

## **Recollecting the Fighting at Kruseecke, 26 October 1914: 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Charles Heyland Evans and the Conflicting Memories of Survivors**

*This article explores the often-contradictory nature of battlefield survivors' reports and in this context examines the post-war evidence that Evans may have been killed by the Germans after becoming their prisoner.*



**2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Charles Heyland Evans**

**Source: Courtesy of Imperial War Museums**

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In a letter written nearly two months after the Battle of Waterloo to John Croker, man of letters and Tory Secretary to the Admiralty, the Duke of Wellington responded to the suggestion of a history of the battle being written by replying:

The history of a battle is not unlike the history of a ball. Some individuals may recollect all the little events of which the great result is the battle won or lost; but no individual can recollect the order in which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred, which makes all the difference as to their value or importance.<sup>1</sup>

More than one hundred years later, writing of another war, Corporal John Lucy of 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Rifles made a similar point in a different way. On 15 September 1914 Lucy and his younger brother Denis, both of A Company but in different platoons, took part in an attack on German positions in a wood on the heights above the River Aisne. John saw his brother advance and after the attack had been driven back he saw a wounded man from Denis' platoon walk past. Denis, he was told, had been lightly wounded and had gone back to the Aid Post. Only later did John learn that his brother was lying on the ground only a few hundred yards in front of him, dead.<sup>2</sup> This episode convinced John Lucy that battlefield recollections are problematic. The noise of shells and guns, the fear, the smoke and the dreadful sights and sounds understandably lead to confusion, with flashes of scenes on a narrow frontage becoming muddled in the

<sup>1</sup> Wellington to John Croker, 8 August 1815, quoted in Henrik Baring, 'The Road from Waterloo', *The Wall Street Journal*, 25-26 July 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Denis Lucy's body was not recovered and he is commemorated on La Ferté-sous-Jouarre Memorial to the Missing.

mind. Thereafter, Lucy wrote, 'I found it hard to believe many of the stories [soldiers] bandied about. The troops, I am sure, did not lie deliberately, but their imagination, in the stress of battle often played strange tricks on them'.<sup>3</sup>

Memory or remembrance studies have burgeoned over the past thirty years. This article seeks to make a small contribution to this wider field by using one small case study to show how battlefield recollections, even when concerned with just one tiny event, varied considerably. For the department in the War Office in London which dealt with the missing, reports from so-called "eye-witnesses" often caused major complications. Recording casualties and passing on information to families were the responsibility of sections within the Military Secretary's Office. MS 3 Cas. was responsible for officer casualties; MS 2 Cas. supervised the process overall and had the final responsibility for deciding whether to declare a missing soldier to be officially dead or officially presumed dead through lapse of time. It was an important responsibility, not only because the sheer number of the missing was so large during the war leaving thousands of families suffering the pain and the anxiety of not knowing whether a relative was wounded, a prisoner, or had been dead for many months. There were also practical issues to be resolved: removing a soldier's name from a regimental roll (or in the case of officers, removing the name from the Army List); the issuing of pensions; the processing of probate; and determining the marital status of a spouse.

Resolving the status of a missing soldier required the compilation of evidence of particular events on a particular part of a battlefield at a particular time. The army's practice of having a battalion roll call as soon as possible after an action began the process of creating a list of casualties. If survivors could not give any information on a soldier who did not answer his name, the soldier was marked as "missing"; if there was evidence he had been wounded, he was reported as "wounded and missing". This information was sent up the bureaucratic line to GHQ and 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon at the Base, where lists were compiled and sent to MS 2 Cas. at the War Office, both in telegraphic form and by letter. The names of officer casualties were then passed on to MS 3 Cas, where files were opened on each one. Any subsequent information received was added to the file.

It was not the role of the Casualties office actively to seek information on or search for the missing. It did not have the resources for such a monumental task. In reality, in 1914 it did not even have the resources to deal with the confirmed dead and wounded. But, for officers in particular, information did come from various sources. Relatives passed on what they had heard from regimental survivors who had contacted them. Family members also carried out their own inquiries, sometimes using contacts in Germany or neutral countries in Europe or seeking help from the International Red Cross in Geneva. From late November 1914 official inquiries as to whether a missing person was a POW were made to Berlin via the American Embassy, with a reply usually arriving within four to six weeks.

