

Frustrated Ambition: The Undulating Army Career of Lieutenant and Quartermaster William Bernard aka William Bernard Collins

In the spring of 1915 a crisis of manpower in the British Army began to emerge. Despite the unprecedented response to Lord Kitchener's appeal for volunteers in the early months of the Great War, the flow of recruits to the New Armies had slowed.¹ It was a struggle for new Service battalions such as the 11th (Lewisham) Battalion, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, that began recruiting in May 1915, to find men to fill its ranks.² As well as turning a blind eye to enthusiastic under-aged boys, recruiters in South London happily accepted men of more mature years, even those in their fifth decade as long as they lied about their age. One such volunteer was William Bernard, who gave his age as 37 years and 330 days when he enlisted in Lewisham on 4 June 1915.³ He was in reality nearly 44 years old.

Lying about his age was by no means the only deliberate misrepresentation on Bernard's attestation forms, but he quickly impressed his army superiors and rapidly rose through the non-commissioned ranks. Within two months of enlisting he was a Sergeant and in February 1916 he was appointed a Company Quartermaster Sergeant. Three months later he was commissioned as Lieutenant and Quartermaster and served with the 11th battalion throughout the battles on the Somme.⁴ But age and other problems eventually caught up with him and he was forced to resign his commission in March 1918, 'unfitted for any position of responsibility'.⁵ By then it was clear that this temporary officer was not what he seemed. The British Army's officer corps expanded hugely during the war, but few chosen for commissions would have had such an unusual hinterland as "William Bernard".

Although by no means a physically imposing figure, it is not surprising that Bernard stood out in the ranks of the 11th Battalion, which were mainly filled with labourers without any military experience. According to his enlistment forms and from conversations he had with senior officers of the battalion, he was unmarried; possessed the army's 1st Class Certificate of Education; could speak French fluently as well as ride; wrote neatly with the hand of a clerk; and, from previous service, had an experienced understanding of the workings of an army unit, having served as Quartermaster in the Royal Field Artillery. These attributes suggested that Bernard had been well educated and came from a social class significantly higher than most of his fellow volunteers in the ranks. He certainly appears to have received a good education, but he was not from such a high social class as his list of attainments indicated.

He was born in Solihull, Warwickshire as William Bernard Collins on 2 July 1871, the second son of a hosier who later owned a shop in Streatham, South London. While his father may not have been wealthy, his paternal grandmother, Mary S. Collins, married to a clothier who died while she was still relatively young, appears to have been so. In April 1891 she was living at No. 30 Baker Street in Marylebone, surrounded by six servants and her two grandsons, Frank and William.⁶ It is likely that Mary helped with the boys' education. William first attended the prep school of Ardingly College, an Anglican boarding school in Sussex, then went to Dulwich College and, finally, completed his education in St Honoré in Paris.⁷ In the 1891 census he

¹ Michael Senior, *Victory on the Western Front: The Development of the British Army 1914-1918* (Barnsley 2016), p.27.

² For the struggles to raise the 11th Battalion, see 'Raising a Service Battalion in 1915: Captain George Pragnell's Marketing Strategy and the 11th (Lewisham) Battalion Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment', on this website.

³ Service Record, Hon. Lt and Quartermaster William Bernard, TNA PRO WO 339/65360.

⁴ *London Gazette*, 11 July 1916, p.6390.

⁵ SR, William Bernard.

⁶ Mary Collins was living on her own means in 1891, but thirty years earlier, as a widow, she was a 'proprietor of houses'.

⁷ Bernard was at Ardingly College on the night of the 1881 census.

described himself as a ‘student for the army’, by which he presumably meant that he was attending an army crammer in the hope of being accepted for one of the royal military academies, at Sandhurst or Woolwich. This would have confirmed the social position for which his education had been a preparation, because all officers were automatically accepted as gentlemen.

What changed the trajectory of his life is unknown. Perhaps the failure to be accepted as an army cadet was a crushing blow, or the death of his grandmother in 1893 cut off the financial support his social ambitions required. Whatever the circumstances, by 1894, when he married in Balham, he had returned to the family hosiery business, his hopes of rising in society dashed. His wife, Flora, was the daughter of a Scottish hosier. They were to have two children, born eighteen months apart in 1900 and 1901. By that time Bernard was working as a shirt cutter, possibly for his father.

