

## **Dying with Sword in Hand on the Aisne 1914: Lt George Owen Birch, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment**

### **Introduction**

The infantry officers of the British Expeditionary Force went to war in August 1914 wearing their swords. The Boer War had raised questions as to the weapon's usefulness and in the years after 1902 there existed a substantial military opinion that officers should carry rifles instead. In 1908, however, the Army Council reinstated the sword as one of the infantry officer's weapons.<sup>1</sup> This was soon seen to be a mistake and by the end of the retreat from Mons in early September 1914 many of the surviving officers had discarded these relics from an earlier age of warfare, judging them as a hindrance and an obvious target for the enemy when on the battlefield. In theory they could have been used like a tourist leader's umbrella, allowing a platoon or company to follow their officer during an advance, but in practice swords attracted swarms of bullets and helped to ensure that officers suffered high casualty rates. Moreover, it is hard to find contemporary evidence of swords actually being used in combat by infantry officers in 1914. There is, however, one example of an officer wielding his sword in close combat on 14 September 1914. It possibly may be the last eyewitness account of a British *infantry* officer wielding his sword in battle on the Western Front.<sup>2</sup> How reliable this account was, however, will be examined here, setting the account in two contexts: first, in the context of the battle as it was fought by 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade of 1<sup>st</sup> Division on 14 September; and second, in the context of the search for answers about what happened to the sword-wielding officer, which led directly to the eyewitness account being written down and becoming an official document. The conclusion is that the officer probably did die using his sword in close combat, but that the rest of the episode should have a veil cast over it, as it blemishes the reputation of his platoon and his regiment.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade and the Battle of the Aisne on 14 September 1914**

The sword-wielder was Lt George Owen Birch of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment. He was born on 28 May 1895 and was the elder son of Rev. George Thomas Birch, Rector of Bucknall in Staffordshire, and his wife Helen.<sup>3</sup> Birch was educated at Dean Close School, Cheltenham, one of the many public schools established during the Victorian era. It was a relatively small school, with 195 pupils in 1914 and was not part of the prestigious Headmaster's Conference, where the heads of the leading public schools met each year.<sup>4</sup> As soon as he reached his eighteenth birthday Birch applied for a commission and on 2 July 1913 was gazetted 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, on probation, to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment. He was promoted Lieutenant on 20 February 1914.<sup>5</sup>

As an officer in a reserve battalion he was not part of the original expeditionary force, but was attached to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and sent overseas with a replacement draft of 91 NCOs and men on 21 August 1914, the very day that his promotion was gazetted. He reached the battalion on 5 September.<sup>6</sup> Nine days later he was reported missing while in command of an escort for Brigadier-General Herman Landon on the heights north of the River Aisne.

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer Jones, *From Boer War to World War: Tactical Reform of the British Army, 1902-1914* (Norman, OK 2012), p.84.

<sup>2</sup> There is an account of a Saxon officer killed while using his sword against a soldier of 1<sup>st</sup> North Staffordshire Regiment on 21 October 1914 at Chapelle d'Armentières. See <http://www.1914-1918.org/despatches/2015/02/04/a-north-stafford-at-war-a-soldiers-diary/>. I am grateful to Martin Feledziak of the Great War Forum for giving me this reference.

<sup>3</sup> A copy of Birch's birth certificate can be found in his Service Record (SR), TNA PRO WO 339/9303.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Seldon & David Walsh, *Public Schools and the Great War: The Generation Lost* (Barnsley 2013), p. 257. Dean Close School subsequently joined the Headmaster's Conference.

<sup>5</sup> *The London Gazette*, 1 July 1913, p.4644, 21 August 1914, p.6678.

