

Article

The Typography of Forgetting: The Unsettling of Dominant Social Narratives in the Resurfacing of a Military Deserter in Family Memory

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Abstract: Society expects history to be objective and factual. Collectively history is the memory of the nation, that group, the imagined community that believes that it has always been together. It could even be said that the nation is about forgetting; forgetting that the people who make up that community were not always together as they are now, or the forgetting of those hurdles and hindrances that create obstacles to cohesion and continuity. Memory is collaborative by nature, and provides a legacy to society, a response to its own mortality in the future. This paper proposes to examine the case of subjective recounting of the past through a family memory of war, the forgetting, the gaps created in narratives to enable cohesion and to fit in with publicly acceptable discourse. It ultimately attempts to answer the question as to why it might be important to re-examine such stories of an individual nature, in a wider scope of the nation, and links those seemingly antinomic periods of time of past, present, and future, which are not as exclusive as might be believed. This paper focuses upon a deserter ancestor, going against the grain of traditional narratives. Traditionally, soldiers are considered by definition of what is expected from them in the national narrative, as 'war heroes'. However, this paper examines the life of a military ancestor who, in reality, did not fit into that framework, and who deserted from the army (although never on the front line, thus avoiding being shot). Nevertheless, the multiple desertions (deserted five times in total, lost kit twice, was imprisoned, and was detained for desertion three times) only 'resurfaced' recently due to the availability of documentation and research carried out in archives. While the ancestor conformed socially to what was expected of him, the reality of his military files seems to reveal the contrary. Despite the high numbers of times that he did desert, he did also rejoin every time, and ended up spending 3 decades in the same military unit. Or, perhaps the manner in which society views soldiers pre- and post-WWI has been altered, and, as such, desertion was not once what it has become. Forgetting has been the norm in society regarding certain pasts that step outside of the national narrative, rather than remembering. This paper attempts to imagine the nation's past in a different way, by including those who also deserted, an area of ill-defined research in military history.

Keywords: memory; nation; national identity; war; critical family history; forgetting; remembering



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1. Introduction

There is a somewhat tattered and well-handled sepia photograph [Figure 1] of my great grandfather, William John King, in which he stands against a studio backdrop in dress uniform, with two slightly faded lozenges of his parents above him. He is holding a military baton and wearing a tunic of the elite East Surrey Regiment. He has two chevrons on his left sleeve, for good conduct, and two crossed rifles, the marksman's badge, to show not just his proficiency in shooting, but that he was the best shot of the entire battalion, corporals and privates included¹. Outside of that sepia photograph, the uniform was a red

crimson tunic, and he would have had black trousers with a red stripe going down each leg, on the outside. The collar was white, and there were two yellow badges on either side of it. It cannot be seen in the photograph, but he would have also worn a white leather belt and had a sword bayonet in a scabbard on his left hip, and he would have been issued with a Lee Enfield rifle. He would have topped it all off with a peaked home services helmet. The metal buttons down the front had the Royal Arms on them². The photograph can be dated to the early 1900s. It is possible that it was taken after 1907 (the year in which he received a Good Conduct badge³) while he was in India as part of his military career with the 2nd Battalion of the East Surreys, an elite fighting force of the British Army. He was posted to India on 20 September 1905, and stationed there for more than six years. He enlisted on 8 April 1902, and remained in the British Army until 24 September 1930, just a few days before he turned 50. This was the man who seemingly made a career of an entire life in the army, a professional soldier. However, on closer examination of his military service record, it would seem that his career was not without its obstacles, since he deserted on numerous occasions (while at home), lost his kit, and was imprisoned and detained for desertion. This article attempts to put that into perspective and to move away from both the catch-all universal narratives of what it meant to be in the British Army, through the questioning of how individuals, families, societies, and, indeed, nations, remember their pasts.



Figure 1. Photograph, c. 1907, William John King (1880–1959). Photograph from author's personal collection.

2. Memory and History: Past, Present, and Future

Individual memories, aggregately, contribute to the construction of collective memories of the nation, that group of people who believe that they have a common history together and that they belong together. Personal memories are not only linked to, but also reflect and shape collective memories (Halbwachs 1997; Hamilton and Shopes 2008). Individual memories and collective memories influence each other; even more so since,

through composure, individuals tell the stories that fit in with what is expected in the times in which they live (Thomson 2013, 2016).

The focus is not so much on those that have preceded us, but rather on the meaningful narrative, which in the words of Aleida Assmann (2009), shows that it is not related to “those who left something behind but [...] those who pick it up” (p. 38). Susan Sontag (2003) notes that that narrative is about “stipulating” to those that follow what they should remember, including “what they hold to be important, to which story they accord eminence, which anxieties and values they have” (p. 86). It was usually only those of “highest rank [who] were singled out for a continuation in memory and only those feats and achievements were selected that contributed to the honor and fame of those who were remembered” (Assmann 2008, p. 58). However, it is no longer the elite alone who construct how we perceive history; individuals can go against elitist claims that they possess and control those histories. After all, memory is what belongs to the group, collectively; but history cannot be claimed by universality (Nora 1984, p. 23), since it belongs to individuals. As an individual, it is important to construct the meaning of one’s life, even if that means bringing into question the narratives that are traditionally meted out, and reproduced, generationally. Nietzsche (1957) noted that “value and perspective change with the individual or the nation that is looking back on its past” (p. 19). It is the present that provides the power to determine the way in which the past is looked at. As such, “history can serve life” (Nietzsche 1957, p. 22), the here and now. The development of the self does not spontaneously begin when an individual is born but is the process of everything that has preceded that individual’s life, including their ancestors (Kramer 2011; Lawler 2008). It is also for this reason that a closer examination of individual ancestors’ lives should be analysed more closely, including those that unsettle the present. Indeed, the service record of my ancestor seems to unsettle since it shows on the surface that he deserted on numerous occasions, and yet, in a complex twist, he had joined, and re-joined, the elite fighting force of the East Surrey Regiment. It unsettles from two points of view. Firstly, this was not the person whose stories I had been told, the hero-soldier. It also unsettled the notion of belonging to the nation. On closer inspection, it would come to unsettle the remembrance of World War One and how soldiering is depicted in general public opinion, and in the image of the nation-state.

