

Great Britain's Great War - Family Remembered

Millions of people were killed in the war which broke out in 1914. With a population in the UK at the time of about 45 million and nearly 1 million British people lost in action, probably every resident in Thornborough lost a relative in this war.

Their stories are grim and their deaths seem pointless to us today, but the causes and course of the war were complex and not understood by most even in 1914. But the effects of the war were obvious and can be understood by reading the diaries and the stories of the people who were there and the loved ones they left behind.

All my grandparents survived the war though both grandfathers were on active duty, but my great uncle Maurice was not so lucky. Here is his story, as factual as I can make it, and I hope that other villagers will be encouraged to add their relative's stories, especially if they are about local people. I have lived in Thornborough since 1989, but this account is not about a local person. This account is about my great uncle Maurice, my maternal grandmother's older brother, who volunteered in 1914 and was killed in action in 1916.



Maurice

His name was Henry Maurice Watkins Wells, the family always referred to him as 'Maurice'. He was born in 1888 in Wallingford, Berkshire. He had four younger sisters and one brother, the youngest, born in 1903. After Harrow school and a BA in modern history from Oxford he joined the family brewery in 1910, 'Wallingford Brewery' owned by his father Henry Watkins Wells. Maurice was of a more artistic bent rather than a businessman like his father Henry, which is hardly surprising as his mother was a fine painter and her father was James Hayllar, a famous artist.

War Breaks Out

So when war broke out in 1914 he was not working at the family brewery, but in London. He volunteered into military service at the Inns of Court officer training corps and on 9th March 1915 was gazetted Second Lieutenant in the 4th Battalion, the Princess Charlotte of Wales's (Royal Berkshire) Regiment.

Maurice travels to France

The Battalion arrived in Boulogne on 31 March 1915 as part of 145th Brigade, 48th (South Midland) Division (TF), and after a period of training it made its way to Houchin (12th July), then Lières (17th July), Doullens (19th July), Marieux (20th July), and Bayencourt (21st July) until finally reaching the trenches at Hébuterne on 23rd July.

At Hébuterne, opposite Thiepval and Gommecourt, it relieved the 4th Battalion of the Oxon and Bucks Light Infantry and alternated between the trenches and billets at Authie and Sailly-les-Bois and occasionally Couin. Maurice was assigned to 'C' Company on 22nd November 1915.

Life in the Trenches

At the time, this part of the front was fairly quiet and the Battalion suffered relatively few casualties during its nine months in the area. But throughout the winter, the Battalion's worst enemy was water. By 29th November it was knee-deep in the trenches – can you imagine living in half metre deep muddy cold water every day and all day in November in ceaseless rain? And it got worse.

On 30th November the Battalion War Diary remarked: "All fire and communication trenches are in a bad state, and only a few pumps could be obtained from the RE's". This was a terrible situation and a lot of precautions were ordered for the prevention of trench foot.

On 1st December the Diary reads: "All working parties were employed in trying to cope with the mud and water in the trenches, which were in a deplorable state owing to the incessant rain. All the trenches were knee-deep in liquid mud, and in many places waist-deep: several men had to be dug out". The complaint continued on the following day: "The trenches show no improvement in spite of the continual pumping day and night: the dug-outs began to fall in too. The trenches become drains for the land as the water was rising even when the pumps were going".

The survivors were finally billeted at Authie from 6th to 14th December, where Maurice's 'C' Company were instructed in bombing, wire-breaking and the wearing of smoke helmets, and from 21st to 28th December, Maurice was sent away on a bombing course.

