

Preparing for and Managing Casualties in a European War 1907-1914

Although most senior officers of the British Army were aware that casualties would likely be very heavy if an expeditionary force were to be sent to aid the French on the continent in the event of war with Germany, it is nevertheless true that the chaotic conditions following the battle of Mons and the enormous number of casualties sustained by the regular army came as a tremendous shock.¹ Losses were unprecedented. At times, the administrative processes established before the war to deal with casualties threatened to collapse under the weight of these losses. The reporting chain often broke down and it was soon acknowledged that the size of the bureaucracy, both in France and in the War Office in London, was much too small to deal with the lists of casualties that poured in daily. Changes, especially an expansion of physical resources and in numbers of personnel, became urgently necessary. This essay examines the planning for a war of casualties before 1914; the effectiveness of the system established in France and in the War Office from August 1914, especially in relation to officer casualties; and the impact that the inability to procure accurate and timely casualty intelligence, particularly in the early stages of the war, had on the public.

Pre-War

The story should begin with the Boer War of 1899 to 1902. With a field army that comprised not only regular forces but also many volunteer units—civilians in uniform—from both Britain and the Empire (40% of the total),² the swift and accurate reporting of casualties was felt to be essential to meet changing sensibilities within the Empire about death and burial. To improve efficiency, a Casualty Branch under the control of the Adjutant-General's Department was established in Cape Town. It acted as a reporting centre for casualties occurring among the myriad, and often small, military formations scattered throughout South Africa. Each soldier carried a card with his name and number in a pocket inside his tunic, which was sent to the Casualty Branch when necessary.³ Lists of casualties, once confirmed from personnel rolls kept by the Base Office at Cape Town, were telegraphed to the War Office, which was responsible for publishing the lists in the newspapers and for informing next of kin.

This system of having a central clearing house in the war zone was subsequently regarded as having worked well.⁴ In 1907, as part of a much wider reform of the army, a War Office committee was established to consider changes to the process of reporting and recording casualties. It was chaired by R.H. Brade, an Assistant Secretary who was to become, as

¹ For the pre-war fear of excessive casualties, see Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War*, 2nd Ed. (Harlow 2001), p. 56; Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman, OK 2012), pp.83-88. For General Cowans, see Editorial Note in Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *Margot Asquith's Great War Diary 1914-1916: The View from Downing Street* (Oxford 2014), p.xix. It was assumed that there would be a 40% wastage in the first six months of a continental war and between 65 and 75% after twelve months. In reality, in the first *three* months of the Great War the wastage rate was 63%. Ian F.W. Beckett, 'The South African War and the Late Victorian Army', *The Boer War: Army, Nation, Empire*, p. 8,

https://www.army.gov.au/sites/g/files/net1846/f/1999_boer_war_army_nation_and_empire_0.pdf

² For the surge in volunteers after 'Black Friday' 1899, see Peter Donaldson, *Remembering the South African War: Britain and the Memory of the Anglo-Boer War, from 1899 to the Present* (Liverpool 2013), p.2.

³ I am grateful to Peter Maxfield, a contributor to the website AngloBoerWar.com, for this information and to David Biggins for bringing it to my attention.

⁴ Interim Report of the Committee on Notification of Casualties, 1907, p. 3, TNA PRO WO 33/2974.

Permanent Secretary of State, the senior civil servant at the War Office during the Great War. Among its eight other members were Colonel C.F.N. (Nevil) Macready—in 1907 Assistant Adjutant-General in the Directorate of Personal Services who in 1914 was to be Adjutant-General at GHQ with the BEF; Colonel J.A. Haldane—cousin of the Secretary of State for War and military attaché with the Japanese Army during the war with Russia; and B.B. Cubitt—who during the Great War was to be Assistant Under-Secretary of State at the War Office with senior responsibilities for the Casualties Branch, MS 2 Casualties (MS 2 Cas.).⁵ The committee's terms of reference were 'to consider and report as to the best machinery for ensuring prompt and accurate notification of casualties in (a) war, (b) in peace, of: 1. Officers 2. NCOs and men 3. The enemy'.⁶ To assist their discussions they had a draft copy of the revised *Field Service Regulations*, Part 2 (the volume dealing with the administration of the army which gave them the proposed details of how casualties would be dealt with).⁷ The committee met on three occasions and did not seek evidence from elsewhere.

