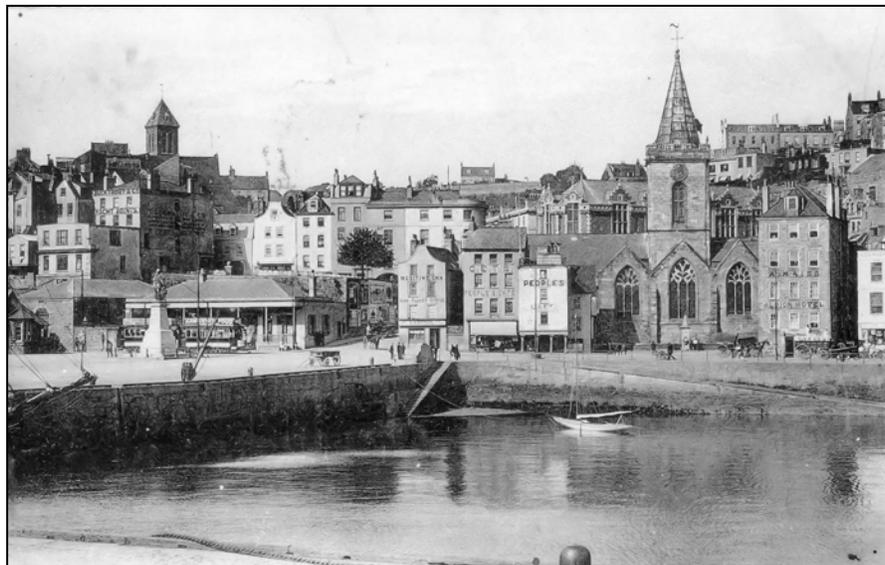


## Guernsey's Lost Generation

By Liz Walton

The impact of the German Occupation on Guernsey's way of life has been the subject of many books, films and documentaries in recent years. However the scale of change brought about by the previous war has largely been overlooked. The First World War, or the Great War for Civilisation as it was then called, ended only twenty years before the Second World War began. Memories of its horrors were probably still too fresh in the minds of the men returning to the island for them to want to write or talk about it in the inter-war years, and since then, the more recent conflict has largely replaced its predecessor as a subject for study. This is due at least in part to its greater accessibility, as it is still within the living memory of many islanders, while very few survivors of the 1914-18 war remain. Also in the Second World War, all islanders rather than just the fighting men were brought face to face with the enemy, and suffered bombing, hardship and deprivation. This focus on the more recent conflict at the expense of the earlier one means that nowadays many islanders are not aware of the fact that Guernsey, like many other communities, effectively lost a generation of young men in one year, and with this loss a way of life was changed for ever.

By the time that war broke out, in August 1914, Guernsey's population had doubled compared with a hundred years earlier<sup>1</sup>, reaching a total of approximately 40,000. This was largely due to immigration resulting from a growth of trade and industry. The railway companies began running steam ships to the island from the mid nineteenth century, and this, combined with the need for skilled workers in industries such as quarrying and horticulture brought many newcomers to the island. In St Peter Port, Guernsey's main town, the harbour had been extended between 1853 and 1870 and St Sampson's harbour had been built between 1866 and 1870.



**St Peter Port in 1910-12**

---

<sup>1</sup> 2005 *Guernsey Facts and Figures*, States of Guernsey Policy Council, p. 66

Roads had started to be built or widened at about the same time, and there had been a tramway between St Sampson and St Peter Port since 1879. St Peter Port had installed gas lighting, and drainage systems had also been built following an outbreak of cholera in 1835. Also as early as 1897, the Guernsey Telephone Council was granted a license to operate a system on the island.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Guernsey was for many people a place of increasing prosperity and growth, although outside of the towns and on the smaller islands, many ordinary working class islanders still led spartan existences. Large families lived in small stone cottages with no amenities, earning a basic living as fishermen, farm labourers, quarrymen and fruit and flower growers. The official language was still French, as was the monetary system, though many middle class residents were bilingual and some incomers spoke no French at all. Most people living in the 'country' parishes, i.e. outside the two towns of St Peter Port and St Sampson, spoke the local 'patois', versions of Norman French which varied from parish to parish, and had existed relatively unchanged for centuries. Compulsory primary school education had been introduced at the turn of the century, and the island also had seen a growth in the number of religious establishments, many of them nonconformist<sup>3</sup>. However many of the old traditions still held sway. The island's last witchcraft trial took place in January 1914, when Mrs Lake of Robergerie, St Sampson's was charged with fortune telling, the explanation of dreams and practising the art of witchcraft. She was found guilty and given the maximum sentence of eight days in prison.

At the outbreak of war, Sir William Carey held the post of Bailiff and thus presided over both the Royal Court and the States. The Lieutenant-Governor, who is also ex-officio the Commander-in-Chief of any troops which may be stationed on the island, was Major- General Henry Merrick Lawson, CB. Guernsey was, and still is, "...neither a sovereign state nor a part of the United Kingdom. Guernsey is part of Her Majesty's possessions, with an independent legislature, judiciary and an executive of committees answerable solely to the legislature and not to any authority outside the island".<sup>4</sup> One effect of this special relationship with the Crown is that no Guernseyman can be conscripted to serve overseas except to rescue the King or to help in the recapture of the British mainland. In terms of defence, the island had had a part time militia in various forms since the fourteenth century. A militia can be defined as "a military force raised from the civil population, and supplementing the regular army in an emergency"<sup>5</sup>. Uniform, arms and equipment were supplied by the British government, with a small amount of States funding.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Militia consisted of two Light Infantry Battalions, the first recruited in the town (St Peter Port), and the second from the 'country' parishes, i.e. the rest of the island. There was also the Royal Guernsey

---

<sup>2</sup> Johnston, P. (2000), *A Short History of Guernsey*, Guernsey, Peter Johnson, pp. 90-92.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.bbc.co.uk/guernsey/content/articles/2005/04/22/the\\_beginning\\_of\\_the\\_church\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guernsey/content/articles/2005/04/22/the_beginning_of_the_church_feature.shtml)

<sup>4</sup> Ehmann, D. and Le Pelley, P. (1993) *A Guide to the Constitution of Guernsey (1994)*, Guernsey Press Company, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Hawkins, J.M. (ed) (1988), *The Oxford Reference Dictionary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Artillery and Engineers (R.G.A. & E.), which consisted of the Royal Guernsey Artillery, two Engineer companies, a field artillery company and a Cadet Company made up of boys from Elizabeth College, a public school in St Peter Port. The Cadet Company was later detached from the R.G.A. & E. to become an Officer Training Corps. Militia training was compulsory for all fit male inhabitants of the island between the ages of 16 and 60, “à l’exception de ceux qui par la Constitution et l’usage de cette île en sont exemptes”, but at least they did receive pay after 1901. New recruits had a three week training, then after completing their term in the main battalion, where they had to complete an annual camp, they were placed in reserve. The situation in Alderney was rather different, in that service was voluntary, supplemented by a ballot where necessary. As the threat of war grew, Guernsey’s militia training intensified so that by 1914, when war broke out in Europe, they were “as highly trained as any peacetime part-time force could be”<sup>6</sup>. They were mobilised when war was declared in August 1914, to replace the British regular army garrison stationed at Fort George, which had been withdrawn almost immediately and sent abroad as part of the British Expeditionary Force.

Local newspapers show that as soon as war broke out, many Guernsey ex service men had volunteered to join the British Army, which was a volunteer force at this stage. In addition, most fit men of military age were already in the Militia. However, the authorities still considered that too few local men were coming forward. The *Weekly Press* of September 19<sup>th</sup> 1914 contains a report of a speech by the Lieutenant Governor, Major-General Henry Merrick Lawson, saying that “...since September 5<sup>th</sup>, 124 men have presented themselves to enlist and 78 have been accepted as medically fit. Many of these however.... are old soldiers and the young men who are neither in the Militia nor its Reserve are not coming forward as they should do to help the Empire in its hour of trial. Further efforts seem necessary....to impress these young men that it is their duty at the present juncture to help the Empire by enlisting in Lord Kitchener’s Army.” A quarter page recruiting poster<sup>7</sup> stated that, “The Regiments at the Front are covering themselves with glory.....It is an honour to belong to such an Army. Every fit man from 19 to 38 is eligible for this honour. Friends can join in a body and serve together in the same Regiment”. As a further encouragement to join up, Reverend Colman, at a recruitment meeting in the Forest, stated that, “The danger of being killed was small, less than two per cent”.<sup>8</sup>

A month later, the same newspaper carried a headline announcing “Guernsey’s Fighting Men – nearly 800 in Army and Navy.”<sup>9</sup> The list showed that they joined units as varied as the Royal Army Medical Corps, the Manchester Regiment, the Royal Hussars and the Royal Garrison Artillery as well as the Royal Navy and Mercantile Marine. Many of them were old soldiers or reservists who rejoined their former regiments. Several of “Mr Attewell’s nine soldier sons”, for example,

---

<sup>6</sup> Parks, E. (1992) *The Royal Guernsey Militia*, Guernsey, La Societé Guernesiate, p.22.

