

Armistice Day is commemorated every year on 11 November to mark the armistice signed between the Allies of World War I and Germany at Compiègne, France, for the cessation of hostilities on the Western Front of World War I, which took effect at eleven o'clock in the morning—the “eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” of 1918.

Lesley Hordon (author of *The Angora Rabbit* and *Breed for Victory!*) writes:

The Great War took both the Government and the Rabbit Fancy by surprise. The younger fanciers hurried to enlist, either selling their stock or handing it over to fathers, mothers, brothers or wives to care for until the day of their return. Older fanciers tried to keep the shows going, despite the chaos on the railways as troops mobilised, and the commandeering of show halls for training soldiers. Others started to breed utility rabbits for food. The soldier-fanciers “somewhere in France” (their precise location could not be given) wrote to *Fur & Feather* about their rabbits and cavies and their plans for their studs when the war was over. Sadly, many would not return.

Among the show reports and cancellations, letters, advertisements and exhortations to breed Table Rabbits in *Fur & Feather* were the reports of fanciers or their sons killed in action, just three of which are given below.

“CORPORAL AJ KILBY GIVES HIS LIFE FOR HIS COUNTRY: Belgian Hare fanciers will hear with regret, mingled with feelings of pride, that one of the most prominent of their number- Mr AJ Kilby, has yielded up his life in the service of his country, being killed in action in France on July 30 1915.”

“The news that Mr Tom Millar, one of our best known breeders of English rabbits, has lost his only son in the war will be received with deep regret by all fanciers. Trooper Millar was only 19 years of age, but he answered the call readily and donned khaki last May (1916). He was a bright young fellow and gave promise of a brilliant career, and his death cannot but be regretted. He has died in the best of all causes, sacrificing himself for the love of his country. May the knowledge that he died such a noble death help his father to bear his load of sorrow.”

“MC MARSHALL: No-one can understand what my hobby saved me from after the terrible news when our boy went down. I really believe it saved me from self- destruction. He was a fine strapping fellow, chief bomber in his section. A clean living, manly man, a fancier to the fingertips, who loved a good Abyssinian cavy and was getting together quite a nice stud. Then the call came, and he went. He went down in the great Somme offensive.”



Private Bob

The following story appeared in *Fur & Feather* on June 14 1915, written by “EGB.” There is no information about the author, other than those initials, but the vivid descriptions given suggest that he knew someone over there fighting in the trenches “somewhere in France.”

Private Bob, of the 5th Midshire Regiment (Territorial Force) lay in the trench, and mopped his streaming face.

Phew! It had been hot, that march had, and no mistake about it. He used to think the long route marches during his training at home hard enough work, but they were not in the same street compared to this.

Home seemed far away now, somehow, very far away. And the regiment only left four days ago. Four days! Or was it a year?

The events of those days were strange and crowded to Private Bob. At times he found it hard to convince himself that he had been taking part in a great reality, and that he was not dreaming a wonderfully wild and impossible dream. If he had had it all prophesied a year before, he would have laughed at the prophet. But there was no laughing now.

Those four days had seen many things, from the moment when the tightly packed troop-train had slowly steamed out of Victoria Station until the present hour. Southampton – the transport boat – the landing at the French harbour – the rapid journey up to the Base – the short rest there – and then the march to the destination they had just reached.

This actual section of the front had been the scene of comparatively little fighting so far. However, information received in high quarters from a reliable source, pointed towards a big German attack here very shortly, and the division which included the 5th Midshires was a portion of the strong force hurried up to guard the position.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and the day, with all its heat and dust was fading away to a beautiful calm spring evening. The storms and mud were now things of the past. The actual trenches occupied by the Midshires were dug at the summit of a small hill.

The country that lay stretched before the slope was not unlike England. The fields, the occasional woods and plantations, the farms ... but the latter were all silent and deserted. From the little belt of trees just at the foot of the rise, the birds sang beautifully and clearly: was this really the red land of blood and strife?

What was that? Yes, it was the dull booming of great guns in the far distance, nothing more. There was no sign of the German attack yet. The only Germans the Midshires had seen were a train load of prisoners at the base, but all along their march that day they had seen many, many results of the enemy's handiwork....



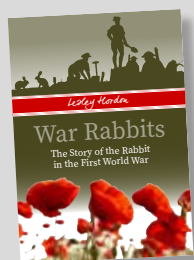
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Again and again hundreds of pairs of eyes swept the landscape but saw nothing. The officers sat in little groups here and there, talking in low voices, exchanging opinions and suggestions. The men – pipes and cigarettes alight – lay and sat in various attitudes – some with closed eyes, wearied with their day's exertions – others reading, writing, playing cards, speaking quietly among themselves.

Private Bob was just closing his eyes when they fell on something just outside the little cove at the bottom of the rise – a rabbit nibbling at the sweet young grass under the shade of the trees.

That rabbit reminded him of something – his unopened FUR & FEATHER was in his pocket. The post, bringing it and his wife's letter, had reached the Midshires at the Base, just before they left and he had time to read the letter only.

In a moment he had the wrapper off and was deep in the paper. It was a very interesting number, and he saw what efforts were being made by Messrs Ambrose, House, Baskerville and many other fanciers to keep the flag flying at home over the good old Fur Fancy.

It was very good news to him. For Private Bob was a fancier and a keen one at that. Only a working man, his hobby had given him unlimited pleasure and had brought him many friends.

