

*I don't very much mind going into
I know well it is worse for those at
home waiting for me to be
in this strain of the
in war we can but trust in
hope for the better*

THE SOMME

GREATER LOVE



John Kirkpatrick



This story begins with the discovery of an item hidden away in a barn on a farm in County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. A single suitcase, the only remaining trace of a family long moved away. As I slowly ran my finger over the letters W.E.M embossed on its side I suspected there was a story here. It was empty, but I know that uncovering its story would take me on a journey..That's the adventure I want to share with you now.



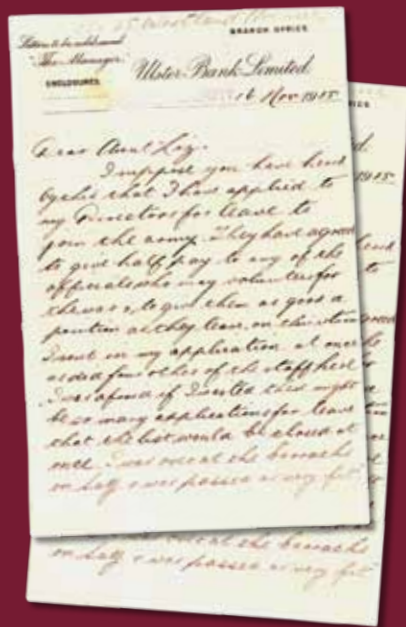
Written by John Kirkpatrick



William Edward
Morrow
1895 - 1916

November 12th 1915 was quiet in the Shipquay Street branch of the Ulster Bank. It had been for most of the day. For William Edward Morrow the highlight that morning had been watching new army recruits marching to the station. Men from Derry City stepping out to do their duty for King and country. Thoughts of adventure stirred within William. On his open ledger was a notice from Major WA Pett; 'all bank staff thinking of enlisting should consider joining the newly formed Bankers' battalion.'

These were unsettling times. Edward handled numbers every day, but he found the scale of casualties reported over recent weeks quite breathtaking: 75,000 French soldiers on the Western front, 50,000 Russians on the Eastern, and over a quarter of a million British, Belgian and German casualties in Flanders.



It was time. His heart hammered in his chest as he thought about the effect this would have on his family, but his decision was made. He would volunteer for this Bankers' battalion, and write himself into the story of this great war and what must be certain victory, into what would be the bloodiest century in human history. For William Edward Morrow this would be the adventure of his life.

His story began in the quiet peaceful community of Bolusty about one third of a mile from the road between Enniskillen and Belleek, perched on the side of the Poolaphouca mountains. He was born in 1895, the second son of Robert and Jeanie Morrow. Family life was simple for those hardworking, devout Methodists. A seasonal routine controlled the pattern of their days. Seedtime and harvest, calving and lambing, cutting the turf for the fire, gathering the potatoes.

Farewells are painful at the best of times, but there were deeper anxious thoughts in Robert and Jeanie's minds as they said their goodbyes to William, watching him leave the homestead clutching his suitcase embossed with those initials W.E.M. As he rounded the final bend in the lane their eyes strained to catch one last glimpse and then he was gone. Sometimes even great love can't find the words to say...



Months later, William is training with his fellow recruits

“Every morning about 10 a.m. a gallant little squad could have been observed marching down Bishopsgate Street, London to their first and strangest parade ground, a school playground in Spital Square, E.C. there to master the intricacies of forming fours and right turning by numbers. They positively swelled with soldierly pride, they fought for the one and only rifle we possessed, they went to their favourite lunching places in the city. They were led bursting with eagerness, down a little alley leading off Bishopsgate Street to the Quartermaster’s Stores, to emerge in the garb of the real article at last”¹

As the war dragged on, not over by Christmas, as many had optimistically thought, the nations of Europe were slowly losing their very lifeblood. In December 1915 the Allies held a military conference at the French General headquarters, in the palace of the Princes de Condé, reflecting on a year that had gone badly. At the same time Erich von Falkenhayn, the German chief of General staff, decided that Verdun would be the next German objective.

On 21 February the Germans attacked. 1,220 guns fired two million shells in eight hours on an eight-mile front, resulting in three quarters of a million casualties, both French and German.

Described as the ‘mincer’, this event is summed up by one French Soldier: “Men were squashed. Cut in two or divided from top to bottom. Blown into showers; bellies turned inside out; skulls forced into the chest as if by a blow from a club.”²

*“Hell cannot be so terrible as this.
Humanity is mad; it must be mad to do what it is doing.”*



With hindsight the historian Charles Emmerson comments:

“The hopes and dreams of a generation were ground into dust by the pounding of artillery shells. Families were ripped apart. Humanity looked into the abyss and, peering into the depths, found its own dark disfigured reflection staring back.”³

To ease the pressure on the beleaguered French, it was decided to mount a new offensive at the Somme. The effects were even more catastrophic.

“The British tried to take the offensive at the Battle of the Somme. During July 1916, they fired a million shells at the German lines and then tried to storm them with 100,000 men. Twenty thousand British soldiers were killed and almost 40,000 injured or captured on the first day. This time it took the generals only four months and the death of over 600,000 men to realise that the old ways no longer worked -that the cold efficiency of the machine gun was more powerful than all the gallantry and courage of their men.”

