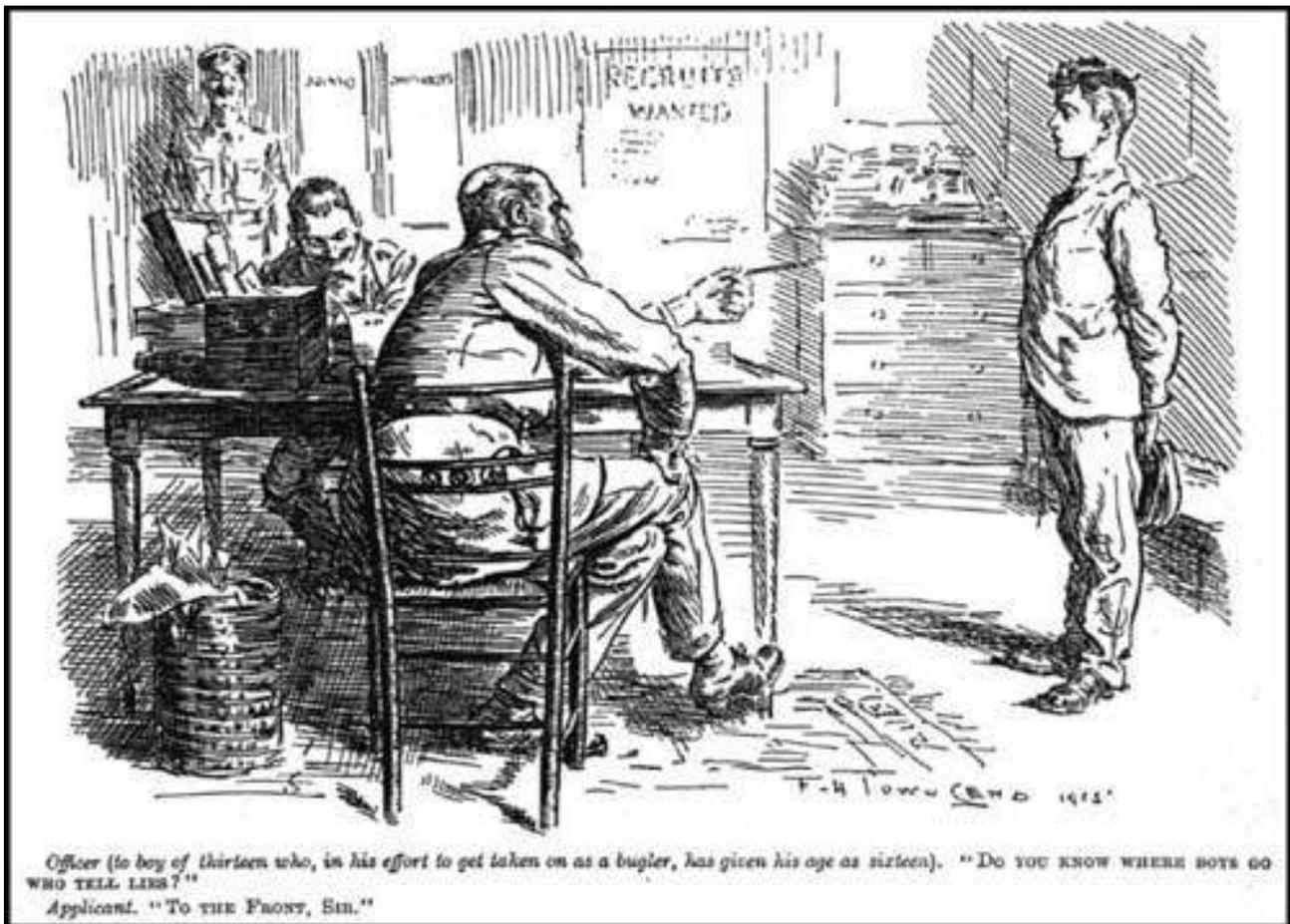


Boy soldiers of the First World War





Officer (to a boy of 13 who has given his age as 16): "Do you know where boys go who tell lies?"

Applicant: "To the front, Sir."

F.H. Townsend, Punch Magazine 11th August 1916

Recruiting officers were eager to enlist young men and did not always check the boy's details very carefully. Also they were paid 2/6 (about £6 at today's value) for each recruit until October 1914 and 1/- thereafter.