The stories of the past that are picked up sometimes unsettle the dominant social narratives that have been constructed or stipulated (Ashton and Hamilton 2010; De Groot 2009; Evans 2011). They resurface, after having been buried somewhere, lost in archives that have largely been inaccessible to the general public. As Hemmings notes, “generating a ‘memory archive’ always does more than reveal historical patterns or burdens: it also opens up the ways in which individual lives demonstrate the irreducibility of experience to the structures we live within” (Hemmings 2022, p. 185). It is both the linking of the past through which we can structure the understanding of the present, and the future by bringing that into question. Those three periods of time are not just merely separated and compartmentalised, antinomic in nature; they are more closely (inter)linked than they might appear. One remembers now in the present, looking back into the past, making choices of what is to be remembered, or not, for the future. The past is just as much about the future as the present is. When we pick up our pasts, the question is fundamentally what one wishes to be in the future, and how this individual memory of the past (re)constructed in the present will affect the future self. The present self (re)constructs the past, by contemplating what one wishes to become in the future, Heidegger’s *ecstases*, or being outside of one’s present self (Heidegger 1927). The present co-realises a past and a future at the same time. One constructs the future self by making certain choices related to how one remembers the past, and what one chooses to forget. This is key, since it is not just a question of remembering, but also forgetting, by choice, design, or accident. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the present also brings with it the sedimented meaning of what has preceded it, with chains of citationality (Bakhtin 1984).

It is, however, unsettling when certain truths and secrets resurface in the present, are discovered, and then uncovered, and they unravel the social narrative that dominates

both on a macro level as part of the nation's identity, but also on the micro level of a family's own identity. What to do when it is discovered that an ancestor was not the person they purported to be, and that they indeed deserted on the very day that they signed up for enlistment, and subsequently deserted five times in total, lost their kit twice, were imprisoned, or detained for desertion three times, and hid it all? The man in the tattered old photograph did not tell those stories since they would have gone against the grain of the narratives of bravery, heroic acts, patriotism, and nationalistic feeling in the face of an enemy. However, truncated, partial stories were told for honour and fame (Assmann 2008); they were passed down, as part of the narrative of family identity, within the wider scope of national identity. However, the question also remains as to why someone might have deserted, and why society has forgotten that people are not one-faceted flat characters, but made up of far greater elements of complexity.

Post-modernity allows for the going against the grain of grand narratives, and the questioning of the notion of reliability and accuracy of what has been chosen to be told as a community, or national story. Many discoveries of family secrets and lies are revelations of disruptions of those past narratives, and the assumptions that people have.

Forgetting has now become more difficult; the ability to forget has been "suspended" (Mayer-Schönberger 2011, p. 4). However, if those memories that resurface cannot be shared with others, then they serve no purpose. This paper raises questions of identity and how collectively and individually people forget unflattering pasts, and why society needs 'good' ancestors. It also raises questions of prescriptive forgetting, for the general good of society and the family, that repressive erasure (Connerton 2008). Why was there a selective process involved in the stories that were to be remembered? Why have they resurfaced now? Beyond the seemingly endless possibilities now afforded by the internet, Schacter (2001) notes that there is a "complex interaction between the current environment, what one expects to remember, and what is retained from the past" (p. 129). Digital resources and archives have now suspended Nietzsche's (1957) "power of forgetting [...] the capacity of feeling "unhistorically"" (p. 6).

Society expects history to be both truthful, objective, and factual (Ricoeur 1955; Nora 1984; Veyrat-Masson 1991; Bevir 1994); and yet, memory fails society, since it is far more subjective than one might be prepared to accept. Family stories are inherited from the past, packaged up like a narrative to be repeated. Yet, they should be questioned. Memories of family stories construct cohesion, continuity, and the individual's place in the group. The etymology of 'to remember' is indeed to be a 'member', 'membership' of a group's stories (Milne 2023). When the group disappears, the membership is lost, the 'memory' falters, and is forfeited, no longer to be 'remembered'. Therefore, for a moment, let us unsettle the dominant narrative of the heroic valour of the soldier (Tobia 2022), that defender of the nation; a narrative that is presented as being a truthful, objective, and factual recounting of history. However, perhaps memory has failed society in both the manner in which one looks back on the First World War and also how soldiering is perceived, remembered, and presented.

3. Desertion in the British Army

Contrary to popular national narratives of any state which tend to obscure desertion in the army, Lynch (2016) notes that military absenteeism is now receiving greater scholarly attention. That attention has shown that only a small number of cases actually made it to general court martials, for example, in the Napoleonic Wars, since desertion was so widespread in the British Army and Navy that there was simply not enough manpower to deal with it. Only those that were the most serious became exemplary cases of believed dissuasion for others. Lynch (2016) notes that there were 77,696 cases of desertion in the British Army between 1803 and 1815, "a loss it could ill afford when it struggled to recruit enough men to cover total casualties" (p. 809). It is also recently that research has emerged related to desertion in the British Army of World War I. This is, in part, due to the fact that court martial records were not released for 75 years. The lists are preserved in the

British National Archives, along with the Court Martial Registers, and also at the British Newspaper Library where they are recorded in the Police Gazettes⁴ (in part). Today, they are consultable, and can contribute to understanding past narratives.

It is generally agreed upon today that desertion occurred in WWI due to soldiers' suffering from chronic exhaustion (Watson 2011), although the British saw fewer soldiers deserting than the German enemy. With regard to executions during World War I, they were promulgated and carried out on the same day, and those guilty would often be paraded in front of others and then executed by firing squads made up of soldiers from the same regimental battalions (Babington 1983; Putkowski and Sykes 1993). This must have had some effect on the soldiers and acted as a means of dissuasion. Yet, this did not bring desertion to a halt.

