



ONE WITHOUT SHAME

By

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Setting

The scene is France during the 1914-18 war. To the left of the stage there are sandbags placed around a makeshift shelter. There is a small wooden table and empty ammunition boxes used as chairs. Just to the right of the shelter a soldier sits on an empty ammunition box. To his right is a propped up rifle and on the ground is a British Army helmet. The noise of gunfire can be heard in the background.

Time sequence is early morning until dawn the following day.

Characters

PRIVATE WILLIAM: (BILL) BANNISTER: An idealistic, strong, principled, 19 years old. He is intelligent but has no privileged educational background. Although threatened with severe punishment he refuses to be on the execution squad, which will execute a deserter from his Company.

PRIVATE ALFRED (ALF) REYNOLDS: A 19 year old who acts out loud Mouth bravado to hide his true feelings of breaking down under stress. He tries to persuade his friend William that neither of them have any rights under army rules.

SERGEANT JOHN RAMPLE: A 39- year-old professional soldier who appears to enjoy aggressiveness. He prides himself on keeping good discipline and can't understand Private Bannister's principles.

M.O. CAPTAIN MARK HALL MEDICAL OFFICER: A 44-year-old career soldier. A pompous, 'by the book', officer. He firmly believes that, in time of war, army authority should not be questioned. His personality gives the impression that he thinks himself superior to the rank and file.

ACT 1

Scene One

(Opens with Private Bannister standing on duty by a trench. Sergeant Ramples voice can be heard, to the right of stage.) It's not enough to have a bloody coward on the team. Now Bannister's decided to play barrack room lawyer.

Where is the silly sod? *(A different voice answers)* Over by the trench. Sergeant. *(He enters on stage and faces Private Bannister)*

SERGEANT: What the hell are you playing at Bannister? Sending a bloody letter to the Commanding Officer telling him you refuse to take part in the execution of Private Dayton. You must have lost your senses.

WILLIAM: No! Come to my senses is more like it Sarge.

SERGEANT: Talk to me like that Bannister and you'll end up dead quicker than Dayton.

WILLIAM: I won't become a murderer for anything or anyone.

SERGEANT: Look its soldiers like him that could lose us this bloody war. If we all became cowards, the Germans would bayonet our guts out.

WILLIAM: John Dayton is shocked out of his mind.

SERGEANT: We could all say that, it's no excuse; we don't run away there's nothing we can do about it. The orders come down from

headquarters. Private Dayton is to be executed in front of the Company to set an example, before we move up to the Somme.

WILLIAM: How can we kill our own comrades? What does that make us? I couldn't live with that.

SERGEANT: : After tomorrow's offensive you might not have to worry about living with anything.

WILLIAM: He's only 16. He lied about his age so he could enlist.

SERGEANT: More bloody fool him. He took the oath to die for King and country. Now he's been given the opportunity.

WILLIAM: What will happen to me for refusing to join the execution squad?

SERGEANT: At the very least a court martial and a sentence of imprisonment if your lucky enough not to join Private Dayton. Why the hell weren't you a conscientious objector instead of joining up?

WILLIAM: I was willing to serve my country in a just war, but not by killing a fellow soldier.

SERGEANT: You're not killing a fellow soldier. You just happen to have been chosen as one of twelve other soldiers to carry out an order to be on the execution squad.

WILLIAM: I am being ordered to fire a bullet at a British soldier.

SERGEANT: Private Dayton his now classed as a prisoner who should have acted like a real soldier and so should you. So let's get on

with fighting this bloody war. At the moment, you're just as useless as the man to be executed. Think about the last time you had your stupid principles. You refused to scream on bayonet practice. Two weeks punishment duty wasn't it? You won't have it so easy with this one. You've made real trouble for yourself.

WILLIAM: Screaming while sticking a bayonet in a straw bag and imagining it was a human body just seemed psychopathic.

SERGEANT: Damn you Bannister if I wasn't a sergeant I'd knock you down but I still think you're a good soldier if you pull yourself together. War's a nasty business, I've had to make decisions that have put mine and other men's lives at risk.

WILLIAM: Do you agree with the execution?

SERGEANT: Whether I agree or not as nothing to do with it. I carry out my orders. In that last fiasco orders were to initiate a gas attack when I could feel the wind blowing in my face. As a result of that idiocy some of our company were gassed. I have to live with that.

WILLIAM: Are you saying we are not allowed to question wrong actions.

SERGEANT: We are at the mercy of the generals and the politicians. A general is a soldier who gives your life for his country. I put you on this duty to give you time to think things over. Have you done that?

WILLIAM: Yes sergeant I've resigned myself to Army punishment rather than the tormented mind I would get if I took part in the execution of Private Dayton.

SERGEANT: Why don't you understand the situation before time runs out and it's getting very close to that. The Commanding Officer's been very patient with you up to now and it's time you gave up your stupid protest.

WILLIAM: I can't possibly see how protesting about taking part in killing a British soldier is stupid.

SERGEANT: Just what the hell are you hoping to achieve? You can't see the futility of what you are protesting about. *(He takes the rifle off his shoulder and moves across the stage. Then points to an area off stage)* You see that rat.

WILLIAM: Yes I've been watching him on and off for the last ten minutes.

SERGEANT: *(He points the rifle at the rat and shouts)* Bang. Did you see it take off before he became a dead rat? Next time it might not be so lucky, it took heed of a warning and used its head. So why the hell can't you?

WILLIAM: Yes it does have some intelligence. But you could be wrong about it being dead.

SERGEANT: Why?

WILLIAM: Before you scared him off I watched him eating scrap's of army food.

SERGEANT: You really are a peculiar one Bannister. Here you are on report for disobeying orders and still finding time for humour. Some might even say you have a sense of humour in sending that protest letter to the C.O. stating you refuse to be part of an execution team. It's never been known for any Private to put himself in that position. If it had occurred back in Aldershot instead of on this battlefield you would have been locked up in the guardroom. Of course they don't carry out executions for desertion back in blighty so it wouldn't have arisen. *(Reaching into his pocket he takes out a pack of cigarettes and offers one to William:)*

WILLIAM: I don't smoke.

SERGEANT: I didn't until I came to France *(He puts the packet back in his tunic pocket)* I've nothing against you personally. I recommended you to be a Non-Commissioned -Officer before this problem came up. I need good soldiers in this company and you've proved yourself.

WILLIAM: I'm not refusing to accept army discipline sergeant

SERGEANT: In the trench's its a different game altogether. It's essential that you lad's accept the discipline of fear. The last time we went into no-man's land I had to put a gun to a corporal's head before he would climb

out of the trench. It was no problem afterwards. He was one of many from my company killed on that day.

WILLIAM: It strikes me that no one should be surprised at finding themselves breaking up under the circumstances in this war.

SERGEANT: In war no matter what the circumstances orders must be obeyed. Do you think that long serving men like me don't feel fear. I saw my best friend get his head blown off in the Boer war. Tomorrow it's back up to the front and that's not going to be a bloody Sunday School outing for me or you. What did you do before you were stupid enough to join the army.

