

Raising a Service Battalion in 1915: Captain George Pragnell's Marketing Strategy and the 11th (Lewisham) Battalion Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment

The massive flow to the colours of volunteers heeding the repeated calls of Lord Kitchener in the seventeen months from the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914 until the introduction of the first phase of conscription in January 1916 is one of the most remarkable occurrences in twentieth-century British history. Winston Churchill described the creation of the volunteer New Armies as 'among the wonders of the time'.¹ More than 2.4 million British citizens freely joined the army in that period, just under fifty per cent of all men who enlisted between August 1914 and November 1918.² The pattern of enlistment, however, fluctuated considerably, with peaks and troughs throughout the months of late 1914 and early 1915. The peak came in September 1914, when the BEF's retreat from Mons stimulated 462,901 men to volunteer. November and January 1915 enlistment figures were above 150,000, but thereafter a declining trend became obvious. The average for the three months beginning July 1915 was only 87,000.³ Faced with this decline, politicians began seriously to consider the merits of compulsory service. In the meantime, however, regimental recruiting units had to find novel ways of (sometimes literally) drumming up commitment to military service.

The 11th (Lewisham) Battalion Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment was one of more than 170 "Pals" infantry battalions in Lord Kitchener's New Armies, not directly formed by the War Office but usually at its instigation.⁴ From the very beginning of the war, prominent members of local communities, eager to help with the war effort, engaged with the War Office to produce a particular type of unit: an infantry battalion; or a unit, such as a battery or an ammunition train, for the artillery. An infantry battalion required enlisting at least 1100 men (from December 1914 the number was raised to 1350 so that a depot unit, one company strong, could be the nucleus for a second line of the battalion).⁵ The local raising committee accepted that they would incur the expense until, once the battalion was ready to be taken over by the army, the War Office reimbursed the costs of equipping the men, up to £8 15s (£8 75p) for each man, and the costs of advertising, at the rate of 2 shillings (10p) per recruit.⁶ The committee would also be responsible for providing accommodation (if the recruit did not live at home nearby) and the unit's rations.⁷

There were two main phases of recruitment for Pals battalions, the first occurring during the first months of war. The second phase began during Lord Kitchener's final attempt in the early spring of 1915 to raise another 300,000 men without recourse to conscription.⁸ With the enlistment rate falling, by May 1915 the War Office was encouraging borough councils to raise new local battalions.⁹ In South London, the mayors of both Lewisham and Bermondsey responded favourably, the former raising a battalion for the Royal West Kent Regiment, the latter for the East Surrey Regiment. There was strong competition for recruits, especially in

¹ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis*, p. 236, quoted in Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies 1914-1916* (Barnsley 2007), p. xiii.

² Ian F.W. Beckett, *The Great War*, 2nd ed. (Harlow 2007), p. 289.

³ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War* (London 1922), p. 364.

⁴ One calculation has 172 infantry battalions, 84 artillery units and 48 units of Engineers designated as 'Pals'. Victor Wallace Germain, *The Kitchener Armies: The Story of a National Achievement* (1930: Uckfield 2014), p. 148.

⁵ Army Council Directive, 2 Dec. 1914 and War Office Circular on conditions for raising a battalion, n.d [1914], Centre for Kentish Studies, Maidstone (hereafter CKS), Records of the Royal West Kent Regiment, WKR/B.11/A.1, 132/1/2.

⁶ War Office Circular 20/General No./3631, 24 December 1914, *ibid*.

⁷ List of articles to be supplied to each recruit, *ibid*; Basil Williams, *Raising and Training the New Armies* (London 1918), p. 46.

⁸ This was to be known as K5, Kitchener's fifth contingent or army of volunteers.

⁹ Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, pp. 119-20; David Sibley, *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916* (Abingdon 2005), p. 28.

the districts along New Cross Road and the Old Kent Road, the ancient main thoroughfare from Kent into London. Bermondsey Council, for instance, was already assisting recruitment to the second line of the territorial 22nd (County of London) Regiment (The Queen's), while other boroughs nearby, such as Camberwell, Clapham, Lambeth and Kennington, were helping to raise second-line territorial battalions for the London Regiment. Even Lewisham Council was involved, giving support to the 20th (Blackheath and Woolwich) Battalion of the London Regiment that was still recruiting, both to replace wastage at the Front and to form a second line.¹⁰ At the same time, artillery units such as the 4th (London) Howitzer Brigade, with its HQ in Lewisham,¹¹ and the 39th (Deptford) Division Royal Field Artillery were seeking volunteers for their batteries in the same South London pool.

