

The German Curator and the British Hussar: Confirming the Death of Lt C.B. Leechman in September 1914

This article, centred on the fate of a cavalry officer who was reported missing in September 1914, shows that civilized behaviour between enemies was still possible in the early months of the Great War.



Lt Colin Barclay Leechman
Source: Courtesy of Imperial War Museum
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In the period before the war and the chaos of its first months, little attention had been paid to the issue of potential casualties. Many in the British army believed that casualties would inevitably be very high, but the enormous losses during the operations of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) between August and December—short advance, long retreat, attack (on the Aisne) and desperate defence (at Ypres)—still came as a profound shock.¹ The reciprocal arrangements among the warring Powers and the role of the International Red Cross and its national subsidiaries with regard to recording and reporting casualties had not been codified when war broke out and it took many months—into 1915—before a coherent, reliable policy began to emerge. Even then the process took many months, leaving families in a limbo of uncertainty.² It was inevitable, therefore, that the massive casualties—killed, wounded and missing, when combined with bureaucratic uncertainty, would lead to much fear and anxiety among the relatives of those fighting this form of industrialised warfare. The misery and worry when a relative was reported missing in 1914 was possibly more intense than in later years, when the reciprocal reporting machinery was in place, for there was no precedent for guidance and no clear means

¹ Sir Douglas Haig was one senior commander who in August 1914, aware of the likelihood of high casualties, was keen to keep the army at home for three months while the expertise of the Regulars could be used to form the backbone of a mass army. Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London 2011), p.67.

² See, for example, Michael Durey, 'An Edwardian Family and their Tragedies: Lt George Archer-Shee, 1st South Staffordshire Regiment (1895-1914)', p.5, *British Army Officers of the Great War*, http://www.greatwarbritishofficers.com/index.htm_files/Archer-Shee%20Article.pdf

of seeking information.³ One result was that middle- and upper-class families often used their own personal networks to seek information. News of a soldier's fate could therefore sometimes come in unexpected ways. This was the case with Lt Colin Barclay Leechman, 3rd (King's Own) Hussars, who was reported missing on 24 September 1914.

Leechman was born on 8 May 1888 in Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). His father, George, was a merchant and agent, with many business interests. In 1897, aged nine, Colin was among the first intake to a new preparatory school, West Downs in Winchester.⁴ This was a progressive boarding school for boys between the ages of 8 and 13. In 1902 he left to attend Rugby School, where he stayed until 1906.⁵ He then went up to Exeter College, Oxford, where he joined the Officer Training Corps (OTC) and pursued his interests in hunting, polo and golf.⁶ He graduated with a B.A. Although there is little known about his character, he appears to fit the profile of the stereotypical pre-war cavalry officer in the British Army, with a love of outdoor pursuits. As a younger son he probably was not under pressure to join the family firm and, from a comfortably well-off background (his father left £32,528 when he died in Ceylon in 1923), he would have been able to choose his own career. This was to be the cavalry, for even before he graduated he was, in February 1911, gazetted to the Unattached Officer List of the Territorial Force. In August of that year he was, as a university candidate, gazetted 2nd Lieutenant in the 3rd (King's Own) Hussars.⁷ A year later he was promoted to Lieutenant.⁸

Leechman was attached to the Cavalry School at Netheravon in Wiltshire when war broke out. This new school, formed in 1904, was the brainchild of Lt-General Robert Baden-Powell, who understood that with the major developments in military hardware on the modern battlefield the role of the cavalry had to change, to include in particular training in a dismounted infantry role. At the school officers were taught new skills 'in scouting, reconnaissance, tracking, signalling, despatch riding and the use of rifles'.⁹

On 4 August Leechman was immediately recalled to his regiment.¹⁰ As part of 4th Brigade of the Cavalry Division, the 3rd Hussars landed at Rouen on 17 August.¹¹ On

³ In August 1914 'there was no satisfactory humanitarian support structure for the kind of global conflagration that was about to unfold'. Peter Barton, *The Lost Legions of Fromelles: The Mysteries Behind One of the Most Devastating Battles of the Great War* (London 2014), p.314.