Lack of accommodation only allowed him to keep a small stock, but the neat little back garden rabbitry, built by himself in his spare time, housed a select stud of rabbits. He had won a few prizes and he had sold a few winners of his own breeding.

He grew his own green stuff and roots in the garden, got corn and bran cheap at the mill where he worked, and altogether made a profitable pastime of his "bunnies."

The "Missus" was almost as enthusiastic as he was and was looking after them in his absence. He knew they were in the best of hands. He was lucky, he thought, as so many fanciers would have had, under the circumstances, to dispose of their studs.

It was getting dusk now, and the landscape becoming more and more enshrouded in gloom. Private Bob refilled and lighted his pipe. Again his thoughts wandered back to home and all it means... the stock would be getting their evening feed now, and the kiddies would be "helping" Mummy to mix the bunnies mash like they used to help Daddy when he was there....

He thought of the night when he had brought home his first open show winner, how he had waved the red ticket in the air as he came into the house, how the victorious rabbit had been lifted out of the box and stroked and petted on the kitchen table and then taken down into the garden to the special supper that awaited it in the snug rabbitry.

And how proudly he had tacked up the 1st prize card on the door of the hutch. There had been

something sacred about that first winner, and he had refused a tempting offer for it. He still had that rabbit, and although it was getting on in age now, it always enjoyed the extra tit-bit he brought it now and then....

They were very, very sweet tonight – those thoughts of home. Then the great war had come, the King and the Empire asked the sons of the land if they were ready – and as a result Bob went out one evening, to come back with his red banded sleeve – Private Bob of the Fifth Midshire Regiment..... That was six months ago.

It was black dark now. Suddenly an aeroplane passed high overhead, turned and came back, flashing signals on to the trenches below. Sharp orders passed down the lines, there was a rapid grasping of rifles and – the Midshire were ready, stern, set faced men – ready – ready.

From further behind, a great searchlight glared and cast its long sweeping rays over the fields below the slope, to show the long packed masses of grey coated Germans coming on towards the slope....

Another order and another – then the British rifles and machine guns began to speak to the enemy – faster and faster, until a murderous leaden storm swept down the hill.

They are not honourable foes, the Germans, but they have pluck. Once, twice they wavered... only to gather themselves and come on – on again, bayonets gleaming strangely On up the slope towards the Midshires in the trenches.

The rabbits were sure it was long, long past supper time. When was it coming? Little furry feet rested against hutch fronts, little noses and whiskers twitched with expectation, little eyes gazed up the garden towards the back door. Where was their mistress? Usually so punctual? Where?

If they could have looked into the kitchen they would have seen her sitting at the table, head buried in outstretched arms.... The kiddies sat in the firelight vaguely conscious of something very wrong with Mummy – they were frightened.

A telegram lay at her feet – one of those terrible messages which break hearts and homes – beginning with "We regret," and signed "War Office."

Private Bob would never feed his "bunnies" again. E.G.B



For the Fallen

Bill Paley writes:

There is a simple wooden bench at the bottom of our lane. It's been placed there at the gates of the local cemetery and overlooks the War Memorial.

The bench is dedicated to the 'Warrior Six', who served with the Yorkshire Regiment in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. They died together, blown to pieces when their armoured vehicle hit a road mine in March 2012.

They were just young men, mostly in their twenties and some like local lad Anton just gone twenty. He was a little boy when we first moved to Longwood and he would often be seen playing with our neighbours' lad in the surrounding fields.

His grieving mum Margaret met his coffin at Wootton Bassett to find his remains could fit into a shoe box. His name is now inscribed on the Longwood War Memorial alongside the names of hundreds of Huddersfield men from the First and Second World Wars.

My Great Grandfather's name, Sapper Levi Hall, is found on a war grave in the FR 40 Cemetery, Etaples, Northern France. He enlisted on 25/05/1915 caught up by patriotism and a need to 'do his bit'.

He need not have done so for he was over 35 at the time, had a wife and six children to support, one of whom was my Granny. He had left his family home in Baildon, West Yorkshire to travel down to Finchley, London where he signed up with the Royal Engineers. My Great Grandma was not too happy but wrote to him two or three times a week until he died in 1917. I still have the post cards he sent her from France.

His death, whilst still tragic, was not as heroic as Anton's. He succumbed to dysentery brought on by the appalling living conditions the troops were forced to endure in the trenches. I have a black edged letter from the War Office sending condolences and sympathy to my Great Grandma, a letter she treasured until her death just after World War Two.

During the latter war my Granddad Jack served in the RAF Regiment as a gunner at various airfields such as Biggin Hill. He too was in his thirties when he got the call up but he was one of the lucky ones, he returned.

Granddad knew the late Ken Pumford a much missed Steel Dutchman from Wakefield. Now old Ken was indeed a hero, for he served in the RAF as a rear gunner and made countless sorties over Germany in his time. This was against all the odds for the survival rate for rear gunners was extremely poor.

In November 2018 the country will commemorate the fallen in World War 1. The eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month will mark exactly 100 years since the end of the Great War.

So it was with great respect and gratitude to these fallen heroes that I spoke up in Committee last year to plea for our Adult Stock Show to be put back to the end of November instead of its usual second week. This would allow our members to pay their own respects free from the distraction of a rabbit show. I am pleased that they agreed to do so.

With this tribute the editor has reprinted EGB's account of Private Bob which so poignantly connects service men and their rabbits. In the words of Robert Laurence Binyon's much loved poem "The Fallen":

"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning,

We will remember them".

Bill Paley