William Edward is now part of the Bankers’ Battalion serving with the 26th Royal Fusiliers and training as a gunner. After training and four months in Flanders he finds himself on the front line in the third phase of the battle of the Somme at Flers-Courcelette on Friday 15th September.

Back home, pale blue peat smoke drifts silently from the chimney on that autumn morning. The fire crackles in the grate and a kettle quietly bubbles. William’s mother brushes her daughter’s hair, her eyes meeting William’s as he stares at her from his photograph hanging on the wall. His father watching on sees in her glance the great love and the weight it bears. Routine is his rescue. he quickly fetches the horse to take the milk to the creamery.

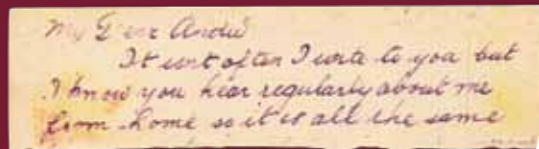
*My Dear Mother
I thank you much for all the paper you are writing
I get an excellent idea of what is going on
but there are ways of overcoming the difficulties
for days if possible*

Somewhere in France, William awakens from a restless sleep. As dawn breaks his eyes slowly focus on the landscape beyond the wall of the trench. In a hollow about a mile away is a village among some trees, its church spire badly damaged by shelling. For the briefest of moments he hears the voices of the sweeter birds above, the sound of home.

It's a brief respite from the noise of shells exploding and the sound of machine gun fire that has punctuated the night. Today there is an extra tension in the air. He feels an urgency to reply to the latest letter from his brother Andrew. He knows these might be his final words, yet he hates the thought of worrying the folks back home.

Once written he finds it best to busy himself by checking and rechecking his Lewis Gun. He touches his breast pocket and feels the little service testament. He draws comfort from its presence, remembering Lord Robert's inscription 'Put your trust in God. He will watch over you.'

The tension is evident in the six faces of this Lewis gun team. Each has been trained for such a moment: one to carry and fire the 28lb weapon, another to carry the tools and spare parts in event of it jamming, and the other four to carry the ammunition magazines in canvas buckets. Their hands sweat, anxiety makes swallowing hard. There is no more time for thinking. William lifts the gun.



My Dear Andrew
It isn't often I write to you but I know you hear regularly about me from home so it is all the same



At home, Robert lifts the two buckets of feed for his young stock. He unbolts the gate and treads carefully into the field, avoiding the deep ruts cut by the hooves of the animals. By the time he returns, Jeanie has the washing out on the line.



My Dear Father
I usually find what I am to say to you more or that much I would tell you but for the reason I have some up, pretty close to the line now I will write in a few lines on journey then

At 6.20am the order is given to advance towards the ruined village of Flers. The troops spill out of the safety of the trenches. At first all is quiet and then suddenly, like metal hail falling on a tin roof all is noise, deafening noise, and a dark black smoke that engulfs the lives of the six young men. The canvas buckets lie limp on the blood-sodden ground. William Edward is gone.

In time a telegram arrives at the Morrow farm, its message short and precise:

**"He fell in action in the advance near Albert."
(September 15th, 1916).**

**"He was one of my Machine Gunners, one of a number of very brave fellows who all did most excellent work right in the forefront of one of the most important and successful attacks since the commencement of the war"-
Captain of D company Officer Commanding.**

In my mind's eye I can see his hand now lying palm open, the fingers that gripped the handle of this suitcase. I place my own hand on that handle and feel it now light and free. Linking us over one hundred years, it bears another weight. I open it and in my imagination hear the voices of young men pouring out from it. Some sound weary and fatigued, but there is warm, friendly laughter too.



I glance again. This time the initials are my own. Once weightless and free carried by a hopeful young man, it has grown heavier. It is weighed down with life's disappointments, hurts, resentments, fears, pride, and shame. Over the years I learned of another who would lift its weight for me but I resisted fiercely, unwilling to yield up my control.

I recall, as a child, reading a story⁴ which I have no doubt William Edward read too. It's about a man who, as he reads about the great love of God becomes aware of his broken life and it weighs him down, nearly crushing him. Finally he begins a journey, a search to be free of his burden. This leads to a cross by the side of the path. As he looks to that cross by faith he is aware that his heavy burden of sin rolls away.

In my own journey there was a time when I too looked by faith to the person who died on that cross and released my grip on that weight.⁵ Since then, many years have passed, twice the lifespan

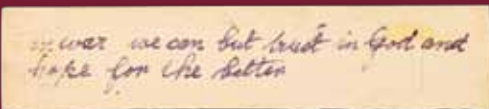
of young William. My selfishness is being replaced by kindness, my rage by peace, my fear by faith, my sorrow by hope, my emptiness with purpose.

As you feel the weight of what you're struggling to carry through life, can you hear the voice of hope and help in the promise of one who says?

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light?"⁶

For one moment we stand alongside William and hear in his final letter

"we can but trust in God and hope for the better"



Acknowledgements

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⁴ Pilgrims Progress by John Bunyan ⁵ I confess my sin to you, and i did not cover my iniquity...and you forgave. Psalm 32 verse 5

⁶ The Bible New International Version Matthew chapter 11 verse 28



W.E.M.