⁴ West Downs School, Winchester – War Memorial, www.westdowns.com/rollhonor.html

⁵ *Memorials of Rugbeians who Fell in the Great War*, Vol. 1, p.136.

⁶ Robert Malpass, *Exeter College Oxford Roll of Honour 1914-1918*, p.71, <https://www.exeter.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/roll-of-honour-1914-1918-robert-malpass.pdf>. Leechman took up polo in Ceylon, where his father also played. *The Polo Monthly*, June 1915, p.236. I am grateful to "lostinspace" of the Great War Forum for this reference.

⁷ *London Gazette*, 15 August 1911, p.6065.

⁸ *Ibid*, 3 September 1912.

⁹ <http://longwaytotipperary.ul.ie/wartime-life/cavalry-school/> The CO of the school in 1914 was an enthusiast for polo.

¹⁰ Col. L.A. Clutterbuck, *The Bond of Sacrifice: A Biographical Record of British Officers who Fell in the Great War* (Reprint, Uckfield n.d.), p.224.

¹¹ The Cavalry Division was renamed the 1st Cavalry Division on 16 September 1914.

the 18th Leechman went into hospital but re-joined his regiment on the evening of the 23rd.¹² By then the unit was just entering Belgium. It was soon retreating into France, protecting the left of II Corps as it began its long retreat to the Marne. It was in the rear at Le Cateau on the 26th and acted as rear guard at Mesnil on the 28th. The War Diary's comment on 25 August summed up the 3rd Hussars' activities throughout August: the 4th Cavalry Brigade continued to manoeuvre in 'mass', without taking an active part in operations. A repeated comment in the diary was that they were always in the dark and no-one told them what was happening.¹³ The weather was hot, the horses suffered, but the first fatality did not occur until 31 August when the regiment, acting as rear guard for the 4th Brigade near the River Oise, clashed with German cavalry and cyclists.¹⁴

The 3rd Hussars' first serious involvement in the campaign came after the Germans began their retreat to the heights overlooking the River Aisne. In the late afternoon of 14 September, after crossing the canal and the river, the regiment marched to the Tour de Passy farm, where they took up a position between 1st Division on the left and the 5th French army on the right. Although the War Diary's writer thought that the fighting that could be heard was 'chiefly an artillery duel', in reality a major infantry battle was underway for the Chemin des Dames ridge in which, on that one day, the British I Corps were to incur 3500 casualties.¹⁵

Early on the 15th the 3rd Hussars were ordered into the firing line just east of the sugar factory at Cerny, which had been the site of repeated attacks and counter-attacks the day before. For six hours they were subjected to a barrage of 'enormous' nine-inch shells ("coal boxes") from a German howitzer battery. 'The noise of the explosions was terrific, but the damage was nil. The moral[e] effect soon wore off.'¹⁶ By now the offensive had been brought to a standstill and both sides were exhausted. They began to dig in, forming the embryo of the trench system that was to develop along the whole of the Western Front by the end of the year. For the next few days at various times the 3rd Hussars occupied the frontline trenches but were usually in support of either the French or the British 1st Division. The regiment's War Diary noted on 18 September that the cavalry was being used as 'a mobile reserve and we may expect often to find ourselves in the trenches'.¹⁷

This was still the situation on 23 September. According to the War Diary, at 3am:

Marched as advanced regiment via Bourg to Paissy at which place on arrival at 4.45 all men and horses were concealed in caves. The daily bombardment commenced soon after. Very dark morning and some patches of thick fog in

¹² War Diary, 3rd (King's Own) Hussars, TNA PRO WO 95/1136, 18, 23 August 1914.

¹³ Ibid, 18-19 August 1914.