WILLIAM: I worked on my parent's farm.

SERGEANT: Strange I had you down as a college boy.

WILLIAM: I certainly intended too but I was needed to keep the farm going. *(He walks a few paces and looks over the trench)* It's very quiet out there tonight. I think they must be short of shells.

SERGEANT: Or saving them for tomorrow when we leave the trench. Don't get complacent because this areas away from the front line. It's quiet now but you never know what to expect. A few weeks ago private Grantly was on duty here when shelling started up, after it was over they found four different parts of him.

WILLIAM: That's a very sobering thought sergeant.

SERGEANT: Sobering ? considering your situation at the moment you really are a cool customer Bannister.

WILLIAM: Situation? all I've done is make a protest against what I consider to be an injustice.

SERGEANT: You certainly are an innocent abroad. You must have been in the Army long enough now to know that isn't allowed. It may be possible for some high-ranking brass to do that but not for the private soldier.

WILLIAM: Then it's time for the private soldier to speak out.

SERGEANT: Our job is to carry out orders from the top. You were lucky not to have been in action on that first day at the Somme 250 from my company were killed in that offensive. It was supposed to be a walk across no-man's land to take over the German trenches. It turned out to be an absolute slaughter. (*He walks away a few paces then turns and kicks a sandbag*) The stupid sods.

WILLIAM: It certainly was a blunder.

SERGEANT: At least we'll know what to expect when we go over the top this time.

WILLIAM: What will be different ?

SERGEANT: On that last one we were ordered to walk across because the enemy had been flattened by days of non-stop shelling. It didn't work

out like that. They were ready and well prepared. My men were cut down like wheat from a scythe.

WILLIAM: Can we expect that tomorrow?

SERGEANT: Possibly but we won't be walking into it.

WILLIAM: Those Germans are full of surprises.

SERGEANT: We need more experienced soldiers there's too many of you boys coming in. God knows how many more private Dayton's will be punished before this war is over. Don't you feel any animosity to a soldier turning his back on the company before a crucial battle.

WILLIAM: No sergeant I think everyone as a breaking point.

SERGEANT: Not in my company. *(He walks over to a box sits down and begins fumbling in his tunic pocket. Before pulling out an empty cigarette pack which he crumbles up in his hand)* Damn I thought I had one left.

WILLIAM: *(Turns away from the obviously disturbed sergeant: and gazes into the periscope)* It looks like Salisbury Plain out there before the noise of training begins.

SERGEANT:: More than training is needed to prepare men for the Somme battlefield. You won't have time to do any drawing tomorrow afternoon.

WILLIAM: Drawing?

SERGEANT: Yes, I noticed you with pencil and pad a few days ago. What were you sketching?

WILLIAM: Just that desolate landscape over there (*He nods in the direction over the trench*)

SERGEANT: Why?

WILLIAM: I have no camera.

SERGEANT: You really are an odd one. But a damn good soldier. I suppose you farm lads get used to killing animals. Those town boys are real soft. I've seen them freeze at the sight of blood. One farmer is worth ten factory men.

WILLIAM: Pulling the trigger on a human being is different from shooting at crows or a rabbit.

SERGEANT: Do you think a soldier out here gives himself time to think that a German he's trying to kill is human. Most farmer's probably see it as slaughtering pigs.

WILLIAM: I don't see it like that sergeant.

SERGEANT: To bloody right you don't that's your problem.

WILLIAM: Before I became a part of this carnage I believed the war was necessary as a means of defence and liberation. It now seems to be more a futile sacrifice.

SERGEANT: Careful, a man can't afford to be too reflective when he's going over a trench top. It could be the death of him. All his attention should be on kill or be killed.

WILLIAM: Don't you see any possibility for negotiation. What was gained from thousands killed in the Ypres battle we both took part in?

SERGEANT: Whether we like it or not we voluntarily agreed to serve our country and if we backed off now we'd end up where private Dayton is. I don't want any more like him in my Company.

WILLIAM: How can a 16 year-old be written off as a coward. He must have shown courage to join up as an under-age soldier.

SERGEANT: : He is old enough to know a soldier will face punishment if he breaks the rules and contravenes section 4 of the Army Act -showing cowardice in the face of the enemy.

WILLIAM: He's not the only soldier to have done that. So far, most of those who received a death sentence from the Court- Martial have been reprieved.

SERGEANT: You have been doing your homework. Pity you can't get it through that soft head of yours what's happening. The delusion of this war coming to a quick end is over. The top brass believe morale is low and any loose discipline could result in thoughts of mutiny. The French army is close to that at the moment.

WILLIAM: I think if soldiers have to shoot a comrade for giving way to overpowering emotions then morale is going to be even lower.

SERGEANT: Why do you think the men keep on fighting? It's because of a belief in patriotism and a sense of duty. That means strong discipline is needed.

WILLIAM: What about humanity?

SERGEANT: Out here, a person isn't an individual he's part of the war machine. Didn't they tell you about that at Aldershot?

WILLIAM: Is no account taken of uncontrollable shock from the constant shelling.

SERGEANT: Shock isn't found in a good unit. A well-trained soldier should not breakdown because of gunfire.

WILLIAM: It could be a temporary lapse.

SERGEANT: Such behaviour can be transferred to other soldiers then you have panic which destroys the fighting mentality needed in an attack like the one planned. Private Dayton was described in the court martial as being liable to cause panic. The Court had no evidence that he had shown any previous courage which would have helped his case.

WILLIAM: Didn't they consider his mental condition?

SERGEANT: No the trial found him to have no sign of any mental disorders. His state of mind was confirmed by the medical Officer has been satisfactory.

WILLIAM: The last time we saw John Dayton in the trench he seemed to be in a trance -like state of shock.

SERGEANT: At dawn tomorrow his problems will be over but not for his next of kin.

WILLIAM: What do you mean?

SERGEANT: His family will be informed that Private John Dayton was executed for Acts prejudicial to military discipline and his grave marker will say 'Shot at Dawn.' His name will be forgotten.

WILLIAM: His family will remember him.

SERGEANT: He should have thought about his family before deserting. When the word gets back to his home town and his next of kin will be ostracised and left on their own. His name won't even be on any memorial. If he had lived he would have been branded as a weak, untrustworthy individual who was unemployable. This will be on his Army record.

WILLIAM: I can't believe civilians would act like that.

SERGEANT: Civilians are just as keen as the army to win this war and it means a soldier has to learn to live with his fears in order to give his best in battle.

WILLIAM: He gave his best when the company took part in the attack at Ypres

SERGEANT: Maybe but he gave way to weakness and showed his true colours when he deserted and left his brother soldiers to fill in the gap. A good soldier can be relied upon not to give way to cowardice. If

gunfire trauma became a legitimate medical condition it might become an excuse for a soldier like Dayton to avoid his duty.

WILLIAM: I know of more than one man from our company sent back down the line because of his nerves.

