

The Royal Guernsey Light Infantry **The 1914 – 18 war and the death of a regiment**

In 1914, as Europe went to war, the Royal Guernsey Militia, which at that time consisted of two infantry regiments and an artillery regiment, was mobilised to replace the regular army garrison which was withdrawn to reinforce the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders.



Recruiting for 16th Irish Division. St. Peter Port, Gsy. 1915.

Militiamen could not be sent overseas but the States of Guernsey decided to offer a contingent of trained men to the British Government. This offer was taken up gratefully and in the end two full strength infantry companies and a machine gun section were sent to join the 16th Irish Division which was forming in Ireland as part of Kitchener's all volunteer army. The companies were attached to 6 Royal Irish Regiment and 7 Royal Irish Fusiliers; the machine gun company went to 6 RIR.



Company departing from Guernsey to join 16th Irish Division. 1915.

In addition a Divisional Ammunition Column was formed from the Royal Guernsey Artillery and sent to 9th Scottish Division.

The 16th Division took part in the fighting on the Somme in 1916 and the Guernsey Companies suffered heavy casualties.

They were eventually disbanded in early 1918.

In the meantime the States decided that they would send a full infantry battalion to the British army, probably because they felt that the island should be seen to be doing its bit.

As a result at the end of 1916 the Militia was suspended for the duration of the war, conscription was introduced and the Royal Guernsey Light Infantry was raised as part of the British army. Most of the initial officers and men



Bayonet instruction. Basic training. C Company RGLI. Fort George, Guernsey. 1916.

Were former members of the Militia but later drafts were not.



Colours presentation to RGLI. L'Ancrese, Vale, Guernsey. 3rd May 1917.

Before they left the Island a big parade was held on L'Ancrese Common when medals were presented to soldiers who had served with the volunteer companies but were now with the RGLI after convalescing from wounds received in action. They also received a set of camp colours sewn by ladies

of Guernsey.

After completing its basic training in Guernsey the battalion left the Island for England on 1st June 1917 for advanced training at Bourne Park camp near Canterbury. After advanced infantry training the battalion sailed for France on 26th September.



Marching to Canterbury training camp. RGLI. June 1917.

On their arrival they were attached to 29th Infantry Division which was commanded by a Guernseyman, Major-General Beauvoir de Lisle and posted to 86th Brigade.



British Troops fighting in trenches. Flanders. 1915.

The Division was made up of regular army battalions and had recently served with considerable distinction in Gallipoli. However by the time the RGLI joined many of the old regular soldiers had become casualties and it is likely that the morale and motivation of the Guernsey troops was higher than that of the battalions around them.



Life in the trenches for Canadian troops. Flanders. 1915.

By the time the RGLI arrived in France to join 29th Division the Western Front had been in place for some time. A continuous line of trenches ran 475 miles from the North Sea to Switzerland. A trench, in theory at least, was a ditch some 10 to 12 feet in depth with a raised fire step along the side facing the enemy. The sides would be revetted with timber to hold back the earth and there might be duckboards to keep the soldiers' feet out of the mud - if they were lucky. Dug outs were cut back from the side of the trench in which off duty men could shelter and perhaps sleep. The trenches zigzagged to prevent the blast from an explosion travelling along them.

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Waiting for an enemy attack. Entrenched Canadian soldiers. Flanders. 1915.



There were usually three lines of trenches - the main or front line, the support and further back the reserve lines. Soldiers would be rotated through these systems so that in theory at any rate they could get some rest while in support or reserve although much time in reserve would be spent repairing trenches or carrying supplies into the line.

After three years of continuous fighting the trenches were pestilential places where the dead of both sides lay unburied and rats and vermin flourished. Many areas were flooded and men could and did drown in mud filled shell holes. An incautious move could draw the attention of a sniper and even if things were quiet there was a constant stream of casualties from artillery and mortar fire as well as from sickness and disease.

The original idea behind the Battle of Cambrai was a kind of large scale tank raid on the German rear areas with the idea of destroying enemy personnel, guns, supplies and most of all morale, but not to capture or hold ground. The tank was in its infancy and nobody was quite sure how best to use it and what effect it would have on the enemy.



Trench conditions. Flanders. March 1915.

In the end the plan was much expanded into a major operation with the objective of pushing the Germans back a considerable distance.

The attack was successful beyond the planners' wildest dreams and almost all the objectives were achieved with minimal - by Western Front standard - casualties. The RGLI, for instance, took their objective, far behind the German front line with only one officer and two soldiers killed and 25 wounded.

But retribution was not far away. German doctrine set, and indeed still sets, great store by early counter attack on lost positions and ten days after the British attack the Germans struck back.