The committee found *Field Service Regulations* relating to casualties to be 'complete' and were satisfied with making only a few recommendations. With reference to officers, the committee proposed that all work relating to casualties in Britain—keeping lists, answering enquiries and notifying next of kin—should be concentrated in one branch of the War Office, the Military Secretary's Office.⁸ Officer casualties were to be treated differently to losses in the ranks, their verification and reporting being the responsibility of the War Office rather than the Adjutant-General's department.⁹ This was because their personal information and the Army Lists were kept in the War Office, whereas Other Rank records, for example, pay lists, were kept at Base Record Offices. Responsibility for officers thus devolved on a sub-unit of the Military Secretary's Office known as MS 3 Casualties (MS 3 Cas.). Before 1914 this sub-unit's main task was to keep a record book to circulate information on the deaths of officers to other branches of the War Office.¹⁰

Another important proposal put forward, that was to be accepted, supported the need for a Casualty Branch at the Adjutant-General's Base overseas, under the control of a Deputy Adjutant-General (DAG). In conformity with the innovation in Cape Town during the Boer War, this Branch would be responsible for checking and validating Other Rank casualties before the War Office was informed. This altered one part of the draft *Field Service Regulations* which stated that the Commander-in-Chief would report all casualties after an action direct to the War Office and send a duplicate report to the DAG's Base Record Office. This was the procedure used in South Africa before the Casualty Branch was established in Cape Town. The changes, however, did not apply to officer casualties because their details were to be verified in the War Office. Thus, initial reports of officer casualties from army units were made both to the Adjutant-General at GHQ and to the Deputy Adjutant-General at

⁵ For Brade's War Office position in the Great War, see Justin Nash, *War Records Revealed*, <https://warrecordsrevealed.com/lt-col-f-e-whitton-and-the-war-office-history-of-the-war-committee-1919-1922/>. For more on Brade and on Cubitt, see Hampden Gordon, *The War Office* (London 1935), pp.77-78. Macready, Brade and Cubitt subsequently were to be knighted.

⁶ Interim Report, p.2.

⁷ This version of *Field Regulations* was published in 1909.

⁸ Interim Report, p.6.

⁹ The committee advised that in wartime the Military Secretary's Office should also become responsible for Other Rank casualties, in a branch called MS 2 Casualties. *Ibid*, p.3.

¹⁰ Colonel William Capper, 'History of MS 3 Casualties during 1914-1919: MS 3 Casualties – Officers: Notes Relative to Above During the Great War Aug. 1914 – November 11th, 1920', p.1, TNA PRO WO 32/9317.

the Base Record Office (known as 3rd Echelon), with the result that the Military Secretary's Office at the War Office was to receive officer reports from two overseas sources when war broke out.

The committee recommended that in time of war MS 3 Cas. should be given lists of the next of kin of all officers sent to the front to expedite the process of notification.¹¹ Obtaining accurate lists was to be a major problem for the War Office during the Great War. Each officer in the regular army was expected to leave details of next of kin at the War Office before going overseas, but 'great numbers did not do this', with the result that delays and cases of mistaken identity were not infrequent.¹² That officer casualties were reported using initials, rather than forenames, did not help in the process of confirming identity before publication.¹³ Every casualty report, therefore, had to be checked against personal files (called by the committee 'confidential reports') and the annual Army Lists, the latter, although using full forenames, not always being up to date.¹⁴

Another committee proposal that was to be taken up was probably based on advice given by Colonel Haldane, who had been an observer with the Japanese forces in Manchuria in 1904-5.

