

It was my Birthday Today

As a collector of military antiques for almost fifty years, I am fascinated by the personal items associated with conflicts of the past that come into my ownership. While uniforms, rifles and bayonets may represent the face of War, it is often the small personal possessions that have been handed down to family members from the past that tell the real story of war and loss.

The medals and Death Pennies of the First World War symbolise a generation long gone and often forgotten. These once proudly displayed decorations are now in the hands of collectors and museums, who try in their small ways to remember a soldier lost in history.

It was my Birthday Today simply asks you to stop and reflect on one man who never grew old.

It Was My Birthday Today

It was my birthday today and no one remembered or called out my name. It was my birthday last year and no one remembered. They said that *at the going down of the sun, we will remember them*, but no one remembers me.

Is my name carved somewhere on some stained and moss covered memorial but never read? Is my name ever called out, my story ever told and anyway does anyone even care?

I am 118 today and I remember when I was 18; 20; 50; 70; 100, but no one else remembers me. Am I 18 or 118 and does it really matter any more?

Medals sent home in a brown cardboard box once proudly framed by my mother and nailed to a wall along with a large brown penny, now never cleaned.

What happened to those medals? Taken down, given away, sold and sold again and now lying in a glass case to be picked up and examined but never understood. Does anyone even read my name and, for even that split second, am I remembered and is my name shouted loudly?

It is my birthday today, no grave, no marker, no name, just medals lost to a family who I never had. No sweetheart, no wife, no children, no grand children, no nephews, no nieces, no one to remember.

My name floats in a light soft French breeze entombed in a mud filled crater, lying beside a *Deutsche Soldaten* who sleeps my sleep and whose body and name will also never be found.

Sometimes, a child walks the fields above me and picks up a brass button from the soil now disturbed by a French farmer's plough. I hear laughter as she runs to a mother with arms extended, but no one remembers me.

It was my birthday today, no presents, no cards, no singing, no dancing, no

drinks bought and no fleeting memories.

They say that we never grow old, but how do they know?

How do they know what we felt in the line, on the firing steps, on the trench wall, mud hiding the tears and sweat and fear?

Whistles sounding, bayonets fixed, ladders slipping, guns blazing, men and horses screaming, tears falling, ears bursting and eyes open in shock and terror.

Now – SILENCE.

It does not hurt any more, as life stops, to view the scene around me.

No heroes return, no kisses on the dockside, no slaps on the back, no drinks in Laverty's, no mother waiting at the end of the lane.

It was my birthday today, and I remember the smell of cordite and smoke and the sound of shellfire and screams, just before my life stopped forever.

We had moved 100 yards, through the wire, always in a line. The Sergeant shouts, *Stay in line boys, stay in line*. John Watts drops to my left, James Telford sinks to his knees on my right but still we walk in line.

Heads up lads, for King and Country, give them Hell

It was my birthday today and today I would see a giant rise before me. A wall of black earth that man created to entomb a generation. A wall of black earth that would rise before me and take my last breath away.

A giant German shell burst that can tear the very earth to its core.

No bullet hit me, no shrapnel wounds – just black French soil. I felt no pain, no panic but remember looking to heaven and blue sky as the heavy black snow fell on my body and I ceased to breathe the morning air.

Darkness, no movement, quietness, no room to move or breathe – and did I even try to breathe?

It was my birthday today and I ask you to think of me, to read my name out loud, to say a prayer for me, to talk of lost Great-uncles – and for one fleeting second to say my name again so that I can be remembered.

It was my birthday today.....

Philip Faithfull owns The Abingdon Collection, Omagh, open by appointment.