Desertion can be broadly stated as absence from the battalion, quitting service, or sleeping, but away from the front line, otherwise it was classified as cowardice (Peaty 1999). It would seem during World War I that few of those sentenced to death were actually executed, since it was believed that those soldiers were still able to serve (Moore 1975; Oram 2003). In other words, despite desertion, they would still be sent back to fight. There was usually a two-week window within which nearly all absentees were caught and brought back (Jahr 2014), and the desertion rate has been calculated at 10.26 per 1000 men (overall desertion rate for 1914–1918), but men deserted less at the front line because they risked being shot on the spot (Chen 2016), and subsequently being classed as cowards. The War Office (1922) noted regarding WWI that there were 55,400 named absentees and deserters, with 44,395 court martials (7361 deserters and 37,074 absentees). A soldier absent for more than 21 days was considered a deserter (Putkowski and Sykes 1993; Chen 2016). This is interesting in light of the fact that Jahr (2014) has shown that most were caught and returned to the barracks with that two-week window, thus falling short of being included in the official figures. Soldiers would be detained while awaiting the sentence of the court martials (Babington 1983; Chen 2016). It should be noted that there were peaks in the numbers of soldiers that deserted the British Army in 1914, upon the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand (because of fear of outbreak of war), as well as during the Christmas periods (to join family members) of 1916 and again in 1917 (Chen 2016). There was also a spike at the end of the war in 1918 that Chen attributes possibly to exhaustion, and that during peacetime the death penalty could not be given as a sentence for desertion.

There was no death sentence for those deserting at home, and my great grandfather, William John King, always deserted while at home, never at the front line. This in itself shows the complexity of the decisions being taken, participating in some of the bloodiest and earliest battles of the First World War, and fighting; and yet, deserting while at home, in more familiar surroundings. Watson notes that throughout the Great War, officers had been good at "wringing obedience from individuals" (Watson 2011, p. 207). Attitudes towards deserters have also now changed, even those who deserted at the front line. There were 306 British Army and Commonwealth soldiers who were shot for desertion during World War I, and there now stands a memorial at the National Memorial Arboretum (Airewas, Staffordshire, UK) to their memory. It is called the 'Shot At Dawn Memorial', and it portrays a soldier tied to a stake, hands behind his back, blindfolded. There are wooden stakes that are behind the monument, representing the men who were shot. There were 346 soldiers shot for military offences in World War I, but the Armed Forces Act 2006 pardoned most of them posthumously, although not those who were executed for crimes including murder and mutiny, under article 359(4) (The Armed Forces Act 2006). Olick (2008) notes that our collective memory is the intergenerational transmission of stories over three generations, indicating that value systems change, and attitudes adapt to those changes. The Airewas memorial is both the physical proof that historians can become the architects, literally, of history and memorial constructions, and metaphorically the designers of critiques of national memory. Today, there is a shift from believing that those young soldiers who deserted were simply cowards, to a fuller understanding as to the multifarious reasons behind those desertions, including fear, anger, cowardice, an inability

to fight, unwillingness to kill, or just because of class and the reasons why someone might have joined up in the first place. Furthermore, desertion while not on the front line does not remove the possibility of heroic action whilst being involved in action on that front line. The complexity of an individual is far greater than the binary set-up that is created by the dichotomy of either 'hero', or alternatively 'coward/deserter'.

William John King's inter-generationally handed-down narrative was covered up by the traditional masculine narrative of the heroic soldier, to fit in with the binary format of good/bad, hero/coward. His children and their descendants knew nothing of the real complexities of what it meant to go to war, since it would have been unacceptable socially, morally, and historically, on both a national and an individual level.

4. William John King: Secrets and Lies, or Perhaps Not

One of my earliest memories of family narratives related to William John King is that he was said to have joined up in the British Army and that he decided to join the elite army corps of the East Surrey Regiment. It was said that he had lied about his age so that they would accept him, even though he was below the age of 18. It is possible this may not be true (since he joined up on 8 April 1902, aged 20 years and 6 months according to the enlistment form in his service record). However, I possess another photograph of William John King wearing medals, one of which also includes the Queen's South Africa Medal, awarded to everyone who served in the British Army between 11 October 1899 and 31 May 1902, with six bars. The 2nd Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment was in South Africa in 1899 and participated in the Relief of Ladysmith, the Battle of Tugela Heights, and the Battle of Laing's Neck, as part of the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). The South Africa medal would suggest that he had been in South Africa before the date he enlisted in Stratford, London in 1902, therefore. Perhaps, he had joined up underage, and had been posted to South Africa. No record has been found, however, of this, although he would tell stories about being in South Africa. When William John King joined the East Surrey Regiment in 1902, he joined as 'William Smith'. This may, at first glance, seem like a pseudonym, but it is in reality linked to his mother's second marriage. The circumstances of William John King's immediate family might shed some light on the reasons why he may have joined up, and, indeed, why he might have deserted, since they are connected.

William John King was born on 28 September 1880⁵, the son of William Martin King and Mary Ann Rice. When William John King was nine years old, his father William Martin King died of pulmonary tuberculosis, on 24 March 1890⁶. Mary Ann King, née Rice, was served with an order of removal (LMA 1890a)⁷ from the Parish of St. Leonard, Shoreditch, dated 4 October 1890, where she had not been residing for long enough for the parish to provide her with poor relief. The order was to remove her and her children to the parish of St. Matthew, Bethnal Green. The Guardians of the Parish of St. Leonard's deemed her to be a pauper and that she had resided for most of her life in the parish of Bethnal Green, which then became responsible for providing for her and her children. The settlement papers (LMA 1890b) for St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green show that the application for settlement in the parish was accepted, but only for Mary Ann King, née Rice, and her three youngest children. William John King was not included. By 8 December 1890, two months after being admitted to St. Matthew's for poor relief from the parish, Mary Ann King, née Rice married again, in St. Andrew's Hoxton. She did not stay in the workhouse for long, although the stigma attached to being in such a place meant that she would certainly have attempted to get out of there with great speed. As Vivienne Richmond notes on nineteenth century English workhouses, even the clothes provided by poor relief boards came wrapped in social stigma that was identifiable in public spaces (Richmond 2013). Having been admitted to a workhouse meant that it would become difficult to get a job and provide for oneself, all the more so in Victorian society, which believed that the poor were only poor because they were lazy and lacked in respectability. Women were largely the recipients of the Poor Law (The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834), which was supposed to provide social assistance to those in need (Thane 1978), but it came at the price