SERGEANT: Maybe but he ran away from the last attack at a time when casualties were heavy. Some of them were his mates. *(He walks away from him but turns back as though he's forgotten something)* You proved yourself a real soldier in more than one instance. For hell's sake don't let this business with Dayton finish you. Before you're protest I recommended you for promotion. If you tell the Captain you will join the execution team as ordered. I can guarantee by this time next week you'll be a non-commissioned officer. Men like you are needed in the company. *(Turns and leaves while speaking over his shoulder)* See it from the point of view that Private Dayton is no longer serving his country, but you can.

SCENE TWO

The sound of exploding bombs can be heard in the background as William is left alone. He takes a letter out of his tunic and begins to read it. A background voice speaks the contents)

Dear William,

The papers say the war will soon be over thank God. There is not a family in the village who it has not affected. Your friends Tom Ashley and John Richards have been reported missing, and John Handley is back home after having a leg amputated.

Your father and I pray every day that you will soon be home sound in mind and body. We can certainly use your strength on the farm. There are no young men left in the village and those that are have to work in the factory. The munitions factory seems to be making huge profits from all this misery.

I'm sure the pony misses you. We look forward to the day you walk down the lane and she gallops up to the corner of the field to greet you.

It was good to read you are not in the front line. Please come back safe.

ALFRED: *(Private Alfred Reynolds is William's friend.*

He interrupts William's reading of the letter. William puts the letter back into his tunic pocket)

What ya'h doing out here Bill? They can't make up their minds about you. I've just heard the Sarge say the medical Officer's coming over to talk to you. It should be a vet.

WILLIAM: Why?

ALFRED: Because they treat us like bloody animals. Have you got trench foot or gob rot?

WILLIAM: Nothing like that I've just got the symptoms of what's right and what's wrong and the only cure is honesty.

ALFRED: Are you playing Hobley's game?

WILLIAM: What game's that?

ALFRED: You remember the last time we went over the top, it was frigging hell. Those shells really made a bang didn't they.

Jim reckoned they busted his ear drums and when the officer shouted out orders, Jim said he couldn't hear. Because of that he was charged with malingering .God knows what you'll be charged with.

WILLIAM: *(Puts a hand round one ear and says)* Pardon! *(Both laugh)*

ALFRED: You won't be laughing if you're daft enough to go on protesting you'll go on a charge like Jim Hobley. Nobody wants to listen. There's no justice for the likes of us we're just here to be slaughtered; so stop acting like a school kid and wise-up to the situation.

WILLIAM: That's exactly what I've done I didn't join up to kill my own countrymen. I cannot be a mindless robot without a conscience. The only chance now for John Dayton is a refusal from his comrades to shoot him.

ALFRED: And you call that wise. the CO might be more inclined to view it as a mutinous attempt by a Private soldier to stir up trouble. No one in the company, apart from you, is daft enough to go along with that reasoning. The army as jurisdiction over us all including you.

WILLIAM: I have never shirked as a soldier and the army is not going to deprive me of what I believe is right or wrong.

ALFRED: There's a fine line between what you are insinuating and that of refusing to carry out army procedure which could mean court martial. Can't you wait to see if clemency is granted to the prisoner?

WILLIAM: There's no sign of that and his execution takes place tomorrow.

ALFRED: It could be a lot worse for us than it is for him.

WILLIAM: In what sick way can you explain that?

ALFRED: His death is going to be quick and less tormenting than lying out there (*He points over the trench top*) Just imagine hours, even days of pain, with half your stomach shot away or limbs blown off. You have seen men brought back with wounds turned gangrenous causing them more suffering before dying. What about Charlie Brooks in the field Hospital at the moment wrenching his guts up and blinded from poison gas.

WILLIAM: Are you trying to make it sound as though John should be grateful to be put out of his agony.

ALFRED: I'm saying that you're forgetting were here to kill or be killed.

WILLIAM: And you think that excuses taking part in killing a comrade.

ALFRED: You're carrying out orders. Can't you report sick so as not to be on the squad.

WILLIAM: Why the hell do you think I'm making a protest. What good would me getting off the squad do John Dayton? If I stick to my protest maybe others on the squad will do the same.

ALFRED: Well they're taking plenty of time to think about it.

WILLIAM: The army doesn't encourage a person to think about right and wrong.

ALFRED: Will you shut up talking like that. Or you'll get more than just yourself into trouble.

WILLIAM: There must be others with the same view as me.

ALFRED: Do you think the squads full of idiots like you. The company follows the rules. Remember what we were told when we came to France.

WILLIAM: We were told a lot of things when we got here.

ALFRED: It was made clear that we were here to kill Germans and win this war. The war facts were read out to us that something as simple as disobedience of an officer could result in being shot. Dayton broke up and lost it.

WILLIAM: Can anyone under these conditions be certain he won't break down?

ALFRED: That is one of the reasons for the execution to show what happens if we don't soldier on.

WILLIAM: That is nothing to do with a person's patriotic duty. It seems to me another form of blackmail.

ALFRED: I'm not quite sure what your reasons for being here are. Mine are quite simple.

WILLIAM: Simple?

ALFRED: Yes bloody simple. I was fed up earning a pittance digging ditches for the local gentry and pressurised by the locals asking why an able-bodied fellow like me wasn't in the army.

WILLIAM: I take it you have no sense of patriotism left.

ALFRED: I have something you seem to have lost. A sense of survival.

WILLIAM: I'm just as anxious as you to survive. This war is not my life's ambition. Patriotism is not going to suppress my entire personality.

ALFRED: You have some funny ideas.

WILLIAM: Funny?

ALFRED: Yes you seem to be living in a different world. You talk about things that shouldn't bother you where we are.

WILLIAM: So you think that an individual's beliefs have to be put on hold until we finish here?

ALFRED: Our own beliefs are none existent as far as the army is concerned.

WILLIAM: I'm not prepared to give unquestioning loyalty to something I believe is wrong.

ALFRED: Listen mate your beliefs are going to finish you off quicker than one of those snipers out there. *(He points over the trench)* Just come over here. *(He guides him over to the trench. Takes off his helmet and places it on top of his rifle. He then places it above the trench top. A gunshot is heard twice before he lowers the rifle)* That's what your beliefs are worth right now.

WILLIAM: I can't follow your line of argument?

ALFRED: My bloody line of argument is that you're not with reality any more. We're not back in that village school in Branston we have to keep on track with our mates. Your feelings can become as dangerous to survival as that lot over there who've just been taking pot-shots at my helmet.

WILLIAM: I'm not daft, I can see what you're getting at but I'd have to be a zombie to shut myself off from the truth.

ALFRED: *(Sighs)* If you weren't my friend I wouldn't bother arguing with you because there seems no point in trying to reason. If you don't have any loyalty to your mates, how can you be a real soldier?

WILLIAM: What do you mean by a real soldier?

ALFRED: A real soldier fights alongside his mates and doesn't want to let them down in battle.

WILLIAM: I go along with that.

ALFRED: Then why are you hell bent on taking the side of a man classed by army law as a bloody coward?

WILLIAM: We don't have to just sit back and accept that verdict.

ALFRED: No! (*He marches over to William and then comes to attention*) we have to stand to attention and accept it. You're not the only one on that execution squad I'm on it as well.