The Japanese used a card index system for their casualty records and it was suggested that the War Office and Base Record Offices follow this policy. This was probably the most efficient method available at the time, although the huge number of casualties during the Great War tested the system to the limit. In MS 3 Cas. alone 178,000 record cards had been filed by the time of the Armistice, containing 900,000 entries.¹⁵

The draft *Field Service Regulations*, only a small part of which Brade's committee examined in 1907, were finalised and published in 1909. A revised version was published in 1913 and it was under these regulations that the BEF went to war in August 1914. On paper, the process of reporting and recording casualties seemed to be logical and efficient but the fact that the personal documentation of officers and Other Ranks were held in different places meant that a fully streamlined bureaucratic system was not achievable. At the DAG's 3rd Echelon, which had settled in Rouen by October 1914, Other Ranks' records were checked by a cadre of soldier clerks (Base Details), detached from each military unit, before the War Office was informed. In contrast, officers' details were verified at the War Office by MS 3 Cas. Both officer and Other Rank casualties, however, were first reported to MS 2 Cas., which was responsible for publishing the casualty lists and, in the case of Other Ranks, informing next of kin. MS 2 Cas. passed on officer casualty reports to MS 3 Cas. for checking yet still retained control of publishing casualty lists, informing next of kin and making decisions on the status of the missing. In practice, therefore, the casualties process was clumsy and cumbersome, as the first months of the war were to demonstrate.

The whole system depended on accurate and swift reporting from all units—infantry battalions, artillery batteries, cavalry regiments, RFC squadrons and medical facilities—

¹¹ Interim Report, p.3.

¹² Capper, 'History of MS 3', p.11.

¹³ For examples of confusion, see *Birmingham Daily Post*, 15 October 1914, *The Times*, 27, 28 November 1914.

¹⁴ Mistakes were more likely to be made when officers were temporarily attached to different regiments.

¹⁵ Capper, 'History of MS 3', p.11.

involved in the war zone.¹⁶ In *Field Service Regulations* commanders of units were required to report deaths to the DAG's Base Office 'as they occur'.¹⁷ In practice, this responsibility often fell on the shoulders of unit Adjutants, who also were required to note the names and ranks of officer casualties in their unit War Diary.¹⁸ At the Base Office the names of all reported casualties, including officers, were to be telegraphed 'with the least possible delay'.¹⁹ As noted above, in the case of officers, this would occur before verification. A casualty telegram would be followed later by a more formal paper report, on Army Form A.F. B 2090A.

One basic principle to which MS 2 Cas. would rigidly adhere during the war was that the battalion or battery or cavalry regiment report on a casualty that came to the War Office from GHQ and 3rd Echelon (or from medical facilities where soldiers were treated) was sacrosanct. It could be altered only by updates from the same sources.²⁰ Descriptions of the last known moments of an officer found in letters to relatives; interviews with wounded soldiers in hospital; reports from prisoners of war and other alternative sources capable of throwing light on a casualty—officer or soldier—were not ignored by MS 2 Cas. Copies were kept in an officer's file by MS 3 Cas. and, in the case of the myriad missing, were given due weight when the decision was finally made to pronounce on presumption of death. But on their own, and if they did not conform to the official report of death from GHQ or 3rd Echelon, they could not form the basis of an official determination of death. Thus, a heavy responsibility lay on the shoulders of the CO and Adjutant of a unit to ensure that casualties were accurately, as well as swiftly, reported.

Understandably, in the crisis conditions of the first months of the war, these requirements were often unachievable. The usual practice in fighting units was to hold a roll call after an action, with survivors giving their opinions on the fate of those absent. The results were collated by the HQ staff of the unit and passed up the administrative chain. With the many casualties amongst officers that occurred after Mons and with the scattering of units during the retreat, it was inevitable that the numbers being recorded as wounded or missing would be very high, with new information only becoming available later as men re-joined their units.