<sup>6</sup> War Diary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment, 5 September 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1281.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment was part of 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Division in Sir Douglas Haig's I Corps, which at the time of Birch's arrival was turning to the offensive, slowly advancing towards the River Aisne, where the Germans had established a strong defensive position on the northern heights overlooking the river. The first main objective for the BEF, after crossing the Aisne, was the *Chemin des Dames*, a road built on the crest of the heights for the convenience of the two daughters of Louis XV in the eighteenth century. Before that could be overrun, however, the British army had to take the spurs jutting out from the heights towards the river that gave the Germans the topography ideal for defensive purposes.<sup>7</sup>

The initial manoeuvre in the battle, crossing the Aisne, was successfully achieved on 13 September along a fifteen-mile front, despite the destruction of bridges and considerable artillery fire. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Welsh crossed on the extreme right of the BEF at Bourg, where they went into billets for the night. On the 14<sup>th</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was in support of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigades in the attack on the heights. At 8am the 2<sup>nd</sup> Welsh Regiment marched through Vendresse with orders to seize one of the spurs, high ground to the west of Beaulne.<sup>8</sup> This was achieved under heavy fire with more than one hundred casualties, including four officers. The position was maintained during the day and in the evening orders were received to advance along the high ground northwards towards Tilleul de Courtcon on the *Chemin des Dames* road. This advance was led by A Company, to which Birch belonged. A halt was made for the night to the north-west of Chivy, a little more than a mile from Courtcon. The War Diary explanation for this decision was that any further advance was unwise following the retirement of 5th Brigade on the left. Whether Birch was with A Company until the battalion halted remains unclear, for the War Diary, compiled after the event, merely states, under the date of 15 September, that 'Capt Robins, 2/Lt (sic) Birch and part of A Company who led the advance of the battalion on the previous evening [were] missing'.<sup>9</sup> There is no statement that Birch's platoon was detached for escort duty. What is certain is that battalions of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Brigade which had captured the sugar factory close to the *Chemin des Dames* and parts of the road itself during the day had been forced to withdraw under fierce counterattacks, leaving the British front line obscure and poorly defined during the night. One relevant point for understanding the fate of Lt Birch was that many of the wounded, both British and German, from the battle during the day were still lying around haystacks during the night in what would later come to be called, once the trench system was fully established, No Man's Land.<sup>10</sup>

The war diaries of other battalions in 1<sup>st</sup> Division give some extra information on what happened when 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was ordered to advance in the evening. The diary of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment stated that:

*At dusk the [3<sup>rd</sup>] Brigade was ordered to move forward to the line of the Chemin des Dames. B and C Companies led by the General who was escorted by one platoon of the Welsh advanced through Chivy. On arrival near the road junction at the North of Chemin des Dames in the dark the column was suddenly fired upon from the right front. The fire was returned and after a little it died down on both sides. As the General and his staff were missing it was decided to fall back to where the Welsh were in position at the head of the valley immediately west of 'T' in Troyon [see the map supplied to battalions in 1<sup>st</sup> Division].*

<sup>7</sup> For recent accounts of the first days of the Battle of the Aisne, see Peter Hart, *Fire and Movement: The British Expeditionary Force and the Campaign of 1914* (Oxford 2015), pp.198-221; Jerry Murland, *Battle on the Aisne 1914: The BEF and the Birth of the Western Front* (Barnsley 2012), pp. 62-137; Adrian Gilbert, *Challenge of Battle: The Real Story of the British Army in 1914* (Oxford 2013), pp.162-96.

<sup>8</sup> War Diary, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Headquarters, 14 September 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1274.

<sup>9</sup> War Diary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment, 14, 15 September 1914.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Great War: The British Campaign in France and Flanders* (E-version 2013 with foreword by Nigel Jones), Vol. 1, p. 263 of 520.

*The General with his staff Captain, Dyer, then came in from the front, where he had been caught between two fires and approved the position taken.*<sup>11</sup>

Further relevant particulars can be gleaned from the diary of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt James Hyndson, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, who had lost his company during the fighting earlier in the day and became temporarily attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Gloucestershires in the evening. He wrote after his battalion had been decimated trying to hold on to the sugar factory:

*Allason orders me to retire, and I do so with two Loyal North Lancs, three Black Watch, two Cameron Highlanders. We move back at a fast double and, coming to a donga, take shelter there. ... We lie there for some time and then move a little further back. I strike the Gloucester Regiment, who are the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade. They have come up in support and have no casualties. They are all eager to go on. ... I decide I will attach myself to the Gloucesters. I am absolutely done. ... The fire is still tremendous, but we are sheltered under a steep cliff and do not suffer. It is not safe to go on top. ... Towards darkness the Gloucesters are ordered to attempt to advance on factory via village of Tryon (sic). They ask me to come and I do so, there being no chance of finding my unit. We move off and have several escapes from "Jack Johnsons" and move up the road. Reach top of road when half battalion in front get panicky (sic). The General's escort bolted and the half battalion Welsh opened fire on us. Luckily they fired high, so no damage was done. The Gloucester Regiment's leading Company has scattered, and it seemed as if we were in for another fight, for we did not know who was firing at us. The officers exerted themselves and quickly succeeded in getting the regiment together again. We then lay down and shouted to those in front to cease fire. It ceased as suddenly as it had begun. We all thought the thing closed, but no, suddenly a black wall seemed to rise in front of us and a crowd of charging men came through us. They were the Welsh. They bayoneted two Gloucesters in their passage through. They went on a couple of hundred yards and lay down, and once again opened fire on us. Again no one was hit and it stopped. After a good deal of not knowing what to do, we got orders to retire down to the bottom of the road and entrench.*<sup>12</sup>

The next morning Hyndson went in search of his battalion and at Chivy a staff officer took him to see the General, who seemed none the worse for his escapade the night before.

The general was Brigadier-General Herman Landon, who had commanded 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade since 1910. He too wrote a report, dated 19 September, which throws light on Birch's fate. Following the attack on the Beaulne spur during the day, he wrote that:

*This situation was maintained against enemy's counter-strokes till about 4.30pm when orders were received for a general advance on Chemin des Dames. I directed 1/South Wales Borderers on wood Chemin ... and 2/Welch on road junction just west of edge of other map, ordering them to report on arrival. After waiting till about 6.30 and hearing nothing, I decided to move up my Headquarters (preceded by 1 Platoon, 2/Welch, and followed by 1/Gloucesters, now increased to 3 companies) through Chivy village to head of valley. All was then quiet. ... Leaving the Gloucs Regt, I advanced my HQ with the platoon of 2/Welch, who being fired on by a German picket on the road, ran back through my HQ and then opened fire. It was here that Lieut Hargreaves [staff Signals Officer], the Brigade clerk and several of my HQ became "missing".*

<sup>11</sup> War Diary, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment, 14 September 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1278.

<sup>12</sup> [2<sup>nd</sup> Lt James Hyndson], 'Diary of a Second Lieutenant, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, The Loyal Regiment, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1914 to 15<sup>th</sup> November 1914', Typescript, War Diary 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, TNA PRO WO 95/1270. Part of this account is quoted in Murland, *Battle on the Aisne*, p. 132.

*Finding the Chemin des Dames still in occupation of the enemy, I made my way to 1/South Wales Borderers and ordered them to find battle outposts and entrench themselves across road to Chivy, just below the crest of the hill about 600 yards south of the main road, with Gloucs Regt in support, and told 2/Welch to entrench where they were on the left and at head of valley.*

*I then went back to Divisional HQ and reported my situation and subsequently established my HQ in village of Chivy.<sup>13</sup>*

Despite the reticence of the battalion war diaries (which were probably compiled at a later date), it is clear that when surprised in the dark Birch had momentarily lost control of his platoon, many of whom panicked and fled, abandoning General Landon and his staff. Having had his Brigade Major killed earlier in the day, Landon could ill-afford to lose more of his HQ staff (and all the paperwork for the attack on 14 September). Nevertheless, perhaps because he felt he had made an error personally advancing as far as he did—after all, he did seem to know the whereabouts of his three battalions—he merely stated the bald facts in his report to Division and, with Birch missing, he did not dwell on the shaming details of the episode. There the matter may have been buried, except that the mystery of Birch's fate was to keep it alive.