A sixteen year old was told how he was able to join the Army. "The recruiting sergeant asked me my age and when I told him he said, 'You had better go out, come in again, and tell me different.' I came back, told him I was nineteen and I was in."

Boy soldiers in the First World War

Great Britain 1914

Before the war many adolescents were encouraged to join the military. As children they joined the Church Lads Brigade and were given uniforms, haversacks and leather belts and pretended to be soldiers.

Boy Service

It was common to leave school aged thirteen or fourteen and work on the farm or in factories.

Boys could join the Boy Service aged thirteen, or aged twelve if sons of serving soldiers.

Most were employed as drummer boys or pipers, the rest were trained in trades like shoemakers or tailors. They were paid a shilling a week until they were old enough to enlist in the Regular Army.

Special schools like the Royal Military Asylum and Royal Hibernian Military School had been built for lads destined to join the Army.

Forage Department of Army Service Corps

Boys were employed to cut and bale hay. They were subject to military law and wore a uniform but were not given lodgings or rations.

About 250,000 boy soldiers were recruited and fought in the First World War.

They lied about their age and did not have to produce a birth certificate until conscription was introduced in 1916.

Officially the recruitment age to the Army was 18 and to fight overseas one had to be 19 years old. This had recently been lowered by a year. (A boy could enlist in the Territorial Army aged 17).

Most other European nations recruited twenty or twenty-one year olds.

The recruiting sergeant was paid 2/6 (about £6 at present day value) for each recruit and there was a strong financial pressure for them to ignore the signs of an underage volunteer.

The medical officer examining them for fitness was also paid 2/6. Again there was strong financial pressure to ignore the lack of physical or mental development and to pass the recruit as fit to fight in the Army.

In October 1914 payments were reduced to 1/- (about £2 equivalent) per recruit.

December 1914 doctors were limited to no more than 40 recruits in one day and were advised to spend at least 7 minutes per examination.

Many parents desperately tried to retrieve their underage children from the front line. Some were sent back but some were given a choice by their commanding officer and could stay fighting if they wanted.

Sir Arthur Markham MP for Mansfield campaigned vigorously for the return of underage recruits.

John Parr, golf caddy from Finchley, the first to die.
He joined the Middlesex Regiment in August 1912 stating his age as eighteen and one month. He was actually fifteen years and one month.
Killed 21st August 1914 at Ypres aged seventeen years and one month.
First British soldier to be shot dead in First World War.
He is buried at St Symphorien Cemetery.
Age on gravestone 20 years
Actual age 17 years

Valentine Joe Strudwick, lad from Dorking, Surrey
Born 14th February 1900
He enlisted in the 8th Battalion, the Rifle Brigade in January 1915 aged 14. After six weeks training he was sent to France.
Killed 14th January 1916 at Ypres.
Age 15 years, 11 months.
Buried Essex Farm Cemetery, Leper, West Vlaanderen

John Condon, lad from Waterford, Ireland
Joined Royal Irish Regiment aged 12
Killed 24th May 1915 at Ypres.
Buried at Poelcapelle British Cemetery.
Age on gravestone 14 years.
Actual age 13 years. (This is disputed but, even if he was eighteen, he was still under age.)
Youngest British soldier killed.



V.J.Strudwick, The Rifle Brigade,
14th January 1916, Age 15



J.Condon, Royal Irish Regiment,
24th May 1915, age 14

Albert French, a lad from Buckinghamshire

He was born 22nd June 1899. He was a keen member of the Wolverton Church Lads' Brigade.

Aged 14, Albert started an apprenticeship as a fitter for the local railway works. One day, 16th October 1915, he did not turn up for work. He had travelled to London to join the King's Royal Rifle Corps since the 16th Battalion had close links with the Church Lads' Brigade.

Rifleman, C/7259

After he enlisted Albert had his picture taken. He send it home and wrote: "My mate said I looked about 14, and not much like a soldier. I shan't be a soldier for another 2 or 3 years, I am only training for one yet awhile..."

Nine months later he was killed on 15th June 1916, a week before his seventeenth Birthday.