News from other sources normally began to filter through several months after the event. One source was POWs from the battalion, who were allowed to send letters to Britain. Another major source was wounded soldiers recovering in hospitals at home,

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<sup>3</sup> J.F. Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum* (1938: Uckfield 1993), p.199.

including some POWs who had been so badly maimed that they were repatriated under a reciprocal arrangement from early 1915. This article focuses primarily on these sources, as they came from men who had been actively involved in the engagement after which a man had been reported missing. In the hospitals they were interviewed by volunteer Red Cross workers who had been given lists of the missing. The ensuing reports were usually quite short, often graphic in content and, when dealing with the same missing soldier, almost invariably contradictory. Rather than helping to decide the fate of the missing, they normally muddied the waters. As relatives of the missing were given copies of the reports, they tended to hinder rather than assist in the decision-making process, for many families tended to cling to the smallest hints of hope that many reports conveyed and were reluctant to accept that their relative was dead. The War Office understood this and was always prepared to delay official decisions regarding death if families wished, even until after the war.

Of the hundreds of cases examined, the one chosen to pursue here is of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Charles Heyland Evans, of 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Border Regiment, who was reported wounded and missing on 26 October 1914 at Kruseecke. He has been chosen because in many ways his case is typical of those that arose in the first months of the war, with several conflicting reports from POWs and the hospitalized available. They demonstrate the difficulties faced by both the War Office and families of the missing when dealing with fragmentary evidence remembered from a time of acute stress and strain. But there is also a twist to Evans' story, which emerged only after the war. Was he killed by the Germans while a prisoner on the battlefield?

Evans was born on 4 May 1891 in Anglesey, Wales. His father, Captain Warren Edward Evans, JP, DL, was a landowner of independent means who had served in the 54<sup>th</sup> Foot, before it became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Dorsetshire Regiment in 1881.<sup>4</sup> The family lived at Henblas, Llangefni, Anglesey. Evans was to be an only child. He attended two prep schools, Syrell House in Llandudno and Mill Mead School in Shrewsbury, and between 1905 and 1909 attended Haileybury public school, which took many pupils from military families. In 1910 Evans went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he joined the OTC and, having gained Certificate A in military proficiency, was placed on the Unattached List of the new Territorial Force as 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant on 21 July 1911. On 20 August 1913 he was gazetted to The Border Regiment as a university candidate and posted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion.<sup>5</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Border Regiment was not in the original BEF that went to France in August 1914. It was part of 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 7<sup>th</sup> Division that landed at Zeebrugge in Belgium on 6 October 1914. The plan was to help the Belgian Army defend Antwerp, but the city fell to the Germans on the 9<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Division was forced to withdraw towards Ypres. It passed through that city and at midday on the 15<sup>th</sup> arrived at Zillebeke, moving on to Zandvoorde a day later. Sir John French, C-in-C of the BEF, was still expecting to advance at this point, not realising that the Germans were greatly superior in numbers and artillery. In preparation for this offensive, on the 18<sup>th</sup> the 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade marched to Kruseecke, with orders to take Menin, which was thought to be weakly defended. When the battalion advanced the

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<sup>4</sup> An uncle, Lt Charles Henry Evans of the 55<sup>th</sup> Foot, died of wounds at Sebastopol on 6 August 1855 during the Crimean War. <http://www.britishmedals.us/files/crimdf.htm>

<sup>5</sup> *London Gazette*, 21 July 1911, p.5435, 19 August 1913, p.5935. I am grateful to Clive Hughes for information on Evans' early years.

next day, however, it was stopped at the small village of America by intense artillery fire. It therefore returned to Kruseecke and entrenched.<sup>6</sup>

