

August 1918...

Like a book being constantly written, life has many chapters containing both good times and times best forgotten. Only when the final chapter is written, will the story be complete. So, we should never define someone's life based on a single chapter, especially if it is one best forgotten.

Brandon lad, Ernest Challis, worked at George Wood's saw mill before the war. He was also an army territorial, who received his call up papers when war was declared in 1914 and immediately reported for duty with his unit, the 4th Battalion, Norfolk Regiment. The first year of Ernest's training saw him based in Britain before he went away on active service to spend many years away from his wife, Emily.

Emily was nine years older than Ernest and a native of Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire. She was not blessed with the best of upbringings - born into poverty and when she was six her mother died. By the time she met Ernest she had been widowed, leaving her to bring up at least ten children on her own. Perhaps Ernest was stationed in Hertfordshire and that is where he met Emily, nonetheless, they married in Watford, Hertfordshire, on 18th July 1915. After just a few days of married life, on the 29th July, Ernest embarked on a ship destined for the Middle East and once again Emily was left alone to bring up the children. Her one consolation was, this time she would receive a 'Separation Allowance' from the army because she was married to a soldier who was fighting in the war.

The following year, on 29th September 1916, Emily delivered another baby to her large family, yet there was little doubt that Ernest was not the father. He had not left Egypt for fourteen months! When news of the birth reached Ernest, he arranged for six months compassionate leave to return home and sort things with his wife. Perhaps many husbands would not have been sympathetic to Emily's plight, but Ernest forgave Emily and they carried on as husband and wife until he returned to active service in the Middle East. We can only imagine what feelings he would have experienced, thousands of miles from his wife, which would have been exacerbated upon his transfer to India. In his absence the army attempted to stop Emily's Separation Allowance, but Ernest intervened. In his letter to the military, he stated that despite this chapter of his life being very hard to endure, he wanted the allowance paid to Emily for the sake of all his children. The military relented and Emily's allowance continued. However, the army refused to pay any allowance toward the upkeep of the illegitimate child.

In June 1918, Ernest began the long sea journey back to Britain and eventually, in August, he and his comrades reported back to the Norfolk Regiment barracks. Ernest's war is virtually over. In January next year he will be de-mobbed and return to civilian life. It will be a life without his brother Bertie, who was killed in the war. Emily's life will be without her nineteen-year-old son, Harold, who was also taken by the war. Despite everything the war threw at them, Ernest and Emily will still have each other. By all accounts, they will remain happily married in Watford, until Ernest's death in 1964, with Emily's death being three years after. Their story is not defined by one episode, but perhaps it demonstrates that love, fuelled by desire, can win through in the end.