Christmas 1915

Nevertheless, he came back to his Battalion for Christmas Day of 1915, which was spent away from the trenches and seems to have been greatly enjoyed. The Diary reads: "A unique and successful day. Arrangements were made at the various estaminets (small cafes which serve beer) in the village [of Authie] for the use of their rooms for Company dinners from 12.30 to 18.00 hours. Three pigs were bought and distributed amongst the Companies, as pork was the favourite meat. The Commanding Officer gave a pudding to each N.C.O. and man; others were received from the 'Daily hens' Fund, and a parcel, containing a shirt, muffler, socks and chocolate: the latter had been provided out of a fund raised in Berkshire by Mrs Sernocold [the CO's wife] and Mrs F. R. Hedges. The sum of £750 was received in addition to gifts in kind. The Commanding Officer and Adjutant visited each Dinner, wishing the men a Happy Xmas and New Year, and a speedy return to their homes at the conclusion of the war. The Officers dined together at the Château, where a most successful and jolly Evening was spent. Major Clarke proposed the health of the Commanding Officer, who briefly responded. The thanks of the Mess are due to Madame Dewailly, who so kindly lent the room, glass, cutlery etc. for the table".

The Worst Enemy

Four days after Christmas the Battalion was back in the trenches at Hébuterne, taking casualties during sporadic actions. But the worst enemy was still active, and on 16th February 1916 the Diary tells us: "All available men were employed in pumping in trying to deal with the volume of water"; then, on 17th February: "Trenches were full of water and in many places the walls were falling in. All day was spent in dealing with the damage".

The 4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment is Relieved

On 24th February the Battalion was relieved for four days respite at Courcelles, "all ranks were very glad of the change". But once back in the trenches on 28th February: "The frost began to break and the trenches commenced to fall in, etc. All available men were employed day and night in coping with the water and falls". Things had not improved by 2 March when the Diary records that "All working parties were employed on pumping and clearing the trenches".

Maurice Returns from Leave to Escalating Enemy Action

On 20th March 1916, Maurice went on leave for an unspecified period, but in late April, after his return, working parties were still employed on "pumping and clearing, day and night", and the enemy artillery and machine-guns had become noticeably more active. The Battalion saw its

first real action during the night of 15/16 May: all was quiet until 00.30 hours, at which time the Germans began a bombardment “of extraordinary violence and accuracy” that was directed at 56th Division’s trenches over to the left of Maurice’s Battalion. This was followed by a raid on the Hébuterne trenches that cost the Battalion 18 killed in action, 51 wounded and 29 missing. Maurice in the front line was reported to have displayed great coolness, visited all his Posts during the bombardment, and handled the situation in a very capable manner, for which he was personally congratulated by his divisional commander.

The Battalion moves to the St. Riquier Training Area

On 16 May, the Battalion marched to Couin and then Beauval (18th May), but the men were so fatigued by the recent action, which came at the end of a week in the trenches, that 85 men fell out on the march. The Battalion then stayed out of the trenches for six weeks, training in the St Riquier Training Area, resting in various villages.

4th Battalion Re-deploys

Considerable disappointment was felt after route marching back to Mailly-Maillet, where 4th Battalion prepared for an attack on 1 July that never materialized. On 6 July the Battalion found itself at Sailly, just north of the Albert-Bapaume Road, and from there, two days later, it moved back to Hébuterne, where it still had to contend with water and mud for a week until it moved back to Sailly (13 July) and Senlis (15 July). On 16 July, the Battalion’s CO and his Adjt went to reconnoitre the village of La Boisselle, just to the south of the Albert-Bapaume Road, which had been captured by the 19th Division on 3 July. According to the shocked report in Maurice’s Battalion’s War Diary, the village “was a perfect scene of desolation; no wall of the village was left, the trenches were blown in, all the wire was shot away, and the debris of the battle lying about – dead, equipment, rifles, bombs, kit etc., the scene was terrible. Our guns had done their work well and the village was completely destroyed. The fortifications of the Germans were wonderful and some idea of the difficulties our attacking troops had to face could be understood”.

4th Battalion is Decimated in 5 Days Shelling

On 18 July, Maurice’s Battalion left Senlis and marched via Couzincourt and Albert to La Boisselle, where they took up positions on 20th July in the old front line of the German trenches between La Boisselle and Ovillers. Three days later, in the small hours of 23rd July, the Germans began to shell the village, counter-attacked at 04.00 hours, and were driven back by 07.00 hours at a cost to the Battalion of 128 of its members. On the following day the shelling recommenced, leaving just 51 officers and men, 9 of whom were suffering from shell shock. On 25 July, having lost a total of 242 officers and men during its five days on the Somme front, the Battalion was withdrawn to Albert, and thence to Arqueues (26th July) and Beauval (28th July), where a draft or 96 reinforcements was waiting.