<sup>7</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1914, p.2

<sup>8</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, September 26<sup>th</sup> 1914, p.1.

<sup>9</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 31<sup>st</sup> October 1914, p.1

whose photographs appear in the *Weekly Press* in November 1914<sup>10</sup>, appear to be of a mature age and were already N.C.O.s in various Regiments. At the other extreme, the youngest local volunteer was said to be Stanley H. Workman, who joined the band of the Green Howards on reaching his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>11</sup> Local newspapers also show that the island soon began to realise that the war would be lengthier, and casualties heavier than had been expected in the summer of 1914. The confident predictions that it would all be over by Christmas, and the figure of 2% for casualties seemed equally unlikely.

Many islanders who had volunteered to serve in the early days of the war had already paid the ultimate price. The *Weekly Press* as early as October 1914 reported that Lieutenant Averell Lecky, of the Leinster regiment, an Old Elizabethan aged 29, had been killed in action, and on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1914 it contained an article about Jean Baptiste and François Moreau, brothers who were both in the 135<sup>th</sup> French Infantry Regiment and who had both been killed in action on 26 September in the battle of the Marne. The Militia's first casualty was Lieutenant Harold Tooley, who was reported missing on 20 December 1914 while attached to the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Also, alongside the list of volunteers for December 1914 is one article about Captain Davy, also of the French Army, who had been killed in Alsace and another listing six members of the Royal Irish Regiment, who had Guernsey connections, listed as missing, and one who had been wounded<sup>12</sup>. In addition, a letter from Drummer Albert J. Cox of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Warwickshire regiment notes the conditions that prevailed in the trenches even at this early stage. In it he states that" ...It is now very cold especially at night. If it isn't snowing it's raining, and the trenches are full of mud and water."<sup>13</sup>

However, as the need for men to join the "New Army" continued to grow, early in 1915 the States offered to send an infantry company and an artillery ammunition column from the local force to join the war effort. The infantrymen eventually formed two companies, one in the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Royal Irish Regiment (R.I.R.) and the other in the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the Royal Irish Fusiliers (R.I.F.). The first contingent of seven officers and 239 other ranks left the island in March 1915, and were followed by several more drafts



**RIR Badge**, (Courtesy of Mr Ron Quesnel)

<sup>10</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1914, p.1

<sup>11</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1914, p.3.

<sup>12</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 29<sup>th</sup> October 1914, p.2

<sup>13</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1914, p.3.

After training in England and Ireland, they went to France in December 1915, where they were attached to units with experience of trench warfare. In addition, the Officers and men of the Royal Guernsey Artillery and Engineers had formed the 9th Divisional Ammunition Column, which had been mobilised on 7th May 1915 and sent to France. The Guernsey contingent who had joined the 16<sup>th</sup> (Irish) Division landed in France on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1915, where they were billeted at Douvrin, near La Bassée before being attached to groups experienced in trench warfare.

On 14<sup>th</sup> January 1916 they went up to the front line along with the 8<sup>th</sup> Seaforth Highlanders, where an early casualty was Major George W. Le Page, who commanded "D" Company, 6th Battalion, Royal Irish Regiment from the time that they left for France. He was killed in action at Loos, on 26 January 1916, aged 40 and is buried at Noeux-les-Mines, a town 6 kilometres south of Béthune on the main road to Arras. A brass memorial plaque in his honour, erected by the Officers, N.C.O.s and men of his Company, can be found in the Castel Church, Guernsey. Several of his men were wounded in the same action. The rest of the contingent arrived in France on February 7<sup>th</sup>, and went through the same type of training. However, during one such session on 16<sup>th</sup> March, five men were killed by an exploding hand grenade. There were further heavy casualties on the Somme, at Guillemont, including Privates Harry (no. 3187) and Peter (no.3188) de Carteret, who died on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1916. Both are commemorated on the same panel of the Thiepval Memorial, which bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave.

The need for men to make up the numbers at the Front grew along with the casualty lists. Lieutenant General Sir Reginald Hart, V.C., K.C.B., K.C.V.O. had been appointed Governor of the island in November 1914, to replace Lawson who had been called back to the War Office. Hart was an ardent patriot who had received many awards for bravery, including a V.C. gained in the second Afghan War. He was already sixty six years old when he took up the post of Governor of the island, a post often seen as a reward at the end of a distinguished military career. Reginald Clare Hart was born on 11 June 1848 in Scarriff, Co. Clare and was schooled at Cheltenham College before joining the army, where he eventually achieved the rank of General. Other awards included the VC, GCB, KCVO and Royal Humane Society's Silver Medal.



**Sir Reginald Hart**

The citation for his VC<sup>14</sup> states that “On 31 January 1879 in the Bazar Valley, Afghanistan, Lieutenant Hart, while on convoy duty, ran some 1,200 yards to the rescue of a wounded sowar of the 13th Bengal Lancers, lying in a river bed exposed to the fire of the enemy on all sides. He reached the wounded man, drove off the enemy and with the help of some soldiers who had accompanied him, carried the casualty to safety”. Hart's award was published in the London Gazette, 10 June 1879.

Hart soon began to put pressure on the States of Guernsey to introduce conscription. The ‘bill for the compulsory attestation of single men’ was introduced on the mainland by Prime Minister Asquith on January 6, 1916, with the proviso that “the bill would prove to be a dead letter if the men would come in now of their own free will, for the group system was reopened and the military authorities would continue to allow them to attest under it.”<sup>15</sup> The bill stated that single men or widowers without children, of military age, who had no grounds for exemption, were to be treated as though they had attested for enlistment, for the period of the war. Newspaper reports of various speeches that Hart made at public events in Guernsey show that he felt that there were still too many “shirkers” on the island. He also felt that there should be a unit bearing the island’s name on the field of battle because Guernsey, unlike many other places in the Empire, did not feature in reports from the Front. He went ahead with the idea despite the experience of other small communities which had been devastated by heavy losses from units recruited from a single town, workplace or football team.

General Henry Rawlinson, a senior Commander in the British Army from the outbreak of war, had been the first to suggest that men would be more willing to join up if they could serve with people they already knew, and Lord Derby, a vociferous opponent of conscription, was the first to test the idea when he announced in August 1914 that he would try to raise a battalion in Liverpool, comprised solely of local men. Within days, Liverpool had enlisted enough men to form four battalions. In East Grinstead a sportsman's battalion was raised, which included two famous cricketers and the England lightweight boxing champion, while London formed a footballers' battalion. There were also units such as the London Artists' Rifles, and the Glasgow Tramways Battalion. In Accrington, recruitment had begun on 14 September 1914, with 104 men accepted for service in the first three hours. Brothers, cousins, friends and workmates enlisted together and within ten days, the Accrington Pals had reached full strength of some 1,000 men. These Pals' Battalions spent much of 1914-15 training in Britain, and for many their first battle was also their last. Out of some 720 Pals who took part in the attack on Serre on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916, the first day of the battle of the Somme, 584 were reported killed, wounded or missing<sup>16</sup>. The Leeds Pals lost around 750 of their 900 volunteers, while the Grimsby Chums and the Sheffield City Battalion lost about half of their men. Percy Holmes, the brother of a Pal, remembered”..... when the news came through to

---

<sup>14</sup> *London Gazette*, 10 June 1879.

<sup>15</sup> *The Manchester Guardian*, 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1916

<sup>16</sup> *War Diary of the Accrington Pals*, The National Archives, WO95/236

Accrington that the Pals had been wiped out. I don't think there was a street in Accrington and district that didn't have their blinds drawn, and the bell at Christ Church tolled all day".<sup>17</sup> As one Pal put it, "Two years in the making. Ten minutes in the destroying. That was our history."

However, Hart was still concerned about what he saw as the number of "shirkers", and the need for a unit carrying the island's name rather than that of the Irish regiments into which the militia had been incorporated. He persuaded the States of Guernsey to authorise an offer to the War Office of a complete infantry service battalion, the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry, to serve in France and thereby show the island's devotion to the Crown. The Conscription Act<sup>18</sup> came into force on the island in December 1916, and on 17<sup>th</sup> of that month, following the suspension of the Royal Guernsey Militia for the duration of the war, the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry was formed. Although the right of conscientious objection to military service had come into place in Britain in 1916, it did not apply in Guernsey. All the Guernsey Officers in the 6th Royal Irish Rifles and the 7th Royal Irish Fusiliers were transferred to the 1st R.G.L.I. upon its formation. Guernsey's quarrymen had already been assembled to form the 321 Quarrying Company Royal Engineers, and had arrived in France on 15th February 1917.