### **The Search for George Birch**

The fullest account of what may have happened to Birch comes in a report written by Corporal Charles Drucker, who was in Birch's No. 1 Platoon. In 1914 Drucker was a twenty-year old regular soldier, a former labourer born in Clerkenwell, London in 1891.<sup>14</sup> He was to survive the war as an Acting Company Sergeant Major Instructor on the Army Gymnastic Staff.<sup>15</sup> His report is reproduced here, with spellings unchanged. It was written on 21 May 1915.

*Sir*

*On Sept 14<sup>th</sup> 1914 I was Corporal in charge of a section of No. 1 Platoon 'A' Company 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn The Welch Regiment. Lieut Birch was my Platoon Commander. My Regiment got into action before noon and we advanced under rather a nasty rain of shrapnel. We got under cover of a small hill and lay down. After about twenty minutes we had orders to extend by platoons. After extending number one platoon was in rear of the Battalion. The other platoons advanced but our platoon remained behind all day long. There is not much to report except that as it grew dark we formed up and marched off as escort to General Langdon. We passed through a small village and it was there that an officer of the Headquarters Staff spoke to two civilians and by their actions etc I fancy they were directing us to some place. We marched on and it rained for a bit and it was so very dark I did not take much notice of my surroundings for a bit as we were speaking in wispers about the good officers we had lost that day. I then became aware that we were going up a hill with trees on each side. Whilst going up this hill we passed a transport and so we had to thin out to get passed. A good many men hung behind with the transport to try and get water. We never stopped. After a while we came to the top of the hill & noticed a flat white road in front of us. Also there was a light in front of us. As we got closer we found that the light was a burning haystack on the right of the road and on the left were 4 or 5 other haystacks which were surrounded by wounded men. Just as we got by the haystack on the right someone called out in broken English something about*

<sup>13</sup> 'Report from 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade on engagement commencing 14<sup>th</sup> Sept 1914', War Diary, 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade HQ, TNA PRO WO 95/1274.

<sup>14</sup> 1911 Wales Census,

[http://interactive.ancestry.co.uk/2353/rg14\\_33163\\_0031\\_34/663868?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.co.uk%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults](http://interactive.ancestry.co.uk/2353/rg14_33163_0031_34/663868?backurl=http%3a%2f%2fsearch.ancestry.co.uk%2fcgi-bin%2fsse.dll%3fgst%3d-6&ssrc=&backlabel=ReturnSearchResults)

<sup>15</sup> It is likely that he died in Wales in 1962.

*“Surrender”. At once everyone woke up and ears and eyes were all alert. Again came the noise and then every one of us like a lot of rabbits scattered and lay down in the shadows away from the haystack which was in flames. Someone gave an order to fix bayonets and lay still. That order was hardly given when Lieut Birch cried out “Get up you lot of cowards and form up on the road in fours”. We got up and formed up and marched on. My section was then in front. Lieut Birch was in front of the platoon and I was next to him. There was also some more NCOs in front. As we marched on the voice came again and in front of us appeared something like a black wall. Right up to it we went and found it to be a large body of the enemy. In my opinion they were from five to six hundred strung right across the road. They were about four deep. We halted and Lieut Birch called upon them to surrender. He had his sword and revolver out. Then started an argument partly in English and partly in the language of the enemy. This argument went on for quite two minutes. Some of our men were catching hold of the enemy’s rifles and there was a proper box up of things in general. But I kept my eyes open and also my ears. I could see that they were about 6 to 1 against us and also by the shouting I could tell we had a very rough lot to deal with. I also noticed that the men on my right were closing round on us so I ordered my section to line a bit of a bank on the right of the road. No sooner had the order left my lips than the enemy commenced firing into our left rear. At once there was a general bayonet fight. It is practically impossible for me to attempt to write it but bullets flew in all directions. Men hunched their shoulders and used their bayonets. There were cries of all descriptions, groans and also curses. But the part that I am asked to write about is that I saw Lieut Birch about four yards from me. He was slashing about with his sword and I was using my bayonet. He turned towards me for a moment and I saw his face. He was quite cool & he had a nice smile upon his lips. I had never seen an officer fighting before and that was also my first taste of German blood. I call to him “I am coming Sir” because I worshipped him as my Superior Officer but just as I said that some one hit me with a rifle. I was clubbed and I dropped at once. Men were stepping on me and I got a few kicks but I was in great pain. I managed to crawl with great difficulty to the side of the road and so up on to the field and so crawl and drag my poor self away from the melee. The last time I saw Lieut Birch he was standing up alive fighting not alone for his King and Country but also for his own life.*

