

Fortunes of War: Captain Arthur George Tillard & Lt George Dixon 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment



Captain Arthur George Tillard (1874 - 20 October 1914)

Source: *Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol. 1 (August to December 1914), p.398.



Lt George Dixon (1888 - 20 October 1914)

Source: *Manchester University Roll of Honour*

<http://www.ww1.manchester.ac.uk/roll-of-honour/dixon-george/>

On 20 October 1914, at Les Trois Maisons near La Basseé, in the department of Nord, both Captain A.G. Tillard and Lt G. Dixon were killed in a bayonet charge that was instrumental in preventing the Germans from breaking through the British lines at a crucial point. Both were subsequently reported missing. Both are now commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial to the Missing. This article is concerned less with the First Battle of Ypres, of which the fighting at Les Trois Maisons was a preliminary part, than with the evidence that emerged in the aftermath of that day that was used to determine their official status as fatal casualties. Tillard's relatives, after initial confusion, received strong evidence of his death and burial from an unusual source. Dixon's endured hopes that were blighted and they never did come to know his fate for certain, thanks in part to receiving, unwittingly, false news from a reliable source. The fortunes of war brought grief to both families, but also highlight the serendipitous nature of "news" from the front, at a time when hundreds of British officers and thousands of Other Ranks were being reported missing. Many of the relatives of the missing used every means at their disposal to discover the truth, but it was not often the case that information received was authoritative and conclusive. Some relatives eventually had their anxieties relieved when news arrived that their son or husband was a prisoner of war; others, however, clung grimly to false hopes for years before accepting the inevitable. The cases of Tillard and Dixon, in microcosm, also demonstrate the acute difficulties faced by the War Office department responsible for officer casualties—M.S. 3 Casualties—when faced not only with conflicting evidence but also with the sheer number of casualties who had been reported missing in the first months of the war.

Apart from both serving in the Manchester Regiment, Tillard and Dixon had little in common. Tillard, born in November 1874, was fourteen years older than Dixon, born in October 1888, and came from a more privileged background. He was the son of an Anglican clergyman and attended a major public school, Marlborough College. He was married, with four children (another was born after his death). Dixon's father, who died in 1897, was from the small business class, a master grocer who could not afford school fees, so his son was educated at Manchester Central School. Aged twenty-six in 1914, Dixon remained unmarried.¹ Tillard made the army his career, attending Sandhurst and fighting in the South African War of 1899-1902. In 1908 he had retired on half-pay and in January 1913 retired from the Active List and joined the Manchester Regiment's 3rd (Reserve) Battalion.² It was there that he would have first met Dixon. Dixon attended Manchester University from 1909, studying mechanical engineering, belonged to the university OTC and in 1911 was working as assistant manager in a machine tool factory. In May 1912 he was given a probationary commission in the Special Reserve with the Manchester Regiment and in the following August was posted to the 3rd (Reserve) Battalion, still as a probationer 2nd Lieutenant until October.³

Ironically, despite Tillard's years fighting in South Africa, including being present at the siege of Ladysmith, by the time the 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment arrived in the village of Les Trois Maisons on 19 October 1914 Dixon was the more experienced combatant officer, at least when the enemy was a modern European army. At the outbreak of the war the 2nd Battalion began mobilizing in Ireland. Dixon was immediately attached to it, arriving in Dublin on 5 August. He sailed to France with the main force, reaching Le Havre on 14 August.⁴ He was thus involved in the battle of Le Cateau on 26 August, the retreat to the Marne and the battle of the Aisne in mid-September. He was one of the few officers to avoid becoming a casualty during this period. Tillard, by contrast, was a sorely needed replacement after heavy officer losses, disembarking in France on 16 September and reaching the battalion the same day with six other officers who were, according to the battalion war diary, a 'welcome addition'.⁵

As part of 14th Infantry Brigade, 5th Division, the 2nd Battalion moved north from the Aisne with II Corps as the BEF was shifted, in great secrecy, to the left of the French army, with the objective of turning the German army's right flank.⁶ It arrived in Les Trois Maisons on 19 October. The next day the battalion was ordered to hold the line while 3rd Division made a second attempt to take the strongly-defended village of Illies on its left. About 9.00am, according to the war diary:

The enemy advanced against our front and left flank. Heavy fighting ensued comprising heavy fire action and two gallant bayonet charges by platoons of A Company under Captain A. G. Tallard and 2nd Lt (sic) G. Dixon. Fighting continued until dusk when we withdrew to our support trenches covering Lorges. The men behaved with great gallantry in spite of the loss of their officers.⁷

¹ At the 1911 census Tillard was living with his family in a thirteen-roomed house in Denham, Buckinghamshire, with 3 live-in servants and 2 nurses for the children. Dixon was living with his widowed mother and three brothers in a six-roomed house, with one servant, in Northenden Rd, Sale, Cheshire.

² *London Gazette*, 3 January 1913, p.44; *Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol. 1, p.398.

³ *London Gazette*, 17 May 1912, p.3585, 6 August 1912, p.5857.

⁴ War Diary, 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment, TNA PRO WO 95/1564, 5-14 August 1914; 1914 Star Rolls, Manchester Regiment, Ancestry.co.uk.

⁵ War Diary, 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment, 16 September 1914; 1914 Star Rolls, Manchester Regiment, Ancestry.co.uk.

⁶ Ian F.W. Beckett, *Ypres The First Battle 1914* (Harlow 2006), pp.19-21.

⁷ War Diary, 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment, 20 October 1914. Dixon had been promoted to Lieutenant on 27 September, although it was not officially gazetted for many months. *London Gazette*, 1 April 1915, p.3232.

Tillard, Dixon and another officer, 2nd Lt Walter Balshaw, were reported missing.

Another account of the action came from Captain Arthur Close-Brooks, the brother of Tillard's wife Emily, who informed her in March 1915 that:

The Adjutant of the battalion says that apparently [Tillard's] company had advanced further than those on his right and left, and he held up the whole German force for about 30 (sic) hours by repeated bayonet charges, and undoubtedly not only saved the whole line from defeat, but also kept the Germans from pushing through.⁸

It was later reported that the battalion's medical officer, Captain George Brown, had subsequently scoured the battlefield but had been unable to find the bodies of Tillard and Dixon.⁹ If this news had been known earlier, it would have been assumed that the two officers had been taken away as prisoners.¹⁰

Dixon and Tillard were officially reported missing on the casualty list dated 24 October 1914.¹¹ Already, however, there was confusion. Two officers by the name of Tillard were serving in the Manchester Regiment, Captains A.G. and A.K.D., the latter in the 1st Battalion. It was the latter who was initially, and wrongly, reported missing. The error was only corrected after the father of A.K.D. Tillard reported that he had received a letter from his son dated 25 October. It was therefore assumed that the 1st Battalion's Tillard had been temporarily separated from his unit but had returned.¹² Without a Service Record available, it is impossible to determine when Arthur George Tillard's wife officially received the news that her husband was missing, but it must have been at some point in early November. It is possible, however, that she had heard unofficially before then, regimental bush telegraphs being remarkably efficient at the time.

At this early stage of the war families of the missing were mainly dependent on their own resources to obtain information. At the War Office, M.S. 3 Casualties was both new and severely understaffed. Like so many other parts of the country's war machinery, it was totally unprepared for its task, in this case dealing with a huge number of casualties in such a short time.¹³ All that could be done was pass on the official particulars sent from France to relatives, which frequently was updated as GHQ or 3rd Echelon (Base) received further information on individuals. The main newspapers in Britain, printing casualty returns as soon as they were released, frequently referred to an officer being missing, then wounded and missing and then unofficially wounded and a prisoner of war or killed. Not until the last month of the year did the government formally establish a means of requesting information on missing individuals with the German government in Berlin via the American Embassy.¹⁴

⁸ *Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol. 1, p.398. Capt. A.B. Close-Brooks was killed in 1917.

⁹ Capt. G.W. Williamson to War Office, 12 September 1915, SR, Dixon.

¹⁰ Brown's search may have been the source of the rumour that Tillard, named as A.K.D. Tillard, had become a POW. See *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 26 October 1914; *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 26 October 1914.

