Suicide in Wartime – By Simon Wilson

Not, I admit, the most cheerful of titles. However, for me, history isn't just about big subjects like the movement of armies and the fall of Empires, it's also about the individual stories, and it is indisputable, when reading old newspapers, that suicide is part of the story for many people. I have long been interested in the subject, since hearing the story of my grandfather's friend.

In September 1939, after completing his morning chores in the pub of which he was the licensee, he went out to the pig sty in the garden and cut his throat. His wife was ill, he had two sons of military age and, having been through the previous war, found the prospect of another to be more than he could bear.

Over the years I have seen many cases reported and reading the story of Gunner Harold Meadows on the research page recently made me start thinking about what I know about suicide in the two World Wars.

Suicide was illegal in England and Wales until 1961. They often say that this was just a theory as you can't punish a dead man, but you can. Until 1823 the Crown could confiscate the goods of anyone who committed suicide and their bodies had to be buried at a crossroads. Even after that date, though they could be buried in a churchyard, those who died by their own hand had to be buried at night until another change of law in 1882.

Attempted suicide however, could be punished. In 1956 (a random year for which I found some stats) 5,387 failed suicide attempts were reported to the police. They prosecuted in 613 cases and although people were mostly discharged, fined or put on probation, 33 were actually jailed.

The stigma attached to suicide goes back centuries – it was seen as a sin against God and, in the 13th Century it became a crime in English law. There had always been a recognition that mental health played a role in suicide, but by the late 50s public opinion was changing to see it as a mental health issue rather than a crime. It was decriminalised in 1961 in England and Wales, in 1967 in Northern Ireland, and it had never been a crime in Scotland.

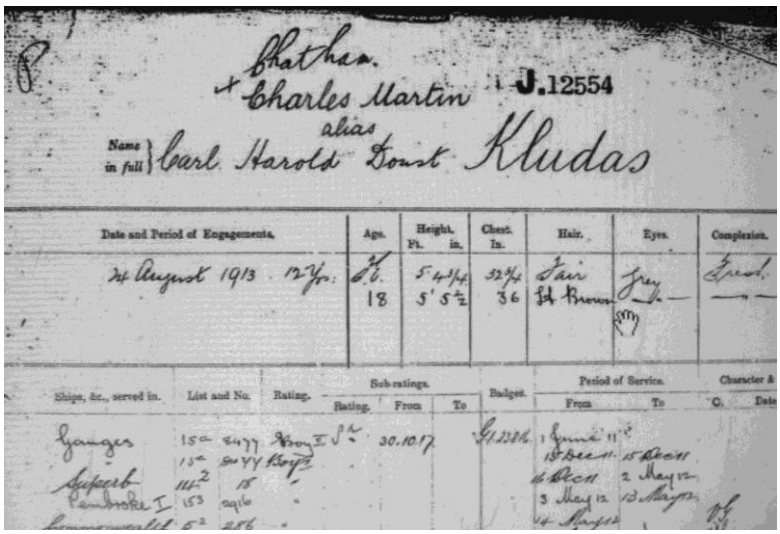
It did, however, remain a possible offence in the army. Shortly after the change in the law, a question regarding 19-year-old Guardsman Till came up in Parliament. After a number of inept "suicide attempts" he was given 112 days detention for "malingering" - Section 42 of the Army Act 1955 – injuring himself with intent to render himself unfit for service. It seems, from the answer given, that the Government was happy that most cases were treated as mental health issues, though a few cases a year, including Till's, were treated as malingering.

A couple of early cases, both from 1914, have echoes in the talk on Internment we were recently given. One concerned the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) and the other was about German nationality and worries over possible internment.

In one, a Suffolk school master was ordered to move out of the county under the provisions of DORA. Local gossip had him noted as a German sympathiser and as such he was not allowed to live near the coast. In his despair, he cut his throat. The case against him was not fully addressed at the hearing and when pressed, the police gave evasive answers. However, the jury was clear on who was to blame. The death was caused "by false reports against his patriotism" and "the police were to blame in not obtaining local information before acting on reported rumours".

This was similar to the treatment given to D. H. Lawrence later in the war, when his anti-war views

and marriage to a German (the former Frieda von Richthofen) led to accusations of spying and signalling to German submarines off the coast of Cornwall. The couple were forced to move. Ironically, in 1912 the Germans had arrested him for spying whilst he was on honeymoon in Metz.


Chatham.
Charles Martin J.12554
alias
Name in full } Carl Harold Ernst Kludas

Date and Period of Engagements.	Age.	Height. Ft. in.	Chest. In.	Hair.	Eyes.	Complexion.
24 August 1913 12 Yrs.	18	5' 5½	36	Fair Lt Brown	Grey	Fresh

Ships, &c., served in.	List and No.	Rating.	Sub-ratings. Rating.	From	To	Badges.	Period of Service. From	To	Character & C.	Date
Ganges	15a 2477	Boy I		30.10.17						
Superb	15a 2477	Boy								
Cumberland I	111-2 153	18 2916								

The Navy papers relating to Carl Kludas, showing his name change to Charles Martin.

The second case was a German - Ernst Kludas, who hanged himself and left a letter telling his wife that he was ashamed of his country and that with him dead she could have her nationality back (having automatically become German on marrying him). He was also, he said, worried about being parted from his wife by internment. Their son Carl, was already serving in the Royal Navy and continued to do so for the rest of the war (although he did change his name to Charles Martin). The Coroner pointed out that, as Ernst was properly registered and not acting in a way to cause concern, any internment would have been temporary and should not have been a matter of such concern.

