

Britain sent quarter of a million underage boy soldiers to fight in World War One

No Glory 25 May 2014

<http://noglory.org/index.php/multimedia/video/202-how-did-britain-let-250-000-underage-soldiers-fight-in-world-war-one#.U7siqbEy9Qx>

Desperate to boost recruitment, the British military turned a blind eye to thousands of children who enlisted by lying about their age. Of 250,000 who were recruited, an estimated 120,000 were killed or injured.

Britain's 250,000 boy soldiers in World War One

Boy Soldiers' fighting in [World War One](#) remained a controversial issue throughout the war. By the time World War One had ended many thousands of youths too young to legally enlist had been either killed or wounded.

When World War One was [declared](#) in August [1914](#), a huge number of men wanted to enlist. Their enthusiasm was shared by many aged 15 to 18. The war was sold to the general public as a war that would be over by [Christmas 1914](#). Therefore recruitment offices had to handle tens of thousands of men and youths who wanted to show their patriotic fervour. Few, if any, of the recruitment officers had time and probably the inclination to check the age of the volunteers. The rule of thumb seemed to be perfectly simple: if the volunteer wanted to fight for his country and was physically fit enough to do so, why stop him? In this way it is thought that as many of 250,000 'Boy Soldiers' were recruited and fought in World War One.

Recruitment rules were simple. To enlist and fight abroad, you had to be nineteen or over. If you were eighteen, you could enlist but you had to remain in the UK until you were nineteen before being posted abroad. No one could join the army under the age of eighteen.

However, the rules were written before World War One was declared. As a war, World War One broke any previously held conventions on how war should be fought. Wars had always brought out the patriotic side of a nation and the same was seen in the UK as well as Germany, France and Russia. However, the impact of industrialisation on the way wars were fought had not been fully realised despite what had occurred during the American Civil War – battles fought in America during this war may have given Europe some inkling of what to expect in terms of casualties.

When Lord Kitchener called for volunteers for the British Army he could not have predicted the rush that occurred. In scenes witnessed all over the UK, tens of thousands went to their nearest recruitment office to volunteer. One 'Boy Soldier' was Tommy Gay:

“I had to go in the army because Kitchener put a poster on the wall which said: “We want you. We want you.”

Though Gay was only 16, he told the recruitment officer he was 18 and was told, “You’re just what we want.” It would have been a scene repeated across the UK – boys lying about their age and facing an officer who did not want to dash their desire to do what was right for ‘King and Country’.

Another ‘Boy Soldier’, Richard (Dick) Trafford was so keen to join up that he played a double bluff on a recruiting sergeant. When as a 15 year old he told a recruiting sergeant that he was 18, Trafford was told that he was obviously too young and to go away. Trafford then bluffed the sergeant that he would get his birth certificate to prove he was 18. An officer heard the conversation. He said that Trafford’s word was enough and that a birth certificate would not be necessary. He readily signed the enlistment form.

Some ‘Boy Soldiers’ were so desperate to join and “be one of the lads” (Tommy Gay) that they not only lied about their age but also their name. By signing on with a false name, their parents could not track them down and encourage a commanding officer to return their underage son.

Lack of hard evidence means it is difficult for historians to know accurate data. However, it is generally accepted that no child under fourteen volunteered. Even gravestones in [Commonwealth War Grave Cemeteries](#) do not help as they show the ‘official’ age of the deceased as opposed to what may have been their real age. Horace Iles may well have been one of the youngest as he joined the Leeds Pals Battalion in September 1914 at the age of fourteen but told the recruitment office that he was eighteen.

The first ‘Boy Soldiers’ arrived in Europe in May [1915](#). The first major battle that involved ‘Kitchener’s Volunteers’ was the [Battle of Loos](#). It did not go well for the British and they suffered 50,000 casualties killed and wounded. 3,600 of these were under the age of nineteen – an age when they should not even have been in the [trenches](#).

On the first day of the [Battle of the Somme](#) in 1916, 500 ‘Boy Soldiers’ were killed and 2,000 wounded. BY the time the battle had ended, 18,000 ‘Boy Soldiers’ had been killed or wounded.

There were those who opposed the use of underage soldiers. Across the nation, these were parents whose sons had frequently joined up without their knowledge. Many turned to the one man who found fame by fighting for the return to the UK of these ‘Boy Soldiers’ – Liberal MP for Mansfield Sir Arthur Markham.

Markham was born on August 25th 1866 into a successful coal mining family. In 1900, Markham was elected MP for Mansfield. Accusations that he was anti-war were false. Markham gave one of his homes in Folkestone, Kent, to the government to house overseas officers and paid for packages to be sent to British POW’s. He also feared that industry would be left short of workers if too many youths left to fight.

Markham used the platform of the House of Commons to openly question the War Office about its recruitment policy. His principal opponent in this chamber was the Under-Secretary of State for War, Harold Tennant. Within the House, many sided with Tennant as they saw that the well being of the army was more important than what many MP's viewed as nothing more than a legal nicety. Markham accused the War Office of dishonesty. In a statement to the House he said:

“There has been fraud, deceit and lying practiced by the War Office.”

Tennant claimed that the War Office was, in fact, the victim of deceit as it had been the boys who had lied about their age, not the War Office enticing in underage soldiers. Markham accused the government of issuing confidential instructions to the Army to ignore age. Tennant denied this and stated that nothing regarding this had been brought to his attention. Tennant put the case of the government plainly:

“In this country no boys under the prescribed age as laid down by regulations have been enlisted with the knowledge of the War Office. Boys under that age are not wanted either with or without the consent of their parents.”

As the war proceeded, Markham became inundated with requests from parents who wanted to know where their sons were. Those who had enlisted under false names were all but impossible to contact. Markham concerned himself with those boys aged between fourteen and sixteen. Tennant responded by issuing War Office directives to senior Army officers that ‘Boy Soldiers’ should be returned to the UK but that the onus for carrying this through lay with senior army commanders in France and Belgium. However, senior officers were not keen to lose trained men and the War Office was not keen to force their directives through.

Markham was seemingly out on a limb and the strain of it was too much for him. He died in August 1916 aged just 50. The number of ‘Boy Soldiers’ recruited fell drastically after the Battle of the Somme had ended when conscription was brought in. Anyone conscripted aged eighteen or over had to bring proof of their age with them.

No official figures were ever kept for the recruitment of ‘Boy Soldiers’. In fact, it would have been impossible to do so with so many youths lying about their age. The record books would have stated ‘aged 18’ for someone who may have been fifteen. The gravestone of Rifleman V J Strudwick in a CWG cemetery just outside of Ypres, does have his true age on it – 15 – but very many clearly do not.

This film was produced by Testimony Films, formed in the UK in 1992 by producer, director and writer Steve Humphries. He was formerly a lecturer in history and sociology at the University of Essex and a producer at LWT: he was described by Broadcast magazine as “the king of oral history”. Testimony has made more than one hundred network documentaries for national terrestrial broadcasters - BBC1, BBC2, ITV1, Channel 4 and Five, as well as for digital and worldwide networks - History, National Geographic International, and Yesterday. The films are distinguished by ground breaking research and emotional power. They are often accompanied by books, co-authored by Humphries, who

has more than twenty books to his name and is honorary vice president of the British Oral History Society.