- **Blundell was ordered to apply the 'coupe de grace' after the riflemen failed**
- **Blundell carried the torment of killing his friend with him until his death**

By [Guy Walters for the Daily Mail](#)

Published: 18:42 EST, 8 October 2014

For the group of 11 soldiers and a junior officer, an order to stay some six miles behind the front line was most welcome. For several days before the order came, during late August and early September 1917, their unit, the 17th (Service) Battalion of the King's (Liverpool Regiment) — known as the Liverpool Pals — had endured some of the most vicious fighting of World War I.

Their losses at the Battle of Pilckem Ridge at Passchendaele had been horrendous. Eighty-two officers and men had been killed and a further 155 had been wounded. As the group rested near a chateau at Kemmel in Flanders, some 30 miles south of Dunkirk, each man would have been thinking who might be the next to fall.

Late in the afternoon of Tuesday, September 4, they got their terrible answer. An officer informed the men that the reason they had been kept behind was to arrange for dawn the following day a firing squad whose duty it was to execute one of their comrades for desertion.



A reconstruction of the execution of one of the 306 World War I deserters facing a firing squad



The condemned man had a blindfold placed over his eyes as the officer ordered his men to take aim



Moments later, the condemned man would be dead after being hit by the volley of shots

It was a job that not one man would have relished. They knew that the soldier they were being asked to shoot was no coward. Private Jimmy Smith had even received two Good Conduct Medals.

The following morning, the reluctant executioners found him bound to a chair set up next to the wall of a barn. Private Smith was blindfolded and a white disc had been placed over his heart as a target.

One of the members of the firing squad was Private Richard Blundell, a friend of Jimmy's. What Blundell and his comrades knew was that Jimmy was not a deserter, but a brave soldier suffering from terrible shell shock.

When the order was given to fire, Blundell, along with the rest of the firing squad, deliberately tried to miss the target. Jimmy was not killed, but he was severely wounded.

In such circumstances, it is up to the officer in charge of the squad to draw his side-arm and administer the coup de grace.

However, as the pale sun rose that morning, the nervous subaltern was incapable of firing. A more senior officer therefore ordered one of the squad to take the fatal shot.

The duty fell, cruelly, on Blundell. He was given the junior officer's Webley revolver and ordered to shoot his friend in the head.



Jimmy Smith faced his first action in Gallipoli where allied forces faced heavy opposition from Turkish troops

Blundell walked forward and held the gun to Jimmy's temple, struggling to keep it on target as his hand shook and his friend writhed in agony from the earlier bullet wounds.

At 5.51 that morning, Blundell pulled the trigger and Jimmy finally stopped moving.

As a 'reward', the men of the firing squad were given ten days' leave.

Private Jimmy Smith was just one of 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers executed for cowardice and desertion during the World War I.

After nearly a century, the question of whether they should be treated as villains or victims was finally resolved when, in 2006, they were given a statutory pardon. Despite this widely welcomed move by the last government, the fates of many of these men are still little known.

Tonight, a new production of a 1998 play called *Early One Morning*, written by Les Smith and directed by David Thacker, will open at the Octagon Theatre in Bolton, telling the story of Jimmy Smith — and shedding light on the desertion and subsequent execution of the hundreds of other young men who were shot at dawn.

As with many private soldiers from the North of England who fought in World War I, Jimmy Smith was raised in poverty. Born in Bolton in 1891, he was cared for by an aunt and uncle after his mother died when he was young. Jimmy barely knew his father, who remarried.

We know little about Jimmy's childhood, but we can assume his education was basic. When he left school, work was scarce and as an 18-year-old he joined the Army.



He later served with distinction during the Battle of the Somme, earning two good conduct medals

He enlisted in the 1st Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, and before the outbreak of war he and his unit served in Egypt and India.

The first time Jimmy saw combat was during the ill-fated Gallipoli campaign in 1915.

Devised by the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, the aim of the campaign was for the British to help their Russian allies by wresting the Dardanelles Strait from the Turks — thus allowing Russia's navy a secure route to the Mediterranean.

It was here that Jimmy took part in one of the bloodiest amphibious landings in history — the assault on a small cove codenamed 'W' beach on April 25, 1915.

The 1st Lancashire Fusiliers were among the first to row towards the shore using small boats. When they were just over 50 yards away, hidden Turkish positions opened up with a murderous criss-cross of machine-gun fire.

‘The timing of the ambush was perfect,’ Captain Richard Willis from C Company later recalled. ‘We were completely exposed and helpless in our slow-moving boats, just target practice for the concealed Turks, and within a few minutes only half of the 30 men in my boat were left alive.’