August to December 1914

Helmuth von Moltke (Moltke the Elder) is reputed to have written that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy.²¹ To which it might be added: no military administrative policy

¹⁶ For the repercussions in one instance of an irregular return from a battalion, see Michael Durey, 'The Irregular Death of Captain Geoffrey Batty, 6th Northamptonshire Regiment, and Its Painful Consequences', *British Army Officers in the Great War: Life, Death and Remembrance*, http://www.greatwarbritishofficers.com/index_htm_files/Batty%206th%20Northants.pdf

¹⁷ General Staff, War Office, *Field Service Regulations, Part 2: Organisation and Administration* (London 1913), p.167.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.177.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.168.

²⁰ Exceptions to this policy were very rare, but see Michael Durey, 'The Search for Answers on the Missing in the Great War: Lt Hugh Henshall Williamson and His Parents' Struggle against Officialdom, 1916-2001', *British Journal for Military History*, Vol.2, no.1 (2015), pp. 86-104.

²¹ He actually wrote, 'no plan of operation extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force'. See Ralph Keyes, 'The Quote Verifier', *The Antioch Review* 64 (2006), p.256. Boxer Mike Tyson made the same point more graphically: 'Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face'. My thanks to James Crossland for this insight.

survives first contact with wartime conditions. The BEF's exploits between August and December 1914 may be separated into three main phases: battles at Mons and Le Cateau in August leading to the retreat to the Marne by the end of the first week of September; the subsequent advance to the Aisne and the battle to take the Chemin des Dames ridge that ended in stalemate by the third week of September; and the desperate defence of Ypres, after the army had been moved north, between 20 October and the end of the year. Each phase presented particular difficulties for the collection and reporting of casualties, but it was the first that caused the most consternation at home. In August both battlefields were left in the hands of the Germans; during the retreat many companies temporarily lost contact with their battalion headquarters and there were many stragglers whose fate could not be discovered; and a number of battalions carrying out rear-guard duties, such as 1st Cheshire Regiment, 2nd Connaught Rangers and 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers, suffered devastating losses when cut off.²² The result was that very large numbers of casualties had to be reported as missing, their fates being unknown. In one casualty list issued by the Press Bureau in October 1914, for instance, no fewer than 678 NCOs and men of 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers were recorded as missing.²³ Eventually, after many months of uncertainty it was found that more than 440 of these men had become prisoners of war.

As the lapse of time between the Royal Munster Fusiliers' action at Etreux (27 August) and the official publication of their casualties (20 October) suggests, there were major issues with the recording and reporting of Other Rank casualties in the first stages of the war. There were fewer problems with reporting officer casualties, partly because, of course, the numbers were fewer, but also because of the more direct reporting links. The names of all nineteen Royal Munster Fusilier officer casualties, for instance, were published in *The Times* in the second official GHQ list on 5 September.²⁴ All, however, were reported as missing.²⁵ Although the battalions cut off during rear-guard actions may be seen as special cases—few if any officers, including Adjutants, escaping entrapment and thus were unable to report casualties to battalion HQs—the chaos in lines of communication in the aftermath of Mons and Le Cateau and the retreat to the Marne ensured that a large proportion of officer casualties had to be reported as missing. This is reflected in the first three GHQ casualty lists (up to 1 September 1914), which had combined totals of 63 officers killed, 162 wounded and 230 missing.²⁶ The proportion of Other Ranks missing was far higher, 91.4% of the 14680 reported casualties.