German troops in action. January, 1915.

The Guernseys were ordered to hold a little village called Les Rues Vertes on the outskirts of Masnieres on the River Escaut and hold it they did. Twice they were pushed out of the ruins by weight of numbers, twice they retook the village at the point of the bayonet, fighting with great tenacity which aroused the admiration of all who watched them.

Sadly however such valour does not come cheap and by the end of the fighting 40% of the battalion's total strength of 1311 all ranks were dead, missing or wounded.

It was the end of a generation in Guernsey and the Island watched, numbed almost into disbelief, as the casualty returns grew and grew until there was hardly a family in the Island, grand or humble, that had not lost a loved one.

Document. Le Poidevin's Account

"The enemy were now coming across and surrendering in larger numbers. They were badly wounded most of them and had the very fear of hell depicted on their faces. The surprise had been a success and had caught Fritz quite unprepared. We were now on the move towards our objective and covered many miles of ground, the

Tanks were ahead and we passed many dug-outs & huts where Fritz had made himself snug since Aug. 1914. We met with little resistance apart from snipers who were very active from Nine Wood. My left section put 2 snipers out of mess.



German sniper in action. France 1915.

Although they had put their hands up and were “Kamerads”. But they shot some of my platoon. After some stiff fighting we took our Objective, Nines Wood and made use of the shell holes for consolidating our position. I had the luck of capturing 5 Huns here, who gave us some valuable information.”

Sgt. W.J. Le Poidevin RGLI

Document. Le Poidevin’s Account

“At one time 3 of us were surrounded with Germans. We gave a good account of ourselves till I got the effects of a bomb and was wounded in the leg and thighs. I managed to crawl to a farmhouse and applied first aid to my leg. After that I was done and could not move. It was very fortunate that I was found by one of our men & help secured to take me back to the dressing station. It was decided to evacuate Messinières. The RFA volunteered to come from Marcoing & take away the wounded in Messinières. While I was being carried along the Canal Bank my stretcher was heavily shelled, and one shell dropped just behind the stretcher killing two and wounding a third. I was Providentially preserved as apart from being thrown out I was unhurt. I managed to crawl about a 100yards and stumbled across the Headquarters of the Inniskilling Fus.”

Sgt. W.J. Le Poidevin RGLI

Document Chapman’s Account

Extract from a letter to Lt. Hutchinson from Lt. E.A. Chapman.

“I feel I must write & tell you what a fine company you had & what fine men they were. The NCOs & men were bricks every one of them & as brave as lions. They really did excellent work & by jove they had something to put up with..... They all stuck to me like good ‘uns. Of course I was at a great disadvantage not knowing the men, but in the short time I had them I got to love them..... Never have I seen such pluck & endurance in any men. The way they went over the top & went over 3

miles to their objective when they were fagged out was a marvel & they dug in & reconsolidated like good 'uns & didn't care a rap for Shells or bullets or Huns.....They were good in rest, & when we went into the line again, & got heavily shelled they showed utter contempt to the danger. They had some very unpleasant & risky jobs & worked so well. The officers too were great. Poor L..? was killed as you know in our first counter attack. He was such a good chap. "Bottles" & Morgan did excellent work. Poor Morgan has died of his wounds. "Bottles" I cannot get news of. He was exceptionally good with his men & showed himself a very fine officer. Plucky & full of grit & he had some very ticklish jobs. I am sure you would have been the proudest man in the Army if you had seen your Officers & men at work."

After Cambrai there was a real danger that the RGLI's service battalion would be disbanded and the men posted to other regiments. There were no more Guernsey lads to fill the ranks and after much pleading by the Lt. Governor large numbers of English soldiers were drafted to the Guernseys to fill the gaps left by the slaughter at Les Rues Vertes. Most of them came from the 3rd Battalion the North Staffordshire Regiment.

During the early part of 1918 the RGLI was in the line at Passchendaele, perhaps the most unpleasant and unhealthy part of the Western Front where the awful conditions resulted in almost as many casualties as did German shell fire.

Meanwhile the Germans were able to move huge numbers of troops from the Eastern Front to the Western Front following the collapse of Imperial Russia and were planning a final attack in the west with the aim of winning the war, or at least forcing the Allies to the conference table.

The main weight of this attack fell on the old battlefield of the Somme, but a subsidiary attack took place in the Lys area of northern France. The full weight of the attack fell on a Portuguese Division, new to the line, which broke and ran. The 29th Division, including the Guernsey troops, were rushed into the line to stem the advance.

