

March 1918...

When William Westlake left school, he did a bit of labouring for the local blacksmith, but decided a career in the army was his calling, so he enlisted with the Northumberland Fusiliers. Upon completing his army service, he married a Brandon girl, Eliza Edwards, and moved to Thetford Road, Brandon, to start a family. By all accounts life was good. He had a job, family and in his spare time he was a bell ringer at St. Peter's church. Then, in August 1914, war was declared. As an ex-army man, otherwise known as a Reservist, he received his call up papers and immediately left his family to report for duty. Within weeks he was thrown into France to stem the German onslaught. Having stopped the Germans, William then endured life in muddy trenches during a most severe winter. Having barely survived, he returned home to recover from frostbitten feet. By spring 1915, he was back in France to face another German onslaught. This time the Germans overwhelmed the units on William's flanks, leading to him and his comrades being encircled. There was only one positive outcome – surrender. William then spent almost three years as a prisoner of war.

On 4th March 1918, William Westlake, lies on an operating table in London's Camberwell Hospital, gravely ill. He was one of a few prisoners returned to Britain by the Germans last month. However, it is too late for William, the surgeons cannot save him and he dies on the operating table. His body is taken to Brookwood Cemetery, the largest in Western Europe, where he is buried. He had been through a lot in his thirty-four years.

By contrast, another Brandon lad named William - William Dorling; was no career soldier. Instead he followed in his father's footsteps and became a gamekeeper on Brandon Fields. Yet, in the patriotic fervour of the early months of war, when other young men were joining up, he volunteered for the army. In April 1916, while he was in the frontline, William Dorling had his own dealings with army medical staff. First an abscess on his knee took him off the frontline for a few days. The following week he received a gunshot wound to his hand, which seemed insignificant at first, but after a few days it caused him enough problems that he got permission to seek medical attention. The army medics simply patched it up and sent him back to the frontline. A week later, with the wound still causing him problems, William spent six days receiving treatment in a French general hospital. Then, once more, he was returned to the frontline. Dorling was still not happy with his progress, so a few days later he reported back to the hospital. This time the doctors were in no mood to accommodate him and he was ordered to return to his unit at the frontline.

On 21st March 1918, the Germans begin their 'Spring Offensive' and make some of the biggest gains in the war. If their early successes continue they may even win the war. They are less merciful to Dorling than they were to Westlake. Two days later they attack Dorling's unit, who hold out as long as they can until the order is given to withdraw under cover of friendly machine gun fire. All the time enemy artillery shells rain down on the men. William is never seen alive again, nor his body recovered. His name is remembered on Arras war memorial.