

Length of Service and Casualty Statistics of Officers on the Western Front: the 1916 Cohort of the 6th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment¹

This is the second in a series examining the length of service and the casualty statistics of the officers of the 6th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment. The first dealt with the 1915 cohort; this is concerned with the 1916 cohort.² The same types of records have been examined and the same provisos and limitations mentioned in the first article are applicable here. The cohort comprises all officers who first reported for duty with the battalion between 1 January and 31 December 1916. Fifty-seven have been identified, nearly twice the establishment number for officers in a battalion at that time. Where feasible, comparisons with the 1915 officer cohort are made.

Most of these officers joined the battalion around the time that the allied armies made their great effort to defeat the German army on the Somme. It was also the year on which the myth of subalterns surviving for only six weeks focused, at least in subsequent memories.³ It is of interest, therefore, that although the 6th Battalion played a major role in the Somme campaign, from 3 July until 10 October, the mean length of service of its officers does not confirm the myth. On average, officers spent 24 weeks serving with the battalion, that is, nearly six months. This was considerably less than the 1915 cohort, which averaged 40.6 weeks. This difference is explained partly by the long 'bedding in' period experienced by the 1915 cohort and partly by the fact that the battalion fought only one major battle in 1915 but three in 1916. Exposure to extreme danger was more frequent on the Somme, although this alone does not explain the officers' comparatively shorter periods of service with the 6th Battalion.

Whether or not an officer managed to avoid becoming a casualty at an early stage depended to a major extent on when he first joined the battalion in the field. Table 1 breaks down the dates of arrival of the 1916 cohort into three-monthly periods and demonstrates that those who joined in the main campaign months were likely to become casualties more quickly. Of course, these findings are in one respect hardly surprising. Entering the fray at the height of the campaign, when replacements in the platoons were urgently required, meant that new subalterns had little opportunity to acclimatise themselves to their surroundings. Nor could the senior officers, with the high casualty rates among officers on 3 July (the battalion's first operation on the Somme), give most of the newcomers time to learn the ropes in less exposed positions.

Table 1: Average Length of Service by Period of Arrival 1916, in Weeks

Jan-Mar (n = 9)	Apr-June (n = 10)	July-Sept (n = 23)	Oct-Dec (n = 15)
30.1	23.2	18.5	31.4

Only 30 (52.6%) of the 1916 cohort were still serving with the battalion by 1 January 1917. Table 2 gives the breakdown of casualties during 1916. Permanent losses from battlefield action were higher in this cohort on the Somme (81.5% of all permanent casualties) than among the 1915 cohort during its first seven months in France up to 1 January 1916 (66.7%), but a higher proportion of the battle casualties of the 1915 cohort were fatal (50% compared with 40%). This may reflect improved medical services by the time of the Somme campaign.

¹ As with all my writings on the 6th Battalion, I am very grateful for the help that Jonathan Saunders has given me.

² Michael Durey, 'Length of Service and Casualty Statistics of Officers on the Western Front: The 1915 Cohort of the 6th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment', 2015 (on this website).

³ Michael Durey, 'Six Weeks? Life Expectancy of Subalterns of the Somme in 1916' (on this website).

Table 2: Permanent Officer Losses from the 1916 cohort by 1 January 1917

Killed	Wounded	Sick	Transfer	Total
9	13	4	1	27

The most dangerous period for a newcomer to arrive was in August. In the first week of that month twelve new subalterns arrived. Just two were still with the battalion by the end of the year (although another two were to return in 1917). Only two were to be killed - 2nd Lt S.J. Coales in September and 2nd Lt J.S. Longuehayne in October - but five were to be wounded on the Somme and three others sent home sick. Only one was to serve with the battalion for more than a year.

The importance of timing for survival is shown most clearly in the military career of Alan Thomas, the future editor of *The Listener*, who arrived at the transport lines of the 6th Battalion in the ruins of Montauban on the morning of 10 October 1916. That afternoon the battalion made its final push on the Somme at Guedecourt and suffered very heavy casualties in doing so (about 300 of the 500 that went into battle).⁴ Thomas was subsequently to be wounded four times (on three occasions slightly) and went home sick once, but served 67 weeks with the battalion before the Armistice.