"I am very sorry to have to write to you and inform you that your dear son was killed in action on June 15th. He died as every true soldier wishes to die - doing his duty for King and Country"

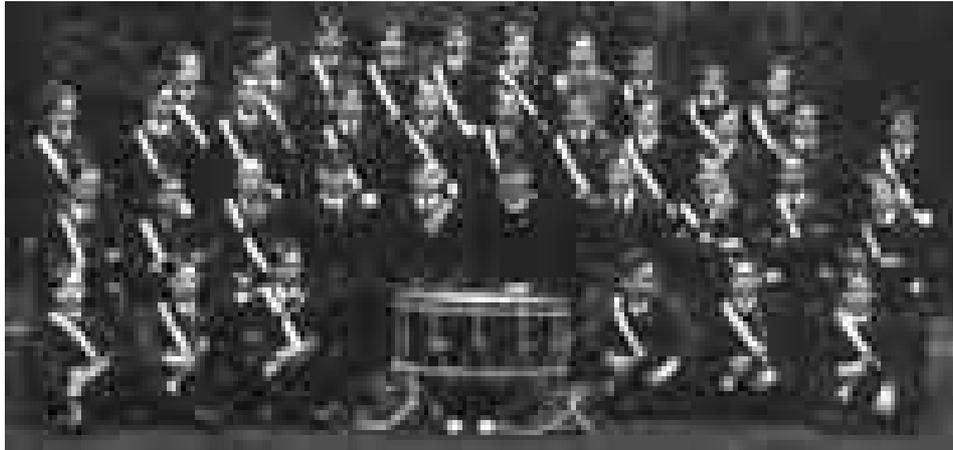
He is buried at Hyde Park Corner (Royal Berks) Cemetery, Belgium

His cross and subsequent gravestone did not have his age.

In 1980 Albert's brother George complained that he had visited Albert's grave and that it had been the only grave he'd seen without the age of death on it.

An official at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission then offered to rectify the omission. Albert's grave now bears the legend "Age 16".

<http://www.mkheritage.co.uk/la/Doc/Astindex.html>



Albert French in Wolverton Church Lad's Brigade



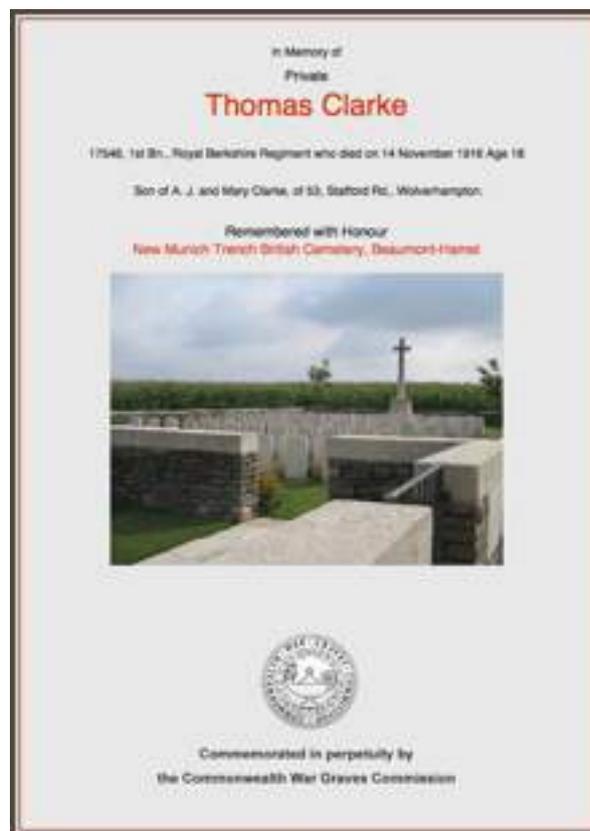
Rifleman Albert French, age 16



Grave of A.E.M.French

Thomas Clarke , a troubled lad from Wolverhampton. He was serving a two year sentence in Borstal (youth prison) for theft.

In April 1915 he was escorted to the recruitment office and enlisted from Borstal aged 17. He had 14 weeks training and was sent to France with the Royal Berkshire Regiment. In April 1916 he deserted and was sentenced to death on 28th April 1916. This was commuted to ten years which he would serve after the war as 'he was too young to be shot'.