WILLIAM: I'm sorry Alf.

ALFRED: No need to be. The cowardly little shirker deserves what's coming to him for deserting his post.

WILLIAM: Can't you think straight any more?

ALFRED: I'm facing up to facts that's all. You have blinkers on about the whole damn business. Do you think John Dayton thought about anyone else when he refused to be a soldier. Did he hell. Every time someone leaves his post another man as to step in for him. If Dayton could save himself by putting you in danger, what do you think he'd do?

WILLIAM: The state John was in the last time I saw him I would say he couldn't think straight about anything.

ALFRED: Accept saving his own skin.

WILLIAM: Do any of us want to be cut to pieces or burned up with mustard gas?

ALFRED: We could be more in line for that with the likes of John Dayton on the loose running away and leaving their mates to do extra

cover for their absence. Aren't we supposed to be trained as part of a team. If you remember, he always seemed to be unreliable even in the training camp.

WILLIAM: He wasn't alone in adjusting to army life after being a factory machinist.

ALFRED: Stop playing martyr and be one of the lads again. You were a cert for promotion, maybe even a commission. Now you're on a hiding for nothing.

WILLIAM: How can it be for nothing when a man's life is at stake?

ALFRED: His life isn't at stake. He's a goner and so are you if you don't wise-up.

WILLIAM: You're not examining the facts. If he was a coward, why didn't he walk down to H.Q. and tell them he wasn't 18. That he had lied about his age. If he was only 16 when he signed on, he is not legally a soldier.

ALFRED: He probably knows it's too late for that. If the Generals excused him on those grounds hundreds of 16 year-olds would pull the same stunt.

WILLIAM: So you're assuming hundreds of sixteen year old soldiers are cowards.

ALFRED: What are you frigging going on about? You always have to be bloody different.

WILLIAM: God, I hope so. They aren't going to take over my mind.

I'd rather die.

ALFRED: That's exactly what's going to happen to you. Listen Bill if you don't get a grip you're on the way to ending up like that idiot Dayton. Do you really think its going to change anything because one stupid little prick refuses to be one of twelve men on the execution squad. Dayton's still going to die and you stand a good chance of joining him. Use you're bloody commonsense the top brass have to cover themselves. If they let him off the hook now others might down rifles and desert so they aren't going to listen to one little private.

WILLIAM: What makes you think I am the only one refusing to take part in murder?

ALFRED: Have you gone mad there's no choice. He's got to go. *(He punches one of the sandbags)*

WILLIAM: He's being used just like you and me.

ALFRED: You really are a stupid bastard Bill. Even the chaplain's given him the last rites.

WILLIAM: Are you telling me the chaplain hasn't spoken out against his execution?

ALFRED: Can't you get it through your head, we're all here to fight the Hun even the Vicar. The Ministry of War employs him here, not God.

WILLIAM: Thou shalt not kill, except in war. Is that it?

ALFRED: I don't know what the hell you're talking about but you're getting it right now.

(He is beginning to lose patience with what he sees as William's stubbornness)

For hell's sake, tell Sergeant Rample you've changed your mind.

WILLIAM: *(He shouts)* We are not talking about changing my socks. I won't be involved in killing an innocent man.

ALFRED: How can he be innocent when the bugger let his mates down?

WILLIAM: He lost his mind. That shouldn't be a crime.

ALFRED: It isn't, if he was anywhere else but here. We're not in the damn Boy Scouts. What the hell do you think this is for? *(Walks over to the rifle picks it up and points it at him)* We're here to kill the German's not run away. Look at it this way Bill. Dayton is able to do what every soldier has to do before he can be buried with full military honours.

WILLIAM: What's that?

ALFRED: Die. *(Spoken sarcastically)*

WILLIAM: Is that supposed to be funny? They won't give a soldier classed as a coward a full military honours burial. Don't you think about anything?

ALFRED: Yes, Alfred Reynolds! And you should be thinking about William Bannister because the buggers have really got it in for you now.

Why do you think you are being kept away from the rest of us? It's because they think you might give us ideas that's why.

WILLIAM: You don't have to talk to me, if you are afraid of being guilty by association.

ALFRED: See that's what I mean! Trying to be something you're not.

Only the brass talks like that *(walks off, waving his arms)*

WILLIAM: You mean I have to act ignorant.

ALFRED: *(Turns back again as though changing his mind)* Just the same at school wasn't it. 'Brainy Bannister' top of the class, but he still finished up mucking out pigs.

WILLIAM: I intend to go to university when I finish here.

ALFRED: And I suppose become a lawyer and put on trial those who executed Private Dayton, stop dreaming! *(He begins to walk up and down imitating a professor)* Oh! Aren't I Professor know it all? Those bloody Germans might have a different idea as to where you're going; and if they don't, the sods here will *(he walks over to an ammunition box sits down and clasps his head in his hands)* We're both as good as dead Bill.

WILLIAM: *(Walks over to him and places a hand on his shoulder)* Come on Alf that's not like you to get so down.

ALFRED: *(Takes his hands away and looks up)*. You're a good mate Bill, that's why I don't like to see you put yourself in the shit. The Commanding Officer doesn't want the others on the squad siding with

you. That's common knowledge amongst the lads. Up to now they think you're playing a game of acting bloody daft so you can get a ticket out of here. I know that's not true because you were always an honest sod even at school. So you're really intent on making a lot of trouble for yourself.

WILLIAM: I never put my refusal in writing to stir up any trouble for the Company. You and I are the only two in our Company picked out to join the execution squad. Making a declaration to the Commanding Officer was the only protest I could make.

ALFRED: And he hasn't even bothered to talk to you in person. He's probably just made out a court martial order similar to John Dayton's.

You know as well as I do that half the Company were killed or wounded in that last attack we did and tomorrow could be worse when we move up to the Somme. That's why some of them think your using the objection because you're another Dayton.

WILLIAM: What do you think?

ALFRED: It doesn't matter what I think. After Dayton's gone I might be looking down my gun barrel at you. You're no coward that's for certain.

The whole company knows you've proved yourself more than once in action but that won't excuse insubordination from a Private soldier.

WILLIAM: What kind of a war is it if soldiers do their duty simply because they don't want to be shot by their comrades?

If we can't think and decide for ourselves we're puppets. When I first came out here I believed it was justified. Now I feel we are all pawns in a game.

ALFRED: We were used before we came out here. Both of us were told how good it would be to fight for our country. For me it seemed a much better deal than working 12 hours a day digging ditches for a pittance before I signed up.

WILLIAM: *(Tries to relieve the tension with humour)* Digging ditches is a good skill for digging trenches Alf.

ALFRED: *(He stares at William and then bursts out laughing)*. Always one for a joke eh.

WILLIAM: 'A merry heart doeth good like a medicine '

ALFRED: Which bloody Christmas card did you get that off? When this all started everyone said we would be home by Christmas.

WILLIAM: Well they didn't say which Christmas *(laughs)*.

ALFRED: I sometimes think you'd laugh, if your bloody arse was on fire.