of curtailing freedoms (Golightly and Holloway 2016). Perhaps the family memory of the soldier was a way in which to exclude the unsightly past events of social failures. Again, with reference to composure (Thomson 2013, 2016), memories are constructed in order to fit in with those around the teller. The memories are told in the quest for recognition, which brings about identity, although the situation of my ancestor provided little room for agency and decision making (Ricoeur 2004). Due to the negative effects of being in the workhouse, it is not surprising, therefore, that the mother of William John King should get out of the workhouse, quickly and at all costs. However, through the eyes of the 21st century, it is obvious that at the time her only way out, as a widowed, now single mother, was through a new marriage to another male provider. Mary Ann King's second husband was Henry James Smith, a fishmonger, residing at 37 Wilmer Gardens (LMA 1890b). Therefore, when William John King signed up for the East Surrey Regiment he was not entirely lying, but adopting his step-father's surname, Smith. However, the army personnel wrote across the front page of the enlistment form 'alias W. J. King', at some point. The military history sheet of his file (TNA 1902)⁸ states correctly the names of his two twin children, and his wife (Florence Healey), as well as their date of marriage (21 December 1913), and their address (38 Wimborne Street, New North Road, London). The next of kin section also states 'Harry John Smith'⁹ of 20 Wiltshire Row as his 'father', and his mother as 'Mary Ann' of the same address. All of these details serve to corroborate the real identity of the 'William Smith' who signed up. William Smith and William John King are one and the same person.

However, these life events had to be resurfaced since they had been lost for two reasons. Firstly, the nuclear family group of my ancestor is no longer present to remember. Individuals belong to different groups that span across different periods of time, and there is no member of the present family unit group old enough to remember that period of time (Halbwachs 1997). Remembering is a social event, and the majority of our memories come from those around us, according to Halbwachs (1952). Bergson (1953) noted that there is a mental type of gymnastics that allows individuals to travel into the past, select, and bring back the representations of those pasts that would bring about insertion of the individual given the circumstance of the now. However, archives have allowed the accessing of those grey areas of absent information to come back to the surface and modify the discourse. This is all the more important in the present case since "widespread knowledge of the war is fading and the majority of the population has only a vague grasp of its history, genealogical research provides an accessible route to learning the war" (McCartney 2014, p. 305).

In the army record (TNA 1902)¹⁰, the statement of service notes for Private William Smith, alias William John King, army n^o. 7324, the times that he was absent from the barracks, the desertions that took place, and the loss of kit, or the reason why he was considered a deserter. It also lists the number of times that he re-joined the same regiment. Every time he deserted, he re-joined the army.

Outwardly, it seems somewhat surprising that he would join up on 8 April 1902 for 12 years' service, and then promptly desert on the very same day, until 29 June 1902. This memory has been suppressed in the narrative passed down. My ancestor went absent for more than two months, immediately. He did not fit into the two-week window mentioned above, but he did get caught, like most. On 20 July 1902, he re-joined the East Surrey Regiment, and was two days later imprisoned by the Commissioned Officer for his conduct, for 20 days (but not before a court martial). He deserted for the second time on 13 August 1902 (just two months later), almost immediately when he left prison. This time, he deserted for 2 years and 3 months, before presumably being caught again, and re-joining on 16 August 1904. He was then brought before a court martial on 30 August 1904 (TNA 1904), in Kingston Upon Thames, and found guilty of desertion and loss of kit. He was imprisoned and had stoppage of all payments until 11 October 1904. Stoppages for food and clothes were the recurring events in the life of any soldier in the British Army (Bond 1962). Where William John King was for the 2 years and 3 months while he had deserted is unknown. He was restored to duty after imprisonment, on 11 October 1904. However, he was considered again as a deserter on 8 January 1905, just 3 months after getting out of

prison. This time he had been absent for more than three months. When he was caught, he re-joined, on 24 March 1905. He was tried and convicted a second time by court martial, dated 5 April 1905. Nevertheless, the record of this particular court martial cannot be found at the National Archives. The statement of service notes that he was convicted on 5 April 1905 for firstly, desertion, secondly, loss of kit, and thirdly, for being 'in prison'. The third reason seems to suggest that he had been sent to prison outside of the army, to a civilian prison. To date, nothing has come to light regarding this, but perhaps it was recorded under an alias, again, or even if it was recorded under the name 'Smith', it has proven impossible to find.

The statement of service (TNA 1902) notes that he forfeited all prior service and was convicted of desertion for a second time and sent to prison. If he had deserted because he was in a civilian prison, then when he re-joined, he was sent to prison again. He was allowed to have 'limited engagement' (while in prison) from 5 April 1905 until 28 June 1905, when he was allowed out. He was allowed to 'extend his service to complete 8 years with the Colors [sic]' (TNA 1902) on 8 August 1905. The statement of service notes at the bottom of the first page that William John King "elects to have former service forfeited on conviction of desertion, viz, from 9.4.02 to 29.6.02, from 2.7.1902 to 12.8.02, 16.8.04 to 7.1.05, from 24.3.05 to 4.4.05, total 264 days" (TNA 1902). He was permitted after three years of clear entry in the Regimental Conduct Sheet, under para. 273 to have those forfeited days restored, which they were. However, it is debateable to what extent he elected to do so, and how much agency he had regarding this decision.

He was to be given little chance of desertion again for the time being, since he was posted to India on 20 September 1905 until 14 March 1912, for 6 years and 176 days. The 2nd Battalion of the East Surrey Regiment replaced the 1st Battalion in India from 1903, where it was stationed in Lucknow until 1904. In January 1905, the 2nd Battalion moved to Sitapur (Uttar Pradesh), at Ranikhet Hill Station (Almora district, Uttarakhand State). Between 1906 and 1910, it was stationed in Mhow (Dr. Ambedkar Nagar, Indore district in Madhya Pradesh State). From 1910 until 1914, it was in Burma (Myanmar), after travelling by train to Bombay, and then sailing the rest of the journey to Rangoon. The British census of 1911 (which, for the first time included military personnel, also stationed overseas) noted that Private 7324, William John King, aged 30, was stationed at Shwebo, Northwest Mandalay, Burma, with the 2nd Battalion, Z Company, on the night of 2nd April (TNA 1911). Shwebo was the headquarters of the military presence of Great Britain in Burma, at the time.