¹⁴ The victim, Private J.H. Abbott, was buried in Ligny Communal Cemetery. He was removed to the London Cemetery Extension at High Wood, Longueval, in 1952. See records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2945500/abbott,-john-henry/#&gid=null&pid=1>

¹⁵ War Diary, 3rd Hussars, 14 September 1914; Peter Hart, *Fire and Movement: The British Expeditionary Force and the Campaign of 1914* (Oxford 2015), p.214.

¹⁶ War Diary, 3rd Hussars, 15 September 1914.

¹⁷ In these circumstances the CO thought that bayonets had become essential, a weapon that the cavalry did not possess at this time.

the vicinity of River ... Patrol under Lt Leechman sent on ahead to keep touch with right of advanced Br[igade] Infantry. The patrol had one horse killed and one wounded. B Squadron had also look-out men in trenches just N of Paissy and Squadron was held ready to occupy those trenches at shortest notice. Regiment remained so placed until 6.15pm then returned to billets via Bourg ... Lt Leechman's patrol was ordered to remain in its position until relieved by 2nd Cavalry Brigade.

The relief did not come quickly. It was not until 7.30am on the 24th that four men from Leechman's patrol returned to billets. They reported that at 1am Leechman had left the patrol 'to direct some French infantry to some trenches' and had not returned.¹⁸

Leechman was reported missing, his father receiving a telegram to that effect from the War Office on 28 September, even though the newspapers erroneously reported a few days later that he had re-joined wounded.¹⁹ The assumption, or hope, was that he had been captured.²⁰ On the official inquiry form sent to Berlin seeking information (probably in late November), Leechman's father had given all the details that were currently available. 'Night of September 23rd. Last seen behind trenches at Paissy, near Soissons. Believed to have lost his way and wandered into the German trenches.'²¹ The German reply was that nothing was known of Leechman. He was not a POW.

It was not until 22 March 1915 that Lt-Colonel A.A. Kennedy, CO of the 3rd Hussars, ordered a regimental court of inquiry to be held into Leechman's fate. President of the court was Major W.T. Willcox, who was later to write the battalion's history.²² They heard evidence from only one witness, Private S.G. Adams. He submitted that:

About the 24th September 1914, I was on a special patrol commanded by Lieut. Leechman all day. We were keeping communication between a battalion of Zouaves and the West Surrey Regiment and Lieut. Leechman was all day at intervals going up on foot to the firing line, generally to the French line. He would then come back and would send a message by one of the patrol to our Brigade Headquarters. After dark he stayed with the sentry just above the horses. At 1am I was on sentry and Lieut. Leechman went towards the Zouaves firing line on foot. He did not say anything to me before he went. I never saw him again. Next morning we reported it to the 4th Dragoon Guards who relieved us, and stayed up there for two days with his horses. I cannot say if there was heavy fire going on at the time he left me. It was a dark night.²³

¹⁸ Ibid, 24 September 1914.

¹⁹ Service Record [SR], Lt Colin Barclay Leechman, TNA PRO WO 339/7940; *Daily Record*, 1 October 1914; *Yorkshire Post*, 1 October 1914.

²⁰ Clutterbuck, *Bond of Sacrifice*, pp.224-225.

²¹ SR, Leechman.

²² Willcox's book follows the War Diary in its account of Leechman's disappearance. Lt. Col. W.T. Willcox, *The 3rd (King's Own) Hussars in the Great War 1914-1918* (London 1925). I am grateful to Steven Broomfield for help with this book.

²³ 'Evidence in the case of Lieutenant Colin B. Leechman, 3rd Hussars, missing', SR, Leechman.

Adams had misremembered the British unit involved. It was almost certainly 1st Northamptonshire Regiment, of 2nd Infantry Brigade, that had companies at the extreme right of the British line that night.²⁴ He also contradicted the War Diary statement that Leechman was guiding a group of French troops. Nevertheless, on the basis of this account the court of inquiry determined that ‘There is no evidence to reasonably suppose that Lieut. Leechman is dead’. This was probably the only conclusion they could come to. Certainly, the MS.2 Casualties Section at the War Office would not have accepted the evidence as conclusive proof of death.

