

Lt Charles Tyerman Taylor, 18th Hussars, Missing in Action 24 or 25 August 1914?

The loss of Lt C.T. Taylor in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Mons is a minor footnote in the history of the 18th (Queen Mary's Own) Hussars (he was their first officer casualty of the war). But it is useful to highlight how, in certain circumstances, official dates of death can be unreliable. In Taylor's case, even the Commonwealth War Graves Commission data are contradictory.

Very little is known of Charles Tyerman Taylor. He was born in Bootle, Lancashire on 23 May 1889. He was the elder son, with two sisters, of Charles Thomas and Amy Taylor. His father was a wealthy and successful timber merchant. His education remains partly obscure. In 1901 he was, with his brother, a boarder at a school in Park Crescent, Southport, but whether he then proceeded to a public school is not known.¹ He did, however, matriculate at Peterhouse, University of Cambridge in 1909.² In July 1910 Taylor was commissioned in the Territorial Force on the Unattached List, a common procedure for university students belonging to the OTC who expected to join the Regular Army. In 1911, while staying at the Strand Palace Hotel in London, he described himself as an army student (presumably he was studying at a crammer). On 17 January 1913 Taylor was gazetted, as a University Candidate, to the 18th (Queen Mary's Own) Royal Hussars, with his commission, but not his pay, backdated to July 1911.³ He was to become, according to his CO writing after the war, 'one of our most promising young Officers, very popular with all ranks and very certain to succeed in his profession, in which he took the greatest interest'.⁴

When war broke out the 18th Hussars, as part of 2nd Cavalry Brigade, was in the garrison town of Tidworth in Wiltshire. In less than a fortnight, after being reviewed by their Colonel-in-Chief, Queen Mary, the regiment had landed in Boulogne, with Taylor one of its subalterns.⁵ He was the unit's Signalling Officer. 2nd Cavalry Brigade comprised three regiments, the other two being the 9th Lancers and the 4th Dragoon Guards. It was commanded by Colonel Beauvoir de Lisle, a celebrated polo player who was very unpopular. One 18th Hussar officer—in October 1914 after Taylor's death—thought him:

An awful blighter. He wants to make a name for himself and cares for nobody but himself – the more casualties the better. Everybody in the Brigade loathes him more than we did at Tidworth, which is saying a good deal. You can't think how we hate him. Nine-tenths of casualties could have been avoided. In no case where he has lost men has the result justified them.⁶

¹ 1901 Census.

² *The War List of the University of Cambridge 1914-1918*, https://archive.org/stream/warlistofunivers00careuoft/warlistofunivers00careuoft_djvu.txt

³ 1911 Census; *London Gazette*, 5 July 1910, p.4781; *London Gazette* 17 January 1913, p.410; Merseyside Roll of Honour, www.merseysiderollofhonour.co.uk/obits/17/1763.php

⁴ Brig-General Charles Burnett, *The Memoirs of the 18th (Queen Mary's Own) Royal Hussars 1906-1922* (Winchester 1926), p.29.

⁵ All the officials were presented to the Queen. Taylor's Medal Index Card gives 15 August 1914 as the date he disembarked.

⁶ Quoted in The Marquess of Anglesey, *A History of the British Cavalry 1816 to 1918*, Vol 7 (Barnsley 2013), Kindle Edition, 1795-1796 of 6156.

The plan was for the BEF to concentrate between Maubeuge and Le Cateau in Northern France by 20 August, with the cavalry at the north-eastern end ready to link up with General Lanrezac's 5th French Army.⁷ From there both forces were to move into Belgium, with the aim of outflanking the German right. Despite intelligence warnings, which were initially ignored, no one was aware that two German armies were bearing down on the BEF. The Germans, equally uncertain of the BEF's presence, almost blundered into General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien's II Corps on the Mons-Condé canal on 23 August.⁸ Heavily outnumbered, the British forces put up splendid resistance but were forced to retreat, a withdrawal that was only to end beyond the River Marne in early September.