There was a general sense of deep foreboding in Britain when war was declared on 4 August 1914, quite as strong as the excitement that is usually seen as the main response to the event. Even before the BEF had left for France the writer John Galsworthy was confiding to his diary that he felt 'great anxiety'. Every one of his daily entries between 7 and 13 August included the phrase 'Thoughts on the war'.²⁷ The absence of firm news about the BEF's activities in August increased anxiety and concern and encouraged a looming fear of disaster among those whose relatives were serving in the army. Uncertainty mirrored the opinion of

²² For recent account of these actions, see Jerry Murland, *Retreat and Rearguard 1914: The BEF's Actions from Mons to the Marne* (Barnsley 2011), pp.159-172 (1st Cheshire), 258-275 (2nd Connaught Rangers), 289-308 (2nd Munster Fusiliers) [iBook pagination].

²³ *North-Eastern Daily Gazette*, 22 October 1914.

²⁴ *The Times*, 5 September 1914.

²⁵ Seven of the officers were much later unofficially reported as killed. *Ibid.*, 23 November 1914.

²⁶ The War Diary of 2nd Royal Munster Fusiliers for 27 August, for instance, comprises a letter by Lt E W Gower written from a prisoner of war camp dated 14 December 1914. TNA PRO WO 95/1279. For officer casualty statistics in the first three official lists, see *The Times*, 7 September 1914.

²⁷ H.V. Marrott, *The Life and Letters of John Galsworthy* (London 1935), 7-13 August 1914.

the anonymous diarist of the Congregation of the Daughters of the Sacred Heart in Mons who lamented after four months of German occupation, ‘We never have reliable news, which is harder to bear, perhaps, than the truth’.²⁸ Feelings in Britain were heightened by Arthur Moore’s despatch from Amiens which *The Times* published in a special Sunday edition on 30 August. It gave, admitted the newspaper’s editor, an ‘extremely sombre’ account of the first week’s fighting, with the prospect of the first casualty lists running into thousands.²⁹ Even at the highest level of society and government the lack of information caused great strain. In a diary entry of 28 August Margot Asquith, wife of the Prime Minister, wrote that ‘I could see [Asquith] was tired and low. He constantly said “I can’t *think* why we get no news ... We’ve been fighting since the 22nd: it is now the 28th, and we’ve none of the names of dead and wounded. It is terrible”’.³⁰ Lord Sandfordham, Private Secretary to the king, confessed to Lord Derby on the 31st that ‘we get no news as to who has been killed or wounded’.³¹ Ladies of high fashion, including the Duchess of Devonshire, Lady Lansdowne and Mrs Edward Lyttelton, with near relations in the army, feared the worst and before the casualty lists were published publicly announced that they ‘will not show their sorrow as [we would] for those who come to a less glorious end’, instead intending to wear an emblem rather than mourning clothes.³² No news was bad news, so it seemed.³³

With the notable exception of Catriona Pennell, historians have tended to focus on the upsurge in recruitment in September 1914 as the great response to early news of the battle of Mons and the retreat to the Marne.³⁴ Less attention has been given to the waves of consternation and anxiety that swamped the families whose relations were already involved in the regular army. Publication of the first casualty lists—the first arrived at the War Bureau in London on 1 September—did little to calm the waters, because of the very significant numbers of the missing. This was despite GHQ’s attempt to reassure the public by repeatedly insisting that the missing included stragglers and unwounded prisoners of war as well as probable casualties.³⁵ The official categories ‘missing’, ‘wounded and missing’ and ‘missing believed killed’ merely accentuated the sense of unease, dread and confusion, especially in the upper reaches of society.³⁶

²⁸ Quoted in Pierre-Jean Niebes, ‘Mons during the Great War in Unpublished Accounts’, *Cahiers Bruxellois* 46 (2014), <https://www.cairninfo/revue-bruxellois-2014-1E-page-71.htm#>

²⁹ *The Times*, 31 August 1914.

³⁰ Michael and Eleanor Brock (eds), *Margot Asquith’s Great War Diary 1914-1916: The View from Downing Street* (Oxford 2014), p.28. This was Asquith’s private feeling. Only two days before when he had replied publicly to an opposition MP’s query as to when the first casualty list could be expected, Asquith cited Sir John French’s report that the extended front made casualty reporting difficult, before claiming that ‘it would be most cruel to issue [a casualty list] that was imperfect’. Ibid, 27 August 1914. The first lists showed that perfection was impossible.