Jimmy Smith was one of the allied troops who was severely wounded at the Somme

In desperation, men jumped into sea, where the massacre continued. Officers and soldiers were drowned under the weight of their equipment or shot as they struggled ashore through the bloodied waters.

Among them was Jimmy, who managed to cross a beach littered with mines. Many of the men found their rifles clogged with sand and seawater and were unable to fire back at the Turks.

Despite the odds, the Lancshires persisted with the attack and by late afternoon, after being reinforced, the regiment won the day.

In honour of their victory, the beach was renamed 'Lancashire Landing' and six Victoria Crosses were awarded. But the assault came at a terrible cost. Just 300 of an original 1,000 men were left standing. Eleven out of 27 officers had been killed.

Jimmy's survival was a miracle and he knew it. But the horrors of that day — comrades mown down in the water, limbs sheared off by landmines, friends drowning in the churning waters — could not easily be forgotten.

Jimmy survived the rest of the Gallipoli campaign and was posted to the trenches of Northern France in 1916. After Gallipoli, he might have thought that war could not get any worse — but that was before July 1 that year, the start of the infamous Battle of the Somme.

Now fighting with the 15th Battalion of the Lancashires (also known as the Salford Pals), Jimmy's luck appeared to hold.

But on October 11, while fighting at Le Transloy Ridge, he was caught in a massive explosion during a barrage. Jimmy was buried alive and had to scabble his way to the surface through the body parts of his comrades. He had sustained a wound the size of a fist in his right shoulder.

Repatriated to a hospital in Bolton, Jimmy made a recovery.



After his injury at the Somme, Smith was sent back to the front in time for the third battle of Ypres

There was no doubt, though, that he was deeply traumatised. Gallipoli or the Somme alone would have been enough for many men. Jimmy had endured the horrors of both. When he returned to the frontline later that year with a new regiment, the 17th Battalion of the King's, Private Jimmy Smith was scarred by what he had seen.

On December 29, 1916, Jimmy found himself in front of his first court martial. His offence was to have left his post and he was sentenced to 90 days of Field Punishment Number One. This involved the humiliation of being cuffed to a fixed object for two hours each day.

Although the regulations prohibited the guilty man being placed in a stress position — in which particular strain is put on certain body parts such as the hands or shins — this stipulation was often ignored. Indeed, the punishment often amounted to torture.

The following July, he was court-martialled again. On this occasion, the offence was going absent without leave. Once again, Jimmy was sentenced to 90 days of Field Punishment Number One.

A few days later, Jimmy's unit was preparing to take part in the Battle of Pilckem Ridge, part of the Third Battle of Ypres.

By now he was undoubtedly incapable of going into combat, haunted by the Somme and Gallipoli and humiliated and distressed by the successive Field Punishments.



Smith was punished twice for desertion and on his third attempt he was sentenced to death by firing squad

Predictably, perhaps, Jimmy deserted again. He would have known very well that if he was caught, he might well face the death sentence, but nothing could make him go into battle again.

Just before midnight on the evening of July 30, 1917, he was arrested in the town of Poperinghe. He was charged with desertion and disobedience, and on August 22, he faced his third court martial.

During the trial, Jimmy did not say a word. Disgracefully, he was not even given someone to act in his defence. The three presiding officers found him guilty.

In some cases, shell-shocked men such as Jimmy were sent to the Labour Corps, where they could still help the war effort, but not have to fight. Also, contrary to popular belief, many were spared the death sentence.



Early One Morning is at the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, until November 1

Of the 30,000 men who could have received the death penalty for desertion and cowardice, only ten per cent received such a sentence and, of those 3,000, 90 per cent of sentences were commuted. Jimmy, though, was not among them. He was sentenced to death and the order was carried out on September 5.

Today, Jimmy lies in Kemmel Chateau Military Cemetery. His gravestone bears the inscription 'Gone, but not forgotten'.

One man who never forgot Jimmy was the soldier who had to shoot him — Private Richard Blundell.

In the weeks before his own death, in February 1989, Blundell was often heard by his son, William, to murmur deliriously: 'What a way to get leave, what a way to get leave.'

According to historian Graham Maddocks, in his book *Liverpool Pals*, William Blundell asked his father in a more lucid moment what he meant.

Still desperately upset seven decades after the incident, the dying Richard told his son what had happened. It was clear, that as he faced his own death, Richard had never forgiven himself.

Early One Morning is at the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, until November 1 (octagonbolton.co.uk/book-online). *Liverpool Pals* by Graham Maddocks (Pen And Sword Books, £20).