¹¹ *Leeds Mercury*, 26 October 1914.

¹² *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 7 November 1914; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 16 November 1914. Major A.K.D. Tillard survived the war and remained in the army.

¹³ Colonel William Capper, 'History of M.S. 3 Casualties during 1914-1919', p.1, TNA PRO WO 32/9317. According to this official account, the Military Secretary's Department took on the issue of casualties almost by accident. The sub-unit for officers was established 'on or about' 12 August 1914.

¹⁴ *Yorkshire Post*, 12 December 1914. No replies to these individual requests had been received at the Foreign Office by 10 February 1915. *Hansard*, 10 February 1915, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1915/feb/10/number-or-land-forces#S5CV0069P0_19150210_HOC_356.

In reality, therefore, relatives of missing officers of the Regular Army in 1914 had to rely mainly on their own connections in the search for information. The International Red Cross in Geneva, for instance, were soon receiving requests for help in finding missing soldiers. Unofficial cooperation between the War Office and the Red Cross began early in the war, but an official link, whereby the War Office regularly passed copies of the missing to the British Red Cross, was established only in July 1915).¹⁵ No fewer than six women made representations to the Red Cross on Tillard's behalf, four from England—including his wife and sister—and two from Switzerland.¹⁶ Nothing resulted from these enquiries, but out of the blue Emily Tillard received two letters from a Prussian officer, Captain von Selasinsky, who had been serving as an ADC with *25th Infantry Brigade* on 20 October. The first letter confirmed Tillard's death.

Enclosed I send you the money found in the pockets of your husband, killed at Les Trois Maisons. ... He was killed in the morning of the 20th October as Prussian *Jäger* took the village defended by him as a hero... You can be sure, dear Madam, that your husband was honoured like we are accustomed to honour our enemies.¹⁷

Included with the letter was a family photo.

The second letter from von Selasinsky—who was to survive to become a Lieutenant-Colonel in the *Luftwaffe* in the Second World War—gave more details of Tillard's fate and included a sketch map of his gravesite:

He has his own place, not amidst other soldiers. As I know he was killed at once, I am sure he had not to suffer a long time. When our soldiers took the place, which he defended, he had a single fight with the German Captain, whose Browning didn't work, and whom he wounded with his Browning. After this happened he got several shots of the German soldiers, who were naturally excited about the accident, because they saw that their German Captain was shooten. But your husband was not disfigured, and easily to recognise. ... I hope you think we have done for your husband all we could do for him as honest enemies. My General, too, sends to the widow of the brave officer expressions of his estimation.¹⁸

Despite the increasing bitterness of the fighting, therefore, these letters demonstrate that it was still possible for battlefield chivalry to be displayed in honour of a brave foe. The sketch map, however, did not prevent Tillard's grave from being subsequently lost. Receipt of these communications must have been bitter-sweet for pregnant Emily Tillard; they brought an end to her anxiety while confirming that her fifth child, born on 23 March 1915, would never see his father.¹⁹ There were now sufficient details of Tillard's death from a reputable source for him to be officially pronounced dead. A family death notice was placed in the newspapers.²⁰

¹⁵British Red Cross: 'Wounded and Missing Service during the First World War', <http://www.redcross.org.uk/~media/BritishRedCross/Documents/Who%20we%20are/History%20and%20archives/Missing%20and%20wounded%20service%20during%20the%20First%20World%20War.pdf>; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 25 August 1915.

¹⁶International Committee of the Red Cross, Prisoners of the First World War, 1914-1918, <https://grandeguerrre.icrc.org/en/File/Search/#/3/2/224/0/British%20and%20Commonwealth/Military/tillard>.

¹⁷ *Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol. 1, p.398.

¹⁸ For Selasinsky's career, see 'Not a Good Day for the 2nd Battalion', The Manchester Regiment Forum, <http://themanchesters.org/forum/index.php?PHPSESSID=971ef577c0bbe7df38a01204cc8c4b61&topic=9075.15>. For the second letter, *Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol. 1, p.398.

¹⁹ *Bucks Herald*, 27 March 1915.