*I managed to get to the village down the road and was seen by a Medical Officer who informed me no bones were broken but that I had a nasty bruised shoulder and must rest. But when daylight came I could not rest as ordered whilst there was so much suffering all around me in that small house. So as best I could I helped to make food for those poor heroes who were worse off than myself. I stayed there for about a week resting, and helping the wounded and then joined my unit. The first words to me were “you are supposed to be killed”. Also on inquiring after Lieut Birch I was told he was dead. But I pray he may still be alive. He was a gallant officer and an absolute gentleman.*

*C. Drucker Sgt Inst Army Gym Staff*

Drucker’s report was not the only account of Birch’s death that subsequently emerged, nor does it conform completely to other reports attributed to Drucker. Birch’s parents were informed by telegram on 18 September that their son was missing.<sup>16</sup> His father soon began making inquiries, asking the War Office for the home addresses of Captain Robins, also reported missing on 14 September, and of Lt the Hon. Wellesley Fitzroy Somerset, who was

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<sup>16</sup> SR, G.O. Birch, TNA PRO WO 339/9303.

wounded the same day.<sup>17</sup> Rev. Birch also received information from Colonel Charles Morland, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion CO, that his son

*was acting, with 15 men, as body-guard to the General commanding 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade and accompanied him on his rounds on the night of the 14<sup>th</sup>. They ran into a German picquet in the darkness and were fired on and my son was seen to fall. That was the last seen of him. The Colonel's hope is that he is a prisoner of war.*<sup>18</sup>

Mrs Birch was active too, seeking out a number of soldiers of the battalion who had returned to Wales sick or wounded. All confirmed the view that her son had been killed. One was a Private Wilkinson, who told the parents that, according to a Corporal Drucker, on 14 September 'between 9pm and 9.30pm' the General's escort was 'suddenly attacked, in the darkness, near a barn, by an overwhelming number of Germans, and that Lt Birch drew his sword. Then he saw him fall. He also fell himself and was unconscious for a time. When he recovered consciousness, he saw Lt Birch lying dead near him'.<sup>19</sup> This second-hand information convinced the Birches that their son was dead and on 15 December Rev. Birch told the War Office that Birch 'is now unofficially reported killed'.<sup>20</sup> The father was also probably responsible for a number of reports placed in local newspapers giving an account of his son's death, although these were garbled in the printing. One stated that the eyewitness was Wilkinson and Drucker was not mentioned at all.<sup>21</sup> Another claimed the eyewitness to be a Corporal Derek, but did mention that Birch died while 'lashing out right and left' with his sword.<sup>22</sup> On 20 December a memorial service was held for Lt Birch at the parish church of Bucknall and subsequently a marble memorial was erected in his memory (see below).

The War Office, however, was not prepared to accept these reports as convincing proof of Birch's death. To issue a death certificate required a formal report from GHQ in France that a casualty had either been killed in action or had died of wounds. A report stating that a man was missing or wounded and missing, even if there were subsequent accounts of the likelihood of death, would be insufficient, unless an identity disc was supplied. Without a death certificate, a casualty's financial affairs could not be wound up, nor could an officer's name be erased from the official Army Lists. The relatives of such a casualty would thus be left in limbo for many months, often as long as a year, until the War Office, using the evidence of lapse of time without news, declared the man officially dead.

Although the Birches appeared resigned to their son's death, they continued to seek information as to how and in what circumstances he had died. Drucker's long official statement, sent on 21 May 1915 to Captain Huntingdon, Superintendent of Gymnasia in Western Command, Cheshire and forwarded to the War Office, was the result partly of their continued activities and partly of the desire of the Casualty Department of the War Office to reconcile the official position of Birch being missing with Drucker's verbal evidence that he was dead. The result was not what they had hoped for.

