

The Fates of the Officers of the 9th Lancers who vanished at Messines on 31 October 1914

Introduction

One of the greatest days of crisis for the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) during the Great War was 31 October 1914, when German forces, greatly superior in numbers and artillery, attempted to break through the lines defending Ypres at two important places, on the Messines ridge and along the Menin Road towards Gheluvelt.¹ A German cavalry General informed his wife on the 29th that ‘If the attack is successful, the enemy line will be pierced and their situation as far as the sea will be untenable. ... It could well be decisive for the northern theatre of operations’.² Facing the brunt of the onslaught at Messines was 1st Cavalry Brigade, to which the 9th (Queen’s Royal) Lancers were attached from 2nd Cavalry Brigade.³ The Cavalry Corps, acting as infantry, was badly stretched, having to defend a line six miles in length from Kleine Zillebeke in the north to the south of Messines with far too few troops.⁴ The numbers on both sides to be involved on the 31st at Messines are impossible to calculate accurately. One very reliable modern account says that ‘some twelve German battalions, comprising some 6000 men, faced not much more than 900 cavalymen’, a ratio slightly higher than the *Official History*’s ‘over six to one’.⁵ Whatever the exact figure—and ‘wastage’ on both sides in the days before has to be acknowledged—the 1st Cavalry Brigade was heavily outnumbered at Messines, with only one artillery unit, I Battery RHA, in direct support. The 9th Lancers at full strength would have had 549 Other Ranks; on 30 October 1914 it numbered 409, with only about 150 available for the firing line as many men were at the Remount Depot and 618 horses had to be cared for away from danger.⁶

The 9th Lancers had had an eventful time in the war, being commanded by the inspirational Lt-Colonel David ‘Soarer’ Campbell until he took over 6th Cavalry Brigade on 8 November 1914.⁷ One Squadron had been among the first to sight German units, on 21 August 1914.⁸ The regiment fought at Élouges on the 24th—where it took part in a disastrous charge and Captain Francis Grenfell won the Victoria Cross for helping to save four guns of 119 Battery, RFA—and suffered like the rest of the BEF on the retreat to the Marne.⁹ On 7 September the 9th Lancers were involved in the last lance-to-lance charge in European history, driving off from Moncel a superior force of Prussian Dragoon Guards, an action that has been described as of ‘antiquarian interest’.¹⁰ It was present at the Battle of the Aisne where, unfortunately, on 29 September while in billets at Longueval, several shells fell amongst A Squadron, killing one officer, Lt G.E. Taylor-Whitehead, and seventeen Other Ranks and wounding another twenty-five.¹¹ This occurred just days before, like the rest of the BEF, the regiment moved north.

¹ Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford 2013), p.243.

² Quoted in Nigel Cave and Jack Sheldon, *Ypres 1914: Messines* (Barnsley 2015), pp.34-36.

³ J.E. Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1914* (1924: Uckfield, n.d.), Vol. 2, p.304.

⁴ John Buchan, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell: A Memoir* (London 1920), p.215. The 9th Lancers were issued with bayonets for the first time on 17 October. War Diary, 9th (Queen’s Royal) Lancers, 17 October 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1113.

⁵ Ian F.W. Beckett, *Ypres 1914: The First Battle* (Harlow 2006), p.160; Edmonds, *Official History*, Vol. 2, p.307.

⁶ War Diary, 9th (Queen’s Royal) Lancers, 30 October 1914.

⁷ Campbell had won the 1896 Grand National on Soarer. Later in the war he commanded 21st Division. Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front* (London 2005), pp.197-198. He gave an inspirational speech to the regiment just two days before embarkation for France, reminding the men that they had ‘the greatest traditions to uphold’. Alexandra Churchill, *Blood and Thunder. The Boys of Eton College and the First World War* (iBooks edition), p.26.

⁸ Edmonds, *Official History 1914*, Vol. 1, p.52.

⁹ Gerald Gliddon, *VCs of the First World War: 1914* (Stroud 2011), pp.34-36.

¹⁰ Reginald Pound, *The Lost Generation* (London 1964), p.43.

¹¹ War Diary, 9th (Queen’s Royal) Lancers, 29 September 1914.

During the morning of 30 October the 9th Lancers were in billets at Neuve-Eglise, a short distance from where the BEF were holding the line around Messines. At 1pm Campbell received orders to prepare to relieve the 11th Hussars, who were in trenches either side of the road to Warneton on the eastern side of Messines.¹² The relief took place at dusk under heavy shellfire. To the left were trenches held by the 2nd Dragoon Guards (the Queen's Bays); to the right, trenches held by two companies of the 57th Wilde's Rifles, attached from the 7th Indian Infantry Brigade.¹³ In Campbell's opinion, his unit was too small to defend his position adequately. He needed 290 men; he claimed to have only half that number.¹⁴ This left him with no support and a weak firing line. With one trench as an outpost held by C Squadron and with the Bay's trenches thrown back, the 9th Lancers were in a small and vulnerable salient (see map). After several requests from Campbell, during the night a troop of the 5th Dragoon Guards was sent up to stiffen the defences in the right trench. Meanwhile, the 2nd Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers began to relieve the Indian troops.¹⁵