Green Conscript Reinforcements

During the reinforcements’ march, which was made in temperatures from 75 to 81 degrees, 125 exhausted men fell out. The Diary expressed some considerable doubt about the quality of some of the new arrivals: “Some of the men should not have been sent out: they had not handled a rifle before, only broomsticks; they had not been taught to turn and had no knowledge of a bomb [hand grenade]; many of the elementary points on sanitation were unknown”. Although the diarist then qualified his remarks by saying that they “refer to only a few” of the new men, it is extremely rare to find such opinions being expressed in a War Diary of the time, and these may well be an index of the shortage of trained recruits in England just after the butchery of the first days on the Somme and when conscription had been compulsory in England for less than six months.

Maurice Joins the Royal Flying Corps August 1916

After resting for two weeks, the Battalion returned to action in the vicinity of Ovillers on 13th August 1916, but Maurice left the Battalion to join the Royal Flying Corps at the end of July. We do not know what moved Maurice to join the RFC, but it may be that like many another RFC volunteer he preferred the high risk of flying to the mud, squalor and ceaseless attrition that he had experienced in the trenches. On 14th August, he was attached to 11 Squadron as a Lieutenant. 11 Squadron had been formed from a nucleus flight of 7 Squadron in February 1915, and after training at Netheravon, Wiltshire, on the Vickers F[ighter] B[omber] 5, it became the world's first fighter squadron when reached France on 25th July 1915 and was stationed at Vert Galand aerodrome, near Villers-Bretonneux and six miles from Doullens on the road to Amiens.

The Vickers FB5 Bi-Plane

The Vickers F[ighter] B[iplane] 5 (F.B.5), was a two-seater (pusher) bi-plane which had first flown on 17 July 1914, and it had a similar configuration to that of the F.E.2(b). It was powered by a 100 hp Gnome Monosoupape rotary engine, its top speed was between 70 and 75 mph, and by the end of 1915 it was clearly outclassed by the Fokker Eindecker. Despite this, the Squadron can list a wide range of war-time achievements during its first 15 months in France. During the Battle of Loos in late September 1915, one of its flights was detached to fly long-range reconnaissance missions from Auchel, mainly over Ham, St Quentin and Peronne, 30 miles behind the front.

Maurice Flies into Action

The brief period that elapsed between Maurice leaving the Berkshire Regt and becoming operational in the RFC suggests that he became an Observer, not a Pilot. In August 1916, 11 Squadron consisted of one flight of scouts, two flights of F.E.2(b)s, and one flight of modified Vickers F.B.5s. When Maurice arrived, its principal duties were offensive patrolling, photography, and escorting bombers, mainly in the Beaumont Hamel/Gommecourt area. On 1st September the Squadron was moved yet again, this time to Izel-le-Hameau, south-east of Savy.



Their Bi-Plane Goes Missing

After only four weeks flying, on 15th September 1916 Maurice and his Pilot, Second Lieutenant Frank Edwin Hollingsworth, were reported missing after an offensive patrol over the German lines that involved a dog-fight with 20 enemy machines. Both men were presumed killed in action on the 15th September 1916, Maurice was aged 27.

Maurice and Frank are Buried

Nine months after they were shot down the remains of the two men must have been discovered in the wreck of their machine, for they are buried in a joint grave in Canadian Cemetery No. 2, Neuville-St Vaast; 10.C.17-18. Presumably their remains could not be separated. Maurice's parents lost their oldest son but had five other children all of whom outlived them. Their father died after being run over by a car when he was cycling to work in 1932 and their mother survived both world wars and died in 1950, aged 88.

Bernard Garbe
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