<sup>17</sup> Rev. G.T. Birch to War Office, 28 September 1914, *ibid*; War Diary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion The Welsh Regiment, 14, 15 September 1914. Robins was subsequently found to have been made a prisoner of war.

<sup>18</sup> Rev. G.T. Birch to Prisoners of War Information Bureau, 12 October 1914, SR, G.O. Birch. Morland died of wounds at Gheluvelt on 31 October 1914.

[http://www.wwlwargraves.co.uk/ww1\\_cemeteries/charles\\_bernard\\_morland.asp](http://www.wwlwargraves.co.uk/ww1_cemeteries/charles_bernard_morland.asp).

<sup>19</sup> Mrs Birch to War Office, 22 June 1915, Rev. Birch to War Office, 22 December 1914, SR, Lt G.O. Birch.

<sup>20</sup> Rev. Birch to War Office, 15 December 1914, *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 19 December 1914.

<sup>22</sup> Great War Forum, <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=188061&hl=%2Bbirch+%2Bwelsh#entry1832932>.

Drucker's statement, written eight months after the event, was not an objective account of what happened to Birch and his platoon on the night of 14 September. Rather, it was a personal narrative of a tiny event in the war that had several objectives: to place his unit in as good a light as possible with the authorities; to vindicate his own actions; and to offer comfort and perhaps some hope to Birch's parents. The reality—which appears to have been a very inexperienced junior officer leading his General almost into the hands of the enemy—was not something to emphasize. If Drucker was like many regular soldiers of the time, who understood the ways of the army and were more than capable of taking personal advantage of opportunities as they arose, he would have been wary of why officialdom was suddenly asking him to make this report but canny enough to tell a story that the Army would want to hear. He had had eight months to hone his story, no doubt with embellishments that grew with the retelling.

The basic outline of his account coincides with those available from official army sources. No. 1 Platoon, led by Birch, was acting as escort to Landon and his staff at night and was heading towards the *Champs des Dames*. The 'small village' mentioned by Drucker was probably Chivy and the 'flat white road' the *Chemin des Dames*. Birch had therefore gone beyond the line to which the British had withdrawn and had reached the furthest point of that day's advance when he came into contact with the Germans. This interpretation is supported by the place where the body of Birch was subsequently found buried (see below). It would also suggest that Drucker might have been more accurate in his assessment of the size of the German force that the escort encountered than the official reports of Birch coming into contact with a German picquet. The 'black wall' of Germans would not have numbered the five to six hundred as Drucker estimated, but it probably comprised a larger number than Birch would have expected.<sup>23</sup> The German call to surrender was feasible if they had superiority in numbers and the 'negotiations' undertaken by Birch may have given Landon and some of his staff time to escape. Whether or not Birch intended to surrender will never be known, for someone fired a rifle and a close combat fight began which ended with Birch disappearing and Drucker staggering back to Troyon.

One can only speculate on the scuttlebutt amongst the 2<sup>nd</sup> Welsh following the debacle on the night of 14 September, but on his return to the unit Drucker would have had his own opinions to add to the mix. Thus, when asked for an account of the events, he would have been reluctant to resurrect the issues of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion seemingly having fled in panic through the Gloucesters and his own platoon abandoning their officer and their general. He blurred his report by writing that many in his platoon had stopped for water from a transport, but at the same time covered his back, obliquely, by admitting that Birch had angrily called his men cowards. He was careful to show that he had done his duty and that he had stood close to Birch during the affray, although he rather gilded the lily by claiming that he worshipped an officer who had been with the battalion only eight days. He was clearly determined to emphasize Birch's valiant actions when in a tight corner, no doubt, having met Mrs Birch, with the intention of leaving an account of a patriotic officer bravely facing death.