However he was not too young to fight and was sent back to the front. He was wounded, recovered and was sent back to the front where he was killed, aged 18, on 14th November 1916. He is buried at New Munich Trench British cemetery, Beaumont-Hamel on the Somme.

Herbert Morris - shot at dawn, aged 17.

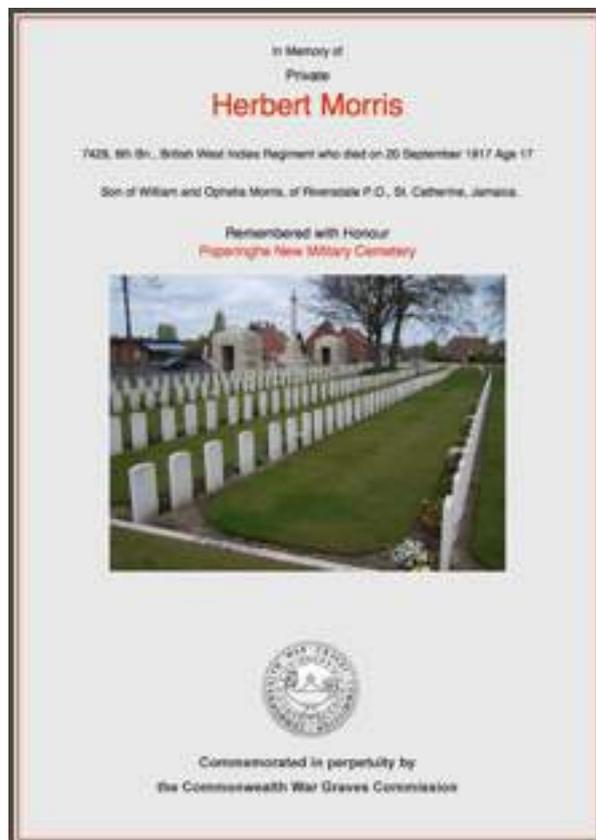
A Jamaican lad from St Catherine, Jamaica

Herbert Morris enlisted in Jamaica when he was 16 years old. He joined the British West Indies Regiment, 6th Battalion, and was shipped to the battlefields in Flanders. According to his superiors, he 'behaved well'.

A year later, building parapets around heavy guns which were firing continuously, his nerves broke down. He ran for two days. Then he was arrested, ran away and was rearrested.

He was sentenced to be 'shot at dawn', because of 'desertion from active service near the frontline'.

Herbert Morris was shot, in a coal-shed in the village of Poperinge, on 20 September 1917. He had just turned 17. He is buried in Poperinghe New Military Cemetery near Leper.



Abraham Bevistein, a brave Polish lad shot at dawn

Aby Bevistein was a Polish immigrant who lied about his name and nationality to fight for Britain.

He joined the Middlesex Regiment in September 1914 aged 16 using the name 'Harris'. He was wounded on 29th December 1915 when a mine exploded under his trench killing two others. He was taken to hospital and then sent back prematurely to the front line. Again he came under heavy bombardment and reported sick. He was sent back to the front line but he walked in the opposite direction and took shelter in a farmhouse.

On 4th March 1916 he was court-martialled and sentenced to death.

He was shot at dawn on 20th March 1916.

He is buried at Labourse Communal Cemetery near Bethune, France

In a letter to his mother, he wrote: "We were in the trenches and I was ill so I went out and they took me to prison and I am in a bit of trouble now and won't get any money for a long time. I will have to go in front of a court. I will try my best to get out of it, so don't worry. But, dear mother, try to send some money. From your loving son Aby."



Abraham Bevestein, died 20th March 1916
Executed aged 17 suffering from shell shock



The Shot at Dawn Memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, Staffordshire.
In memory of the 306 British and Commonwealth soldiers
executed for cowardice or desertion.

Boy soldiers (under 19 years old)

Official recruitment age was 18 years old but the soldier had to be 19 years old to fight overseas.

About 250,000 boy soldiers (under 18 years old) were recruited and fought in the First World War, about one in nine of all those joining. Many would survive until over eighteen years old before being killed.

About 100,000 were killed or wounded.

In the Battle of Loos 50,000 British troops were killed. 3,600 were less than 19 years old.

In the Battle of the Somme about 18,000 boy soldiers were killed or wounded, almost a third of the casualties.