³¹ Quoted in Catriona Pennell, *A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford 2012), p.119.

³² *The Times*, 31 August 1914. Edward Lyttelton was in 1914 Headmaster of Eton College.

³³ In Berlin as well as London. See Evelyn, Princess Blücher, *An English Wife in Berlin* (New York 1920), p.19 (diary entry 14 August 1914).

³⁴ Peter Simkins, *Kitchener’s Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916* (Barnsley 2007), pp.64-66.

³⁵ See, for example, *Grantham Journal*, 5 September 1914; *The Times*, 7 September 1914. Most newspapers reported GHQ’s words.

³⁶ Percy Wyndham, of the Coldstream Guards and husband of Margot Asquith’s niece Diana, was killed on 14 September 1914. Brocks (eds), *Margot Asquith’s Diary*, 26 October 1914, pp.38-39; *The Times*, 21 September 1914.

In his first official despatch of the war C-in-C Sir John French acknowledged that Adjutant-General Sir Nevil Macready had 'been confronted with most onerous and difficult tasks in connection with ... the preparation of casualty lists' and praised his 'indefatigable exertions'.³⁷ Publication of the despatch prompted a number of questions in Parliament, with the issue of the missing prominent. On 10 September Lt-Col J.R.P. Newman, Conservative MP for Enfield, asked Harold Tennant, Under-Secretary of State for War (and brother of Margot Asquith), if arrangements had been made to allow German POWs to communicate with relatives. Newman's purpose was to bring to light the fact that in a large number of cases on the British side relatives could obtain no information on officers or men reported as missing or captured. Tennant replied that the government had complied with Article 14 of the 1907 Hague Convention by establishing a Prisoners of War Information Bureau to deal with German POWs and was ready to pass on official casualty information to the enemy once Berlin agreed to reciprocate.³⁸ A few days later, while replying to Liberal MP Major Gilbert McMicking's question whether the government had sent information to Germany 'so that their relatives might be spared the unnecessary anxiety and distress from which families in this country were suffering owing to the absence of news', Tennant reiterated more forcefully that nothing would be sent to Germany until 'assurance of reciprocal treatment had been received'.³⁹ With Rudyard Kipling believing that Berlin was deliberately delaying agreement 'to increase the agony of relatives in Britain', more than two months were to pass before the process of trading information began, using the neutral US Embassy as a conduit.⁴⁰

The feeling was growing that something had gone wrong with the casualty reporting process in the first weeks of the war. Not only was much of the information released inconclusive, but also wounded officers were arriving home before their names had been officially included in a casualty list. Conservative MP Douglas Hall sought answers to this from Tennant in the House of Commons on 10 September. The Under-Secretary admitted that 'there have been difficulties in rendering complete casualty lists' but pointed out that it would serve no purpose to keep the wounded in France just because their names had not yet been officially published.⁴¹

There can be little doubt that in the early weeks of the war the staff responsible for producing casualty lists in France and London were overwhelmed by unsorted data. Hampden Gordon, historian of the War Office, admitted that the Casualty 'staff was hard pressed to keep pace with the work', an understatement for periods when casualties were extremely heavy.⁴² MS 3 Cas. in the War Office may have had responsibility only for officers but the total number of

³⁷ French's first despatch was published in the third supplement to the *London Gazette* on 8 September 1914, pp.7189-7192, under the dateline 9 September 1914. The comment on casualties is on p.7192.

³⁸ Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 10 September 1914, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1914/sep/10/british-casualties-officers#S5CV0066PO_19140910_HOC_186.

³⁹ *The Times*, 16 September 1914. McMicking had personal reasons for his question. One of his sons was interned while on holiday in Germany and his brother, Lt-Colonel in the Royal Scots, was missing from 26 August 1914 (he was later reported as a POW). Great War Forum, <https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/110176-lt-mcmickling/> (sic).