Competition also came from further afield, with local newspapers carrying advertisements for the 17th King's Royal Rifle Corps, the 3/6th London Regiment, the 10th Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment and even the Royal Naval Division.¹² The Lewisham Recruiting Committee could safely ignore its naval competitor, for the Admiralty was seeking to raise a battalion comprising only public schoolboys or university students, a social group unlikely to be attracted to the strongly working-class 11th Battalion. Other units were much more serious rivals, especially the East Surrey battalion and the three brigades of what was to become the 39th (Deptford) Divisional Artillery. The latter was raised in a matter of a few weeks between mid-May and early August 1915. No fewer than 2500 men were enlisted, mainly from Deptford and Greenwich, making it far more difficult for the 11th Battalion to raise recruits in the areas just outside the borough boundaries.¹³

By the spring of 1915 the process of recruitment was less chaotic than it had been during the first months of the war, when the army had been almost overwhelmed by volunteers.¹⁴ But at the same time the decline in enlistment forced recruiters to develop a strategy that attracted and tempted their primary target, unmarried young adult males between the ages of nineteen and twenty-four, to join the colours.¹⁵ The officer given responsibility for filling the ranks of the 11th Battalion was Lt (from July Captain) George Frederick Pragnell, a local man born and raised in the main recruiting area. He was to prove himself a pragmatic, efficient and sometimes cynical recruiting officer.

Pragnell was born in Blackheath in 1891, the only son of George and Leonora Pragnell.¹⁶ His father was a self-made man who had a remarkable life, which culminated with a knighthood. The son of the head gardener at Sherborne Castle in Dorset, he attended Foster's, the ancient local charity school, before leaving for London, where his first job was as a warehouseman at Cook and Co, one of the biggest textile-trading firms in the country. In 1881, aged 18, he was living with dozens of others working for Cook and Co in a number of houses in Carter Lane, Old Fish St. By dint of hard work and perseverance he became a partner in the company, was appointed JP and Deputy Lord Lieutenant of London and in 1912 received a knighthood. Pragnell Snr played major roles in the Empire Trade Movement, the Wholesale Textile Association, the London Chamber of Commerce and, with his wife, the British Red Cross. He was also Chairman of the National Patriotic Association, which organized lectures and rallies

¹⁰ W.R. Elliot, *The Second Twentieth, Being the History of the 2/20th Bn. London Regiment* (Reprint ed., Uckfield n.d.), p. 8.

¹¹ R.O. Russell, *The History of the 11th (Lewisham) Battalion The Queen's Own, Royal West Kent Regiment* (Lewisham 1934), p. 2.

¹² *Catford Journal*, 28 May 1915.

¹³ H.W. Wiebkin, *A Short History of the 39th (Deptford) Divisional Artillery 1915-1918* (London 1923), pp. 1-3.

¹⁴ Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, pp. 124-25.

¹⁵ For enlistment numbers per month in 1915, see *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire*, p. 364.

¹⁶ They had one daughter, Vera, born in 1897.

in support of the war effort.¹⁷ After the war broke out he was active in the South London recruiting campaign. When he died suddenly in February 1916, aged only 53, his widow received a message from the Queen, in which she stated that ‘the nation has lost one of its most useful and patriotic citizens’.¹⁸

His father’s commercial and social success gave George Frederick Pragnell a flying start in life. He was educated at a prep school in Herne Bay run by Edgar Mobbs and at Dulwich College, close to where his family was currently living in Beulah Hill.¹⁹ In 1911 Pragnell was single, living at home and working as an accountant for Cook and Co.²⁰ In July he was admitted to the socially exclusive Honourable Artillery Company.²¹ By 1914 Pragnell had risen to the rank of Lance Corporal. The HAC was one of the Territorial infantry battalions that Lord Kitchener decided to send to France during the emergency following the retreat from Mons. It landed at St Nazaire on 20 September 1914 and was placed on Lines of Communication duty. The battalion was subsequently posted to the 3rd Division, where it served first in 8th Brigade (from 10 November) and then, from 9 December, in 7th Brigade. By this time Pragnell held the rank of Sergeant, responsible for the Orderly Room.