By March 1918 hundreds of thousands of soldiers had been killed and wounded. The British army was running out of men to fight.

The age of conscription was extended to 51 years old and a lad could fight overseas aged 18½ years often after only four months training.

In August 1918 as the allied offensive succeeded the overseas age was raised again to nineteen.

Immature Adolescent Officers

Officers could serve overseas aged seventeen. However some were posted to the Western Front aged sixteen.

John Stream

John Stream joined the Lincolnshire regiment as an officer shortly after his sixteenth Birthday in November 1915 and served as a second Lieutenant two weeks short of seventeen. He survived his seventeens, transferred to the Royal Flying Corps but was killed aged 18 years old on 19th February 1918.

He is buried at Lijssenthoek Military cemetery, Belgium.

Philip Lister

Second Lieutenant Philip Lister (born 30th July 1899), applied for temporary commission in January 1915 aged fifteen and half.

He trained for a year and then aged sixteen and half was sent to lead his men of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Battle of the Somme.

He survived the Battle but had to act up as Captain for six weeks as so many officers had been killed.

Reginald St John Battersby

Second Lieutenant Reginald St John Battersby from Blackley Manchester joined the Accrington Pals of the East Lancashire Regiment. He was going to enlist as an ordinary soldier aged fourteen but his father, a vicar, persuaded the Mayor of Manchester to give him a commission.

He was sent to the front aged sixteen and took part in the Battle of the Somme. He was severely wounded and invalided out. He returned a second time but shortly after he was blown up by a shell and lost his left leg. He finished the war in an administrative job and later became a vicar.



Second Lieutenant St John Battersby, aged sixteen.
Joined the Accrington Pals of the East Lancashire Regiment
He led his men in the Battle of the Somme and was
wounded.

In the five months of the Battle of the Somme 18,000 boy
soldiers were to be killed or wounded.

John (Jack) Kipling

John was born on 17th August 1897. His father Rudyard Kipling was a writer, poet, imperialist and a political activist. He was a fervent nationalist and an active supporter of the National Defence League that was advocating further rearmament. At the outbreak of World War he worked with the War Propaganda Bureau encouraging the new recruits and poured scorn on those who 'shirked their duty.'

He encouraged his 16 year old son John (Jack) to go to war. John was turned down by the Navy and the Army due to bad eyesight. Rudyard Kipling persuaded an old friend Lord Roberts to take him on in the Irish Guards. Jack joined the 2nd Battalion for officer training at the outbreak of war in August 1914 just after his seventeenth birthday.

After training he was sent to France in August 1915 and six weeks later he was killed in the Battle of Loos on 27th September 1915 just after his 18th Birthday. He was last seen stumbling through mud blindly, screaming in agony after an exploding shell ripped his face apart.

He is buried at St Mary's ADS Cemetery at Haisnes, near Bethune, France.

Rudyard Kipling became depressed and did not write much more of any significance. His belief in the Imperial notion and the need for blind patriotism was severely shaken. He reflected on this in 1924 in his poem:

A dead statesman

I could not dig, I dared not rob,
And so I lied to please the mob.
Now all my lies are proved untrue,
And I must face the men I slew.
What tale will serve me here among
Mine angry and defrauded young?



Second Lieutenant John (Jack) Kipling
Joined up in August 1914 aged seventeen
Killed 27th September 1915 aged eighteen

The Royal Navy

The Royal Navy had a long tradition of taking young lads to sea. By nineteen hundred around thirty training ships had been established around the British Isles.

Some took destitute pauper boys, some acted as reformatories where boys were sent by a magistrate and some acted as industrial training schools. One of the reformatory ships TS Mount Edgcumbe was anchored in Saltash along with two other training ships.

The boys joined around at 11 or 12 years old and left at 15 or 16 years old.

These acted as a ready source of recruits to the Royal Navy and the Merchant Navy.

The Royal Navy established specific training ships like HMS Ganges at Shotley and HMS St Vincent at Portsmouth. Boys joined at 15 years old (sometimes younger) with parental consent and learnt seamanship as well as gunnery. They had one years training often transferring to sea for experience. Most ships had a complement of upto fifty boy ratings aged fifteen. Some served as seamen, some as servants or telegraphists.

