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of two infantry regiments and an artillery regiment, was mobilised to replace the regular army garrison which was withdrawn to reinforce the British Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders.

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.

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

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.
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.

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.

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.
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.
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.

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.

虽然他们举起手来，说他们是“朋友”。但他们向我的排开枪。经过一些激烈的战斗，我们达成了目标，拿下了努恩德，利用了地洞来稳固我们的位置。我有运气抓获了5个德国人，他们给了我们一些有价值的信息。”

卫斯理·朱利安·勒波迪文

“有一次，我们3个人被德国人包围了。我们很好地给了他们一个教训，直到我被炸弹的冲击波击中，腿部和大腿受伤。我设法爬到一个农舍并给我的腿敷上绷带。之后我便无法挪动了。我很幸运被我们的一个士兵发现并帮助我回到医疗站。人们决定撤离梅辛尼尔。皇家野炮兵志愿从马可伊宁来带走梅辛尼尔的伤员。当我被抬在担架上时，铁丝网被重炮轰击，一颗炮弹刚好落在担架的后面，杀死两个，重伤一个。我被巧妙地保存下来，除了被震出担架外，没有受伤害。我设法爬了大约100码，然后在麻吉军的司令部门口绊倒。”

卫斯理·朱利安·勒波迪文

“我必须写信告诉您您有多么优秀的部队，多么优秀的士兵。军士官和士兵们都是砖块，每个人都很勇敢。他们确实做了出色的工作，而且上帝保佑，他们有东西可以顶住……...他们都像好人一样紧紧跟着我。当然，不知道我 unfamiliar with 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.
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”.

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.

A few days later the battalion was ordered to leave 29th Division and report to Ecuires 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 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.

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