It was too little, too late. Shortly before daybreak on the 31st the Germans attacked in force. Francis Grenfell 'heard horns blowing and German words of command and cheering' as the Indian companies on the right of the Lancers gave way.¹⁶ Soon the pressure was felt along the whole front. Campbell reported that:

I told my [Squadron] leaders to hold on and I reported to General Briggs and received orders to hold on. At the same time I received information from my left squadron that the Bays had been driven out of the only trench which protected them from being enfiladed. I sent word to my leaders to hold on but withdrew two troops of my right squadron to support trench A [see map] to prevent the enemy attacking in rear. Both my flank squadrons reported they were being attacked in flank and enfiladed and could not hold on.¹⁷

Campbell then ordered C Squadron, in the outpost trench to the east, to withdraw and to protect the left of the regiment with B Squadron, part of which had been sent to the right. Grenfell, OC B Squadron, subsequently wrote that:

I was now left with two very weak troops—that is, from 15 to 20 men and a machine gun. Suddenly, about twenty yards to our rear at daybreak there was a rush of men from some houses. To my utter astonishment they appeared to be Germans. Apparently the enemy ... had got round my extreme left ... and attacked the troops [the Bays] on my left, who had given way. The Germans were around us at a distance of 100 yards. They took a house, ran up to the top storeys and fired straight into my trench. ... I was on the extreme right of the

¹² Except where noted, the following account comes from Appendix II, 'Report on part taken by the 9th (QR) Lancers in operations round Messines October 30/31st', War Diary, 9th (Queen's Royal) Lancers. The report was written by Lt-Col. Campbell and dated 30-31/10/1914. See also Martin Gillott (ed), War Diary, 11th Hussars, 30 October 1914, https://www.amazon.com.au/Great-War-Diaries-Hussars-Flanders-ebook/dp/B01N7TRZ1E/ref=sr_1_2?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1528856386&sr=1-2&keywords=gillott+11th+hussars

¹³ War Diary, 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen's Bays), 31 October 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1109/1; Major E.L. Swift, 'Brief report on the part taken by the 57th Rifles (FF) in the actions in and around Wytschaete and Messines on the 29th, 30th, 31st October and 1st November 1914', War Diary, 57th Wilde's Rifles (Frontier Force), TNA PRO WO 95/3923. See also Martin Gillott (ed), https://www.amazon.com.au/Great-War-Diaries-Frontier-1914-15-ebook/dp/B076Z1D6GN/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1528856650&sr=1-1&keywords=gillott+57th+wilde%27s

¹⁴ If Campbell really had only about 150 men available, it begs the question of where the remainder of the 409 reported on 30 October were. Many, as noted above, would have been with the horses and at the Remount Depot, but it is likely Campbell underestimated the number of men he had at his disposal.

¹⁵ Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle*, p.244. Gilbert, following Campbell, erroneously states that it was the 6th, not the 5th, Dragoon Guards. See War Diary, 5th Dragoon Guards, 30 October 1914, TNA, PRO WO 95/1109.

¹⁶ Buchan, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell*, p.216.

¹⁷ Appendix II, 'Report on part taken by the 9th (QR) Lancers in operations round Messines October 30/31st', War Diary, 9th (Queen's Royal) Lancers. See also, War Diary, 2nd Dragoon Guards, 31 October 1914.

trench when this was reported to me. I had decided to hang on when I became aware that C Squadron ... had received orders to withdraw. At this moment heavy fire was directed on our trench, not only from the rear but also from the left flank, where the Germans had brought up a machine gun. Luckily, the bullets went a bit high. I ordered the men to retire from the right and crawled out of the trench to the houses that were on the right of the brickfield.¹⁸

Shortly afterwards a shell hit his Squadron and ‘blew it to the winds’. Grenfell was wounded—with ‘an ugly bullet-hole in his thigh’—and carried back to safety.¹⁹

By this time the 9th Lancers were boxed in, ‘forming more or less three sides of a square’. With only one subaltern left unhurt and bombarded by shrapnel, orders were received to fall back to the far side of Messines. This was accomplished ‘in good order’.²⁰ Despite ‘a wonderful defence by cavalry with the bayonet, fighting from house to house and street to street’, Messines was lost to the Germans on the following day.²¹ At dusk on 1 November the remains of the 9th Lancers took over trenches to the west of the village, where they remained until daybreak.

