

WALKING WOUNDED

By Clive Collins

My mother's brother, Uncle Jim, had been a machine-gunner in, As was written on the medals, "The Great War for Civilization 1914-1918."

I knew him as a shy man starved of breath, hidden, much of the time, behind a smokescreen put up by fags, much like my dad, another 14-18 man.

Dad was hit three times: in the chest and bum, injuries sustained from one of Uncle Jim's opposite numbers, a German tasked with firing a machine-gun.

Jim and Dad were pals as much as relatives by marriage. They stepped out together, my uncle gasping, my father grasping tight the sticks that helped him limp along.

In the pub, they'd trade Woodbines back and forth, share pints of stout - "My round now, you know!" - play games of skittles, cribbage, darts and dominoes.

"Whatever did they find to talk about?" My sister wondered on the 'phone today. I said I wasn't sure but doubted very much it was the war.

When Jim was gone, just shortly after Dad, my mother said her brother's wounds, unlike my father's, were really in his head.

That he'd been a patient time and time again in our local loony bin was shocking news to me. "Your uncle Jim saw ghosts,

Hundreds of them, thousands," Mam said. He reckoned they stood in countless glowing ranks between the wardrobe and the bed he shared with Aunty Doll.

"He couldn't sleep for thinking of the ones he'd killed. I'd tell him that he'd had no choice, our lot would have shot him else, and anyway they were only Jerries."

"Not for me," Jim would shake his head. "They were men."

“But Jimmy, love, the war’s been over fifty years and more
by now.”

Mam reckoned she’d spoken so to try and ease her brother’s pain.

It never did. “Not for me.” Jim always said, then he’d shake, and shake
his head again.