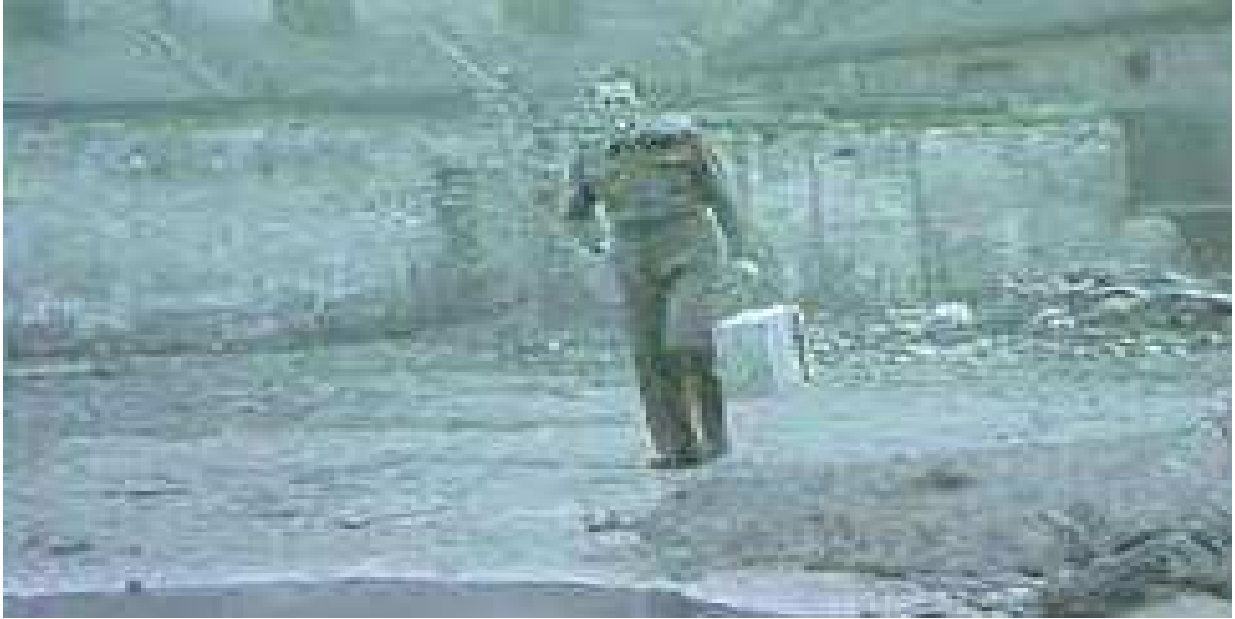


A Lonely Soldier Who Left His Medals Behind

Written by Andy Owen



It was one of those cold, rainy nights that seemed to get into your bones.

And the streets and damaged buildings around Brushfield Street in East London seemed to add to the gloom.

Bleak and depressing...



The area had been hammered by the Luftwaffe in WW2 for years – and only cosmetic repairs had been done so far.

This was Spitalfields.

It was 1946.

The way the stranger walked, told a story in itself. There had been discipline in there, sometime in the past. You could tell.

But right now, there was a distinct lack of positivity.

He crossed the rain-drenched streets and headed for the door of the pub on the corner. The lights and the laughter seemed to draw him in.

It was a pub with history.

A pretty famous place in those parts.

The Gun.



The pub was a very popular watering hole, with a stunning interior.

It had been around Spitalfields in one guise or another for centuries.

It originated as a tavern serving the soldiers of the Artillery Ground in the sixteenth century.



Locals told many stories of it.

Some say Jack the Ripper must have drunk in there, as historians were sure he lived in the area, as did a number of his unfortunate victims.

As the stranger entered the bar, faces turned towards him, but there was no welcome, no recognition.

He had that familiar haunted look that so many strangers seemed to have in those troubled times. This was just another seemingly lost soul that wanted his own space.

He made his way through the crowd and waited patiently at the bar.

The barman eventually got to him and said: "*What can I get you, chum?*"

"*A pint of your best bitter please*" was his reply. There was no trace of an accent.

The pint was pulled and placed in front of him. At that very moment, there were raised voices in one of the corners of the room and a fight broke out.