**The RGLI in training at Grandes Rocques.**

Local newspapers over the next few weeks<sup>19</sup> contained many optimistic and patriotic articles, reflecting what appeared to be the predominant mood on the

---

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.pals.org.uk/pals\\_e.htm](http://www.pals.org.uk/pals_e.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Graham, J W, *Conscription and Conscience: a history 1916-1919*. - London: Allen and Unwin, 1922

<sup>19</sup> *The Guernsey Evening Press, Guernsey Star and Guernsey Weekly Press*

island. Pictures of the R.G.L.I. in training, on parade, its officers in their new uniforms, and men in other Units photographed “somewhere in France” share the pages with reports of school prize givings, temperance meetings, flower shows and sales of work, most of which were raising money for comforts for “our boys in France”. Another popular theme was “Brothers in Arms”, where photographs of various members of the same family who were all away fighting the Great War for Civilisation were featured. The *Guernsey Weekly Press*<sup>20</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> July 1917, for example, carried a story praising a Mrs. Sarre of the Rocque Poisson, St Pierre du Bois who had “eight of her sons in khaki at the same time”, describing this as “a splendid effort”. The six sons of a Mr and Mrs Bott of St Peter Port also feature in the same newspaper later that year. Women were reported as volunteering (and being accepted) to drive trams and horse drawn transport, to work in the fields and to take up employment as bank clerks and civil servants, in order to release more men for the Front. The general theme was that everyone should “do their bit” for the war effort. A speech by the Lieutenant Governor, Sir Reginald Hart in February 1917<sup>21</sup> takes this to the extreme when he describes men who had applied for exemptions from service as “contemptible shirkers” and asked them “not to disgrace themselves, their families and children to the third and fourth generation but to pull themselves together, cancel their exemptions and come out and do their duty”.

It was against this background of patriotic fervour that the First (Service) Battalion of the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry left the island on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1917, after basic training at L’Ancresse, Les Beaucamps and Fort George. They travelled by boat to Southampton, then by train to London’s Waterloo Station, where, according to an unpublished diary of Private L.T. Le Poidevin<sup>22</sup>, they had to march across London to Victoria station. Number 656 Private Latimer Thomas Le Poidevin was a member of C Company, the First (Service) Battalion of the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry, whose diary consists of 92 pages detailing “Some of my experience while on active service from the time I joined up to the time I got demobilised.” The son of Thomas Le Poidevin, a grower from Les Orgeries, Pleinheume, he was aged 24 in January 1917, when he enlisted, and had married Alice Mary Allez in January 1911. He remained with the R.G.L.I. until demobilisation on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, 1919, when he returned to the island. He died in hospital in England in 1955, and is buried in the Vale Parochial Cemetery.

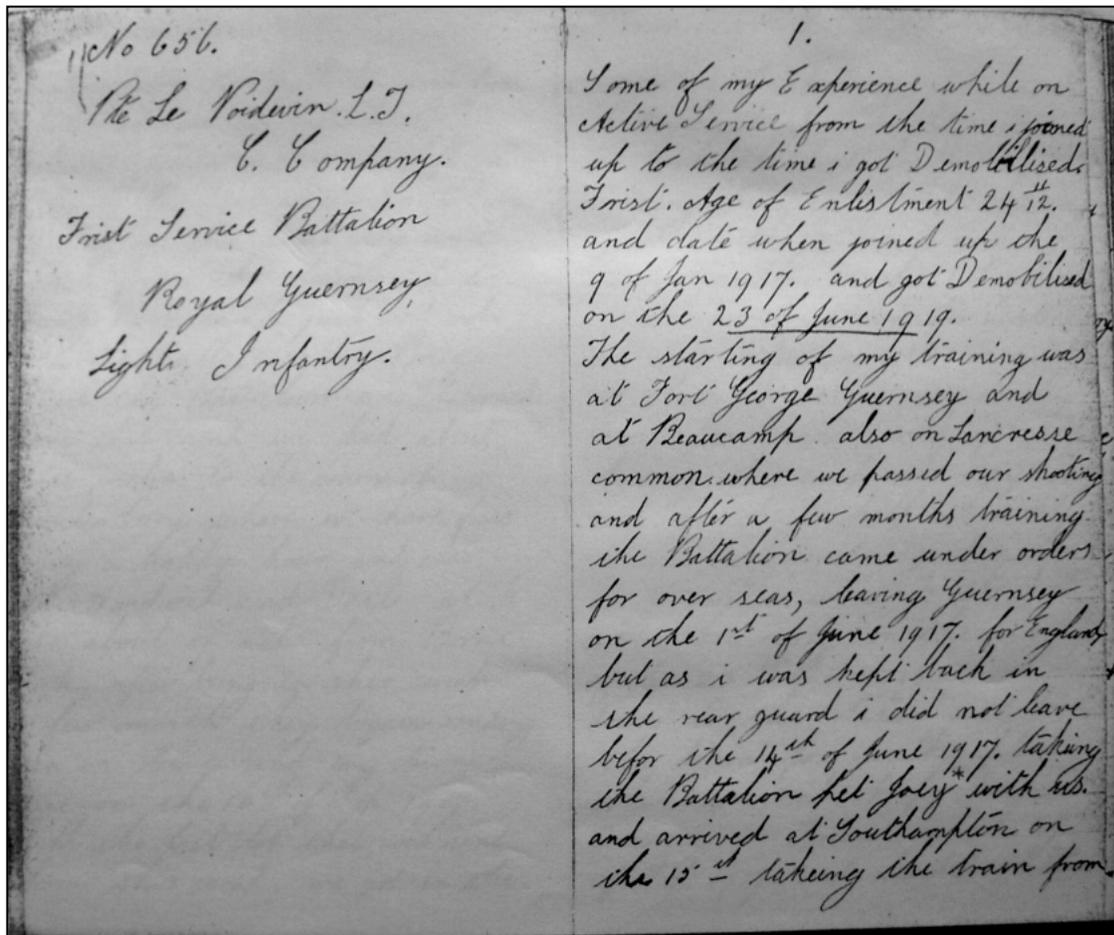
Private Le Poidevin goes on to describe how they caught the train to Canterbury East, then marched to the small village of Bridge for a course of advanced training at Bourne Park camp, a few miles south east of Canterbury. They returned to Guernsey for a short period of leave, then on 26<sup>th</sup> September 1917, amid more ceremonial including inspections and presentation of battalion Colours made by ladies of the island, 44 officers and 964 other ranks of the R.G.L.I. left the island for Southampton.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 7<sup>th</sup> January 1917, P.1

<sup>21</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1917, p. 3

<sup>22</sup> Le Poidevin, Pte. L.T. (undated) *War Diary*, unpublished.



### Reminiscences of Pte L.T. Le Poidevin (courtesy of the Le Poidevin family)

From there they travelled by train to Canterbury again, to join 86 Brigade of the 29<sup>th</sup> division<sup>23</sup>. This regular army Division had been involved in the war from its earliest days, firstly in Gallipoli and Egypt, then at the Western Front since March 1916. By this time, it was made up largely of drafts and conscripts, having taken part in the Arras offensive in April and Passchendaele in July 1917. In two months alone, it had suffered 4,700 casualties.

The R.G.L.I. contingent then travelled on with the rest of the Division to Le Havre, arriving in the early hours of 27th September 1917. From here, they marched to Number 4 Rest Camp, where they stayed for four days before travelling overnight by cattle truck (marked 40 men or 8 horses, something which those who returned frequently mention in diaries and memoirs) to the Ypres area. Private Le Poidevin<sup>24</sup> reports that as they passed through on the train, they saw Guernseymen from the Quarry battalion working near Etaples.

<sup>23</sup> Parks, E. (1992), *Diex Aix: God Help Us*. Guernsey Museums and Galleries, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> Le Poidevin, Pte. L.T. (undated) *War Diary*, unpublished.



**The RGLI in transit in France** (Courtesy of the Priaulx Library)

He also remarked how trainloads of wounded men travelling in the opposite direction called out to tell them that they were going the wrong way! The R.G.L.I. men were based at Stoke camp, Proven a few miles west of Ypres, where, according to the same diary, they were welcomed on their arrival by an air raid and machine and anti aircraft gunfire. This would have been on the fringes of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Ypres, which continued until mid November 1917<sup>25</sup>. They remained there for about a week, mending roads, filling sand bags for protection against shrapnel and acting as stretcher bearers. At this stage of the war, fighting consisted largely of fairly static trench warfare. Typically, a battalion would be expected to serve a spell in the front line, followed by a stint spent in support, and then they would move to the reserve lines. A period of rest would follow, generally short in duration, before the whole cycle of trench duty would start afresh. In reality the cycle was determined by the necessities of the situation. Even while at rest men might be called for duties that placed them in the line of fire. Private Le Poidevin described his experiences of this: "Our Company got billeted on a farm. I was with 20 that was in one of these big barns, wet to the skin and full of mud and no clothes to change so we made the best of it, and after having a good sleep then a brush up, began cleaning our clothes. We were in this place for a 48 hours rest, although we could hear the noise of shells coming from Jerry, and exploding in the Village, wondering if they would hit this place".

