

Farnhill Volunteers and the WW1 Poets – 9

Stretcher bearers

– To Stretcher bearers by Rev. G.A. Kennedy

The bravery of the WW1 stretcher bearers was without parallel. Many of them had no previous medical training but were routinely expected to go out into no-man's land, often in full view of enemy forces, to tend to the wounded and dying, and take them back to field hospitals behind the lines.

As the whistle sounded for the men to leave the trenches the bearers would be the last to go. Then they hauled their heavy wooden stretchers over the top, climbed out themselves and entered the field of battle. They would have to struggle through mud, avoid the shell craters, whilst all the while shells were bursting all around them. It was dangerous work.

John Spencer Whitham became a stretcher bearer in 1915 and was awarded the Military Cross for acts of gallantry on the field, including attending to the wounded whilst under heavy fire and himself wounded.



After demobilisation, John worked for several months at a war hospital in Warrington.

Returning to the local area in 1923 he and his wife set up home in Cowling, where he was verger at the church and caretaker of Cowling School.

The Reverend Geoffrey Anketell Studdart Kennedy volunteered as an Army chaplain at the outbreak of the war. Known as 'Woodbine Willie' he would often aid stretcher bearers bringing in casualties.

The final two lines of his poem *To Stretcher bearers* strongly resemble lines from the Anglican communion service.

To Stretcher bearers
by Geoffrey Anketell Studdart Kennedy

Easy does it — bit o' trench 'ere,
Mind that blinkin' bit o' wire,
There's a shell 'ole on your left there,
Lift 'im up a little 'igher.
Stick it, lad, ye'll soon be there now,
Want to rest 'ere for a while?
Let 'im dahn then — gently — gently,
There ye are, lad. That's the style.

Want a drink, mate? 'Ere's my bottle,
Lift 'is 'ead up for 'im, Jack,
Put my tunic underneath 'im,
'Ow's that, chummy? That's the tack!

Guess we'd better make a start now,
Ready for another spell?
Best be goin', we won't 'urt ye,
But 'e might just start to shell.
Are ye right, mate? Off we goes then.
That's well over on the right,
Gawd Almighty, that's a near 'un!

'Old your end up good and tight,
Never mind, lad, you're for Blighty,
Mind this rotten bit o' board.
We'll soon 'ave ye tucked in bed, lad,
'Opes ye gets to my old ward.

No more war for you, my 'earty,
This'll get ye well away,
Twelve good months in dear old Blighty,
Twelve good months if you're a day,
M.O.'s got a bit o' something
What'll stop that blarsted pain.

'Ere's a rotten bit o' ground, mate,
Lift up 'igher — up again,
Wish 'e'd stop 'is blarsted shellin'
Makes it rotten for the lad.
When a feller's been and got it,
It affec's 'im twice as bad.

'Ow's it goin' now then, sonny?
'Ere's that narrow bit o' trench,
Careful, mate, there's some dead Jerries,
Lawd Almighty, what a stench!
'Ere we are now, stretcher-case, boys,
Bring him aht a cup o' tea!

Inasmuch as ye have done it
Ye have done it unto Me.