In contrast, the three subalterns who joined the battalion in early September lasted thirteen weeks between them, with one being killed, one dying of wounds and the other being severely wounded on 10 October. Thomas was fortunate enough to arrive just as the battalion was withdrawn from the battle on the Somme and thus spent his first acclimatising months in a quiet sector of the Front south of Arras. Yet it could have been so very different. His first task on joining the battalion was to oversee the construction of a communication trench at night. As they were digging ‘a random bullet struck the man working next to me and laid him out. . . What became of him I never heard. But he took the bullet that so nearly came to me’.⁵

It is worth reiterating that one purpose of this article is to use statistical data to help understand *perceptions*, rather than the *reality*, of longevity among surviving officers of a battalion. The rapid exit of officers who had arrived in batches, even if they were not killed, could only have encouraged a feeling that would eventually lead to the six weeks’ myth. In hindsight especially, once memory began to play its usual tricks, the distinction between casualties and deaths was eroded. Moreover, just because a subaltern spent only a few weeks in the unit before “disappearing” did not mean that he did not subsequently serve elsewhere, either in combat positions or with a support unit. Nor did it preclude the officer from having previous experience in the front line.

For some, of course, their only active service was to be with the battalion. That was the case with both forty-year-old 2nd Lt L.L. Murray and Camberwell born 2nd Lt S.E. Wadey, who spent less than a week with the battalion before being invalided home with wounds. Both also suffered from shellshock, or neurasthenia as it was being officially called by 1916.⁶ The wounds of both, a fractured right scapula for Murray and ‘slight spinal paralysis’ caused by an explosion for Wadey, healed by 1917, yet neither again served overseas. In 1919 Murray, who subsequently was attached to 30th London Regiment, a home-based Territorial unit, was still complaining of stiffness in his arm and, even as late as 1924, a Medical Board regarded him as highly strung and unable to sleep.⁷

⁴ C.T. Atkinson, *The Queen’s Own Royal West Kent Regiment 1914-1919* (London 1924, reprint, n.d.), p.220.

⁵ Alan Thomas, *A Life Apart* (London 1968), pp.61, 56.

⁶ Taylor Downing, *Breakdown. The Crisis of Shell Shock on the Somme, 1916* (London 2016), p.89.

⁷ Service Record of Lancelot Loxdale Murray, TNA PRO WO 339/31210. Murray fought for five years after the war to obtain a wound gratuity.

In November 1917 Wadey, who used crutches and continued to complain of headaches and vision problems, was transferred to the army's General List for duty with the Ministry of National Service. He relinquished his commission on 1 February 1919, with the rank of Lieutenant.

This was a dull, even inglorious, military career for a man who, calling himself Captain Wadey and wearing a foreign decoration, informed a prospective employer in 1933 that he had won the DSO. Any possibility that his wartime neurasthenia might have played a role in this deception dwindles when it is known that, on attestation in Epsom at the age of twenty in 1914, he gave his occupation as an accountant's clerk with the Metropolitan Board of Works. Yet when he applied for a commission a year later, he claimed that not only was his father working for the 'Secret Works Department at the Admiralty', but that he himself had been employed in the consular service in Brussels.⁸

This deception continued when he left the army, for he was described on his Protection Certificate as having previously served 'in the diplomatic service'. Using a military rank to which he was not entitled; wearing a decoration that had not been awarded; and falsely claiming to have won a medal were all criminal offences at the time. The best that can be said of Wadey is that, sadly, at a time when employment opportunities for "temporary gentlemen" were in short supply, he greatly embellished his four days' active service in the hope of getting a job with "Fay" Home Recorders Ltd.⁹ The worst that can be said is that he was a fraud and a conman who avoided further frontline service after a very short (and no doubt deeply unpleasant) experience with a fighting battalion.