These military stations correspond to the sixty or so postcards that I now possess that William John King brought back from India. Only one of the postcards has been written on and it was sent to 'Mrs. M. Smith, 20 Wiltshire Row, Bridport Place, Hoxton, London, England'. It is dated 1912, and it states succinctly and to the point: 'Dear Mother, I will be home in May and I will let you now [sic] by the next letter. From Bill'. While in India, nothing is known of what William John King's life there might have been like. No letters exist. However, the single postcard written on represents the emotional entwinedness that exists between those left behind at home, and the soldier sent to carry out in the colonisation procedure. While the British Army had 100,000 men at home, there were almost the same number abroad in the colonies, with the majority stationed in India (Bond 1962). Postcards tended to be used by the working-class soldier, needing far less thought or formulation than a letter, for example. They were a form of creating some sense of proximity, the link between home and abroad, the civilian and the soldier (Brouland and Doizy 2013; Mayhew 2021). The postcards enabled a shared space of imaginary existence in which all were once again joined together, despite the distance that separated them. There were nearly 9 million letters being exchanged per week during World War I, for example, in 1917 (Mayhew 2021).

The statement of service (TNA 1902) notes that King was granted service pay on 5 April 1907, and that he was awarded the 'Pt. G. C. [Good Conduct] Badge' on 27 June 1907. He had obviously, therefore, not deserted again while in India, although he would have had nowhere to go while there, and he was far from London. Proximity to one's own home area and knowledge of the surrounding geography played a role in absence and

desertion from the army (Bowman 2003). Soldiers were far more likely to desert in familiar surroundings than when stationed either overseas or in an area that they did not know.

As per the postcard to his mother, William John King arrived in England again on 13 May 1912. He remained for two years at the East Surrey Regiment barracks until 12 August 1914 in Kingston Upon Thames, when mobilisation began for WWI. In the meantime, he married on 21 December 1913, to my great grandmother Florence Susanna Healey (TNA 1902), in Hoxton. The service record notes nothing between 1912 and the mobilisation for World War I in 1914.

William John King was transferred to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) for 15 days between 13 August 1914 and 27 August 1914. The first landings in France took place on 16 August 1914, after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914. But, while William John King was in France as part of the BEF, he received a gunshot wound and returned home to the depot for a further period running from 28 August 1914 until 25 December 1914, for four months. The circumstances are unknown as to how the gunshot wound occurred. William John King, according to the service record, was mobilised on 5 August 1914. He was then transferred from the 2nd Battalion of the East Surreys to the 1st Battalion. The 1st Battalion of the East Surreys incorporated the 14th Infantry Brigade (5th Division) of the BEF (until January 1916, when it became part of the 95th Brigade in the same Division)¹¹. The war diaries reveal where William John King was moved around to, and they might provide some suggestions as to how the gunshot wound might have happened.

During the period when the gunshot occurred, he had been first posted to Dublin, and then arrived in Le Havre. The 14th Infantry Brigade of the BEF was stationed at the Portobello Barracks, Dublin, between 5 August 1914 and 14 August, and then left from the North Wall port of Dublin aboard the S.S. Buteshire (TNA 1914a)¹². The Buteshire arrived at Le Havre two days later (16 August 1914), where the troops boarded a train and set off at 5.50 a.m. for Le Cateau, where they billeted for the night. Then, the troops marched between the 8 August and 22 August to Landrecies, Saint-Waast, Bellignies, and then Hainin, at a distance of approximately 30 miles (or 50 km). On the morning of 23 August, the order was received to hold a defensive position. By 5 p.m., it was noted that the East Surreys were being hard pressed, but they believed they could still hold. However, they were forced to retire within a few minutes since the barracks had been destroyed by artillery, and they retired to prepared positions about Dour, reaching the Bois de Boussu at 1 a.m. The diary notes that the "men lay down in the street and got what rest they could" (TNA 1914a, p. 6). They continued to retreat all the next day until they reached Saint-Waast, again, in the afternoon of the 24 August 1914, with the diary noting "Troops v. exhausted" (TNA 1914a, p. 6). The following day at 6.30 a.m., the East Surreys were fired at by a German plane, and it is noted that they were not given any great assistance. The 14th Brigade then took up entrenched positions at the Montay-Croix Road, but then the East Surreys returned to Le Cateau, where they bivouacked, and the men are noted again to be "very exhausted" (TNA 1914a, p. 8). Soon after 7 a.m., the Germans began shelling, and continued to do so for many hours, "causing heavy casualties amongst the Infantry, both firing line, supports, and reserves" (TNA 1914a, p. 9). They were forced to retire and reform on numerous occasions. The 2nd Suffolk Regiment was being so heavily attacked by the German Infantry that they were unable to retreat. The 14th Infantry Brigade retreated to Estrées, and the East Surreys acted as the rear guard. In the margin, the casualties are noted for all of the regiments that made up the 14th Infantry Brigade of the BEF, with those for the East Surreys being 2 officers wounded, and 3 killed, 43 wounded and 50 missing for the other ranks. It seems likely that William John King may have been one of those who had been injured during the intense fighting that had taken place. The service record military history sheet for William John King notes that he was then sent home between 28 August 1914 and 25 December 1914, possibly due to his wound.

There is perhaps no incompatibility with being heroic on the battlefield and in the trenches, and deserting in times of peace. This should especially be taken with the under-

standing that perceptions of the British Army were largely modified by the theatre of war and, particularly, World War I. Those who were in the British Army prior to the conflict did not benefit from a positive image. The rank-and-file of the British Army was mostly reserved to lower classes, who had no opportunity of doing little else in life. The death of William John King's father, the family's short time in the workhouse, the stigma, as previously mentioned, may have meant that he felt that joining the army was one of the few options that were available to him. Bond (1962) notes that most recruits into the British Army of the early to mid-nineteenth century were taken from the fringes of British society, including debtors, the unemployed, and criminals, but with increased pay and improved conditions, the typical soldier being selected at the end of the nineteenth century had risen slightly in status. Bond states that soldiers were "inveigled into the Colours by the dubious incentives of drink, bounties, and rosy descriptions of Army life", going on to add that the offer of regular food, beer, and somewhere to sleep were "luxuries which the majority of privates could not have enjoyed outside the army" (Bond 1962, p. 332). It was when the First War occurred that soldiering became something of a respectable position, and this positioning is somewhat of a contrast with the historical past and reputation that had been attributed to those who joined up (McKay 2021). Bowman and Connelly (2012) note that the socially deprived tended to join the army because they were unemployed, and suffering, consequently, from the image of being uncouth and undisciplined, in need of some form of framework to control their loutish behaviour, which was at the root of their economic and socially impoverished status. The rank-and-file were drawn overarchingly from that social stratum, while officers were disproportionately and exclusively drawn from the public school system. That did not mean that the former would comply complacently to all orders that were given, or that they would happily agree to the authority met.