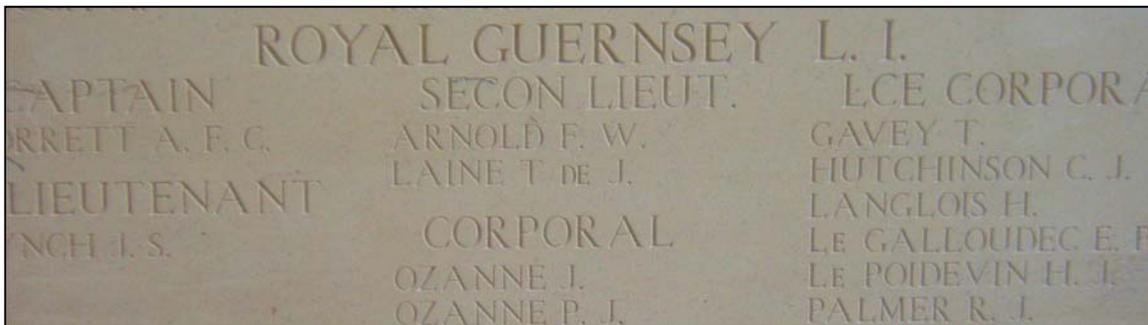
On 17<sup>th</sup> October 1917, the R.G.L.I. left the Ypres area and went by train to No. 4 Camp, Hendicourt, Arras, where, almost immediately they became involved in intensive training for the Battle of Cambrai. Cambrai was to mark the start of a

---

<sup>25</sup> Hook, A. (2004) *World War 1 Day by Day*, Rochester, Grange Books, p.143.

completely new style of warfare. The Tank Corps deployed its entire strength of 476 machines, of which more than 350 were armed fighting tanks, in a surprise attack following a massive preliminary bombardment. This was launched early in the morning of 20th November 1917, with the Third Army under Lt. General Byng attacking on a ten mile front between the river Scarpe and St Quentin. The British Divisions in the front line were the 12<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> (Highland), 62<sup>nd</sup> (West Riding) and 36<sup>th</sup> (Ulster), with the 29<sup>th</sup>, which included the R.G.L.I. men, in immediate support.<sup>26</sup> Private Le Poidevin wrote a vivid eye witness account of what happened in his war diary for 20<sup>th</sup> November: “A minute or two before the guns started our Officer came up and warned us not to get the wind up when the guns would go off as they was some 800 guns and over 400 tanks was going over the top before us. Then a hour before day break the barrage started, my word it was just like a mass of fire lifting from the earth and the working of these tanks coming out from there(sic) hiding places”.

Despite some unforeseen circumstances, this initial action was deemed a success, with large areas being captured, progress towards Cambrai continuing steadily over the next few days and over 8,000 German prisoners taken<sup>27</sup> with relatively few casualties. However casualties there were, among them Private Le Poidevin’s brother, Lance Corporal Herbert John Le Poidevin, R.G.L.I., who was killed in action on 26<sup>th</sup> November 1917. He describes how he heard the news: “As I was sitting down reading a letter from home I heard the next chap to me tell another chap if he knew that my brother had been killed, so I looked up and asked if he meant my brother, so he says yes, he got killed three days ago. So what I done I went and found A Coy and saw his section commander so I was told of how he met his death. It was my last thought that when a few days ago when I was giving the cigarettes and wishing each other good luck that it was the last time seeing each other, it was our parting poor boy (sic)”.



**Panel on the Cambrai Memorial commemorating L/Cpl Herbert John Le Poidevin**

However, the events that were to have such a devastating effect on the Guernsey community began a few days later, on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1917. This was only two months after the R.G.L.I. had left the island in their full military splendour, and on the same day that victory bells were pealed in York Minster

<sup>26</sup> *The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry 1914-18.pdf* at <http://www.museum.guernsey.net/download/>

<sup>27</sup> Hook, A. (2004) *World War 1 Day by Day*, Rochester, Grange Books, p.147.

and other churches and cathedrals in Britain in honour of Sir Douglas Haig's victory on the Western front<sup>28</sup>. The German plan was to cut off the neck of the salient now occupied by British forces by attacking on each side, with the strongest blow to come on the southern side. The first attack came early in the morning, and by 9am, they had penetrated almost 3 miles towards Havrincourt Wood. The first attack fell on the 55th (West Lancs.) and 12th Divisions on the south-eastern side of the salient. The Germans recaptured Lateau Wood, and then moved up to the south of Banteux, and through Villers Guislain and Gouzeaucourt. The direction of the assault was across British divisional boundaries, and the command structure rapidly broke down as the troops became mixed up. Byng's Third Army faced disaster, with the real prospect of several divisions being cut off. Three German divisions also attacked to the north, supported by an intense phosgene gas barrage, intending to cut the Bapaume-Cambrai road near Anneux Chapel. They were repulsed by the machine gun barrage of the 47th, 2nd and 56th Divisions, who had relieved the 36th and 40<sup>th</sup>, and failed to reach the road.<sup>29</sup>

Fierce fighting continued in the southern area, and although originally in reserve, the R.G.L.I. were then ordered to hold the village of Les Rues Vertes. An account from the *Manchester Guardian* quoted in *The Star* of December 17<sup>th</sup> 1917, states that the German advance was so rapid at one stage that they got within 200 yards of Brigade headquarters, so "signallers, cooks, officers' servants and clerks turned out and joined in the battle". Les Rues Vertes is described as "a smoking ruin, littered with German dead," with soldiers fighting "from house to house, up and down the streets, through alleys and outbuildings, in cellars and on broken stairways". The *News of the World* of 1<sup>st</sup> January 1918 stated that "Every man who could hold a gun was in that thin, ragged line, determined to die rather than yield". It also mentions Captain Gee "on that day organising a miscellaneous band of brigade signallers and servants and leading the Guernseys in the wild dash into the narrow streets of Les Rues Vertes." Private Le Poidevin's<sup>30</sup> eye witness account reports that they were ordered to line up in trenches along a canal, but in order to get there they had to walk through the village: "When my turn came to face this street all I could see and hear (was) shells hitting the both sides of the street and men laying (sic) about. "My word", I thought "Here's something to go through", so with luck I reached the trench safe". He goes on to describe the scene some time later, when he was involved in the defence of the bridge near the ruined sugar factory: "We could see some thousands of Germans advancing as this place was on a small slope, only the enemy was wasn't making their way towards us, we knew something was going to happen and sure enough they attacked the bridge that led into the main street of the Village, very hard fighting took place and our battalion being at the bridge head suffered very much in casualties".

---

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 06/10/1917, p. 3, column e.

<sup>29</sup> Coombes, R.E.B.(1994), *Before Endeavours Fade*, London, Battle of Britain International Ltd, pp.102-105

<sup>30</sup> Le Poidevin, Pte. L.T. (undated) *War Diary*, unpublished

This stand left the R.G.L.I. contingent as part of a force surrounded on three sides by the German lines, a position which could not be held. The same edition of the *Manchester Guardian*<sup>31</sup> describes the scene thus: "Dead lay everywhere. The sunken roads round about were overrun with Germans; the supply seemed limitless. We kept on killing them and they kept on appearing in greater and fresher numbers. Flesh and blood had accomplished the seemingly impossible, but there is a limit even to the greatest endurance. We had to give up Masnières." Eventually, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December, Haig ordered a retirement "with the least possible delay from the Bourslon Hill-Marcoing salient to a more retired and shorter line".<sup>32</sup> Private Le Poidevin noted that "...Our Officer came back and ordered us to pack up and follow him as we was (sic) leaving the Village altogether, my word we walked with a light foot". This retirement took place on 5<sup>th</sup> December and is described by Haig<sup>33</sup> as being carried out "without any interference from the enemy". At the end of several days of fighting, at huge cost to both sides, the lines had scarcely moved.

General de Lisle, Commanding Officer of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division, wrote to the Bailiff of Guernsey soon after the battle<sup>34</sup>, to say; "I want to convey to the Guernsey authorities my very high appreciation of the valuable services rendered by the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry in the battle of Cambrai. Theirs was a wonderful performance. On November 30<sup>th</sup> when the Germans, in their heavy surprise attack, pierced our line to the South of my sector, the enemy entered the village of Les Rues Vertes, a suburb of Masnières, which town was my right flank. It was the Guernsey Light Infantry which recovered this village twice by counter attacks and which contained the southern defences of Masnières for two days against seven German attacks with superior forces and very superior artillery. When we were ordered to evacuate Masnières on the night of December 1<sup>st</sup>..... it was the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry who covered the withdrawal. Guernsey has every reason to feel the greatest pride in her sons, and I am proud to have them under me, fighting alongside my staunch veterans of three years' fighting experience..... I regret the casualties were heavy, a further proof, if any were needed, that they fought magnificently".