It is very unlikely that either Murray or Wadey made more than a fleeting impression on the battalion's officers before they disappeared. The same might be said of 2nd Lt M.S. Judd, one of the twelve subalterns who arrived on 8 August. He lasted just five days before being wounded in the trenches at Ovillers. On recovery, however, he was posted to the 7th Battalion, only to be accidentally killed a year later.¹⁰ 2nd Lt G. de L. Hough was wounded after a fortnight and never returned, being attached to the Royal Engineers when he had recovered.¹¹ Hough was, however, no neophyte, for he had already been wounded before his posting to the 6th Battalion. He had been the 8th Battalion's Bombing Officer when that unit arrived in France on 31 August 1915. As part of the 24th Division in September 1915 the battalion was thrown into the Battle of Loos at Hulluch with no preparation and was almost destroyed. Just one officer survived unscathed and Hough was one of only five who returned to England wounded, the rest being either killed or becoming wounded prisoners of war.¹²

Even officers of 1916, therefore, were not all cut from the same cloth, callow young men just out of public school without any experience of life, as the popular view has it. The average age of the cohort was 25.6 in 1916 and the median age 23. Seventeen were under the age of majority and eight of the subalterns aged 34 or over. The youngest, at eighteen, was 2nd Lt R.S. Griffith, who was from a military family and obtained a Regular commission in August 1916. He was initially posted to the 1st Battalion in France in October 1916, but in November he was among a draft of five officers

⁸ In 1894 Wadey's father was an architect and surveyor's clerk. It is possible that he did work for the Admiralty later.

⁹ Service Record of Stephen Edward Wadey, TNA PRO WO 339/72192. For another example of former officers finding it difficult to find work commensurate with their new status, see Service Record of Clement Walter Morgan, TNA PRO WO 339/52651. Morgan, who enlisted in the ranks in 1913 and was commissioned in January 1916, sought a job as a park keeper in 1938. He is yet another of the 1916 cohort whose medical records suggest that neurasthenia was a significant issue. For a general examination of temporary officers of lower social status, see Martin Petter, "Temporary Gentlemen" in the aftermath of the Great War: rank, status and the ex-officer problem', *The Historical Journal* Vol. 37 (1994), pp.127-152.

¹⁰ *Queen's Own Gazette*, Vol. 36 (October 1917), p.3687. I am very grateful to the members of the Regimental Association who recently placed the *Queen's Own Gazette* on-line.

¹¹ In September 1918 Hough was appointed an Assistant Provost Marshall and transferred to the General List. *Ibid.*, Vol. 38 (January 1919), p.3921.

¹² Atkinson, *Queen's Own*, p.130.

transferred to the 6th.¹³ As Griffith remained in the army after the war, his Service Record is not available, but it appears that he left the 6th Battalion in June 1917 and subsequently served with another service battalion after a stint with the 3rd Battalion.¹⁴ He was in Bury St Edmunds when the war ended. After the war, as well as playing cricket for the 1st Battalion in 1919 and transferring to the 2nd when the 1st went overseas, he held a ‘special appointment’ at Army HQ in Ireland for ten months up to January 1922. Shortly thereafter he retired to the Reserve of Officers, at the same time serving in the Territorial Army with 4th Suffolk Regiment. He re-joined the Royal West Kent Regiment in 1931 with his old rank of Lieutenant and possibly spent several years seconded to the Nigeria Regiment. Promoted to Captain in 1935 and Major in 1938, he served through the Second World War, retiring in 1949. He died in 1981.¹⁵

At the other end of the age scale it cannot be said that most of the subalterns made much of a contribution to the battalion.¹⁶ Of the eight aged thirty-four or over, only three lasted more than six weeks with the 6th. Two were killed, two were seriously wounded and one, having spent at most a few days with the battalion, went on leave and on his return was arrested and court-martialled for drunkenness. This was 2nd Lt A.W. Eyles, the only surviving son of a prominent civil servant who was knighted for his work as Accountant General to the Navy Board. He was to have the dubious distinction of being court-martialled twice while an officer and to be dismissed from the service. Eyles was born in Plumstead in 1880 and in 1901 was a medical student at Guy’s Hospital. He gave up his studies to become a journalist and writer of crime novels. In 1909 he travelled to Australia where he met and married Margaret Leonora Pitcairn, later to be a prominent feminist and social commentator. They returned to England and set up home in Nunhead, South London. The marriage was not a happy one, no doubt partly the result of Eyles’ drinking habits.