The regiment’s War Diary recorded the following officer casualties: 1 killed; 8 wounded and 2 missing. The regimental history also mentions another officer wounded on the 31st, Lt D.M. Veitch, who was attached from 1st Lancers, Indian Army.²² The officer confirmed dead was the unfortunate 2nd Lt P.F. Payne-Gallwey, attached from 21st Lancers, who joined on the 30th and was killed within twenty-four hours. The two recorded as missing were Captain A.M. Pollard, RAMC, later confirmed as POW, and Lt F.L. Harvey, whose brother was to die of wounds on 3 November. On the War Diary’s list of wounded were: Major E.H.E. Abadie; Captain F.O. Grenfell; Captain the Hon. R. Robertson; Captain G.N. Reynolds; Lt J.H.B. Hollings; Lt C.W. Norman; Lt F.S. Crossley and Captain I.B.G.T. Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood (Lord Blackwood). Four of these—Robertson, Reynolds, Norman and Crossley—were subsequently confirmed as prisoners of war. Grenfell and Blackwood found themselves next to each other on stretchers at Bailleul.²³

With the ground over which they had fought having been lost, discovering the immediate fates of the wounded and missing was difficult. News of the five captured slowly filtered through, but there was no concrete evidence to explain what had happened to Abadie, Hollings and Harvey.²⁴ Abadie and Harvey were ‘originals’ with the regiment; Hollings, attached from 21st Lancers, had reported for duty on 24 September. Abadie’s casualty status changed after a few weeks, from wounded to unofficially POW.²⁵ Presumably, some information had become available, possibly from a wounded man in hospital. But thereafter the trail ran cold.

Major E.H.E Abadie DSO

Major Eustace Henry Egremont Abadie was OC C Squadron and came from a distinguished military family.²⁶ His father, Major-General Henry Richard Abadie, has been described as ‘in many ways the

¹⁸ Buchan, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell*, p.217-218.

¹⁹ Frederic Coleman, *From Mons to Ypres with General French: A Personal Narrative* (New York 1916), p.274.

²⁰ Appendix II, ‘Report on part taken by the 9th (QR) Lancers in operations round Messines October 30/31st’, War Diary, 9th (Queen’s Royal) Lancers.

²¹ Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle*, p.244.

²² E.W. Sheppard, *The Ninth Queen’s Royal Lancers 1715-1936* (Aldershot 1939), p.256. I am grateful to Steven Broomfield for information about this book and the 9th/12th Lancer Museum in Derby for making it available on-line.

²³ Buchan, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell*, p.220.

²⁴ Robertson, Norman and Crossley were reported as prisoners in *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 19 November 1914.

²⁵ *Western Mail*, 26 November 1914.

²⁶ The Abadie family has been the subject of a recent comprehensive and interesting study. See Liz Moloney, *The Abadies* (Eastbourne 2014). See also Charterhouse World War I Memorial, www.charterhousewarmemorial.org.uk.

very model of an Edwardian Major-General, and before that a dashing cavalry officer of the British Empire'.²⁷ He had served in a number of regiments, including a period as CO of the 9th Lancers. He had four boys from his first marriage, none of whom married or was to survive beyond 1917. Eustace was the third son, born in India on 24 January 1877 and educated at Charterhouse and Sandhurst. On 11 August 1897 he was commissioned into the 9th Lancers and served in India and, from just before the Second Boer War began, in South Africa.²⁸ He was part of the relief force that saved Kimberley and was on Major-General John French's staff. He ended the war having been Mentioned in Despatches and with the DSO. Between 1902 and 1911 he served again in India and South Africa and in February 1914 graduated from the Staff College at Camberley (p.s.c.), a well-regarded qualification that only a small minority of the pre-Great War officer corps possessed.²⁹

What happened to Abadie on 31st October? There is no clear evidence of when or how he was killed, but there is evidence of where his death probably occurred. Abadie began the day with his Squadron in the advanced trench. When it withdrew, the Squadron was divided, with one-half taking up a position close to B Squadron to the north of the Messines-Warrenton road and the brickfields. Francis Grenfell, OC B Squadron, met Abadie at this point, who said to him, 'Well, Francis, what do you think of the situation?' Grenfell could not remember exactly how he replied, but the gist was that he believed his Squadron was being attacked from front and left. 'That was the last I saw of [Abadie]', he later wrote, looking 'exactly the same as usual and ... in the same cheery mood, taking everything light-heartedly, as was his custom'.³⁰ He understood that soon afterwards C Squadron was ordered to make a bayonet attack on the house which the Germans were firing from in the rear, but they were unable to move because of heavy German fire. It was likely that at this point Abadie was killed, possibly in an attempt to rally his men.

There is no evidence in the International Red Cross archives that attempts were made to confirm that Abadie was a POW, although it is possible that the German authorities were contacted via the neutral American Embassy in Berlin for news.³¹ When no officially-acceptable evidence existed for an officer's fate, the War Office usually waited for more than six months before, with the permission of the family, officially declaring that he was presumed killed, thus allowing probate to proceed. In Abadie's case nearly seven months elapsed before the declaration was made, on 13 May 1915. Four days before, his father had died. Having completely vanished, Abadie was commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres.