Most in the British Army in this pre-WWI period had a flexible stance with regard to authority. Mansfield underlines that the rank-and-file would challenge class-based unfair treatment that was meted out to them, adding that the unskilled working class had a high rate of desertion, citing the figure of 25% between 1894 and 1899 (Mansfield 2016, p. 59). Men did not enlist always with the objective of going to war or fighting (Meyer et al. 2022), although this may have become the stuff of legends and family lore. Mayer notes that soldiers may have been reluctant to "relinquish their civilian attitudes and sought to challenge authority and exert their opinions within the confines of the army system" (Meyer 2008, p. 302). Any individual experience of war by a soldier must be seen within the framework of class, education, age, and circumstance, although it is nearly impossible to look back upon the career in the British Army of this ancestor and determine what he felt, or the wider public attitudes towards war that were modified by the events of the First World War, in the transformation of an army as career, or means of escape, or last resort, even, of the lower working class, into one adapted to the times in which it is recalled as a memory of the nation. In the post-WWI period of the 1920s, the image of the soldier was one of disillusionment, with the need to project themselves as soldier-heroes, facing increasing concerns about the continuing costs of pensions. Then, the soldier-victim came forth during the 1960s and 1970s, the popular narrative of the soldier cast aside after the war had ended and they had brought about victory for the nation, accompanied by the notion of the futility of conflict (Todman 1965; Winter 2007; Meyer 2008; Pennell 2012).

The individual immediate family circumstances of William John King were that he had two children born. William John King's twin children, Florence Mary Elizabeth King (TNA 1914a) (although she is incorrectly noted as Francis Mary Elizabeth King on the statement of service) and William Walter John King¹³, were born on 12 September 1915, meaning that they were conceived in the December/January 1914/1915 period, when he had returned home after the gunshot wound. But he was posted again from 26 December 1914 until 11 February 1915 with the BEF (14th Infantry Brigade, 5th Division) to France (for 48 days). The War Diary (TNA 1914b, p. 23) notes for 26 December 1914 that the 14th Infantry Brigade was located at Dranouter, West Flanders, Belgium, and that the shells fired by the enemy had fallen short of the trenches, adding that the soldiers had busied

themselves with drainage of the trenches, and the digging of new ones, as a result. Heavy hailstorms were noted on the night of 28 December 1914, and it was very cold, with a gale blowing. On the night of 29 December 1914, the East Surrey regiment came under persistent rifle fire. On 1 January 1915, it was recorded that the East Surreys were shelled and that two shells had killed five men (TNA 1915, p. 1). Work on the trenches (revetment and flooring) was impeded for the East Surreys on the following day due to very active rifle fire during the night. The 14th Brigade was relieved and went to Bailleul between 4 January 1915 and 10 January 1915, when the East Surreys were sent to Neuve-Église. For most of January, work continued on the trenches, with intermittent shelling of the East Surreys during the night, with the enemy using illuminants throughout the night. On 16 January, again the East Surreys were relieved, and one man was killed while it was taking place (TNA 1915, p. 11). On 18 January 1915, the East Surreys had a shell land in their trench. By 23 January 1915, it was noted that considerable progress had been made in repairing the trenches and that the ground had dried out, although German planes were active and there was considerable artillery fire. On 27 January 1915, with some surprise, it was noted that despite it being “the Kaiser’s birthday [...] everything very quiet during the day” (TNA 1915, p. 22). On 31 January, the East Surreys were sent out on patrol to the town of Le Rossignol, after a French woman had been called to corroborate the story that six mounted Germans near Wulverghem at about 6 a.m. had asked her if there were any English in the vicinity. She had answered that “they were all round” (TNA 1915, p. 26). However, the patrol found nothing when the houses and farms were searched. The statement of casualties (TNA 1915, p. 28), notes that in January 1915 the East Surreys suffered (other ranks) 12 killed and 30 wounded (total 43).

William John King seems to have been admitted into hospital according to the U.K. Military Hospitals Admissions and Discharge Registers (TNA 1914–1918) for this period. He was discharged on 11 February 1915, and had been treated for four days for ‘Rheu’, perhaps meaning a rheumatic disease¹⁴. It is quite possible that he was suffering from rheumatism, due to the privation, wet clothes, damp conditions, and marching. It was as a result of the First World War that greater understanding of rheumatism came about (Glover 1945). Private 7324 William John King was admitted to the 2nd General Hospital, under the number 1470 (in red ink, indicating that he had been transferred from somewhere else, although this is not indicated). The 2nd General Hospital was located at the *Gare Maritime* [port], Quai d’Escale, Le Havre. He is listed as being aged 37 (whereas he was 35). The regiment is indicated as being the East Surreys, and his regiment number is correctly indicated as 7324. He was discharged on 11 February 1915, after 4 days of treatment, and boarded the HMS Asturias, a hospital ship that had been requisitioned by the British Admiralty from the Royal Mail. The hospital register also noted that he had completed 2 months of service with the field force, and that his total length of service was 13 years (corresponding to 1902).

This, therefore, corresponds to the entry in his service record which indicates that he was returned to the depot on 12 February 1915 for the next 2 years and 65 days (until 17 April 1917) and remained stationed there. His service record does not state the reason why he was returned, but the length of time stationed at the depot was so long due to the fact that he deserted on 11 October 1915, while at the depot. As already noted, the familiar surroundings in which he found himself, the experience of war, individual family reasons, as well as his perception of what an army career was, with pre-WWI flexibility, may have all contributed to this, showing the complex nature of the events. His twin children had just been born on 12 September 1915, and this may have had an impact on his desertion. As Joanna Bourke (Bourke 2014) notes, it would be wrong to assume that by joining the army men become members of some sort of group in which women and children are excluded from their lives. However, it should also not be denied that the army is a locus of masculinities, a place where military service attempts to remove all that is not a symbolic representation of toughness, aggression, hardship, and physical sacrifice (Connell 1995; Addelston and Stirratt 1996; Gill 1997; Agostino 1998; Barrett 2001).

