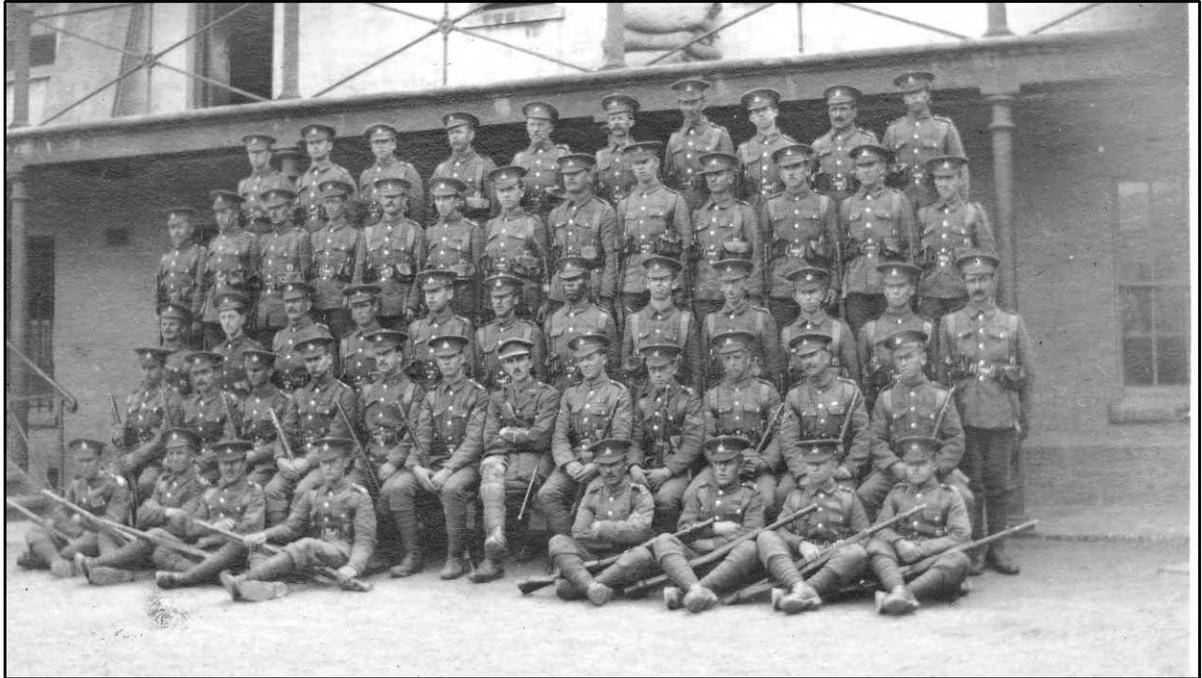


**Charles Duncombe**  
**From the Bahamas to the RGLI**  
**By Liz Walton**

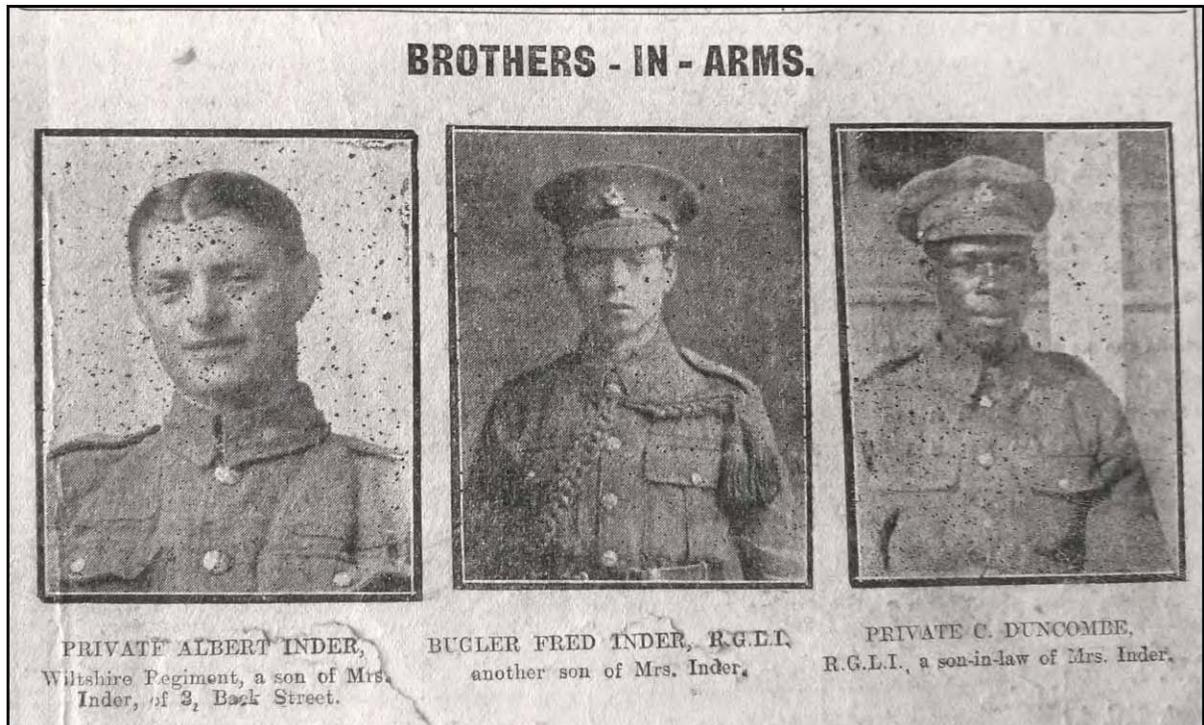


**No 4 Platoon, 1<sup>st</sup> (Service) Battalion, Royal Guernsey Light Infantry at Fort George  
(Courtesy of the States of Guernsey (Guernsey Museums and Galleries), 2010)**

Charles Duncombe, (in the centre of the picture on the previous page), was born in Nassau in the Bahamas. His father was James Duncombe, his mother, Violet Wellington. DNA testing on Charles' descendants show that the family originated in Senegal in West Africa. The most likely reasons that anyone of African origin would have the name of Duncombe is that the family were at some time slaves who took the name of the plantation owner, and the Duncombes were an important family slave owning family in the Bahamas for several generations. Charles' family would have been granted freedom at the latest in 1834 when the British Emancipation Act came into being.

Little is known of Charles' early life, but as a young man he went to sea - some stories say that he was a stoker, his service record states that his last job before joining up was a cook on board ship, but elsewhere in the record it simply states that his occupation was seaman. There is also more than one story about how he came to settle in Guernsey, and nobody seems to know exactly when that happened, but it is likely that it was after 1911 as he doesn't appear in that year's census. One story I have heard is that he was working