In the first world war, soldiers were traumatised by the sight of corpse-strewn trenches, writes Michèle Barrett, while official censors attempted to shield the public from the horrors of battle

Shell-shocked

Live issue . . . the figure of the dead Tommy on the Royal Artillery Memorial in London was controversial

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN ARGLES

When cinemas across Britain showed footage of British soldiers burying German bodies on the battlefield in the official 1916 film *The Battle of the Somme*, the reaction from packed audiences was shock. Day after day the letters page of the Times returned to the issue of whether the film was fit for public exhibition. The king declared that the public "should see these pictures" so that they learned "what war means". The Dean of Durham objected that the film "violates the very sanctities of bereavement". Another correspondent likened the film to watching "the hangings at Newgate and the flogging of the madmen at Bedlam", "mere curiosity" serving as "a pretext for witnessing scenes of agony". The film was one of only two, both made in 1916, that showed dead bodies; by the following year public opinion had swung against the war and images of corpses were deemed bad for morale.

But these controversial scenes, which show the decent burial of intact and fresh corpses whose faces the camera avoids, were a long way from the more disturbing, old or mutilated remains the soldiers often had to deal with. Just thinking about the numbers killed during the first world war (an average of 5,600 dead soldiers every day for four years) indicates the scale of these difficulties. The defence of Verdun was an extreme case. Successive waves of men died on top of each other, defending narrow paths in the hills, and this resulted in very large quantities of unidentifiable French (and German) bones. Eventually, the bones of an estimated 130,000 men were collected and buried according to the sector of the battlefield where they had been found, in the huge "ossuary" at Douaumont.

If the battlefields were difficult for the soldiers to deal with, what could the people at home be expected to cope with? The work of the war artists was censored by Major Arthur Lee, who quickly became a personal enemy of the painter CRW Nevinson. At the end of 1917, Lee refused permission for Nevinson's painting *The Paths of Glory*, depicting two dead British soldiers, to be shown in public. The censor's ruling was clear, since "the War Office, on military grounds, has prohibited the appearance of dead bodies, even Germans, in any official photograph or film". The official correspondence with Nevinson adds that "photographs of this kind are now rigidly suppressed". Nevinson, confident that higher authorities would overrule the censor (as they had just done for another of his paintings) had the work hung in the Leicester Galleries in London for the opening of his Pictures of War exhibition in March 1918. When they did not relent, Nevinson simply covered the two bodies with a strip of brown paper saying "Censored", and left the painting in the show, attracting a lot of press attention and an official reprimand. To the commissioners of British war art, a German corpse was in practice more acceptable than a British one. Only two months later, in May, William Orpen was given permission to exhibit a painting of two corpses, one with a decomposing face, entitled *Dead Germans in a Trench*.

Sensitivity about the image of the dead British soldier continued long after the war. In 1925, Charles Sargeant Jagger's monument for the Royal Artillery, at Hyde Park Corner, set off another round of letters to the Times. Commissioned by soldiers, and executed by an artist who was a decorated war veteran, the stone Howitzer gun on top caused problems for pacifist civilians. Most controversial of all was Jagger's inclusion of a sculpture of a dead Tommy. The figures on three sides of the memorial had been long planned — there was to be a driver, an officer and of course a gunner — but the fourth side was described in terms of "a feature in bronze". At a late stage in the proceedings, thereby minimising the inevitable objections, Jagger revealed that this was to be a "recumbent figure", a dead artilleryman covered by a heavy military coat.

But none of these images really captures the shocking reality of decomposing corpses and their psychological effects on the men who had to live with them. One British painting that does point to a link between mental breakdown and the profound unease we feel when corpses are not treated properly is William Orpen's *The Mad Woman of Douai*, at the Imperial War Museum in London, which remains eerily green in its underpainted, unfinished state, and in which the corpse in the left foreground has received a mere mockery of a burial, one foot not even covered by the earth dumped on top of it. Orpen had been shocked when he saw the cursory attempts at burial on the Somme: "This consists of throwing some mud over the bodies as they lie, they don't even worry to cover them altogether, arms and feet showing in lots of cases." The mad woman of the title stares beyond the improperly buried corpse, her eyes neither focussed nor co-ordinated, her splayed knees an allusion to the sexual violence of war. The other figures are also clearly disturbed, as is the geography of the painting: Douai is in northern France but the nearby ruins are those of the Belgian town of Ypres. An observation balloon hovers over the scene. Balloonists, who were tethered above the front lines, proved to be the only branch of the services in which psychiatric casualties outnumbered the physically wounded. Orpen's painting shows the effect war can have on the sanity of civilians. More commonly, it was soldiers who were deranged by the corpses of their colleagues.

The war poets addressed the subject more obliquely, and Isaac Rosenberg's *Dead Man's Dump* is one of the few poems to refer directly to the changing physical appearance of corpses, comparing "the older dead . . ./ Burnt black by strange decay / Their sinister faces lie,/ The lid over each eye," with the "not long dead". AP Herbert's novel *The Secret Battle* contains dramatic descriptions of decomposing corpses. The ninth edition, in 1949, carries an introductory note by Winston Churchill, to the effect that the tale is "founded on fact". Herbert fictionalised, in the character of Harry Penrose, the fate of the real Edwin Dyett. He was a volunteer officer of the Royal Naval Division who had lost his nerve and was found running away from the front, court-martialled and shot for desertion.