Not everyone had such clear motives. An out of work gamekeeper from Marston Montgomery in Derbyshire, was, to be frank, a bit of a waster. He had been out of work for two years, living off his father and sum of money of his own. He had been known to drink, and his wife had spoken to him more than once about obtaining work. However, everyone said they seemed happy and there had been no arguments on the day of the tragedy. She seemed happy that morning and had chatted to one of the neighbours the evening before about items she was making for a sale of work. On the morning of 9 March 1916, his father heard two shots at about 9.30am. On coming downstairs he found his daughter in law dead, with a gunshot to the neck, and his son on the ground, with a gunshot wound in the side.

The local doctor was unable to save him and he died that afternoon. After attesting under Lord Derby's Scheme he was worried about when his age group would be called up, and had said several times that he might as well shoot himself at home, rather than be shot on the battlefield. There is logic to it, I admit, but if it was such a worry, I wonder why he registered under the (voluntary) Lord Derby scheme in the first place.

The jury gave a verdict that he committed the wilful murder of his wife and then killed himself.

Twenty three years later, in September 1939, a local school teacher would park his car in a lane in the same village, lead a rubber pipe from the exhaust to the driver's window and poison himself with carbon monoxide. He had seemed “quite happy” when he last spoke to his father, and was discussing joining the army as a dispatch rider or in the Tank Corps. He had similar conversations with the nursing sister at the school and with the headmaster. His only trouble seemed to be a feeling that he was letting the school down by joining up. The car, with the engine still running, was discovered by a local farmer on his way to check on his stock. Despite help from a passing motorist

he was unable to revive the victim. The Coroner recorded a verdict of suicide while the balance of his mind was disturbed.

When I was researching bomb disposal work round Brighton I found a number of reports in the newspapers referring to the search for a married couple who had not been seen for a while. Letters were eventually found scattered on the Downs, which indicated that they intended suicide, as they did not want to be parted by the husband's overseas posting. The bodies of Bombardier H. Neale and his wife Eileen, were eventually found in bushes near the Patcham Downs Chattri Memorial, both shot by the husband's service revolver. The Chattri memorial commemorates the Indian dead of the Great War, and is built on the place where 53 Sikh and Hindu soldiers were cremated after dying in Brighton Hospitals.

That was the first one I looked up on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) website, as I wondered how they would treat a suicide. I found that the husband was buried in Bear Road Cemetery, Brighton, *left*, and commemorated by the CWGC. What I hadn't expected was to find that his wife was commemorated by a stone memorial and a note in the CWGC paperwork saying “ashes”. I assume from that, that the CWGC had facilitated the burial of the wife's ashes with the husband.

Detail of Bombardier Neale’s Headstone

Detail of Eileen Neale’s Memorial Stone

In another case, a miner from Kent, who, from the dates mentioned, had married his girlfriend after she became pregnant, found it was all too much for him. They do not seem to have been particularly happy and she spent a lot of time with her mother. He complained about her poor housekeeping and she was seen to have bruises on her face by several neighbours. They had recently argued about the lack of food in the house. One morning the neighbours heard gunshots and called the police. The local constable called, to find the wife and baby dead, and the husband dying. He had taken his weapon, a .303 rifle issued to him as a member of the Home Guard and shot his wife. The bullet also killed the child. He then shot himself.

Many of the reported cases hinge around war-related reasons such as postings, partings, injury, rationing or lack of materials to carry on a business. You would expect from the number of war-

related reasons, and from the availability of firearms, that suicide rates would rise in wartime. I was surprised, on looking it up, to find that most research shows suicide rates going down in wartime. Reasons usually given for this are increased social cohesion (everyone working together for a common purpose) and increased employment (unemployment often being cited as a cause of suicide due to poverty and isolation).

The sample I have used is not very scientific, as I selected them from a variety of cases found whilst researching other things, so this is far from being a scientific sample. It is also quite a bleak subject, so although, like looting and butchers selling cats as rabbit, it's an aspect of life on the home front in both world wars, it's not one I want to dwell on too much. The final example is a little different from the others, as it is much more dramatic than the average suicide.

Alfred Felix de Parmentier Worsfield de la Bere and his wife Sybil.

Alfred Felix de Parmentier Worsfield de la Bere sounds like a character from an Evelyn Waugh novel. He was a successful architect, who had exhibited his artwork at the Royal Academy. He partied hard, had a great beard (at a time when only sailors and tramps tended to wear beards), and in the two years before his death, wrote off three cars. His second wife, Sybil de la Bere, was ten years younger than he was and had a family trust fund. He added her name to his after marriage, as, obviously, Alfred Felix de Parmentier Worsfield is not quite posh enough. They honeymooned in Russia and he kept two Russian bear cubs as pets. Despite his success and her trust fund, they were short of money, which went on parties, new cars and restoring a Sussex manor house (which had, for instance, a bathroom lined with aquariums). They never got to live in the manor house, as the army requisitioned it at the start of the war, before they were able to move in. He volunteered for service and was commissioned into the Pioneer Corps.

In early December 1940 they were discovered in their Brighton flat, clasped in each other's arms. The flat contained a loan agreement relating to her jewellery, pawn tickets and a letter from their bank manager. A rubber pipe ran from the gas supply to the bed.