The ranks of the HAC were filled with men of officer quality and there was a steady loss of the original contingent returning to England to take up commissions. On 29 January 1915, after just over three months in France, Pragnell left the battalion. On 23 February he was gazetted to the 9th (Service) Battalion The Buffs (East Kent Regiment). While under training this unit had been part of 95th Brigade, but in April 1915 it was designated a Reserve battalion. Fortunately for Pragnell an opportunity to transfer occurred almost immediately, for the first men in the 11th (Lewisham) Battalion Royal West Kent Regiment were enlisting in the middle of May. With his father’s influence and strong interest in the Lewisham battalion, it was easy for Pragnell to transfer to the unit.

Given his father’s links to both local and national recruiting campaigns, it was natural that Pragnell, described in the battalion history as ‘a whole-hearted enthusiast ... [who] brought a charm of personality and an organizing ability of high degree to bear on his work’, should be chosen to oversee the battalion’s search for men to fill its ranks.²² He worked out a plan of campaign based on his knowledge of lower-class life in London’s southern suburbs. Although the rapidly expanding borough of Lewisham was still significantly middle- and lower-middle class in social composition, on its immediate borders to the north and west were large swathes of working-class communities that could be tapped (Deptford was not part of Lewisham at that time).

Pragnell rejected a direct recruiting strategy to fill the ranks of the battalion. He discounted the effect of plastering the borough’s walls and entertainment venues with posters, a form of static advertising that competed with myriad other exhortations, both military and civilian.²³ Everyone knows the poster messages by heart, he told the secretary of the civilian recruiting

¹⁷ Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 5th ed. (London 2012), p. 218.

¹⁸ 1881, 1891, 1901, 1911 Censuses; ‘Looking Back at Foster’s School’, www.sherbornemuseum.co.uk (accessed 2 December 2014); *London Gazette*, 12 July 1912, p. 5081; *The Times*, 18 February 1916; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1916.

¹⁹ 1901 Census; *Dulwich College Register, 1619-1926*, p. 430.

²⁰ 1911 Census.

²¹ I am grateful for the help of members of the on-line Great War Forum in determining the date Pragnell joined the HAC.

²² Russell, *11th Battalion*, p. 5.

²³ In 1914 the War Office had asked the London variety theatres to display recruitment posters. Andrew Horrall, *Popular Culture in London c. 1890-1918: The transformation of entertainment* (Manchester 2001), p. 192.

committee, but no one took much notice of them.²⁴ Moreover, as the South London elementary schoolteacher Alexander Paterson had noticed before the war, wall adverts and posters were ephemeral, at the mercy of the wind and rain.²⁵ Large recruiting meetings were equally ineffectual, because young men uncertain about enlisting deliberately stayed away and the speakers did not always set the right tone. At one recruiting meeting during the early stages of the battalion's formation William Joynson Hicks, MP, demonstrated his lack of understanding of the working-class psyche by threatening the imminent introduction of conscription: 'you shall be fetched', he warned. The local newspaper headlined its story, 'Mr W. Joynson Hicks MP and Shirkers'.²⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, on average each meeting for the battalion resulted in just one recruit, with another five breaking their promise to enlist the next day.²⁷

Even though the War Office had recently raised the age limit for recruits to forty and reduced the height requirement to five feet two inches (157.5 cm), Pragnell knew that, as the poor early recruitment figures showed, the well of voluntarism was drying up.²⁸ He hoped that the National Registration Act (a census of all men of eligible military age that began in July 1915) or a 'heavy reverse at the front' might spur recruitment, but soon became resigned to the introduction of compulsory service as the only long-term solution. Making 'the best of a bad job', however, Pragnell embarked on an indirect strategy that recruited by stealth, intruding into the cultural activities of South London's working class. It was a psychological approach that sought to convince by creating positive links between recruitment and metropolitan popular culture.

Much of South London's entertainment was to be found on the streets. Apart from a minority who belonged to youth clubs and sought to better themselves through evening classes, most young men poured on to the main thoroughfares after work.²⁹ 'They only ask', wrote Paterson, 'to be out in the streets, free to turn wherever they like, to mix with others, learn the news, and form a circle of taste and opinion. The Londoner hates to be alone, is most at home when one of a suffocating crowd'.³⁰ They would mill around the street performers, the singers "key-hole whispering" at pub doors, and admire 'the showmen and "drawers" 'dressed as gaudy mountebanks or clowns' to entice punters into the cheap and plebeian penny gaffs.³¹ Some street entertainment was free: a passing 'fire-engine, an arrest on a street, an epileptic in a fit, the short quick appearance of friends at the police-court are scenes in melodrama' that appealed to the senses, while 'a walk along the crowded street at night is an easy and inexpensive outing of which they never tire'.³² The myriad Saturday night markets—Bell St in Southwark, Rye Lane in Peckham and High St in Deptford, for

²⁴ Pragnell to Walter Morley, 26 July 1915, CKS, Records of the Royal West Kent Regiment, WKR/B.11/A.1.