The 18th Hussars played little part in the fighting at Mons, but on the 24 August they were part of the rear guard for 5th Infantry Division as it withdrew to the south-west. This was not a good day for 2nd Cavalry Brigade. For reasons that are still not fully understood, north of Audregnies the 9th Lancers and 4th Dragoon Guards made a charge at a German infantry formation more than a mile away over unreconnoitered ground and came to grief before impenetrable wire while under heavy machine gun and artillery fire.⁹ Retiring behind where the 18th Hussars were holding a ridge, they created such confusion that they badly disrupted the defence, with many horses stampeding. In his subsequent report on this action, the 18th Hussars' CO, Lt-Colonel Charles Burnett, admitted that 'the Regiment was now very much broken up'.¹⁰ B Squadron had already gone astray and it took considerable effort to rally the rest of the regiment just south of Elouges. Once reorganised, the 18th, in two bodies, moved to Wargnies-le-Petite and Bavay for the night.

According to official records, *Officers who Died in the Great War* and the Commemorative Certificate of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, Taylor was killed on the 24th.¹¹ With no Personal File to work with, it is difficult to know when his parents were informed, but his name was on the GHQ Casualties List dated 4 September which was published in the newspapers on the 8th.¹² He was reported missing. The War Office was at pains to point out publicly that "missing" did not necessarily mean that a man was dead, or wounded, or even a prisoner of war. It meant that he had not been present at a roll call and that his battalion or regiment did not know where he was. In the turmoil of the first weeks of the war large numbers of officers and men lost contact with their units, some temporarily and some, unfortunately, permanently. By the end of the year, however, it was becoming clear that a majority of the missing were prisoners of war, as news was received from those

⁷ Brig-General J.E. Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium 1914*, Vol. 1 (1933: Uckfield n.d.), p.49; Holger H. Herwig, *The Marne, 1914. The Opening of World War I and the Battle that Changed the World* (New York 2009), p.70.

⁸ Dennis Showalter, Joseph P. Robinson and Janet A. Robinson, *The German Failure in Belgium, August 1914* (Jefferson, N.C. 2019, pp.175-183.

⁹ Anglesey, *British Cavalry*, Vol.7, 2546-2648 of 6158.

¹⁰ Burnett, 'Engagement at Elouges August 24th 1914', War Diary, 18th Hussars, TNA WO 95/1113.

¹¹ UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects,

https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/60506/42511_6117463_0173-00167?pid=197066&treeid=&personid=&rc=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=nhB17169&_phstart=successSource; *Officers Died in the Great War 1914-19* (London 1919), p.23; Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/176316/taylor,-charles-tyerman/>

¹² *The Times*, 8 September 1914.

in captivity, who also gave information on those whom they believed had been killed. No message was received concerning Taylor.

Although results of inquiries made to the International Red Cross in Geneva usually were recorded in their card files—even if all that was possible was a stamped ‘*Negatif*’—none of the several inquirers on behalf of Taylor appears to have received a reply.¹³ Fellow officers of the regiment, normally a good source of news, could not have helped, for Taylor was detached from the main body of the regiment and alone when he disappeared. He thus seemed to have vanished completely. Then, cruelly, in a GHQ Casualty List published in the newspapers on 2 December it was announced that Lieutenant C.T. Taylor of the 18th Hussars ‘previously reported missing [is] now reported not missing’.¹⁴ The Taylors’ local newspaper contacted them for comment, only to find that they had no evidence to corroborate this story: ‘the fact remains that no trace of Lieutenant Taylor has been received since September, when he was officially reported as missing’.¹⁵ Probably an administrative error had been made in France, for no new information on Taylor’s fate came to light during the war. It was not until September 1919 that the War Office Accounts Department finalised his finances.¹⁶

In December 1920, during the post-war clearances and concentration of bodies in specific cemeteries on the Western Front, the remains of seven soldiers were discovered, having been buried by the Germans. The site, as given on the Burial Return of the Graves Registration Unit, was map reference 57a.W.25.B.6.4. This is a point close to le Pigeon Blanc, a farm about 1.8km west of Romeries.¹⁷ Among the remains were those of two officers, one who has remained unidentified, the other being identified by the name on a tobacco pouch. It was Taylor. All the bodies were subsequently re-buried in Romeries Communal Cemetery Extension.¹⁸ Whether Taylor’s father received this news before he suffered a stroke in 1921 remains unknown (he died in June 1922), but on Taylor’s gravestone when it was erected, presumably at his mother’s request, was the patriotic line *Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori*.

