



greaterlove

WOODBINE WILLIE: AN UNSUNG HERO

Woodbine Willie, aka Reverend Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, was an Anglican priest who volunteered as a chaplain during World War One, a man whose support for ordinary soldiers was unique. He was known for handing out cigarettes alongside New Testaments, and his willingness to be alongside the troops on the front line and over the top, caused him to quickly rise in popularity.

During the war, if not spending time with troops on the front line or preaching, Geoffrey was attending the wounded or burying the dead. He was awarded the military cross in 1917 for running into no man's land to help the wounded. After the war he pushed for the church and Christianity to be at the centre of a recovering war-torn Britain.

In the middle of 1917 Father Geoffrey was posted to The Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, the ridge had to be taken before the allies could then take the nearby strategically placed town of Ypres. Father Geoffrey was at the ridge for the start of the battle. During this time all kinds of thoughts ran through his mind and, in the lulls between fighting, he wrote them down. Here is an extract from his writings:

'We're off now, over the top. I think I'm frightened. But that's bosh. I can't die. That's another thing I'm sure about. "Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Anyway, I'm a skunk to think about that now. What does it matter if I do die? ... except to her... and it is better for her and the boy for me to go out decent and respectable than to have to live on a beastly funk; so come on, you silly old fool, come on!

Lord, that boy looks bad. Buck up lad, it will be all right. We've got em stiff... I say, damn all war, and those who make it! The kings and governors whose heart God is supposed to turn and govern. Come on you chaps. That barrage is perfect. A cat couldn't live in it. Now we're well away. Lord what a howling wilderness the guns have made.'

During the war Father Geoffrey became famous for handing out Woodbines (cigarettes) to soldiers. Because of this he was given the nickname 'Woodbine Willie'; a nickname that would be remembered by soldiers and stay with him for the rest of his life.

He went on to write a poem about his nickname:

*They gave me this name like their nature,
Compacted of laughter and tears,
A sweet that was born of the bitter,
A joke that was torn from the years.*

*Of their travail and torture, Christ's fools,
Atoning my sins with their blood,
Who grinned in their agony sharing
The glorious madness of God.*

*Their name! Let me hear it – the symbol
Of unpaid – unpayable debt,
For the men to whom I owed God's Peace,
I put off with a cigarette.*



Father Geoffrey was also posted to the front line of the Somme. He made sure he was alongside the regular soldiers as often as possible and shared their meals, told jokes and led singing. When asked questions about religion, he tried to answer them in language which could be understood. He did not call the men to prayer but, if any requested it, he was pleased to do so, usually asking God to look after their families back home.

Above all, he ensured he was always present when the men prepared to go over the top. Inevitably he distributed Woodbines. When the whistle blew for the advance, he was in the midst. Once over the top, men usually faced bullets and shells, with many mown down and he then sought the wounded and the dying. The former he often dragged out of the mud, got onto a stretcher, and pulled to the first aid post, ducking shells as they went. Sometimes he dragged the stretchers through flooded trenches.

At times, he lay on his belly as he attempted to comfort the dying. After the fighting ceased, he returned to the makeshift hospital to remain with the badly wounded or to hold a man down as the doctor operated on him without anesthetic, often going without sleep and with little food.

After the fighting, he gathered a few volunteers, and buried as many of the dead as could be found. He was still not finished; as soon as possible he wrote a personal letter to the relatives of the dead.

'Paradise' is a poem Geoffrey wrote from the point of view of a soldier. A soldier who dreams of home in the middle of war:

*When machine-guns start to play
At the ending of the day,
And the sun's last burning ray
Bleeds and dies.*

*When the sable warp of night
Is first cleft by silver light,
With its sudden curving flight
Of surprise.*

*It is then that England calls
From its cottages and halls,
And we think of four dear walls
And her eyes.*

*When the children's prayer is said,
And they lie tucked up in bed,
And the fire is burning red –
Paradise.*



Father Geoffrey's actions on the evening of June 15, 1917 would later see him awarded the military cross. His own written account is as follows:

'It was a common enough scene in those days, an advanced collecting post for wounded in the Ypres salient, on the evening of June 15, 1917. Twenty men all smashed up and crammed together in a little concrete shelter, which would have been full with ten in it. Outside the German barrage banging down all around us ... A boy with a badly shattered thigh in the corner moaning and yelling by turns for "somefing to stop the pain". So it had been for an hour or more. Between this Black Hole of Calcutta and Battalion H.Q. Death and Hell to go through. Hell inside and hell out, and the moaning of the boy in the corner like the moaning of a damned soul.

There was no morphine. That was the horror. Someone must go for it. I went. I went because the hell outside was less awful than the hell in. I didn't go to do a heroic deed or perform a Christian service; I went because I couldn't bear the moaning any longer. I ran, and as I ran, and cowered down in shell-holes waiting for a chance to run again, I thought – thought like lightning – whole trains of thought came tearing through my mind like non-stop expresses to God knows where. I thought: poor devil, I couldn't have stood that a minute longer. I wasn't doing any good either. If I get through and bring the morphia back, it will be like bringing heaven to him. That is the only heaven he wants just now, dead-drunk sleep. If I bring it back I will be to him a saviour from hell. I'd like that. I'm glad I thought of that. I can't pretend that it was that I came for. It wasn't. Still I'm glad. He wants to forget, to forget and sleep. Poor old chap. Heaven is a morphia pill.'

The official notice of his award was published in the London Gazette on the 16th of August 1917. It stated:

'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He showed the greatest courage and disregard for his own safety in attending the wounded under heavy fire. He searched shell-holes for our own, and enemy wounded, assisting them to the Dressing Station, and his cheerfulness and endurance had a splendid effect upon all ranks in the front line trenches, which he constantly visited.'

Father Geoffrey was an Initial supporter of Britain's participation in the war. However, throughout the war his views began to change, and he started to despise its destruction of God's creation. He expressed his change of view in his poem called "Waste":

Waste of Muscle, waste of Brain,
Waste of Patience, waste of Pain,
Waste of Manhood, waste of Health,
Waste of Beauty, waste of Wealth,
Waste of Blood, and waste of Tears,
Waste of Youth's most precious years,
Waste of ways the Saints have trod,
Waste of Glory, waste of God,
- War!