Eyles enlisted in the 11th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment at Camberwell in May 1915 and was promoted from Corporal to Lance-Sergeant of D Company in February 1916. He went to France in May 1916 and in September, just three days before the battalion’s first major battle, was sent to the Officer Cadet School at Blendique. He was commissioned in December, posted to the 6th Battalion and given home leave for ten days in January 1917. He sailed back to France on 21 January. That evening he was picked up by the military police in Boulogne and taken to hospital. A week later he went to the military base at Étaples, where he was arrested, court-martialled for drunkenness and dismissed the service.¹⁷

This should have been the end of the story, but the army had not anticipated the intervention of the formidable Leonora Eyles. On 18 March she wrote a very clever letter to the Earl of Derby, the newly-appointed Secretary of State for War in the Lloyd George cabinet. She expressed bewilderment at the verdict; gave evidence that her husband had been diagnosed with neurasthenia while on leave; and artlessly dropped the name of Sir Alfred Eyles of the Admiralty. She did not ask that Eyles be reinstated; rather, that he be given some other appointment that would enable him again ‘to use the gift of leadership which has always been so characteristic of him’. She then was granted

¹³ C.V. Molony, “*Invicta*”. *With the 1st Battalion The Queen’s Own Royal West Kent Regiment in the Great War* (London 1923, reprint n.d.), p.163; Griffith’s Medal Index Card, Ancestry.Co.

¹⁴ I have been unable to sort out Griffith’s career after he joined the 6th Battalion and my estimation that he spent 28 weeks with the battalion may be wrong. Some fragmentary sources suggest what I have written here and the War Diary makes no mention of him after November 1916. But the Army Lists up to September 1918 record him as still being attached to the 6th Battalion from the 1st. I am grateful to “Jonbem” of the Great War Forum for bringing the Army Lists to my attention.

¹⁵ *London Gazette*, 10 June 1918, p.6884, 12 March 1929, p.1752, 11 September 1931, pp.5903, 14 February 1926, p.976, 17 May 1949, p.2404; *Army List*, 1918; England and Wales: Civil Registration Death Index, Ancestry.Co; *Queen’s Own Gazette*, *passim*.

¹⁶ Some were anxious that their age might prevent their obtaining a commission. Forty-year-old solicitor 2nd Lt S.J. Coales claimed when applying for a commission that ‘I look and *feel* some ten to fifteen years younger than I really am’. Service Record of Stephen James Coales, TNA PRO WO 339/42739. See photo below.

¹⁷ *London Gazette*, 26 January 1917, p. 963; Leonora Eyles to Secretary of State for War, 18 March 1917, in Service Record of Alfred William Eyles, TNA PRO WO 339/83691.

an interview at the War Office, after which the authorities surrendered. Although it was still accepted that Eyles had been drunk and incapable in Boulogne, his commission was reinstated from 20 February 1917. He was, however, to be transferred to a unit in a theatre of war other than France. On 26 April he was attached to the 3rd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment at Newhaven.¹⁸

There can be no doubt that Eyles had an alcohol problem and that trench warfare had affected his nerves. Within weeks his new CO had banned him from all hotels in Newhaven. When he was found drinking in the Ship Hotel—‘I am not clear whether [Eyles] regards 4 whiskies and soda with a liqueur after lunch as the result of his neurasthenic condition or whether he considers this a moderate amount’, wrote one War Office official—he was court-martialled for failing to obey a superior’s orders and dismissed. This time his wife could not save him.¹⁹