Lt F.L Harvey

An unusual feature of the composition of the officer group of 9th Lancers in 1914 was the number of brothers serving together: Riversdale and Francis Grenfell; Guy F. and G. Nairne Reynolds; George Edward and Henry Collingwood Taylor-Whitehead; and Douglas Lennox and Frank Lennox Harvey. Five of the eight were dead by May 1915, four of them killed before Christmas. The Harveys were to die within days of each other, a factor that was to complicate the process of recording casualties at the War Office. The younger, Douglas, died of wounds on 3 November 1914 and was buried in Dranouter cemetery, West-Vlaanderen. Frank was officially reported as missing either on the 30th or 31st of October (it was the 31st). They came from a very wealthy, privileged yet very unfortunate Scottish family.³² Their father was Rev. Edward Douglas Harvey, once Rector of Downham Market in Norfolk, who in 1894 had moved to Beedingwood, a large late Victorian house, in Colgate, Sussex, where he and his wife Constance played leading roles in local Conservative politics and community

²⁷ Moloney, *The Abadies*, p.9.

²⁸ *London Gazette*, 10 August 1897, p.4483.

²⁹ Moloney, *The Abadies*, p.32.

³⁰ Buchan, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell*, pp.218-219.

³¹ The American Embassy was being used as a conduit by November 1914. The absence of Abadie's Service Record from the War Office archives now held in London by The National Archives makes it impossible to know what the family did in their search for news.

³² Frank, for instance, left £354777 in his will. The family's fortune was made in the West Indies.

affairs. Among many other positions held, Rev. Harvey was Chairman of Sussex County Cricket Club.³³ In 1901 the family employed twenty live-in domestic staff.³⁴

Edward and Constance were to have five children, three boys and two girls. The three boys attended Eton, Frank—born in 29 July 1891 he was the eldest—leaving in 1909 and Douglas in 1911. Both went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, Frank matriculating in 1909 and Douglas in 1911.³⁵ Both served in the university Cavalry Squadron of the OTC as officers and both were subsequently commissioned into the 9th Lancers, Frank in January 1913 and Douglas in May 1914.³⁶ Frank was promoted to Lieutenant on 6 October 1913.³⁷

This bald account suggests that the brothers lived in the rarefied atmosphere surrounding the privileged, innocent and often wealthy young gentlemen of Edwardian England who seemingly had the world at their feet.³⁸ Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, Professor of English Literature at Cambridge University, hinted at what was to be lost when these young men went to war. Late in 1914, with Cambridge devoid of students and younger staff, he remembered a small event in 1913 in which Douglas Harvey probably played a part:

I see a cavalry troop of the Cambridge University O.T.C. clattering home over the bridge at Magdalen in a drizzle at the shut of the evening ... calling to one another, as they wheeled by St John's, as if all Cambridge belonged to them. They are gone. They have taken their cheerfulness out of Cambridge; and have left us to an empty university, to chill streets, the short days, the long nights.³⁹

Such memories were to spawn the myth of “The Lost Generation”, a gilded youth, the non-fulfilment of whose talents ‘was part of a tragedy played out beyond their time’.⁴⁰

Yet pre-war tragedies plagued the Harvey family too. One of the daughters died unexpectedly in 1897 and their younger brother, Ernest, died of pneumonia following a boating accident at Eton in April 1908.⁴¹ Only three months later their mother died suddenly while in London.⁴² Such events brought the boys closer together. Being identical twins ensured that Riversdale Grenfell transferred from the Royal Bucks Hussars to join his brother with the 9th Hussars as Intelligence Officer as soon as war was declared. Frank and Douglas Harvey, only two years apart in age, followed the same pathway from Eton onwards partly because of shared family misfortune. It was to lead to greater tragedy.

The death of Douglas, of wounds, was conclusive. He was buried and officially reported dead.⁴³ Frank's situation was much more complex, for no-one could say for certain that he had been killed. As in Abadie's case, Julian Grenfell was the only eye-witness. He reported seeing Harvey during the action on 31 October. In the late morning, returning from reporting to Campbell—who had told him to hang on until reinforcements arrived—he spoke ‘to Lennie Harvey, who was standing with his

³³ *The Argus*, 10 August 2012,

http://www.theargus.co.uk/news/9855724.Amongst_the_ruins_of_lost_Sussex_stately_homes/

³⁴ 1901 Census, Ancestry.Co.uk.

³⁵ G.V. Carey (ed), *The War List of the University of Cambridge 1914-1918* (Cambridge 1921), p.405.

³⁶ *London Gazette*, 11 July 1911, p.5173, 17 January 1913, p.410, 18 February 1913, p.1244, 15 May 1914, p.3929. Their uncle was Colonel Sir George Samuel Abercrombie Harvey, Black Watch, who spent most of his career in Egypt and the Sudan and served during the Great War as Provost Marshal.

³⁷ Army List 1914.

³⁸ For an assessment of their characters, see Churchill, *Blood and Thunder*, p.25.