Given the circumstances—a dark night; ‘practically continuous firing’ at the Front; and Leechman on his own in an area that was still being contested after a French attack on the 23rd—the chances of discovering what had happened to him appeared to be very slim. Despite this, the Leechman family continued to make inquiries. These would usually have included approaching any member of the 3rd Hussars who might have information. With Leechman being alone, and with no other officer having seen him for at least six hours before he left his men to approach the trenches, the regimental bush telegraph could not have been helpful (although no doubt they were hopeful that he was safe). Another avenue of information was the International Red Cross in Geneva. Elsie, Leechman’s sister, sent details to Geneva, but nothing could be learned from that source.²⁵

George Leechman also sought help from his business acquaintances, who might have had ways of seeking news through their pre-war links with Germany. One such was Percy George Archer, an East India Company merchant who probably knew Leechman through business interests in Ceylon. Archer lived in Finsbury Park. Interestingly, in the 1911 Census his household is recorded as having a visitor, a 25-year-old German student called Adolf Rein.²⁶ It was possibly his connection with Rein that encouraged Archer, early in 1915, to write to Dr Max Vollert, who in the records in Leechman’s service record is described as Principal of the University of Jena. Vollert (1851-1935) was a German lawyer and author who between 1909 and 1922 was Curator at the University of Jena and a Commissioner of the university’s main financial benefactor, the Carl Zeiss Foundation.²⁷

Archer’s letter would have been sent via someone in Switzerland. Vollert not only received the letter but was also willing to help. In February 1915 he replied that he would do his best to discover news about Leechman, although he thought it would not be easy. He would initially send copies of the letter to every officer he knew serving in the Soissons area. He also sent a circular letter to POW camps seeking information.

²⁴ The Official History mentions that ‘The 2nd Brigade resumed its old place as the right of the 1st Division’ on 23 September, which probably explains Adams’ mistake. J.E. Edmonds, *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1914* (reprint, Uckfield n.d.), Vol. 1, p.450. See also, War Diary, 2nd Infantry Brigade, 23 September 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1267. I am grateful to Martin Gillott for pointing this out.

²⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross, Prisoners of the First World War, <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/File/Details/2181602/3/2/>

²⁶ Ancestry.co, 1911 English census, https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/2352/rg14_01029_0075_03?pid=2182263&treeid=&personid=&rc=&usePUB=true&phsrc=nhB8262&phstart=successSource

²⁷ Wikipedia, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Vollert

So many different military units were serving on the Champs de Dames ridge at the relevant time that he thought news, if any, would not arrive for a considerable time.²⁸

In March Vollert informed Archer that he had written to a great many officers trying to discover which units were around Paissy on 23-24 September 1914 but had not yet received replies. His inquiries at the War Office in Berlin had received the same reply as the British War Office inquiry a few months earlier: nothing was known of Leechman. Shortly afterwards, ‘contrary to expectations’, the inquiries bore fruit. Vollert received a report from a German officer called von Zebrau of the 3rd Infantry Regiment no. 102 “King Ludwig III of Bavaria”. It stated that ‘The English Lieutenant Leechman was seen by Corporal Richter (8th Company Regiment 102) with a shot in his back on the 26th September 1914 near Ailles, about 50 metres north of the Chemin des Dames. Leechman was dead’. In addition, ‘Captain Reich remarks that it is to be supposed that Lieut. Leechman shortly after this must have been buried by the French. That a shot was not heard can probably be explained by the fact that he appears to have ridden very far away, for Ailles lies several miles from Paissy. The name has probably been discovered by papers which Leechman had with him’.²⁹