WILLIAM: *(Sounds of shells heard in the distance)* Won't the next Christmas at home be great Alf, roast turkey, roast potatoes, and a roasting fire.

ALFRED: And pulling a cracker!

WILLIAM: A cracker?

ALFRED: Pulling Margaret Henshaw, a real cracker a lovely chick.

Just imagine her under the mistletoe. (*He does a dance with an imaginary woman in his arms*) Oh what I'd give to be at home with Maggie.

WILLIAM: Everything will seem so much better after this hell on earth.

ALFRED: Any kind of food! will taste better after the shite we have to eat.

WILLIAM: What's wrong with the food here?

ALFRED: Everything! I've forgotten what good food tastes like.

WILLIAM: (*jokingly*) We get a good choice in the trenches though.

ALFRED: Choice! You really are mad!

WILLIAM: They give us the choice of eating it or leaving it.

ALFRED: I doubt if even Private Dayton will get a choice of food before they execute him. The condemned man will not eat a hearty breakfast. One thing is certain after dawn tomorrow.

WILLIAM: What's that?

ALFRED: Private John Dayton won't be going home for Christmas.

WILLIAM: (*The humour ceases. He turns and walks over to the sandbags looking out as though he can see something*)

ALFRED: (*Points over the trench and shouts a warning*) Don't put your head over that trench or you'll be gone quicker than Private Dayton.

WILLIAM: At least it will be the enemy shooting at me, not someone I know.

ALFRED: It won't make any difference if your names on a bullet, you'll still be dead.

WILLIAM: I don't think they'll carry out an execution on a 16 year-old.

ALFRED: He's been in the army over a year now so that makes him seventeen. His executions a certainty! I'll make you a bet on that.

WILLIAM: I don't gamble on someone's life.

ALFRED: You're such a bloody, 'Goody Two Shoes,' aren't you. Private Dayton doesn't know you exist! And he won't exist after to tomorrow's dawn! *(He speaks in an agitated manner)*

WILLIAM: You don't half gobble on.

ALFRED: What else is there to do in this hellhole. Apart from killing and being killed. You must be living in bloody dreamland. Dayton is as good as dead. It's all signed, sealed, and *(he walks over to a small cardboard box and kicks it on the word)* delivered. Tomorrow he's going to wish he'd been shot at by a German gun rather than a British one when he faces that firing squad.

WILLIAM: It could be your bullet that kills him.

ALFRED: No one will know who killed him. One of the rifles has a blank round in but we won't be told which one has the blank. Harry Stoman from D Company said he was on an execution squad. He told me all about it. Look I'll show you what happens.

(Walks over to an empty cartridge box and turns it up on its end. He then begins to act out the execution procedure.) First he's tied up to a post. *(Puts his hands behind his back)* and given the choice of having a blindfold if he wants it. *(Shuts his eyes)*. Then the Medical Officer pins a small piece of white cloth over his heart for the firing squad to aim at. The Officer asks him if he's alright and moves away. Then it's the chaplain's turn to say some prayers *(Puts his hands together and looks very pious)*. He leaves and the Officer lines up the execution squad. *(Walks a few steps forward, picks up his rifle, turns round and aims it at the box)* The order is given to fire. *(Claps his hands together and makes a loud bang)* If the prisoner isn't dead. *(He walks over to the box and pretends to pull out a revolver, bends over the imaginary victim and shoots)* the Officer puts him out of his misery.

WILLIAM: Bullshit.

ALFRED: Now you're beginning to talk like a soldier.

WILLIAM: To kill a soldier like that is an insult to humanity. The only one with any dignity is the executed.

ALFRED: You asshole where does dignity come into this taste of hell.

Will we think about dignity tomorrow when we hear the order to fix bayonets before going over the trench top.

WILLIAM: There was dignity in that when I first came out here. A sense of defending my country but now I'm not so sure.

ALFRED: Its that standing there waiting for the whistle to blow that gets me. It seems like a relief when I start to climb the ladder. What do you think about before hell breaks loose.

WILLIAM: I hope our side's shells don't fall short.

ALFRED: When those machine guns start. I look for the nearest shell hole and when I find one its usually full.

WILLIAM: Running across that no-mans land is certainly a test of character I wonder how long the generals will keep such strategy. Is it their idea that the side with the most dead will be the loser.

ALFRED: That last trench we gained cost us more dead British than the Germans. I was in one of the shell holes when I saw a fellow from D company get both his legs blown off and pieces of shrapnel sticking out of his body. I climbed out and ran to the next cover. I felt really sick.

WILLIAM: Under those circumstances I don't think anyone could blame you for feeling sick. None of us is free from times when we feel sick and terrified. We're just afraid to show it because we're trained soldiers.

ALFRED: Do you think the Officer's feel the same way we do?

WILLIAM: I'm sure they do but if you were an officer wouldn't you try not to show fear in order to set an example to the men you're leading into action.

ALFRED: Maybe if I had some rum inside me.

WILLIAM: We all need to conceal some emotions at one time or another.

ALFRED: It's a pity Dayton didn't conceal his.

WILLIAM: Have you never felt so scared you couldn't control it?

ALFRED: Yes but I haven't run away yet. I was shaking all over when we had that last gas attack and just managed to get my mask on before it hit us. It was a horrible way to die for some of those too slow. For a long time after, the smell of gas was there. It smells worse than army latrines. Do you think they'll use gas tomorrow?

WILLIAM: It depends on which way the wind is blowing.

ALFRED: Oh what the hell we all seem to be living on borrowed time. You seem to have signed your own death warrant.

WILLIAM: You have some funny ideas at times.

ALFRED: I mean you're committing suicide.

WILLIAM: You're not making sense.

ALFRED: There's no way those in charge are going to let you off the hook now.

WILLIAM: What crime have I committed?

ALFRED: The crime of a private soldier having the courage to criticise his superiors.

WILLIAM: Isn't courage supposed to be a soldier's main weapon.

ALFRED: I really believe you have lost your mind if you can be that naïve.

WILLIAM: Because I refuse to commit what I believe is an atrocity.

ALFRED: Why did I think you were intelligent?

WILLIAM: You don't have to be intelligent to know that shooting dead a fellow soldier is murder. Even if this trench warfare seems to make men lose their reasoning.

ALFRED: You would be locked up now if they didn't need every soldier for tomorrow.

WILLIAM: Every soldier?

ALFRED: Dayton is no longer considered a soldier.

ALFRED: Let's make the most of it.

WILLIAM: Most of what?

ALFRED: *(He holds out a water bottle)* A drink of this before the shooting starts up again. I've got some rum kindly given to me from the Sergeant I'm supposed to share it and talk some bloody sense into you. If he knew I'd told you this I'd be tied to the execution post.

WILLIAM: A tot of rum isn't going to excuse an act of murder.

ALFRED: Will you shut up talking shit like that. *(He picks up a small Tommy cooker and unfolds it)* this is no substitute for a real fire.l

WILLIAM: Necessity is the mother of invention. It's meant to be a smokeless stove which won't draw the attention of sniper's.