Around 1906 Admiral Fisher established three Boys artificer Establishments at Chatham, Plymouth and Portsmouth (HMS Fisgard) which trained boys aged 13 to 16 years old for the modern Navy.

Although the legal age of combat seems to be 18 years old this was comprehensively ignored.

Boys wanting to become Officers in the Royal Navy could start at the Royal Naval College, Osborne, aged 12 then transfer to the Britannia Royal Naval College Dartmouth aged 14. They would then receive their Commission and join a sea based ship as a Midshipman aged sixteen.

The First World War

In the first six months of the war about 100,000 boys and men enlisted in the Navy. Recent research by ancestry.com suggest that many, maybe a third, were aged between thirteen and seventeen years old.

The HMS Aboukir disaster

At the outbreak of the First World War all the boys at Dartmouth were enlisted into the Navy and joined ships in the North Sea blockading Germany.

On 22nd September 1914 the German submarine U-9 sank three cruisers HMS Aboukir, HMS Hogue and HMS Cressy off the Dutch coast. 1,459 lives were lost including 13 boys - all aged 15 - from BRNC Dartmouth.

The First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, did not seem to be worried about the legal niceties of boy sailors at war. He was quite willing, even eager, to send lads into conflict zones where they risked losing their lives.

In a speech in the House of Commons in 1914 he said, "The decision to send the naval cadets from Dartmouth to sea in time of war was arrived at a considerable time ago. It was felt that young officers of their age would be of great use on board His Majesty's ships, and that they would learn incomparably more of their profession in war than any educational establishment on shore could teach them".

Jack Cornwell, a lad mortally wounded aged sixteen.
Awarded the Victoria Cross to encourage the others.

Jack was born 8th January 1900 and lived in East London. His father and elder brother had enlisted in the Army. In October 1915 aged fifteen he enlisted in the Royal Navy. After six months training at HMS Vivid in Plymouth then a short time on HMS Lancaster he joined HMS Chester aged sixteen.

HMS Chester was involved in the Battle of Jutland. The gun where Jack was the sight setter received several near hits and all the gun crew except Jack were killed. He had severe chest wounds and he died two days later on 2nd June 1916. He was awarded a Victoria Cross for remaining at his post. Baden Powell also instituted the Cornwell badge for courage in the Scout movement. His portrait was painted by Sir Frank Salisbury and appeared on postage stamps. Framed portraits of the lad were hung in schools throughout the country.

The alternative version

The Battle of Jutland was indecisive. 6,000 British sailors and 2,500 German sailors were killed. Six major British ships were sunk and the German fleet escaped back to port. The morale of the Navy was severely shaken and Jack Cornwell provided a good heroic example.

The captain of HMS Chester had submitted a citation hoping for the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross for Boy First Class Cornwell. The admirals were not convinced and "burned the midnight oil" over the issue for many days. At that time, in later summer 1916, there was concern in the Navy about the morale of the men who had lost so many comrades for so little gained at Jutland. Pay and conditions were also an issue.

Finally, the Admiralty [but not all on The Board], as an expedient for raising morale by, as it were, 'engineering something to cheer about', decided that John [Jack] Cornwell should be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross, and on the 15th September, the London Gazette published the citation. There was much jubilation throughout the land as their Lordships had intended. Thus, were it not for that poor morale in the mid-war years, it is highly probable that the Cross would never have been sanctioned.

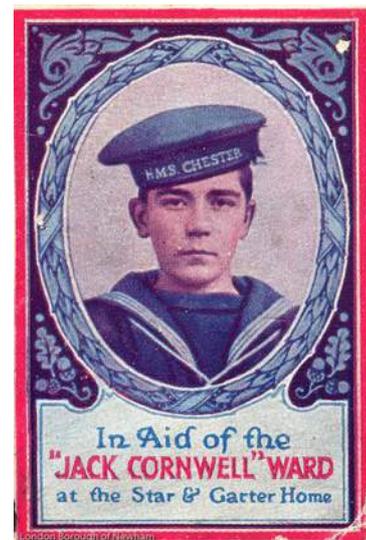
http://www.godfreydykes.info/JACK_CORNWELL_VICTORIA_CROSS.htm



Jack Cornwell, V.C. He enlisted aged fifteen. He was killed in the Battle of Jutland aged sixteen. He was awarded the Victoria Cross though the circumstances around the award seem to be more about raising morale in the Navy.