³⁹ Quoted in Pound, *Lost Generation*, p.56.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.184.

⁴¹ The Derelict Miscellany: Beedingwood, www.derelictmisc.org.uk/beedhome.html

⁴² *West Sussex County Times and Standard*, 18 July 1908. Edward Harvey remarried in 1911 and had another son.

⁴³ When the official stone was erected over his grave after the war, his father added the inscription, “For God For King and Country”.

troop in the road. ... I told [him] I had had orders to hold the ridge, which I pointed out to him, and told him to hold the ridge on my left. This, I believe, is the last that was seen of that officer'.⁴⁴

Edward Harvey received a telegram from the War Office on 3 November, informing him that Frank was missing. The family appears not to have sought information from the International Red Cross in Geneva, but the War Office sent an inquiry to Berlin via the American Embassy which elicited the reply that a Lieutenant George Harvey of the Suffolk Regiment was a prisoner at Burg.⁴⁵ In May 1915, at the same time as Abadie's situation was being reviewed, the War Office began to receive Red Cross reports from wounded 9th Lancer survivors of 31st October. One, Private Pearce, partly confirmed Grenfell's account: Harvey had been sent with eight or nine men to defend a barricade at Messines, none of whom were seen again. Two other reports focused on Douglas rather than on Frank. Trooper Skinner thought that Frank was wounded and a prisoner of war, with Douglas being killed a fortnight later. Lance-Corporal Twyford saw Douglas being buried, after a shell had landed in his trench killing him and four others. He made no mention of Frank but noted that Douglas 'had not been with us long'.⁴⁶

None of these reports could be used to confirm Frank's death. There were enough hints that he might be a prisoner for his father to refuse to accept the War Office's suggestion in 1915 that his son should be officially presumed to be dead. In the circumstances and having already lost so many of his family, Edward Harvey's decision to retain hope that at least one of the sons from his first marriage was still alive is understandable. In deference to his wishes, Frank's name was kept in the Army List until 1919. Only once most of the prisoners of war had returned home did the family's lawyer contact the War Office, in January 1919, asking for a death certificate. MS C.2, the War Office Casualties Department, made one further enquiry to the CO of the 9th Lancers, citing Twyford's unofficial report. As might be expected, no further news had come to light: Frank Harvey 'was last seen going towards his squadron'. On 25 March 1919 the War Office informed Edward Harvey that his son was now officially presumed dead through 'lapse of time'.⁴⁷

Lt J.H.B Hollings

John Herbert Butler Hollings was born at The Watchetts in Frimley, Surrey on 29 April 1887.⁴⁸ His father Herbert was a wealthy landowner, J.P and a Deputy Lieutenant of the county, with a law degree from Oxford University. His mother, Nina nee Smyth, was one of six sisters, a couple of whom, including Nina herself, were strong-minded individualists who lived unconventional lives.⁴⁹ The Smyths were a military family: Hollings' maternal great-grandfather was a cavalry officer at the storming of Seringapatam in India in 1799 and fought in the Peninsular War; and his maternal grandfather, Major-General John Hall Smyth, was a career soldier in the Bengal Artillery and Royal Artillery.

From September 1900 Hollings received his education at H.V. Macnaghten's House at Eton College. Possibly because of illness, he left in July 1903 and spent two years with a private tutor in Surrey. He appears to have sought a military career, for after a year spent under the guidance of a military crammer, he applied for a cadetship at Sandhurst in June 1906.⁵⁰ It seems that he was unsuccessful. In November 1907 he was commissioned into the Hampshire Imperial Yeomanry, which in 1908 became part of the new Territorial Force.⁵¹ Joining this part-time defence force could be a "back-door" way of entering the army and three years later Hollings was commissioned into the 21st

⁴⁴ Buchan, *Francis and Riversdale Grenfell*, p.220.

⁴⁵ Service Record, Lt Frank Lennox Harvey, TNA PRO WO 339/8809. The officer was Lt R.G. Harvey, 2nd Suffolk Regiment, captured at Le Cateau.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* The reports are dated 3 May 1915, 21 May 1915 and 30 May 1915 respectively.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ A copy of Hollings' birth certificate is in his Service Record (SR), TNA, PRO WO 339/7200.

⁴⁹ One sister was Dame Edith Smyth (1858-1944), composer of music, suffragette and bisexual.

⁵⁰ SR, J.H.B. Hollings.

⁵¹ *London Gazette*, 6 December 1907, p.8530.

(Empress of India's) Lancers as a 2nd Lieutenant on probation.⁵² This cavalry regiment was part of the Indian Army. On census day in 1911, however, Hollings was in Egypt, but he served in India until 1914. While there he became engaged to Miss Florence Fletcher, the daughter of a Lieutenant-Colonel in the RAMC.⁵³

With a number of other 21st Lancer officers, Hollings was on leave in England when the war broke out. Replacements for casualties amongst the 9th Lancers' officers by the end of the Battle of the Aisne were required and Hollings was attached, arriving on 24 September.

