

How NOT to treat a war hero

With Remembrance Day just passed and preparation starting for next year's museum exhibition, which like everyone else will centre on 2014 being the centenary of the beginning of WWI. Our aim is to look at life in Saltash during that period and particularly how Saltash and its people were affected by the 'Great War'.

From 1870 to 1920 the Training Ship *Mount Edgcumbe* lay at anchor in the River Tamar just off Saltash. Boys from the ship were a familiar sight in Saltash. Many joined the armed forces and after an appeal in a forces magazine asking for 'old boys' to write to the *Mount Edgcumbe* with their experiences the ship received many letters.

Below is just one of them.

756 Stratford Rd., Sparkhill, Birmingham,

Friday, Aug. 9th, 1917.

Dear Sir,

Just a line to let you know that I, being one of the old boys, saw the "Ashore and Afloat," that you would like to hear of my history since I left the Ship. I started on the stage and was with Harry Tate, Fred Karno, and Kate Carney, till March 8th, 1914, when I joined the army, and on the 16th of Aug. went to France where I met a lot of the boys, 195, 210, 83, 21, 76. They were alright and we had a fine time together. We left Paris on 19th Aug. and started to Mons but we had to retreat (I then knew what it was to want for food: I should have liked to have had some tack and basher or skilly-soup). Well I went through till 25th of December, 1914, when I was at La Bassee, I was hit.

I went to France again in Feb. and was wounded at Ypres on March 13th, got better, went to France and was drafted to the Dardanelles, came home on ten days leave and went to France and was wounded on Aug. 10th at Kemmel; went to France again October and while at Ypres I was on 0. post in the trenches when the Germans fetched down a French Plane and it fell in "No man's land," I forgot myself and went over the top to fetch him in, I got back safely. When I went back again to set fire to the plane I was shot through the head by a sniper, for which they made a fuss of me, and they have given me the Belgium Military Medal. I get on alright and have 27/6 pension. So that finished my career in the army-wounded 4 times, 17 wounds, 22 operations 124 stitches in my body; enclosed a cutting in Paper. I will come down to the ship and have a look round with your permission on anniversary day. Hoping that the boys are learning all they can, I only wish I could have my time over again, will close with the best wishes.

I remain, your old boy,

FRANCIS WILLIAM SANKEY 123.

This very moving letter prompted the Local History Centre to go into overdrive. I was particularly keen to know what happened to Francis Sankey after his discharge from the army. Lizzy and her team took this in hand and there was a happy ending.

Opposite *Extract from "The Daily Sketch," August, 1916*

Hero's White Feather.

How Lucky Jim was Decorated by a Girl at Brighton. Gunner Sankey's Record.

Wounded in nearly every part of his body, operated on twenty two times, carrying about inside him several bits of shrapnel, and wearing a silver plate some inches long at the base of the skull, Gunner Francis William Sankey, of the R.F.A. - Lucky Jim, his friends call him--was discharged from a military hospital at Brighton and given 'civvie' clothes and a walking-stick.

No longer in the army he sauntered down to the front. Others were there when he arrived; they had badges, and he had nothing to show.

He sat down, and girls passed by with a sneer.

Old men know what they would have done had they been as young, and Gunner Sankey wondered why everyone seemed to be looking at him.

The White Feather.

Then, from the group by the railings; came Miss Somebody,

She knew how to treat such a specimen, and without more ado, stuck a white feather in his coat.

"You look rather nice," she said, "but you'd look better in Khaki."

The inevitable crowd collected, and it was some time before the gunner could speak.

"I was tongue-tied," he told the *Daily Sketch yesterday*. "and didn't know what to do. They jeered and laughed so much though, that at last I asked them to give me a chance."

In Many Battles.

"They did, and you ought to have seen them melt away before I had said much. I felt wild with the feather girl, and when she tried to say something I moved on."

This was the man who had fought at

La Bassee	Festubert	Dickebusch
Givinchey	Ypres (three times)	Kemmel
Plug Street	Neuve Chapelle	Hill 60

In less than three days after war broke out Sankey had offered himself, and within a very short time he went to France.

Four times he came back wounded:-

Shot in hand and knee at La Bassee;

Hit in the back by a piece of shrapnel at Kemmel;

Gassed, struck on the forehead with shrapnel and shot in the hip at Ypres;

Knocked over by a "Jack Johnson" (also at Ypres later). For 24 hours he lay as if dead, bleeding from the back of the neck and wounded in the arm. He has a silver plate where the skull was hit and has lost the use of his hand.

His Four Gold Stripes.

"I came back to Blighty each time," said Sankey, "and they put me right. One doctor prophesied that I should never get killed. Twenty-two times I've been on the operation table, and they have put 124 stitches in my body." I can't walk very well and my left hand's no good, but now I've got my four little gold stripes on my arm I suppose there'll be no more bother about the white feather."

A happier man you could not wish to meet, and he says he's quite satisfied with the 25s. a week army pension.

Sankey lives with his mother in Birmingham, although by birth he is a Londoner.



Left.

Francis William Sankey when he was boy on the TS Mount Edgumbe circa 1905. He is with his sister Florence May Sankey.



Right.

Francis William Sankey in army uniform circa 1914



Left.

Francis William Sankey with his son, Edmond Sankey.

Francis went on to marry and have a family. He died in 1963 at the age of 70.