In contrast, 40-year-old Lt A.G. Stigand contributed significantly to the war effort. One of two sons of the British consul at Palermo in Italy to serve in the Royal West Kent Regiment—the other was a Regular attached to the Egyptian Army during the war—Stigand was educated at Rugby and was in the colonial service in Bechuanaland when the Boer War broke out. Stationed at Mafeking, he was in the Town Guard during the famous siege. Before the Great War he was a civil commissioner and mapped what is now part of Botswana. In 1914-15 he participated in the campaign in German South-West Africa although, being away from the main fighting area, he was not awarded the campaign medal. Stigand arrived in England in March 1916 and, after recovering from what was diagnosed as malaria and neurasthenia, was commissioned into his brother’s regiment, as a Lieutenant. He joined the 6th Battalion in the field in late November 1916. He spent nine months in the battalion, including two periods of leave in London and Paris.²⁰

Alan Thomas was very impressed with Stigand and regarded him as a friend. Stigand ‘should have been a Colonel’, he wrote. He was a leader, ready to take charge in any emergency. He recalled a time in April 1917 when he and Stigand were left behind when the battalion went into action. Thomas returned to the house in Arras where they were billeted to find that it had been hit by an incendiary bomb and was burning fiercely. Stigand was in charge of the rescue operation.

‘There’s one case!’ [Stigand] was shouting when I reached him. I offered to go in and look for this last remaining case, whoever he might be, and fetch him out. But Stigand was already in the doorway, hailing someone else who was on the stairs. ‘It’s all right’, Stigand shouted back at me. ‘He’s got it! That’s the lot’. Whereupon the mess corporal appeared carrying “the case”—which was not, as I had supposed, a stretcher case, but a case of sherry. After Stigand had seen to it that everyone was safe ... he had then, in the exercise of a powerful judgement, turned to the rescue of “the cellar”. Under his supervision, reinforced by a display of personal courage on his part that was, I believe, a source of inspiration to all who served under him, every case, every bottle, even those already in use, were saved. It was an exploit of which he was, I think, justifiably proud.²¹

A man of Stigand’s rare abilities, cartographic expertise, experience and discernment was probably wasted as a subaltern in a fighting battalion and so it proved, for in August 1917 he was attached, on probation, to the Intelligence Corps for duty. Once he had proved his worth he was sent to the Mediterranean Theatre and spent the rest of the war with the British Military Mission in Italy. While under this cover he worked for MI5, although in what capacity remains a mystery.²²

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid; *London Gazette*, 7 August 1917. Eyles abandoned his wife and three children in 1923 and was declared bankrupt a year later. He died in 1940.

²⁰ Service Record of Almar Gordon Stigand, TNA PRO WO 339/600003.

²¹ Thomas, *A Life Apart*, p.109.

²² Service Record of Almar Gordon Stigand, TNA PRO WO 339/600003.

Looking in detail at the military careers of volunteer officers such as Eyles, Thomas, Wadey and Stigand shows that the 1916 cohort was a mixed bag of the very competent and the duds, with variations in between. The 6th Battalion would not have been exceptional. Every battalion commander would have faced similar problems. The army had a name for when *general* officers were discarded for incompetence; they were *stellenbosched*.²³ Neither Lt-Col. C.S. Owen nor Bob Dawson, who replaced him as CO of the 6th Battalion in November 1916, suffered fools gladly. According to Thomas, ‘For the lazy and incompetent [Dawson] showed his contempt by getting rid of them as soon as possible’. There were several means at his disposal. He could send them on courses that led to specialized expertise required elsewhere in the army. He could make them Town Majors or give them a liaison job that took them away from the companies. Or he could ‘mark them down for the stickier jobs in the line’ (Thomas thought that Dawson preferred this solution).²⁴ Dawson was not being unreasonable in his actions. He expected the highest standards, standards that he always applied and adhered to himself. An incompetent officer was not only a liability but also a threat to the safety of the battalion.