This placed the battalion at the tip of a salient, which the official history of The Border Regiment described as a ‘half circle or blunt salient’.<sup>7</sup> The battalion remained there for a week, so heavily bombarded from three sides that it was effectively cut off from the rear except at night. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant H.L. Chatfield during a ten-hour period on the 24<sup>th</sup> recorded an average of 150 shells landing per hour. The Germans had been making slow progress, but at 9am on the 26<sup>th</sup> they attacked and captured the battalion’s front-line trenches. These had covered more than two miles, far too long to be adequately defended, especially as the German artillery had been causing 150 casualties per day.<sup>8</sup> Kruseecke fell to the Germans by midday. According to Adrian Gilbert, ‘the 20<sup>th</sup> Brigade fell apart’; Sir Douglas Haig, riding up to view events, was astounded by ‘terror-stricken men coming back’. The brigade had to be replaced in the defensive line.<sup>9</sup>

Warren Evans received a telegram from the War Office on 30 October 1914 informing him that his son had been reported wounded and missing. There followed six weeks of anxiety for the family.<sup>10</sup> On 15 December, however, MS 2 Cas. again contacted Evans, with the encouraging news that the British Red Cross had received information from an unofficial source that his son was wounded and a POW. The source was another 2<sup>nd</sup> Border prisoner, Sergeant Matthews, who had sent news of Evans to the officer commanding the regimental depot. The letter had, in fact, already been published, the *Daily Mail* reporting the news on 12 December. Other newspapers soon followed suit. On the 17<sup>th</sup> both the *Manchester Courier* and the *Western Mail* reported that Evans was a POW, although the former noted that the news was unofficial while the latter claimed it to be official.<sup>11</sup> Matthews’ news was to buttress the family’s hopes for more than eighteen months. He had also sent a private letter to Warren Evans, in which he claimed that Charles Evans ‘was removed from Kruseecke in a German motor car (but to where he did not know)’.<sup>12</sup>

Needed now was confirmation from another source. As mentioned above, there were two main possible avenues to explore: the German War Office in Berlin; and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva. Warren Evans’ inquiry form to Berlin gave the following details:

Last seen about October 25<sup>th</sup> fighting at Zandvoorde, near Ypres. A letter received from a sergeant in a German prison camp mentions that Lieut. (sic) Evans is there wounded and a prisoner.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This brief overview of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion’s actions before 20 October 1914 is taken from the battalion War Diary, TNA PRO WO 95/1655.

<sup>7</sup> Col. H.C. Wylly, *The Border Regiment in the Great War* (Aldershot 1924, Kindle e-Version), Location 242 of 7566.

<sup>8</sup> Ian F.W. Beckett, *Ypres 1914: The First Battle* (Harlow 2006), p.121.

<sup>9</sup> Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford 2013), p.224.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Please forgive our anxiety, he is our only child’, wrote Warren Evans to the War Office at the end of December 1914. W.E. Evans to WO, 27 December 1914, Service Record (SR), 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Charles Heyland Evans, TNA PRO WO 339/9224.

<sup>11</sup> *Manchester Courier*, 17 December 1914; *Western Mail*, 17 December 1914.

<sup>12</sup> Warren Evans to MS 3 Cas, 3 March 1915, SR, Evans.

<sup>13</sup> SR, Evans. There is no date on the form.

The reply was disappointing: the only officer with the surname of Evans known to the Germans was 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Arthur M.G. Evans, who was in the camp at Crefeld.<sup>14</sup>

Inquiries were made to the ICRC via several routes—from Geneva, Holland and Hayes in Kent—as well as by Evans' father. The Red Cross checked every POW called Evans on the German POW lists throughout 1915, but each line of inquiry petered out.<sup>15</sup> As late as November 1915 inquiries were still being made. It was clear that Evans had never been processed through a German POW camp.

In the early months of 1915 severely-wounded British POWs began to be repatriated and British Red Cross volunteers interviewed them in hospital on their knowledge of the missing. The first report, sent directly to Warren Evans, claimed that Evans had been killed on 26 October and buried by 'Captain Allen'.<sup>16</sup> This could not have been correct. Major W. Lynn Allen had himself been killed on the 25<sup>th</sup>, by an act of treachery. He was commanding B Company in the front line in the morning when the Germans raised a white flag. Major Allen 'left his trench to go over to them. He was almost instantly killed by rifle fire'.<sup>17</sup> Whoever made the report that Warren Evans received possibly was confusing Charles Evans with Lt Philip John Egerton, who in the early hours of the 16<sup>th</sup> at Zillebecke was accidentally mortally wounded by his own men. According to the battalion war diary, 'He had warned his men to fire at anyone on their front. It appears that he himself for reasons unknown walked along the front covered by his Platoon and fire was opened'.<sup>18</sup> Egerton died of his wounds on the 17<sup>th</sup> and was buried in Ypres Town Cemetery.