The barman jumped over the bar and, with help from a couple of the regulars, quickly calmed the situation down.

Chairs were put back up and the two protagonists dusted themselves off and moved away to their respective groups, still glaring at each other.

The barman reflected on what had happened. It's every night now, he thought.

Sometimes more than once.

But times were tough. The war had damaged everyone - and people were under great strain.

He shook his head and said quietly to himself – ‘at least the bloody war is over’...

He went back behind the bar. He remembered that he had served the pint and approached the customer, who had already drunk half of it.

He looked at him and said: *"that'll be one and six please, chum"* and held out his hand. There was a silence.

Then the stranger looked at the barman...

"I can't pay you right now, I'm sorry. I have no money."

"Oh, come on chum, you ordered the beer and you're clearly enjoying it. Let's see your money. I'm not running a charity here."

"I have no money. Not even a penny. I'm skint. I have just been demobbed and I used what little I had, to get back to London."

I am so sorry. I shouldn't have come in here. I was wrong, but I needed a beer so badly. I will pay you, but I can't right now."

The barman had met many people in that bar over the last few years. He felt he was a pretty good judge of character. He only occasionally got it wrong.

There was something about this guy that told him he was not a blagger.

This feeling was confirmed almost immediately, when he was handed a bunch of medals from the war. They were pretty impressive.

"Look, as a sign of my goodwill, can you please accept these in lieu of payment and when I come back to pay you for your kindness in a day or two, I'll have them back off you."

The barman looked at the medals and then looked more closely at the man. He had been through a lot. His eyes told the story.

The barman smiled and said, *"no problem, chum. I am putting them behind the bar, here"* – and showed him the shelf.

He placed the medals on there and said, *"they will be safe here, don't worry."*

"Enjoy the rest of your beer. I'll see you in a couple of days."

He reached over and shook the customer's hand, then proceeded further down the bar to handle the new orders flying his way from his other boisterous and demanding customers.



The customer finished his pint and left through the same door he'd used to enter the pub. As he was pulling a customer's pint, the barman watched him go.

Over the years, he'd met and served all types. It was rare that a customer intrigued him. But this old soldier somehow got to him.

He couldn't wait for him to come back in a few days, so he could have a nice chat and find out a bit more about him.

Those days came and went. Then weeks.

After a couple of months, the barman had the medals framed and put on the wall.



He was sure the soldier would walk through the door again, just like he had on that rainy night in 1946.

But he never did.

Those medals stayed on the wall for 69 years.

They were a talking point with the locals for a long time. And when new customers and tourists saw them, they found the story behind them, incredibly sad.

But the old soldier never returned to pay for his pint and collect his medals.

In 2015, it finally became too late for him to collect his medals, even if he was still alive to do so. That was because the old pub closed forever and was demolished as part of the redevelopment of the London Fruit & Wool Exchange.

In the next few years, a new pub was built and it took the name of the old revered establishment. From what I can ascertain, the medals are not on the wall of the 'new' pub.

The Gun is now a 'modern' pub, if you get my drift. Light years from what it once was. No one today is interested in a lonely soldier and his medals.

Whilst I was looking into this story, I read a comment from a local that described what so many felt about the death of The Gun.

"That was a magic pub. They're determined to destroy the City of London and erect eyesore crapholes. But why, oh why, demolish such a beautiful building on a prominent corner position like this?"

The modernists and developers have done more damage to London since the 1960's than the Luftwaffe ever did during WW2. Bland office blocks replacing buildings with character that suited the area.

The same thing is happening everywhere. I hate it. The wonderful old Soho – a personal favourite of mine - was a joy, but in recent years, it has been totally dismembered.

The characters have gone – and so has the atmosphere.

Anyway, I digress.

The Gun was smashed to bits. And with it, went a lot of history.

It's such a shame that the demobbed soldier couldn't be identified. Those medals told a story of a very brave man.

Some tried to find him, but were hindered by the fact that pretty much all WW2 medals didn't have the soldiers name engraved on them, unless they were a special medal such as VC, DFC etc.

So, the trail proved impossible to follow.

I can picture him on that rainy night in 1946, pulling his collar up, opening the door and walking out in the East London rain...

...and disappearing forever.

I wonder who he was – and what happened to him...