In the action which followed the vast majority of the battalion became casualties. On 11th April Lt. Col. T.L. de Havilland took into action 20 officers and 483 men. By 14th April he was reduced to just three officers and 55 other ranks. But the German attack had run out of steam and the last offensive was over. The battalion had played its part in stemming the flow but at a terrible cost.

The Wounded.

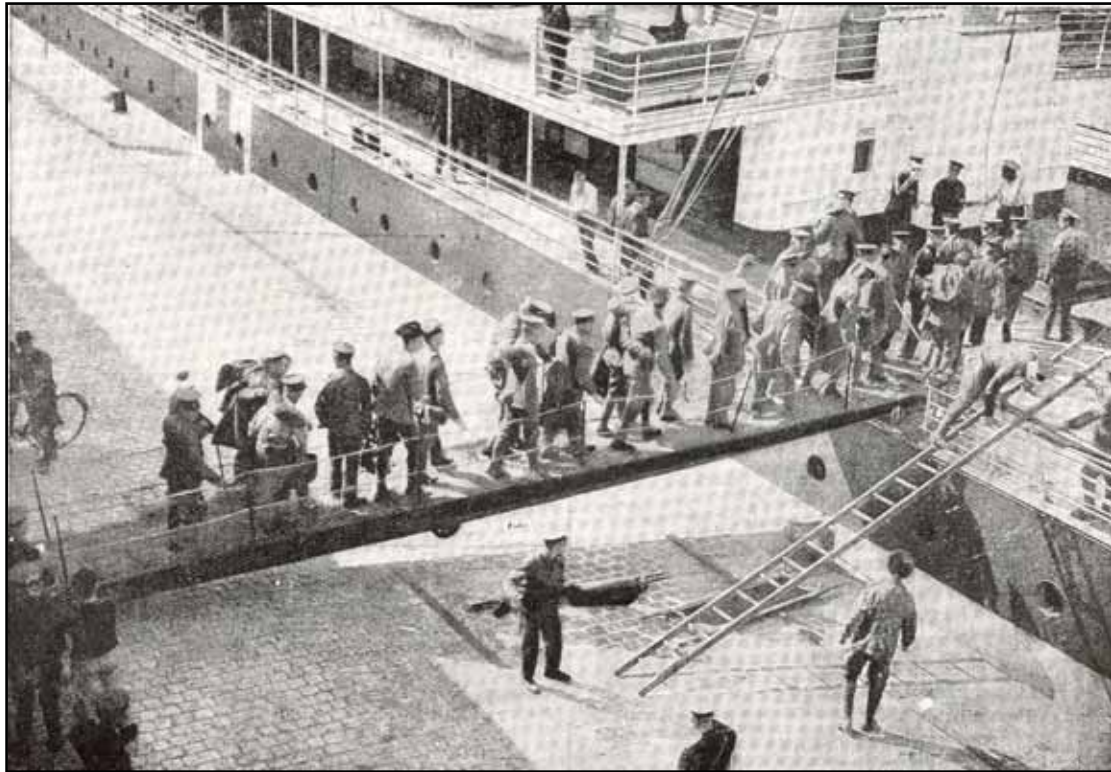
The wounded were sometimes the lucky ones. "To cop a Blighty one" was the dream of the men in the trenches. The reality could be horrifyingly different. The most common injury sustained in the trenches was a head wound from artillery shrapnel.



British Aid Post in France. January 1916.

A steel helmet lessened the danger, but did not remove it. Poison gas was most feared. Men died slowly and painfully from its effects. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s ex-servicemen continued to die from the effects of gassing in the war. Injuries inflicted to the mind from unbelievable horrors seen and experienced, had to be lived with.

From the front line Casualty Clearing Stations, the wounded were passed back to base hospitals and in more serious cases, back to England - "Blighty".



British troops being loaded onto a Hospital ship. Le Havre, France. 1914.



Doctors & nurses at Les Touillets Hospital, Guernsey.

Some RGLI casualties were repatriated to Guernsey. They were nursed by women and girls who very quickly had demonstrated a toughness that belied their genteel backgrounds. Nurses and doctors fought death and disease without antibiotics, penicillin, plastic surgery, skin grafts or blood transfusions. All of these came later, as a result of the research born of necessity during the war.

Lt. Chapman's Letter

*No. 2 Red Cross Hospital
Public Schools Wards
A.P.O. 2 BEF Rouen
France*

"As you have probably heard I had my right leg amputated as it was smashed by a shell & my left leg is broken at the shin. It was the work of two separate shells. Sgt. Le Poidevin came to my rescue & got me down a cellar at the risk of his life & some one else. I think it was my batman. I am pleased to say I am doing well now & gaining strength every day. My pulse & temperature are good & my appetite is wonderful. I can eat anything, & drink anything, & I feel remarkably fit now. I get rather bad nights & lots of pain occasionally. The dressing of my legs which takes place every two days is a painful procedure. I am going to Blighty after Xmas."