ALFRED: Bugger the snipers I just want a good brew up made a bit stronger with a drop of a rum to clear my head.

WILLIAM: I think the idea of the rum ration is to fortify us for what awaits out there. (*He points over the sandbags*) Not to clear our heads.

ALFRED: (*Looks into a large tin and asks*) Is this the only water we've got?

WILLIAM: It's rationed like everything else.

ALFRED: It looks filthy.

WILLIAM: Shall I send for the waiter and ask to change it?

ALFRED: If we don't get it from a shell we cop it from drinking this poison.

WILLIAM: Strain and then boil it.

ALFRED: What the hell am I going to strain it with.

WILLIAM: (*Takes from his tunic a khaki handkerchief and hands it to him*) Put this over a mess tin and pour the water over it.

ALFRED: (*Takes the handkerchief and stares at it*) What's this being used for?

WILLIAM: Well I did have to use it last week in an emergency.

ALFRED: Emergency?

WILLIAM: Yes when we had a gas attack. I'd left my gas helmet too far up the trench so I'd no option but to urinate on the handkerchief and then cover my face with it.

ALFRED: *(Lifts the handkerchief up to his nose)* You mean you pissed on this?

WILLIAM: If you remember the training instructions. It can be a means of preventing the chlorine from reaching your lungs. Are you going to drum up or not because I could do with a drink.

ALFRED: The Joker in the pack. *(He sets about making the tea)* Maybe if John Dayton had got a dose of gas he might have been on his way home instead of brooding in a guard-room.

WILLIAM: You really do come across as stupid at times. Have you any idea what that gas does to the body? Mustard gas if it doesn't kill can make a person disabled for life. I'd rather have a bullet. Is that tea ready?

ALFRED: *(Looks in the tin)* This tea doesn't look fresh.

WILLIAM: Don't be daft is anything fresh around here?

ALFRED: *(He puts the tea into separate mess tins, pours the boiled water in. Then adds some rum from the flask and passes it to William)* Afternoon tea for Bill.

WILLIAM: Where's the bread and jam?

ALFRED: I haven't even got a couple of the usually hard rock biscuits.

WILLIAM: I never thought drinking a cup of tea could be so good. Back home I wouldn't have given it a thought.

ALFRED: *(Laughs)* Are you being bloody funny. The only reason you're enjoying that tea is because it's laced with rum you silly sod.

WILLIAM: I'd swop the rum for some of my mother's blackcurrant jam and bread to go with a cup of tea.

ALFRED: Ya'h can't have everything.

WILLIAM: That's right Alf. What more could we ask for? *(Both laugh)* I wonder if I will feel the same way about having a cuppa next time I have one at the Saturday evening Civic Hall dance back in Branston

ALFRED: To hell with the tea. I'd just want to dance with Margaret Henshaw. I started to write a letter to her over a week ago.

WILLIAM: Are you telling me you haven't finished it?

ALFRED: I never know what to say. Some of the lads write poems to women but I can't.

WILLIAM: It's not difficult if you're sincere about you're feelings for her.

ALFRED: *(Takes a photograph out of his tunic pocket and shows it to William)* How could I not be serious about that.

WILLIAM: She's very pretty Alf.

ALFRED: Be a good mate and give me some idea for a poem to her. I want to send it off before all hell breaks loose tomorrow. It could be the last thing I ever write.

WILLIAM: *(He goes over to one of the boxes and sits down. Takes a pencil and paper out of his pocket)* Give me a few minutes to write something down. *(He begins to scribble)*

ALFRED: I just want to put into words what I think about her.

WILLIAM: *(Hands him the piece of paper)* Maybe this will let her know how you feel.

ALFRED: *(Reads out the poem)* As I go into battle. The guns begin to rattle. I pray to one above. And think of the girl I love. *(He throws his hands up in the air)* What the hell is that? She'll think I've gone bloody barmy. Can't you think of something sexy.

WILLIAM: You didn't say she wanted an erotic letter from you.

ALFRED: *(Indignantly)* My girl's not twisted.

WILLIAM: Did I say she was?

ALFRED: Yes! Erotic means someone's daft.

WILLIAM: I think you're mistaking the word for neurotic.

ALFRED: Okay smart arse I think I'll write my own bloody poem *(Tears up the poem)* Do you remember Harvey Spencer when we were at school?

WILLIAM: Yes.

ALFRED: Well he used to call you a cissy because you read poetry.

WILLIAM: Harvey couldn't read.

ALFRED: *(Walks over to his rifle and picks it up)* Do you have to read to fire one of these?

WILLIAM: What's that got to do with Harvey Spencer?

ALFRED: He passed for the army.

WILLIAM: You'll be telling me next they put him in the Army Intelligence Corp.

ALFRED: No he's too young. He's the same age as Dayton.

WILLIAM: 'Bliss t'was in that dawn to be alive. But to be young was very heaven!'

ALFRED: Damned right it was Bill in those days. You really know how to put things into words.

WILLIAM: They were not my words. I took them from a poem called 'The Prelude' written by William Wordsworth about the French Revolution which was supposed to give 'Liberty, equality, and fraternity.' Since that bloody epoch took place views have changed just as I believe they will change about this war in the years to come.

ALFRED: (*Looks at him with puzzlement*) We went to the same school but I don't remember that part of history.

WILLIAM: Maybe you didn't read the same books?

ALFRED: Or I could have been off the day we had that lesson.

WILLIAM: You were off more times than you were there and you never seemed to be all there when you were present.

ALFRED: At least I learnt bloody commonsense. You won't catch me going up against the top brass.

WILLIAM: (*Takes a drink*) There's more rum in this than tea.

ALFRED: Hopefully it will kill the bacteria from the water. Enjoy it because it might be the last time we have a drink together.

WILLIAM: You really are an optimist aren't you? What makes you think that?

ALFRED: Have you forgotten about tomorrow? We're down to go over the top and if we survive that you've still got a problem. That is unless you get with it and go along with company orders.

WILLIAM: I have no problem in doing what I think is right.

ALFRED: If you are right then his trial was wrong. Everyone knows he committed the crime of fleeing in the face of the enemy and we all know the punishment for that is a possible execution. He was tried and convicted. It might have been different if someone had spoken up for him at the court martial.

WILLIAM: He was convicted in a twenty minute trial with no legal representation. Not to mention a chance to appeal against the sentence.

ALFRED: There you go again talking like a public school educated twit.

WILLIAM: If you reasoned with yourself for just one minute you might come to the conclusion that the public school educated society put together the rules condemning John. Of course I'm only speaking from a Christian educated agricultural worker.

ALFRED: Alright mister bloody smart arse tell me why a Christian educated army chaplain hasn't made any protest?

WILLIAM: I will when I get a chance to talk to him.

ALFRED: Oh! You will get a chance to do just that before they tie your hands behind you. *(He takes up the flask of rum)* Can I finish this off because its not going to persuade you to act like a soldier.

WILLIAM: Go ahead but make sure you can walk back up the trench.