Armed with this information George Leechman attended the War Office on 13 April, now convinced of his son’s death. He informed them that he intended to place an obituary notice in the newspapers.³⁰ His decision placed the War Office in a dilemma; the evidence ‘is arrived at in rather a round-about way’, grumbled Percy Taylor, a MS 3 Cas. official.³¹ Only an official report from the army in France could be used to confirm death. The solution was to declare that Leechman was ‘unofficially dead’, allowing his name to be erased from the Army List and probate to begin. This decision was sent to George Leechman on 18 April. On 20 June Leechman’s death was publicly recognised when he was one of a number of Old Boys to be commemorated at a memorial service in Rugby School’s chapel.³²

Although this episode shows the humanitarian impulse still at work during the early months of the war, it is nevertheless remarkable that such a “forlorn hope” inquiry should have resulted in a convincing result so quickly.³³ This is especially the case as the Germans were not given an accurate place where Leechman went missing, which was north of Paissy. Hence Captain Reich’s assumption that Leechman must have ridden several miles before being killed. The question remains, however: why was his death not reported through official channels? His papers were clearly in the Germans’ possession and they should have been passed up the chain of command. Perhaps the pressure of events prevented this, or the process of reporting both German and enemy casualties by a series of well-defined stages, from the frontline to Berlin, was not running smoothly at the beginning of the war.³⁴

²⁸ Vollert to Archer, February 1915, SR, Leechman.

²⁹ Vollert to Archer, 30 March 1915, *ibid*.

³⁰ The obituary can be found in *The Scotsman*, 15 April 1915; *Newcastle Journal*, 19 April 1915.

³¹ Memo dated 7 May 1915, SR, Leechman.

³² *Rugby Advertiser*, 26 June 1915.

³³ See also, Michael Durey, ‘Fortunes of War: Captain Arthur George Tillard & Lt George Dixon 2nd Battalion Manchester Regiment’, p.4, *British Army Officers of the Great War*, http://www.greatwarbritishofficers.com/index_htm_files/Fortunes%20of%20War.pdf

³⁴ For the reporting process in 1916, see Barton. *Lost Legions*, p.315.

Ironically for Leechman's family, the Official History states that 'On the 23rd and 24th [September] nothing of importance took place on the Aisne ...'.³⁵ The most likely explanation for Leechman's death is that he became disoriented when he moved towards the French position in the early morning of the 24th. Caught between the fluctuating lines on the northern side of the Chemin des Dames road, he either was seen as he attempted to retrace his steps and was shot, or he was the unlucky victim of a stray bullet. That his body was not found until the 26th suggests that the site remained in "No Man's Land" on the 25th. If Reich is correct, the French would have retaken the ground after the 26th. The evidence suggests that they did so, for in January 1920 a Labour Company searching the area for bodies discovered a cross. On it was 'Cavalry Unknown British Officer'. Leechman having been stripped of his papers and belongings, there was no way for the French to identify him. Unfortunately, when the exhumation took place, no remains were found. Thus Leechman, instead of being re-buried at Landresse British Cemetery as planned, was commemorated on the La Ferté-sous-Jouarre Memorial to the Missing.³⁶ Strictly speaking, he was no longer missing, for the cross could have been for no other cavalry officer and his death could now be confirmed. But he had vanished.

Leechman appears to have been over-confident. Having visited the French several times during daylight hours he knew the way and probably expected to follow the same route. But that part of the line, the subject of a French attack that day, remained fluid and irregular. Even the new training skills imparted at Netheravon could not save him. It is still unclear why he did not take the elementary precaution of having a companion with him. Leechman was to be the first 3rd (King's Own) Hussar officer—one of only two—to be killed in 1914.

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³⁵ Edmonds, *Official History, 1914*, Vol.1, p.450. This brings to mind Louis XVI's diary entry for 14 July 1789: '*Rien*'.

³⁶ Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/879467/leechman,-colin-barclay/#&gid=null&pid=1>