Between March and May 1915 another three reports were received from repatriated prisoners via the Red Cross. One was from Private S. Marsh 7155, who was a patient in the Hospital for Epilepsy and Paralysis in Maida Vale in London. He had been in Evans' platoon in C Company. He last saw Evans on 24 October 1914 and stated that it was 'generally reported that he had been killed whilst attacking a trench'.<sup>19</sup> Private Joseph Gray of D Company gave a chilling account from his bed in Chelsea VAD Hospital in Eaton Place in May. He saw Evans shot through the forehead. There were 'also many men killed, hardly any escaped, as the Germans bayoneted the wounded'.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Private H. Reed 6384 was interviewed in Rouen. He commented that Evans' 'sister has been in constant correspondence with the regiment and has heard all that is known'.<sup>21</sup>

It was the practice of MS 2 Cas. to consider whether to presume a missing officer to be dead after six or seven months of the first official report being received from GHQ in France. At this point, May 1915, there was nothing conclusive on which to make a reasonable decision. Indeed, the more information the department received, the more

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<sup>14</sup> Arthur Evans was an officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Welsh Fusiliers, captured on 30 October 1914. I am grateful to "Charlie962" of the Great War Forum for this information.

<sup>15</sup> ICRC Historical Archives, Prisoners of the First World War 1914-1918, <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/File/Details/255647/3/2/>

<sup>16</sup> Warren Evans to WO (telegram), 4 March 1915, SR, Evans.

<sup>17</sup> War Diary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Border Regiment, 25 October 1914.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 16 October 1914.

<sup>19</sup> Report of Private S. Marsh, 15 March 1915, SR, Evans.

<sup>20</sup> Report of Private Joseph Gray, 17 May 1915, *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> Report of Private H. Reed, 20 May 1915, *ibid*.

confused the situation became. Two reports, however—the unknown correspondent's and Reed's—probably referred to an officer other than Evans, who had no sister, and could be discarded. Marsh's statement was mere hearsay and Gray's was in conflict with Matthews', although Gray may have assumed that Evans' head wound was more serious than it was. There was now the possibility that Evans had been captured alive but subsequently died.

The issue was brought to a head in August 1915 following a report from the International Red Cross to the War Office. Sergeant-Major P. Cullinen, a POW, had informed the ICRC that Lance-Corporal A. Jelly 8119 had seen Evans killed, 'shot through the head by a Maxim bullet'.<sup>22</sup> This news, which partly confirmed Gray's statement, prompted MS 2 Cas. to ask Warren Evans if he was prepared to accept this statement as conclusive evidence of his son's death. His response reflected the on-going conflict between heart and head that he was feeling. 'I fear that my son ... has died of his wounds' he began, but:

We have received several accounts from men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Border Regiment of what befell my son ... but they are conflicting, some confirm more or less what the Lance-Corporal Jelly ... states, others say that our son was wounded and taken prisoner on that day. Sergeant S. Matthews ... in a letter dated the 9<sup>th</sup> November [1914] to the officer commanding his depot at Carlisle states that Lt Evans was wounded and captured with himself and four men on the 26<sup>th</sup> October, and Sergeant Matthews in a letter to my wife dated 18<sup>th</sup> December says that our son was wounded in the arm and face and walked to the German hospital with assistance, after that he did not see my son, but his men reported to him that they saw him taken away in a motor. Sgt Matthews' statement is confirmed by Lt Sleigh and Lance-Corporal [illegible] of the Border Regiment who are POWs and from whom we have received letters and also by Messrs Cox & Co Army Agents' correspondent in Germany, who in a *private* report to them confirms Sgt Matthews' statement, who I hear is a reliable man. So I feel that I have some grounds for thinking that his statement regarding our son is accurate. Under the circumstances I trust that I may not be asked to give any definite opinion as to what happened to my son on the 26<sup>th</sup> October, as we feel unable to do so at *present*.<sup>23</sup>