Publicity cards and portraits were used to encourage the youth of Britain to do their duty



Germany

Every male German aged 17 to 45 was liable for military service. They usually served in the year of their 20th Birthday. Military service was 3 years in the cavalry or 2 years in other branches. This was followed by 4-5 years in the Reserves, during which they were liable for two annual training sessions. They then joined the Landwehr for 11 years and on reaching their 39th Birthday the Landsturm 2nd Ban for 7 years.

The Landsturm 2nd Ban seldom saw front line service but provided valuable service that freed up fit military personnel.

In peace time the 17 to 20 year old were only required to register and joined the Landsturm 1st Ban. In war time they could be called upon for home defence or even active service. However if one chose to volunteer one could choose one's regiment especially if choosing the Army as a career.

In practice in peacetime only about one quarter liable for military service joined active units and the rest were posted to the Landsturm or Reserves.

In 1914 Germany could mobilise about 4.9 million men.

During the war a Jugendwehr, a youth corps, was established in many towns which trained boys aged 14 -17 years of age in the use of rifles and machine guns, preparing them in basic military discipline for their future role as a soldier.

About 15% of Germany's volunteers were students and high school graduates. Entire lecture-rooms and classes - together with professors and teachers - would take themselves down to the recruiting offices to enlist.

In 1914 during the 1st Battle of Ypres, the German Army hurled many units of these enthusiastic but untrained students into the fray. They were shot down in thousands.

Many German boy soldiers are buried near Ypres, at the German war cemetery at Langemark. For this reason the place is known as the Studentenfriedhof - the Students Cemetery.



German war cemetery at Langemark, near Ypres.



Walter Kleinfeldt



Walter Kleinfeldt volunteered for the German Army aged 16 and fought in the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

He took many photographs during the war.



An accusation against war

'After the Storm'

He survived the war and set up a photography shop in Tübingen where he worked until he died in 1945.

Australia

During the First World War, the Australian Army's enlistment age was 21 years or 18 years with the permission of a parent or guardian. Although boys aged 14-17 could enlist as buglers, trumpeters and musicians, many gave false ages in order to join as soldiers.

Their numbers are impossible to determine.

Enlistment of boys was normal practice for the Navy and several died on service during the First World War.

James Charles ('Jim') Martin, lad from NSW

Jim was 14 years 9 months old when he died at Gallipoli.

He was born in Tocumwal, NSW Australia on 3 January 1901. Having just left school to work as a farmhand, he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in April 1915 at the age of 14 years and 3 months. He told the recruiting officers that he was 18.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00069.001

It is said that when Jim's father was rejected for military service, the 5'6" lad said: "Never mind dad, I'll go instead".

He joined the 21st Battalion and in June 1915 he left for Egypt. He embarked for Gallipoli on the steamer HMT *Southland*, "to have our share of the Turks". However, the ship was torpedoed by a German submarine off Lemnos Island and Martin spent four hours in the water before rescue. Private Martin landed with his battalion on Gallipoli on 8 September. They were stationed in the trench lines near Courtney's Post on the ridge above Monash Valley. He wrote to his family (4 October) that "the Turks are still about 70 yards away from us... Don't worry about me as I am doing splendid over here."

But on 25 October he was evacuated to the hospital ship *Glenart Castle* suffering from enteritis. He died that evening and was buried at sea. His name is recorded on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.

61,000 Australians died during the First World War. About one hundred were aged 15 to 17 years old. 90 were in the Army. 11 were in the Navy, most of these died of illness or accident.

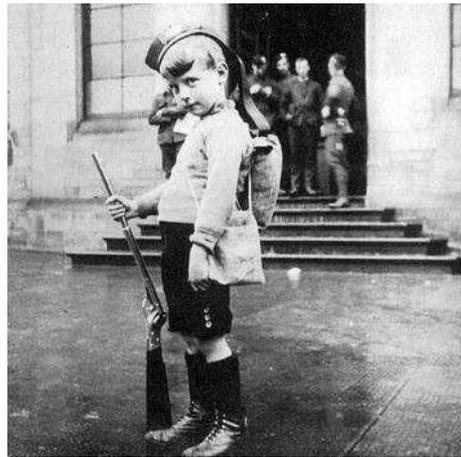
Boy soldiers fought for all the armies

Adolescents fought in all the Armies. Often they lied about their age. There are not good records and we could not find anything about Austria Hungary, Russia or Italy.