Incompetence came in many forms and for some the burden of ill-health caused by previous service reduced their ability to cope at the sharp end of the army. There are two possible examples among the 1916 cohort. The first was Capt. B.W. Parker, a Special Reserve officer who had re-joined the regiment in August 1914 but was sent to France with 2nd Essex Regiment. In December 1914 he was evacuated with frostbite. Six months later he was posted to 1st Royal West Kent Regiment and was badly wounded in his arm on 7 October 1915. When he joined the 6th from the 1st Battalion a year later it was found that he ‘instinctively protects the arm against rough handling of any kind’. Clearly, unable to fulfil his battalion responsibilities, he was placed on detached duties as a Town Major and in 1918, after another Medical Board examination, was posted as an Assistant Railway Transport Officer.²⁵ The second was Lt. W.E. Sykes, at 41 the oldest of the 1916 officer intake. Pre-war he was a Territorial officer with 5th Royal West Kent Regiment and went with the battalion to India in October 1914 when it relieved a regular battalion. He did not return to England until January 1916, sick with ‘debility’. He remained unfit for six months. Like Parker he had been transferred from the 1st Battalion in November 1916. Like Parker, too, Sykes was placed on detached duties from the 6th Battalion as a Town Major.²⁶ It appears that when the 1st Battalion was ordered to pass on some officers to the junior battalion, the opportunity was taken to get rid of officers who were not fully fit. By moving Parker and Sykes away from battalion duties Dawson was merely “passing the parcel”.

Casualty Statistics

As previously noted in the article on the 1915 cohort, the official statistics relating to the British Army during the Great War record the number of wounded and sick casualties, not the number of individuals wounded or sick. Table 3 shows the distribution of casualty reports for the 1916 cohort during the war (that is, it also includes reports for both before and after service in the 6th Battalion). A notable feature of these figures is that only 31.6% of the 1916 cohort died during the war. This is, of course, a high percentage, reflecting the greater dangers faced by officers, but it is low compared with the fatality rate amongst the 1915 cohort (51%). The 1916 cohort, however, was marginally more likely to be wounded, with 1.21 wounding reports per officer compared with 1.08 for the 1915 cohort. Taking battle casualties (killed and wounded) as a whole, the 1915 cohort suffered more than the 1916 cohort: 1.43 reports per officer compared with 1.14. Clearly, the longer an officer served in the front line, the more likely he was to become a battlefield casualty. He was also more likely to suffer non-battlefield illnesses. Given the law of averages, such results are not unexpected.

²³ Based on the practice, during the Boer War, of sending incompetent officers to the town of Stellenbosch in the Western Cape Province without their losing rank.

²⁴ Thomas, *A Life Apart*, pp.58-59.

²⁵ Service Record of Bertram Wellington Parker, TNA PRO WO 339/15961; *Queen’s Own Gazette*, Vol. 36 (July 1917), p.3653.

²⁶ Service Record of Lt Walter Ernest Sykes, TNA PRO WO 374/66774; *Queen’s Own Gazette*, Vol. 36 (July 1917), p.3654.

Table 3: 1916 Officer Cohort Casualty reports 1914-1919 (N = 57)

DIED	WOUNDS	SICK	POW	TOTAL
18	47	22	7	94

It is in the casualty category of prisoner of war that the 1916 cohort comfortably exceeds the battalion's first cohort (7 to 2). This was owing primarily to one disastrous night during the Battle of Arras at Monchy-le-Preux on 3-4 May 1917. The battalion was in support for the main attack on a number of trenches that had been heavily contested with the enemy for days.²⁷ An eyewitness view of what happened was written by Lt L.W. Browning in his February 1919 report following his repatriation from Germany.