Lt. E.A. Chapman of the Buffs was in command of B Coy during Cambrai.

The Survivors

After Lys a few men who had been separated during the battle straggled back to the battalion but there was no question that the RGLI would be able to go back into the line in the foreseeable future.



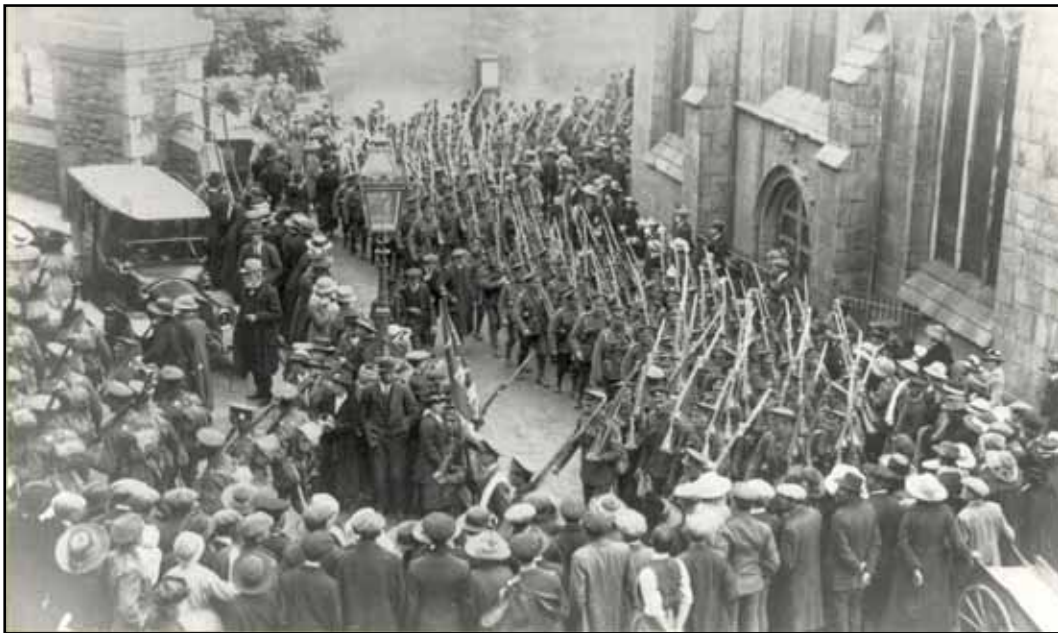
Mounting guard at General Haig's Headquarters. 1918.

A few days later the battalion was ordered to leave 29th Division and report to Ecuire where they took over as guard troops on Field Marshal Douglas Haig's headquarters at Montreuil. There they licked their wounds and received a number of drafts of new soldiers from the depot in Guernsey. But the RGLI's war was over.

In May 1919 the battalion returned to Guernsey



The RGLI survivors arriving in St. Peter Port Harbour, Guernsey. 22nd May 1919.



The RGLI survivors marching through the streets of St. Peter Port, Guernsey. 22nd May 1919.

The Cost.

The RGLI left behind them in France 327 graves bearing their cap badge. Many many more Guernseymen suffered grievous wounds of body and mind while yet others had suffered years of captivity in Germany.

The war had been won, but at a terrible cost which was felt in every home in the Island. When the call for men came in 1939 the States remembered 1917 and 1918 and refused to send the Militia to war.

The Total Number of men who served in the RGLI was 3549
Of those the number recruited in Guernsey was 2430
 The remainder were transferred from England.



Unveiling the Island War memorial. Smith Street, St. Peter Port. 1st September 1926.

Of the 3549 men of the RGLI, 2280 served in France with the 1st (Service) Battalion.

The following casualties were sustained.

Killed in Action or Missing, presumed dead.	230
Died of Wounds	67
Died of Sickness	30
Total	327
 Wounded	 667
 Prisoners of War	 255

The following honours were awarded to the RGLI

Officers	1 Companion of the Order of St. Michael & St. George
	4 Military Crosses
	1 Member of the Royal Victorian Order
Men	3 Distinguished Conduct Medals
	7 Military Medals
	1 Medaille Militaire
	1 Croix de Guerre
	 2 Officers and 2 men were mentioned in Dispatches.



**Here dead we lie because we did not choose
To live and shame the land from which we sprung.
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose;
But young men think it is, and we were young.**

A.E. Housman 1859-1936