The special correspondent of *The Times* in a despatch from the War Correspondents' Headquarters in France noted that "There are no hardier men in the Empire than these Channel Islanders, and they fought as keenly as young troops could, and with the steadiness of veterans".<sup>35</sup> It goes on to say that, "...the Guernsey flag had been hoisted at the Royal Court House on Wednesday and flags were flown in all parts of the Town and Island, in honour of the gallant lads of the R.G.L.I.". Lieutenant Harry Stranger of the R.G.L.I received the Military Cross, given for acts of bravery during combat situations, for his part in the battle, as did Second Lieutenant E.J. Stone. A letter from Sir George Cave, Secretary

---

<sup>31</sup> *Manchester Guardian* quoted in *The Star* of December 17<sup>th</sup> 1917

<sup>32</sup> Sheffield, G. and Bourne, J. (2005), *Douglas Haig, War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>34</sup> *The Star*, Dec 17<sup>th</sup> 1917, p.1

<sup>35</sup> *The Times*, Tuesday December 04, 1917, Page 10, column c

of State for the Home Department, to Sir Reginald Hart, Lieutenant Governor of the island, dated December 29<sup>th</sup> 1917 also notes the courage of Guernsey's soldiers at Cambrai. In it, he commemorates the "...splendid conduct of the Guernsey men" and "...the great part taken by them at a critical time in stemming the attack of the enemy". It goes on to say that "The heavy losses which the battalion incurred are deeply to be regretted, but these gallant men fell in rendering the highest service which any man can render to his country and to humanity, and I have no doubt that their example will be both a pride to their families and to the Island, and an incentive to all to assist to the utmost the great task which lies before the Empire".

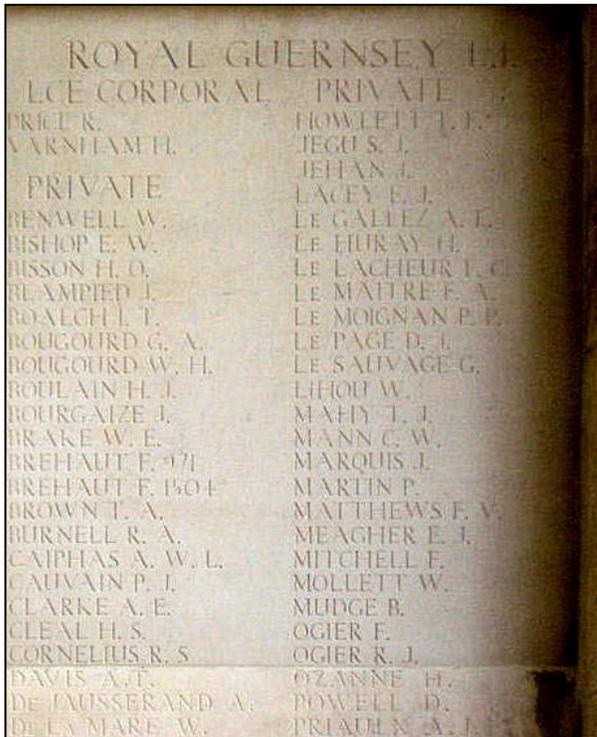


### **French and Commonwealth War Graves in Northern France**

However, pride was not the only emotion to be felt in Guernsey when news came through of the R.G.L.I's first battle. Islanders were soon to learn that of the original 44 officers and 964 other ranks who had left the island only months earlier, one officer and 14 soldiers were listed as killed, eight officers and 266 soldiers were wounded and two officers and, perhaps worst of all, 214 soldiers were missing. Overall, the Third Army reported losses of dead, wounded and missing of 44,207 between 20 November and 8 December 1917. Nine thousand men were reported to have been taken prisoner by the Germans. News of the losses gradually began to filter through to the island early in 1918. Many Guernsey families had endured the Christmas period knowing that there had been heavy fighting and considerable losses, but with no news of the fate of their sons, husbands and brothers. However, by January 12<sup>th</sup> 1918, the *Weekly Press* contained little other than columns of names and photographs of men killed, wounded, gassed, taken prisoner, or simply listed as missing. Many would die later of their wounds, or of the effects of gas or the harsh conditions in prisoner of war camps in Germany to which those captured at Cambrai were taken. In the autumn of 1918 local newspapers were still reporting confirmations of the deaths of soldiers missing

since December 1<sup>st</sup> of the previous year<sup>36</sup>. They also reported on some previously thought to have been killed, but were later discovered to have been taken prisoner.

The figures themselves are horrifying enough but when individual stories are examined, the almost unbearable toll of suffering that Cambrai exerted on Guernsey families become evident. Privates Nico and Wilfred Sarre of the R.G.L.I., two of the sons of Mrs Sarre who less than six months earlier had been reported as having the honour of having eight boys in khaki, were killed at the same time and buried side by side. Two more, Privates Peter and E. Sarre were taken prisoner in the same battle, as was her son in law, Private E. Martel. Mr. Sarre senior was by this time an inmate of the country asylum, and was therefore unaware of all this. Her remaining sons were all still on active service, and soon afterwards Private William Sarre was reported wounded<sup>37</sup>. Other families suffered devastating losses, for example, Privates Walter and Bertie de la Mare, farmer's sons of Torteval, who joined up together were both killed on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1917. Overall, almost 40% of the battalion's total strength had become casualties. Many headstones in Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries such as Point-du-Jour and Honnechy, near Arras, carry the R.G.L.I. crest, sometimes with a name but more often simply stating "Known Unto God". In addition, the Cambrai Memorial at Louverval, which commemorates the 7,048 men who were killed in action in November and December 1917 at Cambrai but have no known grave, bears a long list of Guernsey names.



The effect of the R.G.L.I.'s first battle must have been devastating for the people of Guernsey. Because of the large number of casualties, and difficulties in keeping accurate records under battle conditions then relaying them home before the days of modern communications technologies, families often had to endure a long period of uncertainty before they could make appropriate arrangements and then grieve properly. Even when it had been confirmed that a soldier had been killed in action, the whereabouts of his grave was often unknown as the fighting moved back and forth over the same ground many times.

### A Section of the Cambrai Memorial

<sup>36</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*,

<sup>37</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> February 1918

Private Le Poidevin's report of a mid December meeting with the man who had buried his brother shows just how difficult it was to keep accurate records at this time, even for those directly involved: "I happen(ed) to be at the canteen at the time when two chaps was at the counter one of then I knew well, this one ask me how my brother was, so I told him the news, and it happen(ed) that the other chap was the one that buried my brother. I was very pleased to hear that he got buried. He also told me that the Officer that had my brother's things had been killed, so things was (sic) lost".<sup>38</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Herbert John Le Poidevin, brother of Private Le Poidevin is now commemorated on the Cambrai memorial at Louverval, as he has no known grave. Local newspapers also carried heart-rending requests from relatives of missing men, such as Mrs Bachmann, wife of Company Sergeant Major F.M.A. Bachmann, R.G.L.I. who ".....would be glad to receive news concerning her husband from any of his comrades, or anyone who was in touch with him during the fighting in which the R.G.L.I. was engaged" as they had received no news from the authorities. She did not receive official confirmation from the Red Cross of his death on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1917 and subsequent burial at Seranvillers until April 1918.

In January 1918 the R.G.L.I. were sent back into the line just beyond Ypres, after spending Christmas and New Year billeted at Verchin, near St Pol-sur-Ternoise. They had marched there from Le Parcq, near Hesdin, in extremely bleak, wintry conditions. Private Le Poidevin noted that the top of the snow was frozen so hard that walking was extremely difficult. After Cambrai, Sir Reginald Hart, the Lieutenant Governor of the island, had asked the War Office for help in making up R.G.L.I. numbers so that the battalion would not need to be disbanded. As a result of this, groups from various other battalions, including about 200 men from the 3<sup>rd</sup> battalion of the North Staffordshire Regiment, which was stationed in Guernsey, were drafted in to join the remnants already in France. Thus, initially almost half of the R.G.L.I. of early 1918 consisted of men from outside the island. However, on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1918, 65 men who had served with the Guernsey Companies of the Royal Irish Regiment and Royal Irish Fusiliers were transferred into the R.G.L.I. when their old battalions were disbanded<sup>39</sup>. This meant that large numbers of Guernseymen who had survived the horrors of Cambrai had to return to France then face going to the Front once more.

Almost as soon as numbers were made up, the reformed R.G.L.I. moved in to the Passchaendale area, and on 18<sup>th</sup> January was moved up to the Front Line again. When not on the Line they were involved in trenching and draining the forward area, and although this sector was relatively quiet at this time, conditions were dangerous and unpleasant. Parks(1995)<sup>40</sup> quotes the divisional historian as saying that "The dead of friends and foe lay unburied, and supporting lines or

---

<sup>38</sup> *Unpublished War Diary of Pte L.T. Le Poidevin*

<sup>39</sup> Parks, E. (1995), *Diex Aix: God Help Us, the Guernseymen who marched away 1914-1918*, Guernsey Museum Service.

