

## **An Englishman with the Royal Jersey Garrison Battalion 923 Private Claude Charles Morton**

It is a little known fact that there was conscription of Jerseymen into the British Army during the Great War. Prior to that, peacetime Militia service had, of course, been compulsory although part-time, and as tensions built up after the events in Sarajevo on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1914, the entire Militia including its Reserves was mobilised at the end of July by the Island's Lieutenant Governor, Lieutenant General Sir Alexander Rochfort. But, the Militia were not part of the British Army, and could not normally be called to serve overseas, as they were responsible for the Island's defence.

The long War, and even longer casualty lists caused the Imperial (i.e. the British) government to introduce conscription via a Military Service Act in early 1916 this being applied to men from England, Scotland and Wales (with Ireland being excluded). Not long after, the States of Jersey were approached and invited to consider the introduction of a similar Act in Jersey that would see men, between the ages of 18 and 41, automatically become members of the British Army.

After much deliberation, and not a little too-ing and fro-ing between Jersey and Whitehall, the Act eventually came into effect in February, 1917. To counter any suggestion that the Act could be regarded as draconian, an appeals process was incorporated whereby men could state their case for exemption in terms of such arguments as fitness, being a sole provider or undertaking work of essential nature for the Island. In one such case, a man even sought to be exempt on the basis that he felt that Army food would not be to his liking!

Jersey's Military Service Act had another consequence. As men were now, *de facto*, in the British Army, they could not be expected to serve in the Militia, and it was thus necessary for that organisation to be suspended "for the duration" by a provision in the Military Service Act. But, there remained the need for the Island's defences to be manned, and this needed more resources than Victoria College's Junior Officer Training Corps standing guard over the Royal Bay of Grouville each weekend. As a result, two new British Army units came into being, 110 Company, Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA), and the Royal Jersey Garrison Battalion (RJGB). It was to these units that men who were of the wrong age or insufficiently fit to be sent to the Front were allocated. The RJGB would be organised with an establishment of 479, a figure that was just under half the size of the standard British Army infantry battalion but with a steady turnover of men, between its creation in March 1917 and the Armistice, nearly 1100 men had served in the battalion.

Yet, the never-ending demand for military manpower continued, and it would appear that Jersey could not keep up with the near insatiable need for men at the front, and also, for the RJGB. In 1918, one solution to keep the RJGB up to strength was an influx of 100 men from British Army Regiments such as the Durham Light Infantry, the Northumberland Fusiliers and the Leicestershire Regiment.



Limited evidence that this had occurred had been gleaned by the Channel Island Great War Study Group, but they were recently contacted by Vivien Concannon, the grand-daughter of a Claude Charles Morton who had served in the RJGB with the number 923, and she provided digital copies of two photographs, including the one above. The Group had previously noted that Claude had been in the York and Lancaster (Y&L) Regiment, with the number

31330. Close examination of the photograph revealed that the cap badge was indeed that of the Y&L, and though not readily visible in the photo, the shoulder titles also state Y&L. Meanwhile, the inspection also revealed a wound stripe on the cuff of Claude's left sleeve.

According to Vivien, Claude was born on 20<sup>th</sup> August, 1886 in East Dulwich into a family of entertainers – his parents and siblings being Music Hall performers, his father was a tightrope walker during the 1850's and '60's, his mother a dancer, singer and choreographer. However Claude, being the youngest member of the family, became a painter and decorator – far removed from the glamour of the greasepaint, etc. and the family tradition of entertainment.

All Vivien knew of her grandfather's military record is that prior to the Great War, he was a member of a Territorial Army (TA) unit in Hemel Hempstead and had won prizes for shooting. When and where he joined the Y&L was not known to her, but she knew that he had been badly wounded in the arm, and that according to her father the muscles in Claude's upper arm were destroyed. After the War, he returned home to his wife, son and spent the remainder of his life working as a painter and decorator, rather handicapped by his war wound, in Hemel Hempstead where he died in 1949.

The other photograph of Claude in uniform, shown on the next page, was taken earlier than the one with him in the Y&L, and it showed that he was a member of the Northamptonshire Regiment.

With this information, casualty records and medal records were checked for numbers either side of 31330 for the Y&L, it became evident that all of the men in the range of numbers 31261 to 31340 were ex-Northamptonshire men from the range 25000 to 25500, and Claude had been part of this batch. Furthermore, some of these men would be dying on the Somme in France during late-1916. Claude's arm wound must have resulted at about this time, for he is listed as being wounded in the Times of 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1917, implying that this happened in late-November, 1916. Looking at dates and other information, it is almost certain that these 80 Northamptonshire men were assigned, in early-October, 1916, to make up the numbers in the 12<sup>th</sup> (Sheffield City) Battalion, York and Lancaster Regiment, one of the "Pals" units that suffered so grievously on the "First Day of the Somme" with just over 50% casualties during the failed attack at Serre. If that is so, Claude spent a mere two months in France before being medically evacuated back to "Blighty".

Some of this analysis was confirmed when Vivien rediscovered some old family postcards, the information on which suggested that he had been conscripted into the Northamptonshire Regiment in 1916, being trained with that Regiment's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion at Twydall Camp at Gillingham in Kent. However, between service in the Y&L and in the RJGB, he had also spent time serving with the Royal Defence Corps (RDC) at Kilnsea outside Hull. The fact that he served in both the RDC and the RJGB is a strong indicator that he was one of

many thousands of men who were no longer fit for front-line service throughout 1917 and 1918. Clearly, he endured for many years after.



The Group was delighted to receive the photographs and the additional information from Vivien Concannon. Fortunately, in Claude Morton's case the material has helped to build up a broad understanding of his military service with four units, and how he came to be serving with the RJGB in Jersey in 1918.

BHB – February, 2010.