Although often under pressure from the War Office Accounts department rapidly to resolve cases of the missing, as mentioned above MS 2 Cas. always respected the wishes of families unable to acknowledge that their relatives had died. Evans' file remained open for another six months before further inquiries were instigated. Captain William Watson, who had been the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion's Machine Gun Officer on 26 October 1914, was contacted in February 1916.<sup>24</sup> All he could offer was hearsay evidence, stating that 'During the retirement of the 7<sup>th</sup> Division from Krusik (sic) outside Ypres on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1914 several men of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Evans' platoon informed me that he was badly wounded. That is all I know about it and I wrote to his father

<sup>22</sup> ICRC to WO, 20 August 1915, *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Warren Evans to WO, 2 September 1915, *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> Watson was conspicuous during the defence of Kruseebecke on 25-26 October 1914 and was wounded on 2 November. Wylly, *Border Regiment*, Locations 281, 317 of 7566.

telling him all I know'.<sup>25</sup> Six weeks later Bertram Cubitt, Assistant Undersecretary of State at the War Office and head of MS 2 Cas, informed Warren Evans that unless the family had received more information on their son, the War Office intended officially to pronounce him 'presumed dead'.<sup>26</sup>

Evans's uncertainty, or rather his unwillingness to reach a final decision, had remained unchanged. After rehearsing his previous comments and stating that he still was 'inclined to believe' Matthews and the others who thought his son was a wounded POW, he reluctantly agreed that Charles Evans must have died of wounds.<sup>27</sup> On 5 April 1916 the War Office proceeded to declare him dead through lapse of time. As Evans' official date of death was 26 October 1914, his subsequent promotions to Lieutenant (on 29 October 1914) and Captain were cancelled.

The inconsistencies in the statements about Evans' fate were not uncommon. The families of many other officers declared missing were forced to share the consequences of imperfect recollections of events occurring in periods of acute stress, fear and disorientation for the participants. It is understandable that the Evans family continued to cling to Sgt Matthews' claim to have seen their relative in German hands. That he was wounded yet never reported a prisoner led logically to the conclusion that he must have died of wounds soon after capture. This should have resulted in an official German report of his death, but this was not forthcoming. It was a minor mystery, but within one of the statements from the Red Cross which were seen by Warren Evans there lurked, unappreciated, one possible solution. As Joseph Gray had stated, the Germans bayoneted many of the wounded Border Regiment prisoners. Could Evans have been one of these?

In 1924 Col. H.C. Wylly, the prolific author of regimental histories, published his history of the Border Regiment during the Great War. Wylly normally relied very heavily on the regimental war diaries in his work and this was the case with his chapter on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in 1914. But within his war diary synopses there is a statement that is unique: 'Evans was wounded and captured on the 26<sup>th</sup> October and was shot by the Germans after capture for trying to defend a man of the Regiment whom the enemy were ill-treating'.<sup>28</sup> The provenance of this information remains a mystery although, given that there is no hint of this event in the results of the many inquiries made during 1914 and 1915, it is possible that it came from a statement made by a returned POW after the war. It would have been impossible to transmit this information while the war was in progress. In the end, however, Wylly's claim has no greater status than Matthews', Jelly's, or Gray's. Evans certainly appears to have been alive when captured, but how badly wounded he was remains unclear. What is clear is that if the fates of the missing were to be determined, all avenues of inquiry needed to be assessed, even if they led through an increasingly tangled web of half-remembered memories and hearsay to the unsatisfactory declaration of presumption of death through the passage of time.

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<sup>25</sup> Capt. W. Watson to MS 3 Cas, 14 February 1916, SR, Evans.

<sup>26</sup> Cubitt to Evans, 26 March 1916, *ibid.* For Cubitt, see his obituary, *The Times*, 24 September 1942.

<sup>27</sup> Evans to MS 2 Cas, 27 March 1916, SR, Evans. When Evans' military accounts were being closed in September 1916, his father still did not 'feel justified in making a declaration' that his son was dead, although he accepted the official decision. Evans to Secretary, WO, 25 September 1916, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Wylly, *Border Regiment*, Location 371 of 7566.

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