The first news that the Hollings' family had of the fate of their son came in a War Office telegram dated 5 November 1914, stating that he had been wounded on 30/31 October, how seriously being unknown.⁵⁴ A further letter, sent on 22 December to Hollings' father with a copy to Lt-Colonel Fletcher, who had been making enquiries on behalf of his daughter, quoted a report from the Adjutant of the 9th Lancers: 'Lt. Hollings was wounded at Messines on night of 30/31 October. He with others was put in a house and since then nothing further has been heard of him'. A day later the BEF's Deputy Adjutant General's department informed the War Office that Hollings was wounded and a prisoner of war. This led to Florence Fletcher initiating an official enquiry to Berlin, which elicited the reply, 'unbekannt' (unknown).

There matters stood until early February 1915, when a Lt Charles W.N. Moncrieff, of 2nd King's Own Scottish Borderers, wrote to the British Red Cross Society describing what he had seen on the night of 31 October at Messines. 'With regard to Lt J. H. B. Hollings, 21st Lancers, reported missing on the 30th October', he wrote:

I regret to say that in Messines on the night of 31st October, in the garden of the Convent school there, I found the body of a subaltern of the 21st Lancers. He seemed to have been standing on a ladder looking out over the garden wall, and to have been killed by a shell which had brought down the wall at this place, as well as the ladder on which he was standing. As the hour was very late, the night dark, and much to be done, I did not look for his identity disc, and next morning before I had been to the place again to identify and to arrange for his burial, we were ordered to retire from Messines; but if the casualty lists of the time do not allow for the death of any other subaltern of the 21st Lancers at that time and place, I am afraid that he must be identified as Mr. Hollings. He was in a remote corner of the garden, and it is probable that no one else of the Cavalry Brigade saw him killed.⁵⁵

If the body discovered by Moncrieff had been that of Hollings, he had been killed during the house to house fighting on the morning of 31 October. The Germans had broken into the north of Messines and a battery of 65th *Field Artillery Regiment* had been dragged into the village to destroy the convent, which was captured by the 125th (*Stuttgart*) *Infantry Regiment*.⁵⁶ Moncrieff was able to discover the body following a subsequent counter-attack beginning about 1pm by his battalion and 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, both of 13th Brigade, with a combined force of no more than 800 men.⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid., 2 December 1910, p.9039.

⁵³ Florence Marjorie Fletcher was born in Simla on 4 January 1890. In December 1920 she married Captain E.W.D. Vaughan, MC, of the 2nd Lancers, Indian Army (the son of a Major-General). I am grateful to "Mark1959" of the Great War Forum for information on Florence Fletcher.

⁵⁴ SR, J.H.B. Hollings. Unless otherwise stated, all references hereafter come from Hollings' service record.

⁵⁵ Lt Charles W.N. Moncrieff to Secretary, Enquiry Department for Wounded and Missing, British Red Cross Society, 3 February 1915, *ibid.* The letter in the Service Record is a typed copy. I have been unable to find a Lt Charles W.N. Moncrieff mentioned in the 2nd KOSB War Diary. It is possible the initials were mistyped and that the officer was 2nd Lt C. K. Scott Moncrieff, who joined the 2nd from the 3rd Battalion on 24 October 1914. For Scott Moncrieff see <https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/3931694>. I am grateful to Ken Morrison for this reference.

⁵⁶ Beckett, *Ypres 1914*, p.160.

⁵⁷ The 2nd KOSB had only arrived in the Messines area, by bus, on the 31st. Ray Westlake, *British Battalions in France and Belgium 1914* (Barnsley 1997), p.347.

It was desperate close fighting. Sometimes only fifty yards or less separated the foes. House to house fighting is as difficult to describe as it is to conduct ... In that most nerve-stretching, surprising type of warfare, when death may threaten from above, below, at the side and even from behind, the KOSB took the convent and cleaned the houses near the church. But though the enemy was seen hurrying back to his prepared positions by the brickfields, east of Messines, once he got there, by covering fire from his reserves, he was able to hold the KOSB within the eastern edge.⁵⁸

The next day, the Germans took the village.

Did Moncrieff find Hollings' body? On the balance of probabilities, he did. But MS 2. Cas., at the War Office, could not use his report to confirm death without the identity disc, as it contradicted other information in their possession. Moreover, Hollings' father had not given up hope and he ensured that his son's name remained in the Army List until the end of 1916. His mother, however, appears to have accepted the inevitable earlier. In December 1914 Nina Hollings had gone to France to look for a site for a potential hospital at the behest of Lady Eva Wemyss. A suitable chateau was found, at Compiègne, and she and her long-term companion, the artist and sculptor Helena Gleichen, worked there until May 1915. That she had accepted the death of her son is suggested by her wearing a black arm band while driving ambulances and tending the wounded.⁵⁹

Matters remained officially in limbo until the War Office received a request for information on Hollings from the Central Casualty Bureau at Simla in India on 15 April 1917.⁶⁰ Presumably the Bureau became involved because Hollings was still nominally serving in the 21st Lancers, an Indian Army regiment that had remained on the sub-continent. After reviewing Hollings' file at the War Office, one official declared that it was 'an extraordinary case'. No evidence could be found that Hollings had ever been officially declared missing, only wounded. The official was inclined to blame the family, for he claimed, erroneously, 'that no enquiries have been made by the relatives'. The usual checks were made to satisfy the Indian department and finally, in May 1917, after his father had accepted that no hope remained, Hollings was officially presumed to be dead. The family did not respond to the offer of Hollings' name being published as a casualty.