It is notorious that men in battle remember only flashes of events and in the aftermath struggle to make sense of what happened in their small part of the battlefield. Drucker's situation was more complicated, for the blow he received left him with more than a sore shoulder. He admitted to Mrs Birch that for a short time afterwards he was 'mad', i.e., he probably suffered concussion. After his return to his unit he remained with them until October, when he was invalided home after a shell burst near him. This time, according to Mrs Birch, 'he really was mad for three days'.<sup>24</sup> That he was suffering from what was called shellshock or neurasthenia is suggested by the newspaper report that while in hospital in England he was

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting, although probably just a coincidence, that Hyndson used the same phrase 'black wall' to describe the 2<sup>nd</sup> Welsh fleeing through the Gloucester battalion.

<sup>24</sup> Mrs Birch to War Office, 22 June 1915, SR Lt G.O Birch.

at first unable to speak and communicated only by writing.<sup>25</sup> Loss of speech was a common symptom of shellshock. This does not mean, however, that the veracity of all the events he describes should be rejected. A vivid picture of Birch swinging his sword right and left is a scenario likely to have been burned into his mind even as the rifle butt descended on his body. On balance, Drucker's account of Birch's final moments is probably correct.

Ironically, despite the length and colourfulness of his narrative, Drucker did not solve the War Office's dilemma, for he failed to confirm that Birch had been killed. In fact, he let slip that Birch was still alive when he last saw him. In these circumstances the Casualties Department had no option but to keep Birch's case open. Not until November 1915 was Birch officially pronounced dead, on the grounds of lapse of time.<sup>26</sup>

No family could be completely satisfied with this method of resolving the fate of the missing, but in the case of the Birches there was subsequently to be a sad but positive response to their searches. Their contact with the enquiry branch of the Queen Victoria Jubilee Fund Association eventually brought results. This body, originally established to assist British subjects in distress in Geneva, had been given permission by the German government to make inquiries in POW camps about missing officers.<sup>27</sup> In August 1916 the Association sent to The Welsh Regiment's base in Cardiff a statement from Private G. Pratty, who had been in Birch's platoon and had been captured in the early hours of 16 September 1914. As he was being taken away he 'passed within 10 yards of Lieut Birch, who was then lying dead, having apparently attempted to get back to our lines. I was not allowed to examine him but feel convinced from what I saw that he was dead'.<sup>28</sup> The Enquiry Branch followed this up a month later with a less convincing report from Private William Hughes, then interned in Ostrowek POW camp, who remembered that on 14 September 1914 they 'were suddenly attacked but what became of him I cannot say for certain but in my own mind I should say that he was killed'.<sup>29</sup>

No remains of Birch were found during the clearance of the battlefields at the end of the war and thus he was commemorated on the La Ferté-sous-Jouarre Memorial to the Missing that was unveiled in November 1928. There was, however, to be one final twist to this tale, for in 1955 a grave was found close to Cerny-en-Laonnois that contained the remains of three soldiers. One of the soldiers was German, the other two British. Birch was identified by his boots, collar badge and regimental buttons. Together with the other British soldier, L/Corporal G.H Cole of The Welsh Regiment, Birch was disinterred and reburied in the London Cemetery and Extension at Longueval on the Somme.<sup>30</sup> There was, of course, no sign of his sword.

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<sup>25</sup> *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 19 December 1914.

<sup>26</sup> War Office List No. X 6524, 9 November 1915, SR Lt G.O Birch.