Le Pigeon Blanc is a considerable distance, about 25km, south of where the 18th Hussars spent the night of 24 August 1914. How did Taylor’s body get there if he was killed on that day? The answer to this minor mystery can be found in the history of the 18th Hussars written by Taylor’s former CO, now Brig-General Charles Burnett, in 1926. Referring to the events of 25 August 1914 Burnett wrote:

Between 6 and 7pm the rearguard of the 7th Infantry Brigade took over the position on the ridge [just north of Solesmes] from the cavalry, and we received

¹³ International Committee of the Red Cross, 1914-1918, Prisoners of the First World War Archives, <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/File/Details/5097639/3/2/>

¹⁴ See, for example, *Western Mail*, 2 December 1914. The GHQ List was dated 30 November.

¹⁵ *Liverpool Daily Post*, 4 December 1914.

¹⁶ Taylor’s name appears to have been omitted from the 1915 Army List, which suggests that he was presumed dead in that year.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Charlie2, JP, clk and Howard of the Great War Forum for their assistance in helping me to understand maps of and places in this part of France. Le Pigeon Blanc is now a hotel.

¹⁸ Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/176316/taylor,-charles-tyerman/#&gid=null&pid=1>

orders to move to Beaumont, where the Headquarters of the Cavalry Division had been established.

It was no easy task collecting the troops under cover on St Python Rd, and Lieut. C. Taylor, our Signalling Officer, whose duty it was to keep communication between the two squadrons and Headquarters [of the regiment], met his death in endeavouring to reach one of the detached troops we had on the ridge. The Germans had brought their guns up to close range and pushed forward small parties of infantry, so both rifle and gun fire on the ridge was heavy, especially just before and at dusk.

We never actually determined how Taylor lost his life for he was alone at the time, and his absence was not noted till the Regiment was well on its way to Beaumont, and it was very uncertain as to whether he was really “missing” or only astray for a time. ... This was our first casualty among Officers, and though for a time we could not realise that any untimely fate had overtaken him, yet we felt his absence and soon feared for the worst.¹⁹

The site of Taylor’s remains thus makes sense once it is appreciated that he went missing on the evening of 25 August, not the day before, for his remains were found close to the ridge that the 18th Hussars had been defending earlier that day. It is noteworthy that the date of Taylor’s death given on the final Graves Registration Report Form is 25 August 1914, contradicting the Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s own official date of death.²⁰

Yet the 24th remains the official date of Taylor’s death and it was the date that his relatives continued to commemorate, no doubt because that was the date on all official records in their possession. On the fourth anniversary of his supposed disappearance they formally accepted that he was dead.²¹ On the thirtieth anniversary, 24 August 1944, one of his siblings placed an *In Memoriam* notice in an unknown newspaper: ‘In memory of Charles Tyerman Taylor, Lieutenant, 18th Hussars, missing in the retreat from Mons, France, 24 August 1914, Dearly loved elder son of the late Charles and Amy Taylor, Aigburth Drive, Liverpool’.²²

Several factors contributed to the uncertainty of the date of Taylor’s death. One would have been the official regimental report sent to GHQ and to 3rd Echelon, the Deputy Adjutant General’s Base in France, which must have given the date he went missing as the 24th. Another would have been that the Regiment was in retreat, unable to search for Taylor once he was thought to be missing. A third factor would have been that he set off alone on his mission to find elements of his unit. Presumably failing to make contact with any groups of the 18th Hussars, there was no one to witness and report on his death. In less chaotic and critical circumstances he would probably have

¹⁹ Burnett, *Memoirs of the 18th*, p.29.

²⁰ Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/176316/taylor,-charles-tyerman/#&gid=null&pid=1>

²¹ Notation in Taylor’s Medal Index Card, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/1262/30850_A001524-00288?pid=4511024&treeid=&personid=&rc=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=nhB17173&_phstart=successSource

²² Andrews Newspaper Index Cards, Ancestry.Co.UK.

been accompanied by his servant. Nor, apparently, did the Germans keep a record of his name when they buried him. Taken together, these four factors explain how he vanished and why his family waited in vain throughout the war for news of his fate.

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