This was not the end of the story, for it appears that Hollings *had* been buried in 1914 and his grave marked. By whom remains unknown. During the battlefield clearances in 1920 a memorial cross 'bearing the name and regimental particulars of Lieutenant J.H.B. Hollings, 21st Lancers, was found at Messines'. No remains were found with the cross, which it was planned to re-erect in the new concentration cemetery of Messines Ridge British Cemetery, south of Ypres.⁶¹ If the cross was taken there, it no longer exists, nor is Hollings mentioned in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission list of burials and commemorations for that cemetery. He is, however, commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial to the Missing.

Even more remarkably, but unknown at the time, Hollings' remains had also been found, yet remained unidentified. The remains, including clothing and buttons that showed that he was an officer of the 21st Lancers, were found at map reference (map 28 Ypres) o.33.c.9.4, close to Messines' convent.⁶² The connection with Hollings was not made, however, at that time. The remains were reburied in La Brique Military Cemetery, No. 2, with Kipling's inscription "Known Unto God" on the

⁵⁸ Quoted in Cave and Sheldon, *Messines*, pp.73-74. See also, War Diary of 2nd King's Own Scottish Borderers, TNA PRO WO 95/1552, 31 October 1914.

⁵⁹ Dix Noonan Webb Auctions, https://www.dnw.co.uk/auction-archive/past-catalogues/lot.php?auction_id=455&lot_id=294468. It appears that Hollings' parents had been estranged for many years.

⁶⁰ SR, J.H.B. Hollings.

⁶¹ Major Stopford to Herbert Hollings, 24 April 1920, *ibid*.

⁶² I am grateful to "Howard", of the Great War Forum, for help with this map reference.

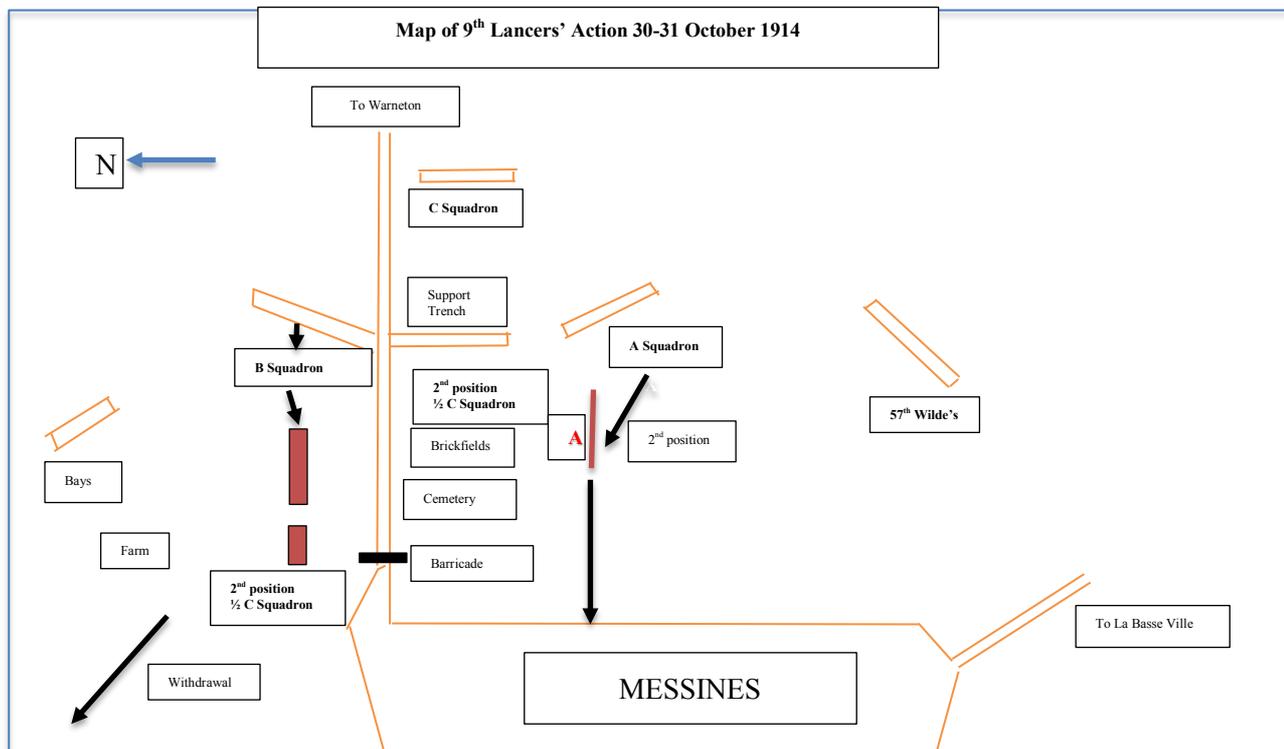
headstone. This cemetery is north of Ypres and some way from Messines and it remains unclear why the reburial occurred so far from his place of death. Perhaps the cemetery at that time had been designated as an “open” repository to which all discoveries were sent for interment?