Photographs show youngsters in uniform apparently in the regular forces.



British lad pretending



and another



into uniform



.....now for real



German boys pretending



.....now into uniform



These German boys were lucky to be made Prisoners of War and not die in the trenches.



French boy soldier
with a decoration.



Edouard Mina from Lyon

Most did not know about the reality of war. **Reginald Garth**, a 12 year old boy from Perth, Australia stowed away on the transport RMS Mooltan.

His three brothers and father enlisted for the First World War and he wanted be part of what he thought might be an adventure. Fortunately he was shipped home.

French war memorials sometimes depict widows & orphans

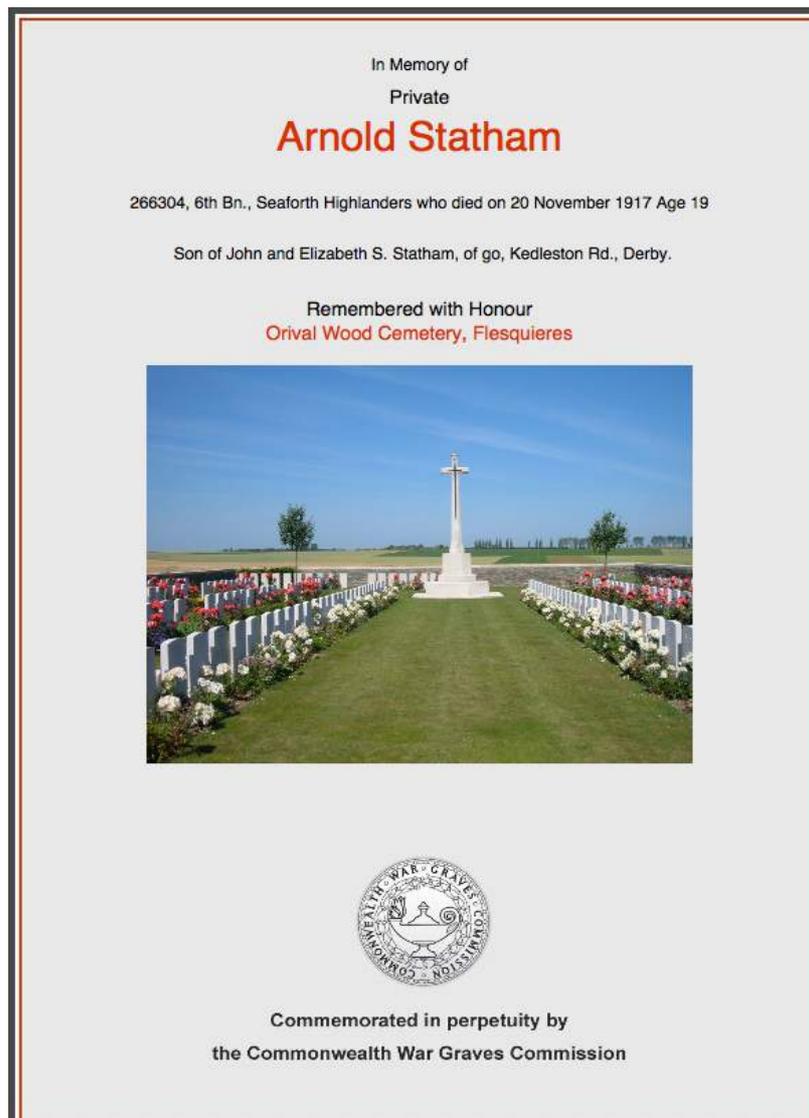


Maudite soit la Guerre (Cursed be war)
Commune de Gentioux, Normandy
Guerre 1914-1918

Private Arnold Statham of Derby joined the Seaforth Highlanders. He was killed on 20th November 1917 aged 19 and is buried at the small Orival Wood Cemetery (300 graves) at Flesquieres near Cambrai.

His headstone has the inscription:

‘School, War, Death’



<http://www.childrens-war-museum.co.uk/great-war/>

<http://histclo.com/essay/war/pac/pac.html>