²⁰ See, for example, *Kent and Sussex Courier*, 4 December 1914. Tillard's father had been Vicar of Penshurst in Kent.

On 19 December his photo appeared in *The Sphere* among twenty-one BEF officers confirmed dead.²¹ In January 1915 the process began of settling his army accounts.²²

The mixture of bureaucratic muddle, no firm news and the sudden appearance of proof of death did not apply in the case of George Dixon. Probably killed within yards of Tillard, although later in the day, his fate took much longer to determine, although it possibly could have been settled earlier and with less confusion. At about the time that Emily Tillard was receiving her letters, the invalided orderly of Dixon gave a newspaper interview in Manchester. He was quoted as saying that Dixon 'was shot dead whilst engaging one of the enemy in a bayonet charge at La Bassée'.²³ It was an orderly's duty to remain close to his officer in combat, so there is, perhaps, no reason to question this statement. Unfortunately, it appears that this news was not officially reported to the War Office at the time.²⁴ Even if it had been, however, the War Office would have needed corroborative evidence, preferably from an officer, before accepting it for the purpose of officially accepting Dixon's death. Such evidence was not available, although private and unofficial enquiries by the Dixon family elicited reports that he was wounded in the mouth and that he had been killed and buried on the road near La Bassée on 21 October.²⁵

The newspaper report might, however, have prevented an error being made at the time regarding Dixon's fate. Representations to the International Red Cross had no result, but on 2 February 1915 the War Office received a list of wounded POWs from the American Consul-General in London which included the entry: 'Lieutenant Albert Dixon, Manchester Regiment. Reported hospital Cologne'. This was immediately passed on to Dixon's brother, with the warning: 'This may possibly refer to 2/Lieutenant George Dixon, Manchester Regiment. Further investigations are being made to confirm this report'.²⁶ Within ten days any hopes that this may have been Dixon were dented, if not dashed, when a follow-up letter to the family reported that the patient was Private Albert Dixon, of the Royal Horse Guards.²⁷ Strangely, however, the War Office decided to keep paying Dixon as if he were a prisoner of war.

The silence that then fell on Dixon's fate was broken on 16 May 1915 by a volunteer worker of the British Red Cross' Enquiry Department for Wounded and Missing, who was interviewing soldiers in Catterick Hall hospital in Didsbury, near Manchester. Interviewed was Henry Gerrard, who had been in A Company, No. 4 Platoon, which was Dixon's. He stated that he 'was not 5 yards from [Dixon] when he was hit in the head by a rifle shot and killed instantly; witness having lost his own rifle took Lieutenant Dixon's rifle. This happened at the Cross Roads, nr. La Bassée'.²⁸ This report was passed on to the family, but they appear to have done nothing with it for several months.²⁹ It was not sent directly to the War Office, for it took a letter from Hugh Williamson, dated 30 August, for the Casualty Department to begin enquiries (they were not considering accepting his death as presumed because their records still showed him a prisoner of war). Williamson, the father of a 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment officer, lived in Sale, like Dixon's widowed mother, and had taken up the case after his son gave him information about Captain Brown's failure to find the bodies of Tillard and Dixon. On the advice of Sir Louis Mallet of the British Red Cross, he applied 'formally' to the War Office on behalf of the family for information on Dixon. He

²¹ *The Sphere*, 19 December 1914, p.297. Ten had served in South Africa.

²² In his will Tillard left £6984. *Manchester Evening News*, 27 February 1915.

²³ *Ibid.* 16 November 1914.

²⁴ There is no record of the statement in Dixon's Service Record.

²⁵ Hugh Williamson to War Office, 30 August 1915, SR, Dixon.