⁴⁰ For Kipling, see Pennell, *Kingdom United*, p.140.

⁴¹ Hansard, House of Commons Debates, 10 September 1914, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1914/sep/10/british-casualties-officers#S5CV0066PO_19140910_HOC_186.

⁴² Gordon, *War Office*, p.295.

its staff at the outbreak of war was just four, two officer (retired) clerks and two soldier clerks. One of the staff officers and Controller of the sub-branch, Captain Harold Stanton, formerly of the King's Own Scottish Borderers, was responsible for all correspondence with MS 2 Cas. and the public and conducted interviews with relatives (an increasingly demanding task as the months passed).⁴³ Major Stewart was responsible for the telegrams to be sent to next of kin via MS 2 Cas. All the work involved with checking lists from GHQ and 3rd Echelon, as well as filling the record cards, filing them and organising office routine, thus initially fell on the shoulders of two clerks. Additional staff were swiftly added, most of whom were voluntary lady workers. It was not until September 1915, however, that additional *paid* staff were added, many of these being officers' wives.⁴⁴ Later in the war officers, either incapacitated or recovering from wounds, were brought into the office. By the Armistice in November 1918 staff numbers in the War Office Casualty branches had grown to 1267.⁴⁵

The end of the retreat on 7 September 1914 gave the BEF the opportunity to reorganise and consolidate. There was a small breathing space, with casualties tailing off, allowing battalion HQ staff to interview survivors and compile their lists and the Base and MS 3 Cas. to reduce the backlog of unchecked casualties. *Field Service Regulations* laid down that 'When an officer or a soldier is missing and cannot satisfactorily be accounted for, a court of inquiry will be assembled to collect all evidence of the case, and will record an opinion as to whether it is reasonable to suppose that the officer or soldier is dead'.⁴⁶ A period of up to six months was given for this process. Clearly, the number of missing precluded such courts of inquiry taking place in early September, but unofficial inquiries would have supplemented the roll calls following the reintegration of units at the end of the retreat. By that time also, letters from some wounded officers containing their memories of events would have been in circulation, most regiments having extremely effective bush telegraphs.

More information thus slowly became available to the Adjutant-General's offices which enabled many of the previously missing reports to be updated. As a result, as well as the official casualty lists, the newspapers were constantly publishing revised statements on individual officers, some of whom, having been reported missing, were now confirmed to have been killed or to have died of wounds. For a small number of families there was good news. Their relative had been found to have been wounded or had returned to his unit unscathed.

Most of the missing officers were prisoners of war but there was still no official news of their fate. From mid-September, however, unofficial information began to be published. This usually came from families who had received information from prisoners of war who had managed to send a letter home, giving information on the fates of fellow officers, including those incarcerated with them. In October a large tranche of POW officers was unofficially named, after Cox and Co, army agents, released a list of 67 missing officers whose

⁴³ I am grateful to the late Charles Messenger and 'HarryBrook' of the Great War Forum for information on Stanton. For his obituary, see *Gloucester Journal*, 5 March 1927.

⁴⁴ Capper, 'History of MS 3', pp.1-2.

⁴⁵ Gordon, *War Office*, p.307. Most of this staff worked in MS 2 Cas. At its peak MS 3 Cas. employed: males, two Class A clerks, 22 Class B clerks and three civilian supervisors; females, one senior administrative assistant, five assistant group supervisors and seventy-two lady clerks. Capper, 'History of MS 3', p.11.