<sup>40</sup> Parks, E. (1995), *Diex Aix: God Help Us, the Guernseymen who marched away 1914-1918*, Guernsey Museum Service

reserve positions did not exist....The whole area had been churned up by shells into craters which were full of water, and in some places these craters were overlapping and the soil like a morass.” Private Le Poidevin noted that in the Reserve Line “In the day all we could see was nothing but shells holes and dead here and there, it wasn’t safe to walk about day time, Gerry used to shell this place very often”. The R.G.L.I. were involved in sporadic fighting, with sniping and trench raids happening on an almost daily basis, resulting in what Parks describes as “a steady trickle of casualties”. At the end of March, they repelled a trench raid with the loss of 26 soldiers. A further 45 were wounded, two were taken prisoner and 6 were gassed. A few days later, on 3<sup>rd</sup> April Private Le Poidevin<sup>41</sup> reports going up to the front: “This was one of my longest walk on the duck boards I thought we’d never reach the front line. This time we were more on the right of Passchaendale, near hill 60. Our company took over front line; this part was a very lonely and rough place.”

A few days later, events began to change dramatically. The R.G.L.I. was attached to 86<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 29<sup>th</sup> Division, a reserve division, but suddenly on 9<sup>th</sup> April they were taken south by lorry to Vieux Berquins in the Lys area of France, to strengthen the line there. On the evening of 10<sup>th</sup>, the battalion was ordered to



march to Doulieu and dig in east of the village. Fighting had suddenly escalated, as the German army pushed on across the Lys towards Hazebrouck, an important point on the only lateral railway line apart from the one which ran along the coast.

**The battle area nowadays is peaceful farmland**

Following a mustard gas bombardment, the Germans attacked forcefully along a line from La Bassée Canal to Armentières, creating the real risk of a breakthrough to the Channel coast. The general mood was not optimistic at this stage. On 11<sup>th</sup> April Brigadier John Charteris<sup>42</sup>, Staff Officer at G.H.Q., wrote “Our men are fighting well but are hopelessly outnumbered and practically untrained, owing to the enormous front we have had to hold all winter, when the Divisions should have been training. Our losses are huge, and we are still being pushed back. It is all so sad!” On the same day, in the face of Maréchal Foch, the Allied generalissimo’s refusal to release any more reserves, Haig issued his now

<sup>41</sup> Le Poidevin, Pte. L.T. (undated) *War Diary*, unpublished.

<sup>42</sup> Charteris, J. (1931), *At G.H.Q.* in Lewis, J.E. (ed) (2003), *World War 1, How it happened*, London, Robinson.

famous Order of the Day<sup>43</sup>: “There is no other course open to us but to fight it out! Every position must be held to the last man. With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one must fight on to the end. The safety of our Homes and the Freedom of mankind alike depend upon the conduct of each one of us at this critical moment”.

Then on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup>, they were taken up to the line to fill a gap between 87 Brigade and 40 Division. As they moved forward they came under prolonged machine gun fire, and heavy losses to various sections caused them to withdraw to the east of Doulieu, which was bypassed by the Germans. In the early hours of 12<sup>th</sup> April the R.G.L.I. were ordered to withdraw to a position further west, where they stayed until about midday, when they were ordered to withdraw a further 1,000 yards then dig in again. At daybreak, the Germans had begun shelling along the entire front. This withdrawal under heavy shelling and machine gun fire was made all the more difficult by the waterways and hedges that divided the landscape, and casualties were very heavy. A couple of hours later they withdrew yet again, this time to the village of Bleu where the remaining troops were placed in position along a small stream, which came under heavy artillery fire. They withdrew even further, this time to a railway cutting on the Hazebrouck- Bailleul line. Here they remained until they were relieved by Australian troops on 14<sup>th</sup> April.

Parks<sup>44</sup> notes that “the wounded had had to be abandoned during the retreat, and many small groups of officers and men were cut off and forced to surrender”. Losses were catastrophic. Private Le Poidevin reports rejoining the remainder of the battalion after the battle, “.....which was 55 men and two Officers. In this push the Battalion lost 474 men and NCOs and 17 officers.”<sup>45</sup> This matches closely with official reports which state that Colonel T.L. de Havilland led 20 officers and 483 men into action, and by 14<sup>th</sup> April, he was reduced to three officers and 55 other ranks. Another 47 men who had been separated from the main group and had joined up with other units rejoined their fellow soldiers, and were regrouped into a provisional battalion with the survivors of 1<sup>st</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers. Private Le Poidevin noted rather forlornly that “by us being so very little men in the Battalion they could only make two companies and the same with the Lancashires that was in the same Brigade, so between the both of us we made a Battalion”. Their job was to dig trenches in case the Australians had to withdraw further “...doing the same work as before only more on the right of Caestre, every day passing Hazebrook which the Germans shelled day after day.” However, by this stage the German offensive began to tail off because of lack of supplies. The line had held, but as with Cambrai, there had been little gain but a huge cost in casualties on both sides.

---

<sup>43</sup> Bourne, J. and Sheffield, G (2005), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and letters 1914-1918*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

<sup>44</sup> Parks, E. (1995), *Diex Aix: God Help Us, the Guernseymen who marched away 1914-1918*, Guernsey Museum Service

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

The R.G.L.I. was virtually decimated by the end of April 1918, but again numbers alone cannot tell the whole story. Privates Adolphus and Archie Gallienne, twenty four year old twins from St Pierre du Bois died within three days of each other, and have no known grave. Their deaths are commemorated on the Tyne Cot memorial. Their older brother, Private Thomas John Galliene had been listed as missing since Cambrai, and was eventually said to have died in action. He also has no known grave and is commemorated on the Cambrai memorial at Louverval<sup>46</sup>. A granite obelisk in the Vale Church Cemetery in Guernsey records the deaths of the three sons of William and Ellen Stranger in less than two months; Private Frank Stranger, of the Australian Imperial Force, had died of wounds on March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1918, Second Lieutenant George Stranger, R.G.L.I. was killed on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1918, and Captain Harry Easterbrook Stranger died on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1918. The confusion of the battle also led to some tragic mistakes in reporting casualties. The *Weekly Press*<sup>47</sup> carried a report stating that Lieutenant Philip Stranger's parents, Mr and Mrs J.J. Stranger, had been informed by means of a telegram from the War Office that he had been killed in action on April 11th. This was confirmed on the following day by a letter from his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel de Havilland, stating that he had been killed instantaneously in an advance. On 27<sup>th</sup> April, however, they received another telegram from the War Office stating that the Red Cross had informed them that he was a prisoner of war and in good health "somewhere in Germany". Lieutenant Stranger survived the war.



**The Ploegsteert memorial, Belgium, where many RGLI men are commemorated**

<sup>46</sup> *Guernsey Weekly Press*, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1918

<sup>47</sup> *The Guernsey Weekly Press*, April 27<sup>th</sup> 1918,

Back in Guernsey, any remnants of earlier patriotism had largely disappeared with the loss of so many men. But more was still being asked of islanders. Newspapers of the time carried regular reports from the parish Tribunals, where men could appeal against their conscription on various grounds. An article written in April 1918 noted that 17 appeals had reached a Tribunal Appeal Court, held before the Bailiff, Jurats, Procureur and Military representatives. The Bailiff, Sir Edward Chepmell Ozanne, who had lost his son in France in 1915, was reported as pointing out that efforts were being made to increase manpower at the Front, and that too many civilians were coming before the court with “any and every kind of excuse to get exemption from the military duties which were incumbent upon them.” However, “The Army Council was determined to make every man available to serve”.<sup>48</sup> In the same month the States of Guernsey discussed a letter from the Home Secretary to the Lieutenant Governor which stated that “...His Majesty’s Government believe that the island will feel that while it enjoys the full protection of the Armies and Navies of the Crown, it should bear an equal share of the heavy burden which rests upon the country, and will be ready to take whatever measures may be necessary for the purpose.”<sup>49</sup> It goes on to suggest ways in which the island could raise funds for the war effort, produce more food and send more men to the Forces. This was a mere two days after the devastating R.G.L.I. losses in the Doulieu region.

Haig’s dispatch of 20<sup>th</sup> April, read out to the States of Guernsey,<sup>50</sup> remarks on the gallant service of the R.G.L.I. However, this would be small consolation for islanders reading the lists of men killed, wounded or missing, presumed dead, that filled lengthy columns in the Guernsey papers for the second time in four months<sup>51</sup>. Just over six months after they arrived in France, the RGLI had virtually ceased to exist. After the battle of the Lys, the few men who remained from the original service battalion and the second draft were joined by recruits from the second battalion in Guernsey, but they could no longer be a fighting force. Instead, on 27<sup>th</sup> April they were given the role of guard troops at Haig’s headquarters at Montreuil.

