

Onward, Christian soldiers

[Hugh Pym] When I just two months old, my grand-mother gave me as a present, an amazing piece of family history, candlesticks which were part of a communion set that was used by my grandfather when he was a chaplain in WW1.

And here's an extract from a letter that she wrote at the time she gave it to me, "throughout the war of 1914-18 they gave light on countless makeshift alters on the battlefields of Northern France".

My grandfather Tom Pym was one of over five thousand chaplains in the British army. It was their job to minister to the wounded, bury the dead and preach to the men about the "justice of the allied cause".

When war broke out in 1914, the expectation would have been that their role would be the same as in the Boer or Crimean wars – but, as with so much of the story of the Great War, change was on its way.

When he was just 29-years-old Tom swapped the quiet, studious life as a chaplain here at Trinity College Cambridge for the battlegrounds of the Somme and Ypres.

My grandmother Dora actually wrote a book about him "Tom Pym: A Portrait". And in it she quotes from letters he wrote to family and friends at the time.

Here's an extract from one he wrote just a week before going over to France. And you can really sense the trepidation he must have been feeling, "two months ago I should have joyed to be going out with this Expeditionary Force... nowI rather dread the plunge right into the midst of the regular Tommy".

Perhaps he was right to feel anxious the next few years would test his faith to the limit.

At the same time Tom would be part of a generation who, as a direct result of their experiences on the Western Front, would change forever the role of chaplains in the line of duty.