

# My uncle the deserter - and why we all should give thanks to him

GREG O SHAUGHNESSY



**H**e was five-foot four inches tall and nine stone in weight and he worked in O'Mara's bacon factory.

Christy O'Shaughnessy was 17 years of age when, against his mother's wishes, he signed up for the Royal Munster Fusiliers.

The year was 1915 and Christy was my grandfather.

Like most of his kind, Christy signed up for the money, not the glory, because lads from the lanes of Limerick knew little about glory but everything about money, or to be more exact, everything about the lack of it.

He was a clever boy, young Christy, well-read and well-spoken but like all of his kind, he was destined for a life of hard work with small recompense so it must have come as a seductive lure when the chance of a uniform and foreign travel presented itself.

Though the family always believed he had fought in the Dardanelles - the worst-conceived military operation in history thanks to Winston Churchill's stupidity - the military records show that Christy did no such thing. According to his army file, he spent six months bashing squares and sweeping barracks until the army sent him to the Somme in 1916, just as the Easter Rising was taking place in Ireland.

He didn't have a glorious war, but he survived it, in a manner of speaking, even if his survival was only physical. Like thousands of others, Christy's experience of the Somme left him with both tangible and invisible injuries that haunted him for the remainder of his life.

Christy wasn't a fool, it seems, and was soon promoted to Lance-Corporal -- not a very prestigious rank, admittedly, but it showed that he had something extra going for him. Four weeks Christy spent in the trenches, in the blood and the faeces and the filth. Amongst the rats and the screaming of wounded men. The trench-foot and the cold. The fear.

Four weeks until a German bullet broke his forearm and he was sent to hospital in England.

The reports on his file show an impressive attention to detail: was the wound self-inflicted? It's a telling question considering how many soldiers on both sides lit a cigarette in the dark, holding it above the parapet in the hope that an enemy sniper might draw a bead on them and who could blame any man who did such a thing? Better to lose an



arm than lose a life. Who could blame any man for wanting to depart from the hell of the trenches? But imagine the unending moment of terror as you waited for a rifle bullet to smash your bones. And imagine the relief that you'll no longer have to walk on the corpses of your comrades in the mud of the Somme or Ypres or Passchendaele.

History doesn't record the circumstances of how Christy was shot but they sent him to a hospital in Sheffield where he stayed for four weeks

before they granted him leave to visit his mother in Limerick. Ten days at home. Ten days away from the insanity of the Western Front. Ten days away from the mud and the stink and the filth. Ten days away from going mad.

Christy didn't go back to the army.

It was Ireland, just after the Easter Rising, when the British authorities, in their absolute stupidity, had executed the leaders. Pearse's blood sacrifice changed everything and a

boy in a British uniform could not have been a welcome sight on the streets of Limerick, or at least not among the dirt-poor, even though it mattered not a jot to them which elite was grinding them down,

Ultimately, they would come under the heel of the factory owners, and those industrialists were happy to accommodate with an Irish government just as much as an English one, provided they could extract maximum production from the lane-dwellers they employed.

war ten miles behind the lines, lobbing gigantic explosive projectiles at the enemy, with nobody trying to bayonet him or poison him with gas. No mud, no trench-foot, no trenches, no rats.

They put him in charge of a mule-train bringing ammunition up to the huge guns pounding away at the Germans, and he had a good war between January 1917 and October 1918. When he came home, he boasted that he had a French girlfriend called Sally Dubois, but nobody believed him.

Still, it went well. He rode his mule-train up and down the trail, feeding enormous shells to the insatiable guns until one day in October 1918, not more than a month before the Armistice, disaster struck. A mule kicked him in the leg, shattering his knee, inflicting a dismal injury and they hauled him off to hospital for a second time.

It's easy to see where this is going. This is where Christy was found out.

- Where did you get that gunshot wound?

- I was shot.

- No you weren't, or at least, not under that name.

- Oh.

- You're not Christy Fitzpatrick, are you?

Caught.

They charged him on two counts: desertion and fraudulent enlistment. But they didn't shoot him, perhaps because the war was over or perhaps because he re-enlisted.

Either way, they didn't court-martial him either, choosing instead to fine him a very specific amount: the value of the uniform he was wearing when he deserted.

One year later, Christy was discharged from the army with a disability pension due to the gunshot wound to his forearm, but his life didn't go well. These days we call it Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but back then they had a far more immediate and accurate term for it: shellshock.

Christy had no ideological attachment to the Great War. For all I know he might not even have been keenly aware of the difference between being British and being Irish. I just don't know.

But what I do know is that Christy survived the war, for which I give thanks in a very personal way, and I know that his survival was in body only, like so many men of his generation.

That's why, on the 11th November every year, I find a moment to recall the memory of men like Christy, for their sake and for the sake of those who came after them.

It doesn't take much to light a candle.

Still, Christy didn't go back, and who could blame him? Who, having experienced the trenches of the Somme would willingly return?

He didn't go back and the army were aware of it. Finally, in November of 1916, they decided he had deserted - not a small thing at the height of the Great War when men were routinely lined up against a wall and executed for such transgressions.

No small thing at all, and yet that's what Christy did until his sister Mary-Anne intervened.

Mary-Anne wasn't happy, it seems. She wanted the soldier's wages for the family, she wanted the pension and so she browbeat him into re-enlisting, which he finally did, but Christy wasn't a fool. He wasn't going back into the trenches of the Somme to walk on the bodies of his comrades, to taste the mustard gas in the back of his throat or to feel his insides being sucked out as giant German shells exploded only yards from where he cowered in terror.

Christy was no fool. Instead of re-enlisting in the Munster Fusiliers where someone might recognise him and where he might well be returned to the hell of the trenches, he went out to Ennis and joined the Royal Field Artillery, enlisting under his mother's family name. He was now Christy Fitzpatrick. Christy was going to spend the rest of the