Private Le Poidevin reports their departure from the Front thus: “We left the 86 Brigade which belong to the 29<sup>th</sup> Division on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1918. We came away the same day from Hazebrook having the 29 Division brass band to lead us down to the Station..... During the night we arrived at Etaples and from the Station marched to No.9 rest camp. We left this camp on the 29<sup>th</sup> April and our little band in front marched through the town of Etaples and got billeted in a Village called St-Aubin..... The Battalion left St Aubin on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May for Montreuil where they joined the General Headquarters, and kept on G.H.Q. for a time”. Here they stayed, retraining although when the Armistice was signed on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918 the battalion was under orders to prepare to go back into the line.” The *Weekly Press* of 31<sup>st</sup> August 1918 contains an article based on a letter “written by an R.G.L.I. officer”, describing their life at G.H.Q. and how they

---

<sup>48</sup> *The Star*, Guernsey, April 23rd 1918

<sup>49</sup> *The Star*, Guernsey, April 15th 1918

<sup>50</sup> *Billets d’Etat for 1918*, States of Guernsey.

<sup>51</sup> *The Guernsey Weekly Press*, May 25<sup>th</sup> 1918,

“sent a guard in the ordinary way every day to the château”, but on this occasion it was a special Guard of Honour to the King. It goes on to mention how they were inspected by Haig, Maréchal Foch, the Commander in Chief of the Allied Forces, and President Poincaré of France, and concludes by noting that that “the men did their duties splendidly.”



### **The RGLI on Duty at Montreuil**

On 21<sup>st</sup> May 1919, six months after the Armistice was signed, most of the remaining men of the R.G.L.I left for Guernsey on the S.S. Lydia. There remained in the war cemeteries of France and Flanders more than 300 graves of R.G.L.I. members, to say nothing of those of many other Guernseymen who served with other Units. The Cambrai Memorial at Louverval, the Thiepval Memorial on the Somme and the Ploegsteert Memorial in Belgium bear long lists of Guernsey names - Bisson, Guilbert, Le Tissier, Queripel and Sebire, to name but a few. Many families are represented on all three memorials. The colours of the 1<sup>st</sup> Militia Battalion, now decorated with battle honours for Ypres 1919, Passchaendale and Cambrai 1917, Lys, Estaires, Hazebrouck and France and Flanders 1917 – 1918. and other flags were laid up in the Town Church, where they remain to this day. Meanwhile Sir Reginald Hart had retired from his post as Lieutenant Governor of Guernsey in 1918. He left the island immediately, apparently looking back on the clifftop memorial to Sir John Doyle, a Lieutenant Governor of the island in the early nineteenth century who had instigated an ambitious programme of reclamation and rebuilding as part of his defensive strategy against the French, saying “They won’t build one of those for me”.<sup>52</sup> The *Star* reported his leaving by publishing a photograph of him, and stating underneath that “General Sir Reginald C. Hart, V.C., K.C.B., K.C.V.O., has been

---

<sup>52</sup> Parks, E. (1995), *Diex Aix: God Help Us, the Guernseymen who marched away 1914-1918*, Guernsey Museum Service, p.25.

permitted to relinquish the office of Lieut. Governor of Guernsey on reaching the age of 70 (on Tuesday) and has since left the island"<sup>53</sup>.

However, island life did not return to its pre-war state when the Armistice was signed and the survivors returned. Families had lost neighbours and tradesmen as well as friends and relatives. All sectors of island life were affected, blurring previously clear distinctions between different social classes. The policy of the recently formed Commonwealth War Graves Commission was that men killed in action should be buried near where they fell, alongside their comrades. They felt that there should be "no distinction... between officers and men lying in the same cemeteries in the form or nature of the memorials" because of the common sacrifice made by all ranks<sup>54</sup>. Dr Josiah Leale, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P. was a well known local doctor and one time Colonel of the North Division of the Guernsey militia. His son, L/Cpl. F.R. Leale of the Royal Fusiliers, was killed in action on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1916, aged 26, and is commemorated on the Thiepval memorial, along with many other Guernseymen such as Private James Brehaut of the Royal Irish Regiment and Private John F. Hamon of the Royal Irish Fusiliers. Rifleman Ernest Stanley Gard of the London Regiment, London Rifle Brigade, son of Reverend John Gard, Minister of Spurgeon Baptist Church, St Peter Port, died of wounds on October 19<sup>th</sup> 1916, aged 19, and was buried at Etaples Military cemetery near Boulogne. Privates A. Jehan and J. de Jersey of the R.G.L.I. lie in the same cemetery. Sir Edward Chepmell Ozanne, Bailiff of Guernsey from 1915 to 1922, lost his son Captain Edward Ozanne of the Royal Fusiliers in February 1915, at the same time as Private Winterflood of the Army Service Corps was killed in action. As families from all strata of society mourned relatives lost in the same battles and commemorated in the same way it became impossible to retain the old social distinctions.

The island that the survivors returned to had also changed in other ways. Its people had suffered food shortages caused by shipping blockades, the loss of trade with France and the fact that there was a shortage of agricultural and horticultural labour to tend the crops as the fit young men had gone away to war. Unemployment was now a real problem as the economy was run down, raw materials were in short supply and the huge war effort had come to a halt. The Spanish flu pandemic had also resulted in many unexpected deaths of healthy young women and children at home, an almost impossibly cruel blow for the men who had survived the war. Many men also died of it in prisoner of war camps in Germany before they could be repatriated. Local newspapers carry evidence of a general lack of social stability in the immediate post-war period, with accounts of child neglect, drunkenness, robbery and violence. In 1919, for example, the Royal Court heard a case of bigamy involving the widow of a Private de Carteret of the R.G.L.I. He had been listed as missing on December 1<sup>st</sup> 1917 after the battle of Cambai, then eventually presumed dead in October 1918. Private Atkinson, also of the R.G.L.I., a non local man brought into the island with the reinforcements, married her in May 1919 despite having a wife and several

---

<sup>53</sup> *The Star*, February 28<sup>th</sup> 1918., p.1

<sup>54</sup> Longworth, P (2003) *The Unending Vigil*, Barnsley, Leo Cooper, p.33

children in London. It was stated that he did this because she was the recipient of a war widow's pension<sup>55</sup>. The widow of Private Clifford Brimmage, who was listed as missing then killed in action after Cambrai, was left (like many other island women) to cope alone with a large family – in her case 7 children between the ages of 13 years and 7 months.

The loss of so many young men had affected the whole community on this small island where most people are related by family, work or proximity, just as it had done with the Pals' Battalions of the previous years. Individual families had suffered devastating losses that altered their life to an extent that we can scarcely imagine nowadays. The *Weekly Press* had carried pictures of "A Fighting Family" – the six sons and three sons in law of Nico and Mary Le Sauvage of St Pierre du Bois, all of whom were in uniform. By the end of the war, they had more than their fair share of injury and bereavement. Private Ernest Le Sauvage, Royal Irish Fusiliers, had been killed on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916 and is commemorated on the Loos Memorial. Private George Le Sauvage, R.G.L.I., had been listed as missing then killed in action on 1st December 1917, and is commemorated on the Cambrai memorial. Private C. Le Sauvage of the R.G.L.I. was wounded at Cambrai and returned to the island, and Private A. Le Savage of the Royal Irish Fusiliers was wounded on the Somme in 1916, then returned to the island and joined the R.G.L.I. Privates T. and J. Le Sauvage of the R.G.L.I. appear to have escaped unharmed. Of the three sons in law, Private W. Board, R.G.L.I. was taken prisoner of war at Cambrai on 1<sup>st</sup> December 1917, and remained in Germany until December 1918, while Privates T. Le Provost and E. Le Moigne, of the R.G.L.I., both served in France until the end of the war, returning on the *Lydia* on 21<sup>st</sup> May 1919.

The Sarre family, mentioned earlier for their "splendid effort" in having eight sons in khaki, were also from St Pierre du Bois. They lost three sons at Cambrai, where a son in law was also taken prisoner of war. A fourth son was later taken prisoner and died in Lille in April 1918. The memorial that stands just outside the churchyard walls shows the heavy burden borne by just one small country parish. The St Peter Port parish memorial, besides carrying names of several members of the same family, like the three Pidgeon brothers, also shows how streets and neighbourhoods were affected. There were at least four men from Constitution Steps who did not return, plus six from Victoria Road. Businesses were also affected. The Guernsey Brewery lost two of its brewers, George Saxby and H.W. Estridge, while Le Riche's lost Captain Albert Rosamond (who was also employed by the Guernsey Brewery) and Pte Ashelford, who had come over from Jersey.

The following figures, collected by Mière<sup>56</sup> (undated) show the extent of the overall sacrifice.

---

<sup>55</sup> *La Gazette de Guernesey*, 25<sup>th</sup> January 1919, p.1

<sup>56</sup> Mière, J. (undated) *Untitled research notes*, Item L/C/24/E/1, Jersey Archive Service

“In the 1914-18 war, the Channel Islands sent 12,460 of their sons to the battle front.