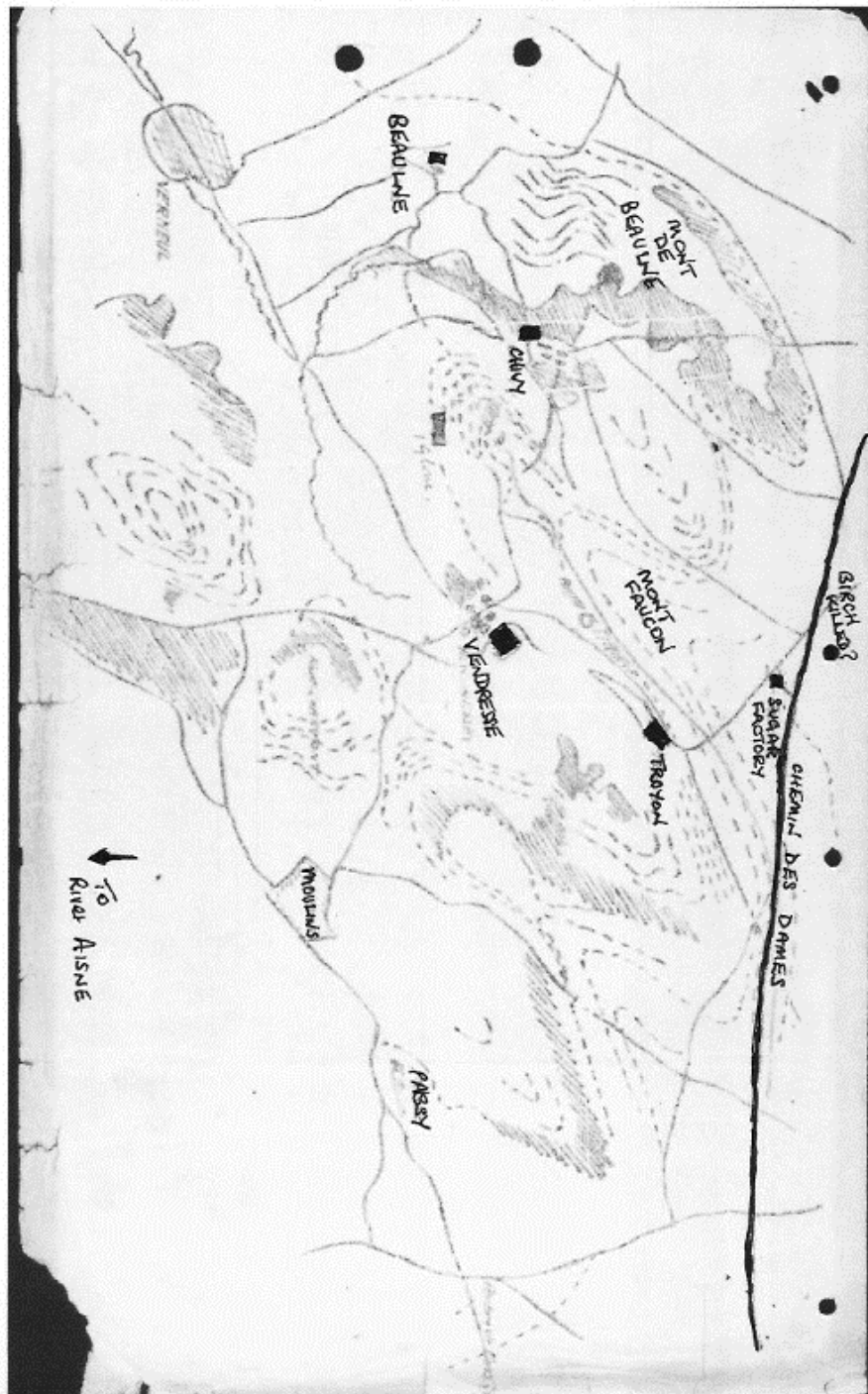
<sup>27</sup> Switzerland and the First World War, <http://www.switzerland1914-1918.net/blog/a-british-organisation-in-geneva-helping-prisoners-of-war-the-enquiry-branch-of-the-queen-victoria-jubilee-fund-association-during-the-first-world-war>.

<sup>28</sup> QVJFA Enquiry Branch to Record Office, Welsh Regiment, 29 August 1916, SR, Lt G.O Birch.

<sup>29</sup> QVJFA Enquiry Branch to Record Office, Welsh Regiment, 25 September 1916, *ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Commonwealth Graves Commission, <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2945558/BIRCH,%20GEORGE%20OWEN>. The London Cemetery was being used as the concentration cemetery at the time for all British remains found on the Western Front.





Source: War Diary, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Gloucestershire Regiment, TNA PRO WO 95/1278.



Source: <http://killedattheaisne.blogspot.com.au>



Lt Birch with his sword

Source: Supplied by 'Wulsten' on Great War Forum:  
<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=188061&hl=%2Bbirch+%2Bwelch+%2Bregiment>