

I was born in 1896 and raised in North London by a single mother and orphaned in my early teens. I gained a legal guardian, a senior and respectable figure within the Church of England and was sent to live in Salisbury. I was educated and lived in more comfort than anything I had previously known, but two years later when I was 15, I returned to the capital to fulfil my dreams of becoming a journalist, a profession only just opening its doors to women, albeit restricting them to the society and light entertainment columns.

When war broke out in 1914 I saw an opportunity: I approached every newspaper on Fleet Street, and pitched the idea that they take me on as a war correspondent. No-one took me seriously, although *The Times* did help me secure a passport and offered a cursory promise to look at my work in the unlikely event I ever got to the Front.

Well, I got to Paris and passed six weeks moving among the troops trying to get an angle for a story. Most of those I encountered misunderstood my mission, taking me to be a prostitute. I was disillusioned and came to see that, to make progress, I would have to disguise my gender. I persuaded two English soldiers in Paris to set me up with a uniform; eventually ten soldiers shared in this exploit - I called them the 'Khaki Accomplices'. I bought a bike and muddied my face with a disinfectant named Condyl's Fluid, razored my cheeks in the hope of giving myself shaving rash and finally added shoe polish tan. Two Scottish military police shaved off my long hair and I bound my chest. My soldier friends taught me how to drill and march - and with forged identity papers, I became Sapper Denis Smith.

In the town of Albert, a Lancastrian sapper called Tom Dunn took pity on me, helping me to shelter until we were moved up to the Front. I lived and worked with the troops, joining the tunnelling company of the Royal Engineers as they dug below No Man's Land. The conditions triggered a series of fainting fits and I knew I had to turn myself in; I was scared that if my true identity and gender were discovered when I was unconscious, my friend and ally Tom could be implicated and face court martial.

I was arrested immediately, interrogated as a spy and declared a prisoner of war. But the problem facing the officers who arrested me was how to classify my actions! A woman in uniform at the Front was unheard of; they were stumped but concluded that I had to be detained. The Battle of Loos was imminent and a woman at the Front couldn't be trusted. And so I was removed - to a convent.

Well, I persuaded them after a couple of weeks to allow me to return to London. By chance, on the ferry I met Emmeline Pankhurst. Emmeline insisted I should tell my story back home in a series of lectures. The British authorities, however, had other ideas: they invoked the Defence of the Realm Act and forced me to sign away any right to publish my story until after peace had been declared.

Scotland Yard made one more attempt to categorise my offence, but ultimately released me without charge, to the banks of the Thames, homeless, alone and with a crippling gag-order, which was disastrous for me as a single woman dependent on journalism to earn a living.

I contracted septic poisoning, a souvenir from the trenches, and worse, I was left with bizarre psychiatric symptoms, including a tremor so severe that at times it prevented me from writing. But soon after the end of the conflict, in 1919, I determined to publish my story. In my modest rented rooms in Canonbury, I pulled the book together and *Sapper Dorothy* was published that year, though it caused only a minor ripple. In the 1920s the world wanted to roar, not reflect back on the dark days of the Western Front or the efforts of a lone woman on a quest to prove her worth as a war correspondent.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, as it would be diagnosed now, grew increasingly impactful on my life and I finally sought medical help. I admitted then that the respectable figure in the Church of England who had sent me to Salisbury had subsequently raped me. The physician only saw in front of him a woman without a husband or respectable family, a woman with unbecoming attention-seeking behaviours and an array of bizarre nervous symptoms. So it was not surprising that I was met with ice-cold scepticism and incarcerated, first in Hanwell Lunatic Asylum and thereafter at Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum in North London. And that is where I stayed for thirty-nine years until my death on my 68th birthday, October 4th 1964.

If you look at the records, you will see that I received not a single visitor for the duration of that time.

Dorothy Lawrence 1896 - 1964

Cate Fowler

(Sources below:)

Wikipedia

Femail online

Sparticus Educational

The Heroine Collective

Her Salisbury Story

Stylist magazine

Today I Found Out

A woman lived here, Alternative Blue Plaques, Remembering London's Remarkable Women, by Allison Vale