Dyett can be seen as a man who was executed for war trauma, a psychological casualty. His case was publicised in the John Bull newspaper in 1918; he was one of only three officers executed during the war. AP Herbert had been an officer in the same RN division (the 63rd), and was "shaken to the heart's core" by what happened to Dyett. "APH" had actually taken part in the action in which Dyett's courage failed: 435 men attacked the village of Beaucourt; fewer than 20 survived.

Herbert went through the disastrous Gallipoli campaign of 1915, whereas Dyett only joined the battalion after it was evacuated in early 1916. Herbert's strategy in *The Secret Battle* is to use his own memories of Gallipoli — the novel was written amid "horrible and extraordinary nightmares" — to explain Penrose's mental breakdown on the western front. Rotting corpses were the worst problem. Things go wrong when Harry decides to sleep on the floor of a trench where, our narrator sees ("in a moment of nauseating insight") that there are maggots from the French and Turkish bodies not far beneath him. "Rubbish," says Harry, "they're glow worms resting."

Harry's mental decline is associated with guilt about the deaths of men under his command, and a less explicable, somewhat uncanny experience of corpses. One incident combines the two themes. A shell has hit a section of the trench parapet and Harry has moved four men out of that bay into the next one, unfortunately putting eight men straight into the path of a shell. Six of Harry's men are killed. A mere two hours later, they have unfathomably decomposed into black, reeking, fly-ridden corpses — as if they had been dead for weeks. They look like the bodies of enemy Turks, and Harry cannot identify any of his men by name. "I hope," says the soldier-colleague who is the story's narrator, "I may never again see such horror as was in Harry's face."

Harry ends up being invalided out of Gallipoli with dysentery, but before he goes, the narrator takes the opportunity to expand on the problem of dead bodies. He describes the unit being moved forward to an area that has recently seen a huge battle; there are corpses everywhere, hanging over and into the trenches. As they can only bury them at night, they have to live with them. "But there was a hideous fascination about the things . . . a man came to know the bodies in his trench with a sickening intimacy, and could have told you many details about each of them." He tells us that men were constantly being sent away, stricken with nausea, by the doctor; that it was the only thing worse than the front line. Even the prospect of battle became more attractive than staying there — "anything was welcome if we could get out of that trench, away from the smell and the flies, away from those bodies . . ."

Another British army officer had a quite different take on the experience. Captain Guy Nightingale's letters to his family in 1915, when the Royal Munster Fusiliers took part in the landings on Gallipoli, are unusual in addressing so directly the problem of dead and decomposing bodies. (His mother and sister got most of this, while his father got political commentary on the botched conduct of the invasion.) On April 25, the Munsters came ashore and "got most awfully badly mauled in doing so". "The heaps of dead are awful and the beach where we landed was an extraordinary sight the morning we buried them."

Writing to his mother on May 10, he described being sent on a night attack to a place where more than 2,000 unburied corpses "were still lying there highly decomposed". The stench was awful and in the dark they kept treading on them, he says. "When it was light, I found I had dug in next to the remains of an officer in the KOSBs [King's Own Scottish Borderers] [whom] I had last seen at the opera at Malta and had spent a most jolly evening with." Nightingale prided himself on his tough approach. Of one incident he says: "We mowed them down and only once did they get so close that we were able to bayonet them. We took 300 prisoners and could have taken 3,000 but we preferred shooting them. All the streams were simply running blood and the heaps of dead were a grand sight." As a professional officer, Nightingale is resentful of his over-promoted and inexperienced volunteer colleagues. He notes scornfully that "three of them have already collapsed from nerves and weak hearts, after five days on the peninsula", and complains that one new recruit got hit during dinner and inconsiderately "fell into the soup, upsetting the whole table, and bled into the tea-pot, making an awful mess of everything". The letters refer constantly to the smell of the dead and decomposing bodies lying between the trenches, and their efforts to throw lime over them. Digging for a new HQ Mess, he says brightly that they "started on four different places before we were able to procure a spot free from dead Turks".

In letters to his sister, Nightingale is full of bravado. Gallipoli is not as exciting as hunting elephants "and very little more dangerous". In fact, he is "very glad now that I used to go in for big game shooting" as it is a good education for active service. Lots of fellows are "going off their heads" but he himself "never felt better in my life . . . I eat and sleep like a pig and feel most awfully cheery". Nightingale is especially withering about signs of mental weakness — even completely involuntary ones. "Geddes is a ripping commanding officer to work with, but he is frightfully worried and his hair is nearly white! I've never seen fellows get old so quickly. This morning I saw a fellow called O'Hara in the Dublins whom I hadn't seen for about a fortnight and I hardly recognised him!"

Half a century later AP Herbert tried to re-read *A Secret Battle*, having been rather pleased with its impact. "Mr Lloyd George, I was told, read it all night and recommended it to Mr Churchill, who was Minister of War, and gave orders that court martial arrangements should be altered in some ways." It gave, he felt, "a veracious picture of daily life in the front-line on the Gallipoli Peninsula. I saw, I heard, I smelt it all again." Of the slaughter in France, and Dyett's execution, he says, "I did not read any more."

Major Guy Nightingale survived the war but not the peace. His regiment was disbanded in 1922. In April 1935, aged only 43, exactly 20 years after the landing on Gallipoli, he shot himself. At the funeral, along with his mother and sister, were a decent muster from the local British Legion, and most of the team from his cricket club.

Censored... in 1917 permission was refused for public showing of *The Paths of Glory* by Christopher Nevinson

IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM/ BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

Captain Guy Nightingale's letters are in the Imperial War Museum. Michèle Barrett of Queen Mary, University of London, is working on a Leverhulme-funded project on shell shock.