At 2.30am May 3rd 1917 the 7th Battalion Queen's Regiment attacked supported by 6th RWK. A and B Companies were in support to C and D Companies and lay under heavy fire from 1am till 9.30pm, but could get no communication with either the Queen's or C and D Companies. Some time during the evening however we discovered C and D Companies were lying in front of enemy front line and received orders to attack at 9.30pm, capture enemy front line and pass through, the front line to be occupied by C and D Companies. We attacked according to order, captured and passed through enemy front line. Both Companies then lost direction and after advancing about 600 yards beyond captured trench, B Company decided to dig in. We sent a scout to report to Headquarters, but he found the previously captured trench occupied by the enemy, who sent him back with a message to surrender. During the night we were hampered considerably by numbers of the Queen's who had been captured or wounded early in the morning and were without food or equipment. We sent out other runners but none of them found their way back. On the morning of the 4th our contact plane flew over and we burnt our flares in the approved manner. Enemy delivered an attack which we successfully repelled. We again sent out scouts who reported all trenches they examined to be occupied by the enemy. On the 5th the enemy bombarded our position with light minnewerfers (sic). Our position was composed of two redoubts. I in company with two wounded officers and the remainder of B Company and the stragglers before mentioned, occupied one of these. We had received no food since the night of the 2nd. We had no water. The officers held a conference and decided that owing to the fact that 25% of our forces were wounded and without arms, and that we had lost direction, to attempt to fight our way back was useless sacrifice. We therefore sent a prisoner we held with a message that we would surrender, provided we received safe conduct. We laid down our arms at 10pm on the night of the 5th May.²⁸

Of the six officers captured, five were from the 1916 intake. This was 12.5% of the cohort still serving with the battalion, with nearly 40 months' frontline experience between them. Despite the practice of leaving a group of officers, NCOs and men out of every attack, to act as a cadre around which the battalion could be reformed, every major push continued to drain units of their hard-won expertise and experience. There had always to be small, repetitive learning curves at unit level within the larger one that revisionist historians in the past few decades have brought to our notice. This helps to explain why the British Army's learning curve was more of a rollercoaster than had once been thought.²⁹ It also points to the vast importance of the relatively few long-serving officers and NCOs for keeping their battalions as effective units in the line of battle.

²⁷ Unsurprisingly, the battalion War Diary has no details, merely recording the officers as missing. War Diary, 6th Battalion Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment, 3-5 May 1917, TNA PRO WO 95/1861. An account of the action, which is described as 'a disastrous day for the 6th Battalion', can be found in Atkinson, *Queen's Own*, pp.253-55.

²⁸ Service Record of Lt Leonard William Browning, TNA PRO WO 339/43575.

²⁹ The main contributors to the debate are noted in my review of Peter Simkins, *From the Somme to Victory: The British Army's Experience on the Western Front, 1916-1918* (Barnsley 2014) (on this website).

It is very likely that only four of the 1916 cohort of officers survived the war unscathed. One was Eyles, who was dismissed almost as soon as he been posted to the battalion. Of the others, 2nd Lt A.J. Donaldson, spent most of 1918 as an assistant instructor on a military mission to the United States. Another was Stigand, mentioned above. The fourth was 2nd Lt V.H. Holroyd, whose personal record contains no evidence that he was either wounded or sick. He was still with the battalion at the Armistice, but he did claim, when seeking a short-term commission in the Royal Artillery in 1939, that he had been involved in a great deal of ‘instructional work’ during the war.³⁰ This gives an “unscathed rate” for the cohort of 7%, only slightly higher than the 1915 cohort’s 6.1%. For both groups of officers, the Western Front was an unhealthy place.



‘I look and feel some ten to fifteen years younger than I really am’.
2nd Lt Stephen James Coales, DOW 18 September 1916
 Source: TNA PRO WO 339/42739



Capt. Alexander Kilburn Hall. Wearing the uniform of a Private in the 18th (1st Public Schools) Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Reported Missing in Action, 7 October 1916.
 Source: Courtesy of Ron Ely

³⁰ Service Record of 2nd Lt Vivian Hutchence Holroyd, TNA PRO WO 339/61374.



2nd Lt Morris Stanley Judd, wounded within seven days of joining the 6th Battalion. Accidentally mortally wounded with the 7th Battalion, died 18 August 1917. [Photo: Courtesy of Helen Price]