on a boat that was wrecked off the island and he managed to get ashore, liked the place and settled here. Another version, which came from one of his daughters is that when his ship berthed in St Peter Port he walked off and up Cornet Street, went into a pub called the Kentish Arms, then went back home with a chap who lived near the

gasworks (which fits with his address being given as the Longstore) and just never went back on board. He married a Guernsey woman, Susan Inder of Back Street, St Peter Port some time between 1911 and 1917, as she was still single in the 1911 census but was married to Charles when he joined up. She was one of thirteen children of Stephen and Harriet Inder who came originally from Somerset. The picture (below) from the *Guernsey Weekly Press* of (courtesy of the Priaulx Library, Guernsey) shows Charles Duncombe with his brothers in law Fred and Albert Inder.



976 Private C Duncombe enlisted along with the other young men of St Peter Port and joined the 1<sup>st</sup> (Service) Battalion, the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 1917, soon after its formation. His Service record shows that he lived at Brick House, Longstore, St Peter Port. His age on enlistment was 30 years and 6 months (though in 1919 his age was given as 40) and he was 5 feet 11 inches tall. His last employer before joining up was Bragg and Son, Corn and Forage Merchants of South Esplanade, St Peter Port, Guernsey, and he was a seaman/cook. He stated that he was born in the Bahamas, West Indies.