ALFRED: We've still got half an hour left before the next order so this could be our last game. *(He walks over to the sandbag removes a tennis ball and a piece of wood shaped like a cricket bat)*

WILLIAM: Alright but stop using the word last.

ALFRED: *(Throws the ball to him)* Balls to you *(He walks over to an empty ammunition box which he sets up to act as a wicket)* I'm the last man in. *(Using a different accent he says)* I say old chap are you ready to bowl.

WILLIAM: *(Juggling the ball between his hands)* Why couldn't we have settled the dispute between them and us with a game of cricket.

ALFRED: Don't be stupid the Germans are good at sport if we played them for a World Cup they'd win hands down. *(William bowls and Alfred hits the ball which goes out of sight he shouts)* Four! Damn that's the only ball I have. *(He moves towards the sandbag and is about to climb over when the Sergeant enters)*

SERGEANT: What the hell are you two playing at? Get your kit together you're both going on a recce. Make a sketch of the land

Bannister and the cricketer here can check the barbed wire and look for his ball on the way back.

SCENE 2

(The medical Captain's makeshift office is situated away from the trench but looks similar to what a dug-out first aid post would have looked like.

The Officer is standing to right of stage and shaving when the Sergeant enters from the left)

OFFICER: Ah! Sergeant Rample I need to talk to you. It seems that upstart is causing havoc. I don't know what kind of soldiers we're getting. A couple of weeks ago an eighteen year old used one of these *(waves the shaver)* to cut his throat because 'things got on his nerves'. I mean do they think they are coming to France just to drink the French wine. How are they being trained? *(Using the shaver mirror, looking down at his face to shave his chin as he is talking. Facing the audience. Then begins to clean and carefully puts his shaven tools carefully away.)*

You see Sergeant if the likes of Private Dayton get away with it don't you think it would be grossly unfair to men like Corporal Manning who was cut to pieces throwing grenades at a German trench a few days ago? *(He walks over to a bag and takes out a newspaper.)* Where the hell do they get the news from back home? Look at this Sergeant *(He hands a British Newspaper to him.)*

SERGEANT: *(Reads out loud)* ‘Good progress on the Somme. Our boys are winning the war.’ There’s nothing here about the high cost in men’s lives sir.

OFFICER: Damn right there isn’t. Nobody back home wants to read that. At least there’s no mention of execution for cowardice either thank god. That would destroy morale.

SERGEANT: ‘The end justifies the means.’

OFFICER: Ah, you’ve read Shakespeare Sergeant.

SERGEANT: Shakespeare? No, I heard a Corporal say it just before we went over the top on that last outing.

OFFICER: Oh, how did you make out on that one?

SERGEANT: There were six hundred of us and three hundred and forty two were killed or missing including the Captain.

OFFICER: Yes, I remember a trench was gained in that very heroic attack. It was a proud day for the company.

SERGEANT: Could I have another drop of that Sir? *(He is disturbed by the Officer’s remarks)*

OFFICER: Help yourself Sergeant. Brave honourable soldier’s all of them. We haven’t got many like Private Dayton. Although one is one too many. *(He walks across to right of stage and speaks in a reflective mood)*
The Colonels leaving me to sort out Private Bannister’s problem. It could

be really damning if his story got back home. That's why we have to treat it with the decorum the little bugger doesn't deserve. Any ideas Sergeant?

SERGEANT: I'm doing what I can to change his mind, but it's very difficult. He seems to have unnatural principles. I've never heard him use the soldier's language. I've never seen him drunk and I've never heard him discuss the French brothels.

OFFICER: He's a strange one and he's not even a Non-Commissioned Officer

SERGEANT: He was about to be if he hadn't got himself into this mess.

OFFICER: Does he know that?

SERGEANT: Yes, I did inform him.

OFFICER: Do you think he might see things differently as a NCO?

SERGEANT: I doubt it Sir.

OFFICER: Here we are talking about one soldier's problem and tomorrow we will be facing a battle that could be the most important of this war.

SERGEANT: Well as they say Sir 'one rotten apple in a barrel.'

OFFICER: Yes Sergeant its hard luck having a deserter in a company like yours with such a good reputation. Maybe Dayton can see it as an opportunity to redeem himself.

SERGEANT: I don't understand Sir?

OFFICER: I mean the man has the chance to show the company that his execution will be an example to explain they must not fail to carry out their duty as soldiers. In this way, he is allowed to die for his country. In much the same way as dying on the battlefield.

SERGEANT: Would it not be better and more useful to give him the option of joining his comrades in tomorrow's battle?

OFFICER: Afraid that's out of the question. He's a convicted man. His only chance lay on the recommendations of various high ranking officers' to whom his file was sent. They made it clear there were no extenuating circumstances in his favour.

SERGEANT: Did they have the final say Sir?

OFFICER: No that was left to General Douglas Haig, who as you know is Commander in Chief of the British Armies in France to give final order for execution. That has been confirmed by him with the words. 'No recommendation to mercy.' Which means the only decent thing Private Dayton can do is take his punishment like a good soldier.

SERGEANT: Usually the ones who turn their backs to the enemy have the threat of being shot at by the 'battle police.' Then of course, there's no court martial or any other problem to deal with. In our last confrontation with the enemy, that particular day left no option for any soldier. Either goes forward with a strong possibility of being hit or go back and be shot for showing cowardice.

OFFICER: To my knowledge, no one was court martialed after that battle.

SERGEANT: No Sir but some were shot by the battle police. It does seem a little ironic to have the option of either dying on the Somme or tied to a post.

OFFICER: We have to maintain standards, Sergeant, if we are going to be the victors of this war. You and I have to repress our emotions. We can't allow the other ranks to see us show signs of weakness.

SERGEANT: Of course, not Sir but they haven't been trained long enough. It's quite amazing how some men seem to go to pieces before they even experience action in the front lines.

OFFICER: And it's part of our job to make them aware its unacceptable behaviour from soldiers.

SERGEANT: A very difficult task at times sir.

OFFICER: Certainly, but I see too many supposedly shocked out of their senses from shell fire. Whilst really they are merely emotionally weak or downright cowards.

SERGEANT: May be the best treatment for their condition is non-medical but disciplinary treatment?

OFFICER: Your experience has obviously taught you how to distinguish between the bad and the good soldier sergeant.

SERGEANT: I think that kind of observation must come with the rank of sergeant.

OFFICER: No question about that.

OFFICER: You've seen quite a lot of action sergeant. What was your work before you joined up?

SERGEANT: I was a porter at the Chesterfield hospital.

OFFICER: Oh so this mutilation is not new to you? We are both used to the sight of blood. We have something very much in common Sergeant as a hospital porter, I'm sure you will have seen death before.

SERGEANT: Yes, I have the outlook that we all have to die sometime and if it happens on the Somme no ones going to cry over me.

OFFICER: What! No wife or parents?

SERGEANT: Never knew my parents and my wife left due to my drinking habits. My army friends are all I have now Sir. Although most of them have copped it.

