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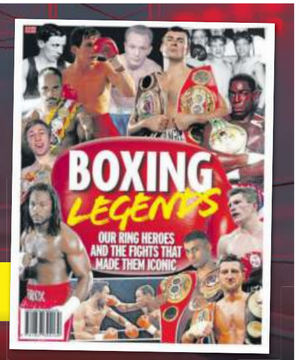

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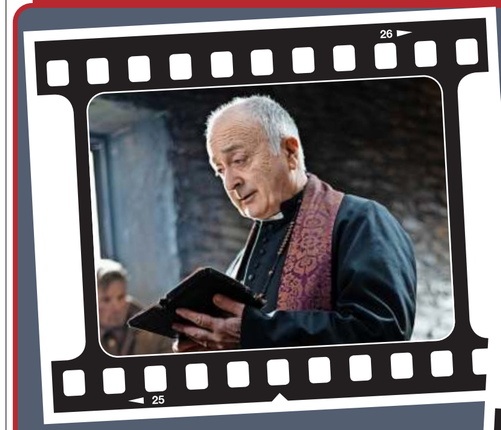
ROBINSON STARS IN NEW FILM ABOUT SHAME OF WORLD WAR ONE









Picture: TIM ANDERSON

"THEY died a hero's death." It's a phrase you often hear about the 1.3million British soldiers killed during World Wars One and Two, no matter the harrowing realities of their final hours. But for 306 men branded "deserters", death came without even that scrap of consolation. They went to the firing squads, most of them teenagers, stripped of their medals and military pensions for their families. Here Sir Tony Robinson tells MEG JORSH how new film The Fallow Few is keeping their stories alive this Remembrance Day...

Sir Tony's mission to honour tragic Few



FALLOW LEADS: Our Meg with Sir Tony and Bradley. Inset, Star woman gives Tony a hug

FOR so many of those who made it home, World War One never really ended. They lived with the memories of the horrors they had seen and experienced, often without saying a word.

Actor and historian Sir Tony Robinson, who grew up in Hackney, east London, remembers being told as a child about the day his grandfather Jack returned from the front lines.

"My grandad laid newspaper on the floor," he says. "He stood on it and took off all his louse-ridden uniform and his boots, wrapped them all up and threw them on the little coal fire.

"My dad and his brother Cyril – they were only kids – watched this burning taking place, for what my dad said felt like hours on end.

"And then when it all turned to ashes, Jack just went upstairs to bed and never, ever spoke about World War One again."

Tens of thousands of Jack's comrades developed what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in response to the carnage they had witnessed.

Tormented by nightmares and prone to unpredictable behaviour, some were institutionalised and others tried to numb the pain with drink.

But the condition, then called "shell shock", was still poorly understood.

And for soldiers, there was no greater sin than cowardice.

Those who tried to flee the trenches would find themselves facing a court-martial and, in many cases, a firing squad. Their heartbreaking stories are brought to life in new film The Fallow Few, featuring Sir Tony and Merlin star Bradley James.

Sir Tony, who shot to fame playing Baldrick in 80s BBC sitcom Blackadder, says: "I play a guy called Frederick Scott, who was a real person – an army chaplain in the First World War.

"He was actually Canadian, although he was serving with British Army soldiers, and he came upon what we would think of now as a terrible injustice.

"A guy was about to be executed for cowardice because he broke ranks when the firing started. Now we would say, 'Yes, it's PTSD.' We would know exactly what it was, but it wasn't recognised at that time.

"And so he was just being given the worst possible punishment for what they interpreted as running away."

Written and directed by newcomer JR Rappaport, the movie is set in a claustrophobic cell in which condemned soldiers are being held before execution. It tells a story inspired by two men who were shot for desertion in 1917 – Edwin Dyett, a 21-year-old Welsh officer, and Canadian quartermaster William Alexander, 37.

"Scott looked into the antecedents of William Alexander and discovered there was mental illness in both sides of his family," says Sir Tony.

"So he thought, 'Great, we'll be able to appeal.'

"He went back to the officers and they said, 'Forget it. We can't make exceptions because it would undermine discipline.'

"On the morning William was sent to his death, they covered his face with a gas mask which was turned around 180 degrees.

"Not because they didn't want him to be able to see the people executing him, but because they didn't want the guys with the guns to be freaked out.

"They thought if they saw a real human face they might fire wide, which apparently happened in other circumstances."

Dyett and Alexander were among 306 troops handed conditional posthumous pardons by the Government in 2006.

The wording expressed regret for them being sentenced to death by the authorities of the time.

However, it stopped short of quashing their convictions. And for Sir Tony, it is vital we remember them just like any other British soldier.

"Our history is who we are," he says. "How do we know who we are if we don't know where we come from?"

The Time Team presenter, now famed for his history documentaries, has been fascinated by the past for as long as he can remember.

He gives the credit to his mum Phyllis, an audio typist, and civil servant dad Leslie.

He says: "They were ordinary working-class kids who were called up into the forces in their 20s to go and fight against Hitler in the Second World War. My dad was stationed in Scotland, my mum in Reading.

"Then I was born in 1946, so they hadn't been home all that long.

"And they were just telling me all this stuff about the adventures that they'd had.

"I began to realise very quickly that if they had all these adventures when they were kids, mine wasn't the only time that had ever existed.

"I didn't even know it was called history. It was as central to my life as breathing."

- ***The Fallow Few is out now to rent or buy on Apple TV, Prime Video, YouTube, Google TV and Rakuten TV.***
- ***Clapham Picturehouse, south London, is hosting a screening and Q&A session with the cast and director JR Rappaport tomorrow at 6pm. Head to picturehouses.com for details.***