After joining the RGLI he would have done some initial training in Guernsey before traveling to Bourne Park Camp in Kent for further training which lasted until September, 1917. The Battalion then traveled on the SS Miller to Le Havre in France, landing on 27<sup>th</sup> September, 1917. The Battalion Diaries show that they stayed in a rest camp at Le Havre until 30<sup>th</sup> September before travelling by train to Proven, near Langemarke in Belgium. Here they supported the front line troops by working as stretcher bearers, signallers and road menders until 17<sup>th</sup>

October when they moved on to Hendecourt in Northern France where they were joined by another 240 men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Reserve) Battalion of the RGLI. They stayed in camp for further specialist training to prepare them for the battle of Cambrai.

On 20<sup>th</sup> November they went into the front line for a successful attack on Nine (Neuf) Wood, which they seized from the Germans at 2 pm that afternoon. On the following day the Germans counter-attacked, but were driven off. However in the course of the fighting on 21<sup>st</sup> November, 1917, Charles Duncombe received gunshot wounds in the right arm and chest. These were severe enough for him to require hospital treatment, first at the 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian General Hospital in Etaples in Northern France, then at the 6<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Depot in Etaples, and finally at the 13<sup>th</sup> Convalescent Depot in Trouville. He rejoined the remnants of the Battalion who had survived Cambrai on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1918. At this stage they had reformed, with the addition of men transferred from the Reserve plus men who had enlisted in the UK to make up for the losses at Cambrai. They were still in Northern France and Belgium, where spells in the front line alternated with periods of training and forming working parties employed in digging defence lines, wiring, trenching and ditching in the forward area. In the early hours of 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1918 the Battalion, which was then based at Neuf Berquin, was involved in the battle of the Lys. It was forced to withdraw from its position near the village of Doulieu, then suffered several heavy attacks and withdrawals over the next few days, with losses eventually being so great that they were forced to form a provisional Battalion with the 1<sup>st</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers. On 30<sup>th</sup> April they moved to Montreuil where they formed the guard at Haig's GHQ for the remainder of the war. So few men had survived that the RGLI was no longer a viable fighting unit.

Charles Duncombe was with the RGLI at the battle of the Lys and was one of the survivors, despite poor health resulting in stays in hospital in March then again in May, 1918, both times suffering from fever and debility of unknown origin. On 26<sup>th</sup> May, 1918 at Rouen he was downgraded from A1 physical condition to B2. From there he was transferred to the Labour Corps on 14<sup>th</sup> July, 1918, where as 604573 Private Duncombe he joined 895 Area Employment Company at Marseilles. The Labour Corps had been formed in February, 1917 and by November, 1918 consisted of 325,000 British soldiers, 98,000 Chinese, 10,000 Africans, 6 Battalions of the British West Indies Regiment, 300,000 Prisoners of Wars and contingents from Egypt and Fiji. The British soldiers were usually transferred from other units because, as in the case of Charles Duncombe, illness, age or injury meant that they were not fit to serve at the front line. Area Employment Companies covered categories of employment as wide ranging as cooks, storemen, clerks, tailors, shoemakers, telephone operators and traffic

controllers. In short, they performed essential everyday tasks, and by doing so freed the fitter men for the front line.

Marseilles was the Base of the Indian troops in France during the war years, and the Royal Navy, the Merchant Navy and British troops worked in the port or passed through it, so the Labour Corps performed numerous essential tasks there. Charles stayed in Marseilles until he was transferred to the Army Reserve when the war was over, in 1919, and he returned to Guernsey. He was refused a disability pension because his war wounds were said not to have caused him any lasting disability. He was entitled to the British War Medal and the Victory Medal for his services. He became came back to Guernsey after dispersal from Harfleur on 21<sup>st</sup> May, 1919, and remained on the island until his death. An elderly friend recalls that Charlie worked for many years as a plank runner, i.e., running up the gangplank of ships unloading baskets of coal into waiting carts. He also played the ukulele in a local band.

© Liz Walton 2010

[Contact Liz](#)