King went before the court martial (TNA 1916)¹⁵ for the third time on 26 October 1916, in Kingston Upon Thames, and was sentenced to 1 year's detention (not imprisonment) this time. Then, upon completion of this period of detention, he reintegrated into the BEF and was posted to France on 18 April 1917 until 22 July 1917, for 96 days. Bowman notes (2003) that court martial trials were generally badly handled during the First World War, and that they served as some form of example to others, rather than attempting to "dispense any recognisable form of justice" (Bowman 2003, p. 12). A 'prisoner's friend', an officer willing to take up the defence of the soldier, would be appointed, but rarely played any active role in the proceedings (Bowman 2003). The objective, however, was to maintain discipline, not to provide a legal system that would be democratic. Only 10.82% of those who were sentenced to death in the First World War were actually executed (Putkowski and Sykes 1993, p. 14). There would have been a stigma attached to such an execution for the battalion, and it seemed that even though those reviewing such cases were more and more reluctant to commute the death penalty, there were still low numbers that received that capital punishment in the Army. The intent of the soldier being accused of desertion was highly important also (Putkowski and Sykes 1993, p. 14).

The BEF was posted to the village of Savy (War Diary WO 95/2390/3 18 April 1917, p. 187), when heavy artillery action was noted throughout the day. By late morning on 19 April 1917, artillery activity was considered to be abnormally heavy, and Cepy Farm was shelled with "amazing intensity" (TNA 1917, p. 188). On 29 April, the church parade and lectures were held, with the weather that was noted as being "extremely fine", that the "troops in very good spirits", with a "tribute to the work of the Brigade during the previous fighting" (TNA 1917, p. 192). While the trenches were undoubtedly terrifying and dangerous, they were also complex places of monotony and boredom, as well as places with events that were the scenes of conflict, but also alternating with moments of pleasure and comradeship (Meyer et al. 2022). This is despite the remarkable enduring of myths related to the First World War about it being the constant and systematic "slaughter of millions of young men" (McCartney 2014, p. 299), or the "popular image of the war, which is one of an horrific slaughter for no particular reason" (Connelly 2002, p. 2.).

King then returned home between the 23 July 1917 and 24 September 1918, for 1 year and 64 days. However, on 21 October 1917, he deserted for the fifth time, for almost a year this time, and then he re-joined on 18 September 1918. Watson notes that the desertion rate for the year 1917 was three times higher than that of the previous year, showing that there were growing issues of endurance of soldiers as the war progressed, noting that "intense psychological or physical fatigue could cause men to become timid or apathetic, decreasing their combat motivation and prompting them, in contemporary parlance to 'shirk'" (Watson 2011, p. 38). They were more concerned with self-preservation by this date. The court martial of 25 September 1918 (TNA 1916) sentenced King to two years' detention at the barracks at Chelmsford, and the forfeiting of his entire former service.

When World War I had ended and the Armistice had been signed on 11 November 1918, William John King was transferred permanently and compulsorily to the Labour Corps, a few days later, on 15 November 1918, at the Labour Centre Aldershot Command. Aldershot was the detention barracks for military personnel, known as the 'Glasshouse', due to the glass roof. It became synonymous with all military prisons, which are referred to as 'glasshouses' in the U.K. Military prisons were first set up in 1844, when it was decided to separate military offenders from civilian prisoners. The cells in Aldershot were 3.5 m² (12 feet) and had ceilings 3 m (10 feet) high (TNA 1918). There was ventilation via a hopper arrangement of windows, and there was heating provided through pipes, and gas lighting. There were 3.5 m (12 feet) high walls, with broken glass on the top that surrounded the perimeter of the military prison.

On 12 December 1918, William John King had 653 days of his sentence remitted. He then served in the Labour Corps at the base depot for 12 years, until 24 September 1930, completing the length of service that he had originally signed up for. The Army did not let

him out of his engagement (nor did he decide to leave), and he served the time that he had agreed in 1902, and it became a lifetime career for him in the army.

William John King had deserted a total of five times in his career in the army. He had (re-)joined the same regiment six times. This was, perhaps, by force, by choice, or because he had no other opportunities available to him. He had spent 6 years and 176 days in India. He had been sent to France in the BEF for 15 days, received a gunshot wound in his right arm, and then been sent home for 20 days. He returned to France for 48 days, before being sent home for 2 years and 65 days, before being sent back to France to fight for 96 days, and finally return to the depot for 1 year and 64 days. He had been court martialled four times. He was detained at the depot three times and imprisoned three times. Ultimately, he had served his 12 years, but had remained in the army between 1902 and 1930 (a total of 28 years). He forfeited his entire service, and it was only reckoned from 10 December 1918 until 24 September 1930, a total of 12 years. He received an army pension as a result only for that period. He was awarded the Victory Medal as part of the BEF¹⁶ and also the 1914 Star Medal (TNA 1921)¹⁷. Perhaps, as previously stated, the time in the army had afforded him the luxuries that he would not have been able to access outside of the army, given his social status and lack of opportunity. The fact that his pension was only reckoned from 1918, therefore, must be seen in the light of the advantages that he had gained while serving: food and accommodation, and perhaps some sense of structure, and employment (although with his own personal adoption of flexibility towards that, from time to time).

5. Conclusions

There is a relationship that exists between memory and knowledge. My ancestor covered up his desertions, imprisonments, and detentions in order to fit into the common narrative of the nation, to fit into the community of which he was a 'member'. At the very least, he omitted those stories, as society recognised the role that he had played as a soldier in the First World War. However, perhaps more so, he was unable to tell the stories related to his own personal experience of being in the Army, since the approach to soldiering had been modified by the First World War. It was transformed from the loutish, lower working class with no other alternative, into one of relative respectability and honour. Meyer (2008) notes that the stories told about the past and veterans' lives should portray a variety of experiences, rather than a catch-all narrative. The story of William John King's career in the army is one such deviation from the universality of the national narrative, and popular societal belief of the First World War.