It took seventy years for the threads relating to Hollings’ fate finally to be brought together. During a periodic re-examination of their files in 1992 the Commonwealth War Grave Commission’s researchers identified the remains by a process of elimination. The information on the headstone was changed to reflect this decision (see the Concentration Report below). They could find no descendants of Hollings to whom they could pass on this change of status.⁶³

Conclusion

Abadie, Harvey and Hollings were among more than 220 BEF officers who vanished in 1914, their fates still uncertain when the war ended. They had disappeared at a time when the bureaucratic processes for dealing with casualties, and especially with the missing, were in their infancy. As far as Regular officers were concerned, the War Office placed considerable reliance on relatives to assist in the search for the missing, using their regimental and family contacts to uncover evidence. Contact with Berlin via the American Embassy began only in November 1914 and the very useful connections with the British and International Red Cross organisations were not officially formalized until 1915. Often, however, the more information that was received on the missing, the more uncertain each case became. Even the official reports from the BEF in France were not always compatible (see Hollings’ case). Eye-witness accounts were frequently unreliable (see Harvey’s case) and it is fortunate that the accounts given by Grenfell and Moncrieff exist to give some details which help to explain the fates of three officers serving in the same regiment who died within hours of each other and in close proximity to each other. Even so, Abadie and Harvey never moved beyond the status of presumed dead, the former in 1915, the latter in 1919. Only Hollings was to be officially declared dead, nearly eight years after a shell had knocked him from his ladder. He was one of the few 1914 missing officers whose fate was to be eventually confirmed after the war. His case suggests that the story of the vanished of the Great War has not ended and remains fluid.

⁶³ Private information from Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 22 May 2018.



ST JEAN 11-46E
 IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES
 CONCENTRATION OF GRAVES (Exhumation and Reburials).
 No. 15/468
BURIAL RETURN.
 LA BRIQUE BRITISH CEMETERY No. 2, 28. 6.26.4.5.25
 6/2343
 26 JAN 1922

PRINTED IN FRANCE BY ARMY PRINTING AND STATIONERY SERVICES
 All crosses erected. 4. 1. 1922.
 Name of Cemetery of Reburial: LA BRIQUE BRITISH CEMETERY No. 2.

Plot	Row	Grave	Map Reference where body found	Was cross on grave?	Regimental particulars	Means of Identification	Were any effects forwarded to Base?
P 1	D	1	28. 0.24.b.2.7. ✓	NO	UNKNOWN BRITISH SOLDIER 12th County of London	TITLES & CAP BADGE ✓	NO
P 1	D	2	28. 0.12.c.45.95. ✓	NO	UNKNOWN BRITISH SOLDIER	CLOTHING ✓	NO
P 1	D	3	28. 0.24.c.3.1. ✓	NO	UNKNOWN BRITISH SOLDIER DORSET REGT	CAP BADGE ✓	NO
P 1	D	4	28. 0.12.c.45.95 ✓	NO	132282. GNR. Ed. GOWLETT 63766 or 62696 U. B. S. R.F.A. R. G. A. No. 18-10-14	TWO SPOONS ✓	YES (PIECES OF SPOONS) EFX/11265
P 1	D	5	28. 0.24.b.2.7. ✓	NO	UNKNOWN BRITISH SOLDIER Lt. John H. Hollings	GLOTHING ✓	NO
P 1	D	6	28. 0.33.c.9.4. ✓	NO	UNKNOWN BRITISH OFFICER 21st Lancers.	GLOTHING & BUTTONS ✓	NO
P 1	D	7	28. 0.33.d.4.3. ✓	NO	3121 CPL. DALY RICHARD ST GEORGE, 11 18th Hussars No. 1-11-14	DISC ✓	YES (DISC) EFX/11266

ENTERED 9/31/22
 SLIP CHECKED 2.2.22
 G. R. [Signature]
 Asst Registration Officer.,
 No. 1 Area, I. W. G. C.

This form to be made out in triplicate, two copies being handed to the D. A. D. (C. of G.) and the other retained by the Burial Officer.

Source: Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2081842/hollings.-john-herbert-butler/#&gid=null&pid=1>

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