OFFICER: Yes, you certainly must have become hardened over the years Sergeant: I've only served a fraction of the time you've served. Yet I've seen a colleague from medical school have his head blown off and I've had to make decisions I wouldn't have contemplated before this war. Last week a colleague, medical Officer in the artillery regiment was taken out of his post. He had suggested that some men in the regiment were in no fit state to take part in the planned attack.

SERGEANT: I can understand that Sir. If his report conflicted with the planned strategy of the regiments attack policy.

OFFICER: Under such circumstances the needs of the individual count for little, we have to be loyal to the regiment.

SERGEANT: That goes without saying.

OFFICER: The army needs more men like you to help us win this war.

SERGEANT: Thank you Sir.

OFFICER: What was Private Dayton like as a soldier?

SERGEANT: A liability.

OFFICER: In what way?

SERGEANT: He tended to go over the trench top but instead of moving forward, he looked for the nearest hole and stayed there.

OFFICER: So he couldn't control his fears.

SERGEANT: If you care to put it like that Sir.

OFFICER: We all have to be prepared to risk our lives in combat. Once we leave the confines of the trench, we can't avoid duty for our country.

SERGEANT: Without discipline, we'll lose the war.

OFFICER: True, there must be a balance between clemency and enforcing discipline. All the same, I wish I didn't have to play a part in these proceedings. I'm not a psychiatrist. How am I supposed to make a decision between what is shirking and what is a complete mental breakdown?

SERGEANT: At his court hearing, he said he had no problems when he was away from the sound of the guns.

OFFICER: Yes and that statement helped seal the little blighter's fate.

SERGEANT: That and the fact that so many of his company had been wiped out a few days previously. When those attacks on the Somme had started. He made it quite clear to me that he was not going back into the trenches. His comment was that he had had enough. When two NCO's tried to take him back for combat, he broke away from them and ran back to the rear.

OFFICER: Then of course, he was contravening section 4 of the Army act showing cowardice in the face of the enemy. *(He walks slowly over to a shelf, opens it and while looking down at the file says)* His medical history is a little strange. There are a few notes made by his former Medical Officer a few months ago in a rear hospital. 'He has no signs of any physical injury but there are signs of a breakdown in the mind.' Unfortunately, for Dayton that Officer was blown to pieces a few days later.

SERGEANT: I think our state of mind has to be put on one side until after a battle Sir.

OFFICER: I agree with you. If our soldiers can't stand the strain of this Western front its all over for the country. It's no wonder our senior commanders won't compromise if a soldier refuses to return to his post.

SERGEANT: If they got away with it, I can think of lots of others trying the same game.

OFFICER: Quite right sergeant. The senior command has carried out over ninety executions for desertion in the past year. Since the general routine order 585 was issued reversing the idea of being innocent until found guilty. Under 585 a soldier is now considered guilty until strong evidence proves his innocence.

SERGEANT: Will you be present at tomorrow's dawn execution Sir?

OFFICER: I have no option. I have to verify the prisoner of not being harmed while imprisoned and that he is in good mental and physical health. *(He turns around and walks slowly over to the far side of the stage. His back is turned to the sergeant as he says)* Do you have any family sergeant ?

SERGEANT: No Sir we didn't have any children before my wife went off.

OFFICER: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

SERGEANT: No need for that Sir. If I had had a son, he might have been here at the front. Or if I'd had any children, they might have turned out like my wife.

OFFICER: Obviously, your marriage was not made in heaven.

SERGEANT: More like hell I think.

OFFICER: You mean she wasn't a soldier's woman.

SERGEANT: That was the problem she was a real soldier's woman, to more than one soldier.

OFFICER: War can bring out the worst in a person as well as the best.

SERGEANT: She didn't need any war to encourage the worst in her.

OFFICER: I've been very lucky. My wife is one of the best and I have a fourteen year old son studying at Eppleton Public School one of the best schools in the country.

SERGEANT: You have a lot waiting for you when you get back then.

OFFICER: I most certainly have and a good post at St John's Hospital guaranteed.

SERGEANT: I have nothing waiting for me. The army is my life and home.

OFFICER: Oh well I dare say it could be worse sergeant, a soldier is part of an honourable profession. *(He puts a hand over his forehead and appears to look puzzled)* I wonder what the execution of one cowardly boy is going to make to the war effort. Are any of them volunteers on the firing squad?

SERGEANT: No, you can never get volunteers for a firing squad. Two of them are the same age as Dayton. The idea is for them to see that lying about their ages won't exempt them from punishment.

OFFICER: The last youngster I witnessed being executed had been given so much rum to drink that he had to be carried semi-conscious to the place of execution.

SERGEANT: *(He stands up and paces a few steps backwards and forwards before speaking. Obviously disturbed.)* I've been on one where twelve soldiers were instructed to execute the prisoner from a position where they couldn't miss and none of the bullets hit the man. The Officer in charge had to complete the execution.

OFFICER: Presiding over the execution of a coward is not an easy task.

SERGEANT: It certainly doesn't make one popular with the men Sir.

OFFICER: Never the less if the army has no deterrent we could find ourselves with a mutiny on our hands. *(The sergeant stands up straight as the officer goes into a rant. The officer begins to show a little strange behaviour. He appears to lose his calmness.)* We are engaged in a war we have to win. If the military power shows any signs of moral weakness, it could take over our whole combat power. *(He is pacing about and waving his arms as he rants as though arguing with himself.)*

SERGEANT: Can I have another drink of that Sir? *(He points to the flask.)*

OFFICER: Yes of course sergeant *(He sits down on a chair and puts one hand up to his forehead.)* We've got too many under-age and under trained soldiers with the company.

SERGEANT: If they lie about their age, they have to take the consequences when they break down Sir.

OFFICER: They come out here from the factories and the farms to relieve their boredom and impress the people back home. Then when they experience the reality of the trenches, they go to pieces. The likes of Private Dayton don't seem to realise that thousands of dutiful men are dying or being maimed every day.

SERGEANT: Well I think at dawn tomorrow he'll realise the seriousness of deserting his post Sir.

OFFICER: *(He leaves his seat once more and walks over to a pile of files and picks one up. Opens it and has a worried look on his face as he speaks.)* There's certainly no reprieve for him. My orders are to be present and to make sure he's medically fit for the whole damn procedure. I didn't become a Doctor for this. If that's not enough the Commanding Officer wants me to deal with Bannister. How is the company, as a whole, taking the execution?

SERGEANT: No protest apart from Bannister. As far as I know, he hasn't stirred up any of the others in the company.

OFFICER: Maybe I can explain things to the fellow. Where is he at the moment?

SERGEANT: I've sent him out on a reconnoitre with his friend Private Reynolds to make a note of the land and check the wire.

OFFICER: Send him to me, if he returns? (*A long pause as they stare at each other over the implications of the Officer's words*)

SERGEANT: Yes Sir, as soon as he returns. I hope you can save a good soldier from his foolish idealism.

OFFICER: Good chap, I really must get on with these reports now.

SERGEANT: (*Gets up from his seat salutes and says*) Thank you for the drinks Sir. (*The Captain salutes back. Waits until the Sergeant leaves before furtively reaching for the flask of rum. After drinking he sits down and grasps his head with both hands*)