⁴⁶ *Field Service Regulations, Part 2*, pp.170-171.

chequebooks had been used and thus were assumed to be alive and in captivity.⁴⁷ To some extent this mitigated the effects of Berlin's initial failure to implement the relevant section of the Hague Convention until October 1914.⁴⁸

During the next two phases of the war in 1914, which were notable for much close contact combat and the emergence of the trench system, the "interior economy" of most battalion HQs remained more stable than during the period of open warfare.⁴⁹ Although the numbers initially reported missing or wounded and missing still remained high, they were a significantly smaller proportion of total casualties. The two main casualty lists for the Battle of the Aisne, for instance, recorded 165 officer casualties, with only 24% of them missing or wounded and missing (compared with 50.5% for the early days of the war).⁵⁰ During the vicious and desperate fighting in defence of Ypres in October and November 1914 the proportion of missing dropped even further. Of the 1432 official officer casualties reported in *The Times* between 1 and 30 November, only 205 (14.3%) were declared to be missing.⁵¹

Better knowledge at battalion HQs of the fates of officers in the fighting, despite the loss of much of the ground over which the battle moved, improved casualty reportage. Families of officer casualties thus received news earlier, usually within a week, and official casualty lists were also published more quickly than in the first weeks of the war.⁵² Individual mistakes in reporting still occurred, perhaps too often at times, but the casualty reporting system as envisaged before the war was working more smoothly by the last months of the year, at least as far as officers were concerned. It was helped by another reciprocal arrangement that came into force in the last weeks of the year.⁵³ The families of soldiers who were officially missing (but not officially KIA) were able to complete a War Office form that was sent through the US Embassy to Berlin seeking information on their relatives. The process was slow, but by the beginning of 1915 returns were arriving which showed whether or not the names of the missing could be found in German records. All too often, however, the terse reply *unbekannte* (unknown) was to leave many families in limbo until, after six months or more, MS2 Cas. asked them if they would accept that their relation could be officially pronounced 'presumed dead'.⁵⁴

Experience was to lead to changes to the recording system as the war progressed and periods of very high casualties continued to place the War Office casualty branches under great strain. Moreover, the presence of Territorial units in the BEF also compelled changes, with a separate branch for Territorial officers, MS 3 Cas. TF, being established in early 1915 before being merged with the main branch two years later. MS 3 Cas. was meant to be a record and

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 10 October 1914.

⁴⁸ A reciprocal agreement to notify each government about prisoners of war was reached by the end of September, but the first German lists did not arrive until October. Ibid, 29 September, 22 October 1914. To place pressure on Berlin, on 18 September 1914 the Foreign Office had informed the International Red Cross in Geneva that information about German casualties would no longer be given as 'hostile states do not reciprocate'. Quoted in Peter Barton, *The Lost Legions of Fromelles: The Mysteries Behind one of the Most Devastating Battles of the Great War* (London 2014), p.322.

⁴⁹ For the beginnings of trench warfare, see

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 21, 23 September 1914.

⁵¹ Ibid, 1-30 November 1914.

⁵² This did not apply to Other Rank casualties.

⁵³ Capt. H. J. C. Stanton (Controller, MS 3 Cas.) to Mrs Helen Archer-Shee, 16 December 1914, TNA PRO WO 339/8986.

⁵⁴ The War Office only presumed a soldier to be dead if the family accepted.

reporting office, not a detective agency. Yet 'gradually & imperceptibly M.S. 3 Cas. became a sort of clearing house for everything imaginable regarding officers'. Duties came to include interviews with relatives who visited the War Office (sometimes as many as sixty per day); liaising with the War Office finance and pensions departments, the Directorate of Graves (established in May 1916) and the prisoners of war department (established in February 1915); compiling an accurate daily list of officer casualties for publication as well as 'the King's List' (for George V's official letters of sympathy) and lists for the commemorative plaques and scrolls after the war; and, from June 1916, issuing permits for relatives to visit gravely wounded officers in French hospitals.⁵⁵ The level of success of MS 3 Cas. is still to be determined, but the casualty system that emerged from the war was still robust enough to act as a template at the beginning of the Second World War.

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⁵⁵ Capper, 'History of MS 3', pp. 6-9.