As stated at the start of this paper, it is more about the person who picks up this memory (Assmann 2009), since it brings into question the relationship between memory and history, but also identity, and the powerful interactions between them. Heathorn notes that there is an "evolving memory of the war for its survivors or for its subsequent generations" (Heathorn 2005, p. 104). Despite the myths related to the Great War remaining largely present, attempting to look at the career of a particular soldier can challenge the popular conceptions of war (McCartney 2014). My ancestor did not conform to the narrative that was expected (post-WWI) of him in his acts. Yet, he did conform in the way that he narrated his participation in the Great War. This paper is about the present, the imaginings of the past, the narration of the life events of individuals. Above all, it is about the shifting of what may be considered to be the truth, from one time to another. Desertion on a service record must, therefore, be taken in the historic context of pre-First World War, and why that may have occurred, rather than simply presuming that it means a lack of honour. Looking into that from the perspective of an individual case is important, since it adds to the multitude of experiences of the Great War. It also contributes to the understanding that historians are not alone in shaping the memories of the nation and the past, but this also falls to individuals and families. It also challenges society's "inherent desire 'to remember' while simultaneously 'forgetting'" (Pennell 2012, p. 16). Looking at the service record of William John King, there needs to be a desire to remember what he did, and the circumstances under which he joined up, and subsequently deserted, to enable some

understanding of how perceptions of soldiering were modified by narratives about WWI. There must also be an attempt not to forget.

My ancestor carried out prescriptive forgetting, for the common good of his immediate family (Connerton 2008). Society has undertaken the repressive erasure in forgetting officially that there was a difference in pre-WWI flexibility attached to soldiering. Forgetting allowed for the constitutive shaping of a new identity, not only on the individual level, but on the national level, but it reduced soldiers into a dichotomy of good/bad, brave/coward, which is not revealing of the reality of the situation. My ancestor may simply have chosen to forget that he deserted, since it did not detract from his participation in the battles, nor from his injuries, and, ultimately, his career.

While generalities cannot be constructed or patterns designed out of one single case, that makes it no less relevant to the official narrative. After all, is this not the very core of approaches to understanding the ways in which societies live, through personal stories, rather than catch-all narratives? As Penny Summerfield (2019) notes, the “turn to the personal” (p. 6) is still a subject of much debate. However, those individual stories are part of a wider historiography. They can never replace it, but they can contribute to providing legitimate access to understanding and reappraising past events. Reading against the grain of popular national narratives does not destroy them or bring them fundamentally into question; but rather, it brings about a better contextualisation of the irregularities in those memories. Individual stories appositely serve that end.

As Maurice Halbwachs (1997) notes, it is important to remember that memory is collaborative by nature (see the comments above about ‘membership’ and the etymology of ‘to remember’), and that it fits into the framework of the present entity that remembers (or forgets) certain elements (Halbwachs 1952). As Ernest Renan (1997) stated in his lecture on the nation in 1882, sometimes what is important in the construction of a nation is not the remembering, but the forgetting; forgetting that at one time people were not all together; forgetting that at one time people were at odds. However, society is in a position to choose the typography, the art of arranging and processing the data that it has at its disposal, of forgetting, and remembering this or that past, and what it decides to make of them. Individual narratives can also contribute to the wider, macro level of national narratives. This is the ‘imagined community’ of Benedict Anderson (1983, p. 6), so important to the construction of a group of people that believes that it has something in common; forgetting and remembering: memory. It is important that paradigms should not be constructed in which individuals are placed and believe that they have to fit if they are to have any worth. Those paradigms reveal struggles of power and stipulation, through the controlling of what is to be remembered as societal and historical pasts with the intention of shaping the identity of the collective group that makes up the nation. If we do not examine the full array of possibilities in past histories, then we cannot hope for a collective change towards inclusivity.

These questions, this grappling, the heaving tug-of-war between what we remember and what we forget, are nothing new. However, it is being altered by the accessibility of archives now at the disposal of historians. While they are nothing new, they are essential. If we create paradigms from which no deviation is permitted in society as to the way in which we narrate our histories, then it will block the pathway to greater cultural and social achievements in the future (Nietzsche 1957). It is no longer a mere question of inheriting those narratives from those who preceded us (Bond et al. 2017). As Mayer-Schönberger (2011) reminds us, “[f]orgetting has been the norm, and remembering the exception” (p. 2). However, the difference is that what is remembered shifts over time as society lives, changes, and seeks out new values, in the creation of new memories, by the now, for the new possible future. Memories are never isolated moments of the past, but they are links between the apparently paradoxical present that taps into the past, in order to decide on what the future should be.

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Notes

- 1 There is no documentary evidence of it having been awarded to him in any files, however.
- 2 Uniform details taken from The National Army Museum, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/east-surrey-regiment>; also, the Queens Royal Surreys, https://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/short_history/short_history.shtml. Both URLs consulted on 1 September 2023.
- 3 See p. 9.
- 4 The Police Gazettes are searchable at the British Newspaper Library.
- 5 The National Archives, UK [hereafter, TNA], Service Record, William Smith, alias William John King, Recruitment Stratford, London, 8 April 1902. A photocopy of the service record was obtained in 2012 from the Army Personnel Centre, Support Division, Historical Disclosures (by post, before digitisation of records occurred).
- 6 Birth Entry, General Register Office, September Quarter 1880, Islington 1B 337.
- 7 Death Entry, General Register office, March Quarter 1890, St. Saviour, 1d 71.
- 8 Marriage Entry, General Register Office, December Quarter 1890, Shoreditch, 1C 204.
- 9 East Surrey Regiment, Private L/7324; Labour Corps, Private 671007; East Surrey Regiment, Private 14172. 1914–1920. The complete file is linked to all of these army numbers.
- 10 'Harry' is the spoken form of the first name 'Henry'.
- 11 Marriage Entry, General Register Office, December Quarter 1913, Shoreditch 1c 130.
- 12 For a more comprehensive study of the East Surrey regiment history, (see [Pearse and Sloman 1923](#)).
- 13 Birth Entry, General Register Office, September Quarter 1915, Shoreditch 1c 110.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 It might have referred to 'Rheumatic Fever', an inflammatory disease that develops after untreated bacterial throat infections, step throat or scarlet fever. It causes joint pain and heart problems. However, on the same page there is a distinction made for some patients suffering from 'Rheu', while others have 'Rheu Fev.'.
- 16 Aldershot Military Museum.
- 17 East Surrey Regiment, Private L/7324; Labour Corps, Private 671007; East Surrey Regiment, Private 14172. 1914–1920. This information is corroborated by the medal card index for Private William John King: ([TNA 1921](#)).

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