



How did Britain let 250,000 underage soldiers fight in WW1?

Bring the boys home

Narrated by Greg James, Radio 1 presenter

Video transcript

In January 1916 conscription to the British Army was introduced. This meant that volunteers were no longer needed.

The number of underage boys enlisting dropped dramatically.

But there were still many thousands still serving.

Finally, In June 1916, the War Office instructed that if parents could prove their son's age with a birth certificate, they'd be removed from the front line.

Until then, boys could stay if they wanted to, or commanding officers could keep them if they didn't want to let them go.

News of the huge casualties in the battle of the Somme in July brought a flood of letters to the war office from parents eager to get their boys home. But the process could be painfully slow. Some parents waiting months for a reply.

And some not getting the reply they might have expected:

And this is what one mother, Mrs Evans, received:

'Mrs Evans,

In reply to your letter of 11 July I know your son quite well as he often does work as a messenger and is quite an exceptionally intelligent man: I am astonished to hear that he is so young. He looks up to the standard of a 19 or 20 year old. I can hardly think that he ought to be discharged as under age being so physically big and strong. The rule is that if the man or boy is up to the work he stays whether he is under age or not.'

But, for the majority of boys, like 16 year old George White, their time on the front was over.

Speaking after the war, George said:

'The CO asked me how old I was. He said that he admired my courage in joining up and coming to France...He then shook my hand and wished me good luck'

Only those aged under 18 were sent straight home. Boys older than that were kept in holding camps until they were old enough to serve on the frontline.

By 1917, most boys had either returned home or were in base camps in France.

But for some it was too late.

Young Fred Bird's mum had successfully applied to have him brought home. But after cheerily waving goodbye to comrades in the frontline, he was killed by shellfire as he made his way along a communication trench.

Archive stills and footage courtesy of Footage Farm, Mary Evans and Ian Packham