Served:		Killed/died on active service:	
Jersey	6,292	Jersey	862
Guernsey	5,109	Guernsey	1,112
Alderney	116	Alderney	43
Sark	48	Sark	17
France	895	France	264
Total	12,460	Total	2,298

These totals include Channel Islanders who served in the Allied and Commonwealth Forces.”



Every aspect of island life was affected. Many women had taken up temporary occupations in fields as diverse as agricultural labouring, tram driving and the civil service in order to “do their bit” for the war effort by releasing men to go to the Front. These were situations that would have been unthinkable in pre-war years, when the majority of women either stayed at home until they married, or went into domestic service. Shipping registers of the time<sup>57</sup> also show that some had chosen to travel to France or England, as munitions workers, seamstresses, and pay clerks or to work with organisations such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Voluntary Aid Detachment and First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. After the war, it had been expected that they would return to their homes and lose their new found independence.

**Ada Le Poidevin in France with the Salvation Army.**

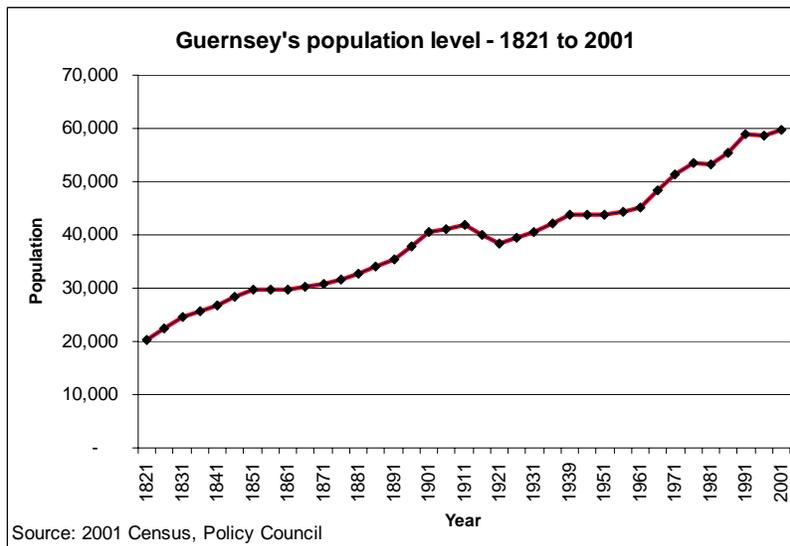
However the loss of so many of the island’s male workforce meant that some were forced to continue to work in order to provide for their own families who had lost breadwinners, or to help bereaved mothers and sisters. Some also chose to continue to work because the shortage of young men meant that they were unable to take up the traditional roles of wives and mothers. Although some women undoubtedly welcomed this new freedom, and would have found it difficult to return to domestic life, for many it was not a matter of choice, and it undoubtedly had an effect on the lifestyle of the island.

For the people of Guernsey, things could never go back to the way they had been before the war. Not only were families torn apart by the loss of fathers, sons and brothers, but the island as a whole had lost a large portion of its fittest young

---

<sup>57</sup> *Collected Shipping Registers*, Jersey Archive Service.

men. According to Tabb<sup>58</sup>, “2,298 young men of the Islands gave their lives in the conflict from the 12,462 (6,292 from the Bailiwick of Jersey and 6,168 from the Bailiwick of Guernsey) who rallied to the colours”. Mière’s figure of just over 1,000 Guernseymen killed is approximately 16% of those who went to fight, and about 5% of the total male population. Statistics compiled by the States of Guernsey Policy Council (above)<sup>59</sup> show the effect that this had on the island over several years. The total population of Guernsey in the 1911 census was 41,858, consisting of 21,197 females and 20,661 males. By 1921, this had dropped by over 3,000 to a total of 38,315, of whom 18,246 were male and 20,069 female. Not only had there been a high proportion of deaths during and just after the war, but also the young men who died would have been the fathers of the next generation.



For many of the men who returned, their experiences in places as far apart as Mesopotamia and Murmansk had widened their horizons to a point that would have been unthinkable before the war. In fact, a significant number signed on again for regular military service, despite the suffering and hardship that they had endured. They had seen a wider world and could not return to the confines of a small island. Those who chose to come back to the island had lost brothers, friends and workmates and they returned to an island that had lost its insularity. Many had been gassed or wounded, and even more carried the kind of emotional scars that have been well documented in more recent years. Some, such as Private J. Le Provost, whose last resting place in the St Pierre du Bois Parochial Cemetery in Guernsey is marked by a standard Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone, came home only to die several years later as the result of wounds received in the war<sup>60</sup>. Considerable numbers chose to emigrate to

<sup>58</sup> Tabb, P. (2005), *A Peculiar Occupation: New Perspectives on Hitler's Channel Islands*, London, Ian Allen Ltd.

<sup>59</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Parks, E. (1995), *Diex Aix: God Help Us, the Guernseymen who marched away 1914-1918*, Guernsey Museum Service, p.113.

Canada and Australia in the following years, possibly as a result of contact with men from those areas during the war. Newspaper advertisements of the day indicate that there was also probably an element of starting a new life away from the old memories.

The men of Guernsey's "lost generation" can never be forgotten because of the impact their deaths had on island life. A brief glance at the thousand or so names on the Bailiwick memorial at the top of Smith Street in St Peter Port shows the scale of the loss, but each individual death affected family, friends, neighbours and workmates in an interconnecting network that covered the whole island. In the years following the Armistice, many had the firm conviction that it had been "the war to end all wars". This was a reaction to the horrors of the conflict which led many to believe that the cost of modern warfare was so high that no nation would ever fight another again. King George V summed it up in a speech made during his visit to the war cemeteries in 1922, when he said, ".....in the course of my pilgrimage, I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace upon earth through the years to come, than this massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war." Sadly, less than twenty years later, the world was at war once more. Guernsey suffered the hardship of Occupation, and lost young men in battle as well as civilians who stayed at home or were evacuated to 'safer' places. However, one of the few consolations is that the island did not lose another generation of young men on the fields of France and Flanders where their fathers and uncles had fallen.



**The graves of three unknown members of the RGLI who fell at Cambrai, Honnechy British Cemetery.**

## Bibliography

Bourne, J. and Sheffield, G (2005), *Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Charteris, J. (1931), *At G.H.Q.* in Lewis, J.E. (ed) (2003), *World War 1, How it Happened*, London, Robinson.

Coombes, R.E.B. (1994), *Before Endeavours Fade*, London, Battle of Britain International Ltd.

Ehmann, D. and Le Pelley, P. (1993) *A Guide to the Constitution of Guernsey (1994)*, Guernsey Press Company.

Graham, JW (1922), *Conscription and Conscience: a history 1916-1919* London: Allen and Unwin, 1922.

Hook, A. (2004) *World War 1 Day by Day*, Rochester, Grange Books.

Johnston, P. (2000), *A Short History of Guernsey*, Guernsey, Peter Johnson.

Longworth, P (2003) *The Unending Vigil*, Barnsley, Leo Cooper.

Mière, J. (undated) *Untitled research notes*, Item L/C/24/E/1, Jersey Archive Service

Parks, E. (1992) *The Royal Guernsey Militia*, Guernsey, La Société Guernésiaise.

Parks, E, (1992), *Diex Aix: God help us. The Guernseymen who marched away.* Guernsey Museums and Galleries.

Tabb, P. (2005), *A Peculiar Occupation: New Perspectives on Hitler's Channel Islands*, London, Ian Allen Ltd.

*2005 Guernsey Facts and Figures*, (2005), Guernsey, The States of Guernsey Policy Council.

*War Diary of the Accrington Pals*, The National Archives, ref.WO95/236

Le Poidevin, Pte. L.T. (undated) *War Diary*, unpublished, used by kind permission of the Le Poidevin family

*Collected Shipping Registers*, Jersey Archive Service, St Helier, Jersey

Newspaper Archive of the Priaulx Library, Guernsey

Museum of the Royal Guernsey Militia, Castle Cornet, St. Peter Port, Guernsey

**Websites:**

(All as accessed January 19<sup>th</sup> 2006)

<http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/FWWcasualties.htm>

<http://history.foote-family.com/ww1.htm>

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/guernsey/content/articles/2004/07/08/rqli\\_birth\\_feature.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/guernsey/content/articles/2004/07/08/rqli_birth_feature.shtml)

[http://www.lightinfantry.org.uk/regiments/gli/gli\\_index.htm](http://www.lightinfantry.org.uk/regiments/gli/gli_index.htm)

<http://www.pitt.edu/~pugachev/greatwar/ww1.html>

<http://www.1914-1918.net/>

<http://www.cwgc.org.uk>

<http://www.westernfront.co.uk/>

First published in the Report and Transactions 2005 of La Societé Guernésiasse,  
Volume XXV, Part V.

© 2006 Liz Walton

[Contact Liz](#)