This rather constricted life appears claustrophobic for a man whose military and social ambitions had been thwarted. For no known reason (although it is probable that his marriage had broken down) and with the Boer War at its height, on 24 December 1901 Bernard went to Dover and enlisted in the ranks of the Royal Field Artillery, using his real name but claiming to be 23 years of age.⁸ He was to serve twelve years and six months, more than half of which was spent in India. He rose to the rank of Corporal. On four occasions while in England, however, he went AWOL, losing his stripes in the process after a Regimental Court-Martial. In 1910 he spent forty-five days in hospital in Karachi, suffering from a severe case of gonorrhoea.⁹ Promoted again, to Acting Bombardier, he became clerk in the office of the 94th Battery for the final two and a half years of his service. He received no further promotion. On his discharge at Gosport in January 1914, he was given a good conduct report.

When Bernard enlisted in May 1915 aspects of his former career soon became known to the 11th Battalion’s authorities. What they did not know was that he was significantly overage; that he was married; that his name was Collins; and that he had fraudulently enlisted. It appears that he first re-enlisted on 8 September 1914, soon after the war had broken out. Whether he chose to return to the RFA remains unknown, but for some reason he deserted. Only in May 1915 did he decide once again to join the army, this time with the infantry. He was at the time a clerk living in Catford, so the 11th Battalion was a logical choice. Enlisting under another name was a shrewd move; it reduced the chances of his desertion being discovered.

It is likely that Bernard would never have confessed his fraudulent enlistment if it had not been for the prospect of his receiving a commission from the ranks. He had been promoted to Company Quartermaster Sergeant of A Company on 5 February 1916, which made him a candidate for the position of Honorary Lieutenant and Quartermaster of the battalion when the position fell vacant. At that point the battalion was training at Aldershot and it became clear that the current incumbent, John Doe, was unfit and it was decided that he should be transferred to the 12th (Reserve) Battalion. It appears that the first name put forward to replace Doe was that of the battalion’s Regimental Sergeant-Major, E.W. “Busty” Goulds. A Regular, Goulds was one of the most popular men in the battalion.

According to the battalion’s historian:

Dear Old Goulds was mother, nurse and teacher all in one. Privates, NCOs, Warrant Officers and Officers alike turned to him for advice, sought his ready help, received

⁸ Pension Record, 2039 William Bernard Collins, Ancestry.Co. Unless otherwise stated, all information for Bernard/Collins comes from this source and his Service Record.

⁹ For sexually transmitted diseases amongst soldiers serving in India, see Timothy Bowman and Mark Connelly, *The Edwardian Army: Recruiting, Training, and Deploying the British Army, 1902-1914* (Oxford 2012), p.55.

his kindly encouragement. Always accessible, mild or stern as occasion demanded, Goulds was all that a Regimental Sergeant-Major should be, steeped in Regimental lore, a veritable encyclopaedia of military knowledge, unselfish and unboastful, he was profoundly respected by us all.¹⁰

Goulds' nomination, however, was rejected by 123rd Brigade. No doubt anxious to keep the appointment in-house, Major G.A Heron, OC A Company, strongly recommended Bernard for the position to the new battalion CO, Lt-Col A.F. Townshend. Townshend held several long interviews with Bernard before supporting the application. Bernard, he wrote in April to Brigade, had experience as a Battery Quartermaster Sergeant in the RFA and was an excellent accountant, with useful riding and language skills. Townshend made this statement after he had decided that Bernard's voluntary confession of fraudulent enlistment made on 28 March did not require a court-martial. Bernard had shown an exemplary character while serving with the battalion, but it having been discovered that he was 'probably 45' years of age, he was ordered to prove his fitness. Lt R. Puttock, the battalion's medical officer, passed Bernard fit for overseas service in April. Bernard left with the battalion for France on 2 May 1916, but in the capacity of Acting Quartermaster.¹¹ His commission was not confirmed for another fortnight.¹² The route may have been very long and serpentine, and there were few prospects of being promoted beyond the rank of Captain, but Bernard had finally achieved his aim of gaining a commission, even if it were honorary.

Essentially, a Quartermaster was responsible for supervising a unit's supplies and provisions. The position has been described as 'a dead-end job'.¹³ In reality, the morale and the fighting qualities of a unit depended heavily on the efficiency of the Quartermaster's office. Bernard was ultimately responsible for the feeding, clothing, equipping and paying of a battalion, in all circumstances and in all conditions. Company Quartermaster Sergeants and their "storemen" did the hard work and took most of the plaudits, but the Quartermaster himself oversaw what was a very complex operation, especially in a fighting battalion. Admittedly, a Quartermaster's pen was mightier than his sword, which partly explains why older, more experienced NCOs and Warrant Officers were appointed to the position. Nevertheless, it was not a sinecure in wartime and the position placed great strain on the incumbent, especially as he would shoulder the blame for any failures in supply.