²⁶ War Office to J. Dixon, 5 February 1915, *ibid.*

²⁷ War Office to F. Dixon (sic), 15 February 1915, *ibid.*

²⁸ Sir Louis Mallet, Red Cross, to Hugh Williamson, 13 August 1915, *ibid.*

²⁹ Sir Louis Mallet to The Secretary, War Office, 21 September 15, *ibid.*

admitted that prospects of finding him alive were small after such a long time, but the family still hoped that he might be a prisoner of war in hospital.³⁰

Only now did the War Office become aware of the interview with Gerrard. On 14 September the Casualty unit asked Mallet for a copy of Gerrard's report sent to the Dixon family. Once this arrived they had to search for Gerrard, as his name had been spelt incorrectly on the original interview report. Not until 4 October could Gerrard be formally re-interviewed (he was found in the regiment's 3rd Battalion in Cleethorpes). He stated that:

2nd Manchester Regiment at about 6am 20th October 1914 was ordered into action at La Bassée. A Company to which Lt Dixon and I belonged was ordered to attack a position about 100 yards in front of our trench. This was successful and my Company remained in possession of the captured trench until about 4.30pm. Lt Dixon was unharmed at this time. At about 4.30pm we were ordered to retire and as the retirement was being carried out I saw Lt Dixon shot in the head by a rifle shot. He fell in the middle of the road down which we were retiring. I passing at about ten yards distance saw blood trickling down his face and he was in my opinion dead. I did not see him again.³¹

By this stage of the war the Casualties Department had worked out a general protocol regarding evidence supplied by eye-witnesses to events that led to an officer being declared missing.³² Gerrard's statement shows the problems they faced when interpreting action accounts from participants whose memories came from periods of acute stress. Gerrard could be relied upon for identifying Dixon, who was his platoon officer. He could be relied upon for evidence of Dixon being wounded, probably mortally. But his statement did not prove that Dixon was dead, only that *in his opinion* he had been killed. It is also worth noting that the events described in the statement differed from the events described by Dixon's orderly nearly a year before. In one he was killed in the midst of a bayonet charge; in the other he was in the process of retiring from the battle line. It is possible that in November 1914 the orderly confused Dixon's death with Tillard's. Although this would explain the discrepancy in the accounts, it seems highly unlikely, given that he was Dixon's servant. As it appears that the War Office was unaware of the November newspaper account, it would not have clouded its judgement. Nevertheless, on its own Gerrard's account was insufficient to lead to an official judgement that he had died. The process of declaring Dixon dead had to rely on the passage of time since he was last heard of. Gerrard's evidence was corroborative, not definitive. In Dixon's case, therefore, he was finally officially 'presumed dead' on 26 October 1915. He was one of the many who had simply vanished.

Understandably, Dixon's family remained unhappy that they had received incorrect information earlier in the year, which they had clung to even after they had been told it was wrong. Prompted by a query from his mother after the decision had been made to pronounce him dead, that 'everything possible should be done to trace the [original] mistake to its very source', the Casualties department took measures to track down the source of the error.³³ It was not possible to follow the paper trail back to the American Embassy in Berlin so long after the event (although the source of the error began there, even if the interpretation of the information was made within the War Office), but there was one alternative avenue to pursue. One of the men on the original list, Captain Gordon Adams of the 2nd South Lancashire Regiment, had been repatriated and he was asked if he could confirm the names of those who were in hospital with him in Cologne.³⁴ Unfortunately, Adams could only reply that he had

³⁰ Hugh Williamson to War Office, 30 August 1915, *ibid.*

³¹ Statement of 8054 Private Henry Gerrard, 4 October 1915, *ibid.*

³² Policy was agreed in February 1915.

³³ Mrs Dixon to C.2 Casualties, 11 November 1915, *ibid.*

³⁴ R.C. Fowler (C.2 Cas.) to Capt. G. Adams, 23 December 1915, *ibid.*

not seen any of the officers named, although he pointed that there were forty-seven different hospitals in the city, in any of which they could have been treated.³⁵ There the trail ran cold.

Two officers of the same company of the same battalion went missing on the same day in October 1914. Discovering what happened to them both followed two different trajectories. Tillard's case was very unusual; Dixon's was, unfortunately, much more common, with snippets of information, often contradictory, failing to achieve a resolution that could have brought closure to his grieving family. 'Presumed dead' was an unsatisfactory category, but it was to be an inevitable conclusion for so many who vanished during the Great War.

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³⁵ G. Adams to Secretary, War Office, 2 January 1916, *ibid.*