How did Pack Up Your Troubles become the viral hit of WW1?

The story of the song's success

Narrated by Gareth Malone

Audio slideshow transcript

After the writers of Pack Up Your Troubles, George and Felix Powell had won the marching song competition they capitalised on the song's success by performing it in their 1915 review show 'Some Glee.'

Like today, pantomimes would feature popular songs of the day and that winter Pack Up Your Troubles was featured in shows up and down the country.

In January 1916, one of the leading entertainers of the day Florrie Forde gave it another boost by adding the song to her repertoire. She sang it in music halls and theatres across the UK, leading the audience in singing the chorus.

The song was so successful that the brothers released it as a record, where it quickly went from being a B to an A side.

And of course it was also published in songbooks. Sheet music could be bought very cheaply and sold in huge quantities at the time.

Soon postcards and calendars were produced using the popular lyrics an early example of music merchandising. And postcards would be sent to the front by families and sweethearts of soldiers.

By the end of 1916, Pack Up Your Troubles was declared by one newspaper to have 'front place in the affections of the public'.

Now the British Army took Felix Powell on as an entertainer singing the song to troops along the Western Front.

He wrote down the places he visited, from Amiens to Rouen, on his trusty tambourine.

The song was released in America and in 1917 Pack Up Your Troubles featured in the hit Broadway musical 'Her Soldier Boy'.

The success of the Pack Up Your Troubles didn't dilute its message.

Nothing demonstrates this better than the story of the SS Laurentic, which in 1917 hit a mine in the Irish seas and sank. Hundreds drowned. In the aftermath, the wet and cold survivors were taken to a large hall.

One young sailor spotted a piano. He started playing the first lines of Pack up Your Troubles and soon the whole company gathered around him singing the chorus together.

By 1918 it achieved something even the British Army couldn't – it crossed No Man's Land to be sung by German troops.

Pack Up Your Troubles had travelled a long way from a drawer of songs, the Powell brothers had labelled as 'duds.'