The 11th Battalion, as part of 41st Division, spent several months in the relative backwater of the trenches around Ploegsteert before moving to the Somme in mid-August 1916. Its first major assault was at Flers on 15 September, which was costly but largely successful. Its second attack was at Le Sars on 7 October, which was a miserable failure. The original battalion was effectively shattered; there had been 720 casualties during these few weeks.¹⁴ Bernard's main role was to ensure that the troops received supplies of food and water during this desperate period. He is mentioned in the battalion history as bringing supplies up to the front line on the evening of Le Sars attack, although the Transport Officer, Lt H.W.E. Bainton, rightly received most of the credit, being awarded the Military Cross for his efforts in supplying water and bringing in the wounded in the aftermath of the attack.¹⁵ Despite the difficulties, the battalion history reckoned that the Commissariat was at its best on the Somme: 'Never before nor

¹⁰ R.O. Russell, *The History of the 11th (Lewisham) Battalion The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment* (Lewisham 1934), p.6. Goulds was eventually appointed Lt and Quartermaster to the 11th Battalion in June 1917. *London Gazette*, 16 July 1917, p.7108.

¹¹ Russell, *Queen's Own*, p.49.

¹² The commission was dated 18 May 1916. *London Gazette*, 11 July 1916, p. 6390. Quartermasters were usually given an honorary commission.

¹³ Bowman and Connelly, *The Edwardian Army*, p.29.

¹⁴ C.T. Atkinson, *The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment 1914-1919* (London 1924), pp.210, 219.

¹⁵ *The Queen's Own Gazette*, December 1916, p.3575.

afterwards had the Quartermaster's Department and the Transport to surmount such difficulties. Never did they do better work'.¹⁶

The Somme was Bernard's swansong. To spend six months with a line battalion for men of Bernard's age was often enough to wear them out. He was given ten days' leave in November and on his return was declared unfit for duty with a combatant unit. In January 1917 he was transferred to the General List and posted to the depot at Rouxmesnil near Dieppe. He was to remain there until the end of the year. The experience was clearly demoralizing and he became increasingly undisciplined, reverting to type. On 27 October 1917 he faced a court-martial for neglecting to obey an order, for which he was reprimanded. In mid-December he again was court-martialled, on a charge of drunkenness. This time he received a severe reprimand. After a spell in hospital again suffering from gonorrhoea, he was ordered to England and asked to resign his commission on the grounds of 'general inefficiency'. He resigned on 2 March 1918.¹⁷

The military career of William Bernard aka Collins is a mere footnote in the history of the 11th Battalion Royal West Regiment, yet it highlights several interesting facets of life in early twentieth-century Britain. It was set in an era of limited but real social mobility, with scions of many middle-class families hopeful of being able to achieve the rank of Esquire or Gentleman. Bernard set foot on the ladder of upward social mobility thanks to the largesse of a successful grandmother, who gave him the educational background vitally necessary for advancement. The army was the next step, but it eluded him, probably because of his sponsor's death. Thrown back, almost literally, on to the hosier's shop floor, he struggled within the confines of marriage and an unappealing and unsatisfactory work environment for a few years before breaking out. The army gave him the opportunity to start again.

To climb up the greasy pole within the ranks required determination, discipline and the ability to pass examinations. Using a smooth tongue to gild the lily appears to have been another of Bernard's useful attributes. In his interviews with Townshend in March and April 1916, Bernard convinced his CO not only to disregard his fraudulent enlistment but also to accept that, when in the RFA he was a Battery Quartermaster with a 1st Class Certificate in Education who was qualified to act as an army schoolmaster. There is no evidence in his records that either claim was correct. Bernard never rose above the rank of Corporal and left the army in 1914 as Acting Bombardier. His highest educational qualification in the army was a 2nd Class Certificate and there is no record that he was a teacher. No doubt his horsemanship and language skills were genuine, for he would not have been able to avoid using them in France. These attributes of a gentleman, however, allowed Bernard to trick his CO. Fraudulent enlistment was followed by a fraudulent promotion. It was a hollow victory; the Somme saw to that.

© Michael Durey August 2017. All rights reserved.

¹⁶ Russell, *Queen's Own*, p.78.

¹⁷ *London Gazette*, 1 March 1918.