

# *The Soul Brothers*

**This sad story is dedicated to all those that died in the two great wars but this particular one from our sleepy Cotswolds village of Great Rissington tells of THE GREATEST SACRIFICE ANY ONE FAMILY HAS GIVEN to our great country. Please take time to read this story and maybe pay your respects at our church for the five Soul brothers who died in the First World War.**

Alf and Arthur were identical twins. Born an hour apart, they died five days apart.

Walter wrote a cheery postcard home from hospital and was dead from a blood clot by the time it was delivered.

Albert, the youngest and, with Walter, the first to enlist, was the first to be killed.

Fred was never found but his mother kept a candle burning in the window in the hope that he would return.

Annie Souls got a shilling a week for each dead son and a letter from Prime Minister Herbert Asquith in 1916 conveying the "sympathy of the King and Queen for Mrs Souls in her great sorrow" after three of the boys had been killed.

Arthur won the Military Medal for the action in which he was killed but the citation detailing the courage that cost him his life probably went on a bonfire of family papers said to have burned for two days. Maud Pill, aged 101, used to live in Great Rissington and recalls them all coming along to village dances in uniform.



Albert Souls

"They were nice looking, though not very tall," she says.

"None was married but Arthur did have a girlfriend who lived with the family."

Home for the Souls family was a four-bedroom tied cottage across the green from the village school.

The boys would have followed their father into agricultural labouring by the age of 12 or 13 but they could at least write their names, which they carved into the beams of a village barn.

When war broke out in 1914, Albert and Walter quickly joined the 2nd battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment.

”Tired and weary, the men never failed to respond to any exertion demanded of them.

Battalion diary, 11th Cheshires, Alfred's regiment

The older boys - Fred, Alf and Arthur - enlisted originally in the 16th Cheshires, a 'Bantam' battalion, raised to take big-hearted recruits otherwise too small for the army.

From battalion records and through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, I found out where they fought and died.

Albert and Walter sailed to France in June 1915 and were soon surrounded by death and knee-deep in mud.

In September, they were flung into the Battle of Loos where the British suffered 50,000 casualties.



Alfred Souls

The diary paints a chaotic picture of trenches jammed with dead and wounded, where men risked being gassed by their own side before going over the top into a firestorm of enemy machine guns.

The brothers came through it and the Worcesters were singled out for special praise for their gallantry.

A month later they were paraded before King George V on a damp and foggy morning.



Arthur Souls

The diary reports that the King's horse reared up and threw him off as he left the parade ground.

Inseparable, the Souls lads transferred to the newly-formed Machine Gun Corps in January 1916 and spent weeks on training and trench duties amid the slag heaps in the bleak, flat mining area around Bethune in northern France.

On March 14, the 5th Brigade Machine Gun Corps war diary reports one casualty.

It might have been all quiet on the Western Front but it was the day Annie Souls lost her first son to the war.

Walter's unit was hurled into the battle of the Somme on July 20 - he probably wouldn't have known that a day earlier, brother Fred had gone over the top nearby with the 16th Cheshires never to be seen again.

Walter was wounded and shipped out to a hospital at Rouen, from where his mother received this letter:

"Dear Mrs Souls, I much regret to have to tell you that your son died very suddenly about nine o'clock yesterday evening.

"He came to us with a wound in the upper part of his left leg, and on Tuesday he had to undergo an operation, but he rallied from that all right and he seemed to be better.

"In fact he was quite cheery, and then in the evening on the next day he quite suddenly collapsed and died instantly from an embolism (or clot of blood) in the heart.



Frederick Souls

"I am enclosing a postcard which he wrote on the day he died. He will be buried in the little British cemetery just outside Rouen where lie other brave lads who have fallen in this dreadful war.

"This will be a dreadful blow to you and you have our deepest sympathy in your great loss - M. Phillips, Matron, 25 Stationary Hospital, BEF, Rouen."



Walter Souls

The hospital chaplain wrote: "You have both made a great sacrifice - you have given your son, he his life. It was only the day before I had a talk with him. He seemed quite happy and little did I think that he was so near the end."

Alf went from the 16th to the 11th Cheshires who, from their diary entries, were badly mauled in the early days of the Somme and reduced to just 100 men - one tenth of normal numbers.

"Tired and weary, the men never failed to respond to any exertion demanded of them," reports the battalion diary.

They suffered appalling casualties again at Messines Ridge and Ypres in 1917 and were in the thick of the backs-to-the-wall action at Ploegsteert Wood in Flanders in the great German spring offensive of 1918, when Alfred Souls met his death.

"This will be a dreadful blow to you and you have our deepest sympathy in your great loss."

**Letter to Annie Souls from matron of the Rouen hospital where her first son Walter died.**

The 11th Cheshires fell back 38 miles over one 48-hour period, stopping six times to dig in and make a stand and being reduced once more to just a handful of officers and a straggling bunch of exhausted survivors.

Alf wasn't one of the lucky ones - he was killed, aged 30, on April 20, 1918, and is buried in leafy Strand Military Cemetery on the edge of the wood.

Family legend says that Arthur, by then a lance corporal attached to the 7th Royal West Kents, lost all will to live when he heard of his twin brother's death.

The West Kents' diary for April 1918 records orders to hold the Villers-Bretonneux plateau "at all costs", lists casualties as six officers and 228 other ranks killed, wounded and missing and gives a roll of honour, including "Military Medal for 21683 L/c Arthur William Souls (since a casualty)."

He is among 550 soldiers, half of them unidentified, buried in Hangard Communal Cemetery extension, one of those places of terrible beauty, sloping down towards a poplar-lined lane and the winding Luce river - once running with blood but now as peaceful and pretty as the River Windrush near Great Rissington.

Albert is buried at Bully-Grenay in a grim part of northern France where the scars of battle have healed but the slag heaps and scars of coal mining remain. Walter is laid to rest at St Sever Cemetery, Rouen.

Close by is the grave of another soldier who shares a tragic bond with young Walter Souls - he, too, was one of five brothers to die in "the war to end wars".

The occasional TV camera apart, Rissington has been spared the Hollywood invasion and the Souls haven't received the Saving Private Ryan treatment just yet

But those haunting pictures in the church are a reminder how one family was destroyed.

Every Remembrance Sunday the names of the brave village sons are solemnly read out at a special service.

The congregation turn, heads bowed, towards the memorial, and silently remember them all.

"You have both made a great sacrifice - you have given your son, he his life."

**Hospital chaplain's letter to Annie Souls.**