²⁵ Alexander Paterson, *Across the Bridges. Life by the South London River-side* (1911: New York 1980), p. 7. For war posters being vandalized in Devon during the first months of the war, see Bonnie J. White, 'Volunteerism and Early Recruitment Efforts in Devonshire, August 1914 – December 1915', *The Historical Journal* 52 (2009), p. 656.

²⁶ *Catford Journal*, 21 May 1915.

²⁷ Pragnell to Morley, 26 July 1915. For the 'self-regarding' nature of many recruiting meetings, see Trevor Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War* (Cambridge 1988), pp. 159-60.

²⁸ *The Times*, 20 May 1915; *Hither Green Journal*, 25 June 1915.

²⁹ For youth organizations, see Basil L.Q. Henriques, *The Indiscretions of a Warden* (London 1937), pp. 24-28; Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, pp. 154, 163; James Walvin, *A Child's World. A Social History of English Childhood 1800-1914* (Harmondsworth 1982), pp. 189-92; Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 2 (London 1902), p. 87.

³⁰ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, p. 141.

³¹ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, p. 13.

³² Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, p. 42.

instance—with their temporary barrows and stalls selling cheap food and goods were a particular source of amusement.³³

Londoners flocked to public processions, whether they were funerals, Pearly King and Queen charitable parades or commercial advertising ventures that brought music hall artistes onto the streets.³⁴ In 1915 military recruiting parades added variety to the London thoroughfares. Pragnell tapped into this popular enthusiasm by ordering a series of marches, none of the notices for which were to mention the word ‘recruitment’. Instead, he rather deviously called them either a ‘Grand Military Procession’ or a ‘Grand Military Pageant’, perhaps in an attempt to link them with the annual City of London Lord Mayor’s Show.³⁵ Noisy marching bands were vital to raise crowds and before the 11th Battalion’s own band was ready he used popular music hall entertainer Harry Lauder’s Pipe Band.³⁶ Interestingly, he also employed bands from youth organizations—from the Lewisham Cadet Battalion, the 5th Brockley Scouts and the Church Lads’ Brigade—thus drawing the under-aged into the pageantry.³⁷ The processions, setting off in the early summer evenings as the streets began to fill, also included armoured cars, wounded local heroes on leave from the Front, local dignitaries and the battalion companies in full marching order. At the rear, however, straggled enlisted men in mufti (civilian clothes), ‘hopelessly out of step’ and luring onlookers to join in. Any man failing to sing “Fall in and Follow me”, Pragnell warned, ‘would be severely dealt with’.

Another of Pragnell’s ploys was to take advantage of Londoners’ fascination with the music hall and the cinema, most South London boroughs having at least one of the former by the outbreak of war.³⁸ They must, he wrote, ‘be systematically tapped’. He had been appalled to see ‘the number of suitable men in mufti’ in the audience when he visited the Lewisham Hippodrome one Saturday night in July. There was to be no escape for the patrons, whom Pragnell called ‘a captive audience’. Recruiters were to mingle with the ‘early doors’ crowd on the pavement; were to give a handbill—Pragnell called them ‘Jesus loves me certificates’—to those sitting in the cheap seats in the gallery; and were to mingle with the exiting patrons at the end of the performance. He also expected music hall managers to allow local celebrities and wounded soldiers to speak to the audience for ten minutes. Cinema managers were to show lantern slides advertising the battalion and its sporting events.³⁹ They were also asked to show a short film taken of the largest and most ambitious procession, held on 11 September.⁴⁰

Pragnell was aware that sport played a large part in the lives of London’s young men, as, by the war’s outbreak, it also did in the lives of regular soldiers.⁴¹ With its HQ situated in the pavilion of the Private Banks Sports Ground in Catford, it was perhaps not surprising that the Battalion’s recruiting card emphasized the opportunities for playing sport: ‘Boxing, Cricket, Football, and all conceivable kinds of SPORT are encouraged ... COME AND BRING YOUR PALS. You can ENLIST together, PLAY together, TRAIN together and FIGHT

³³ Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (Oxford 1993), p.52.

³⁴ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, pp. 4, 48-50; Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, p.42; S.C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c.1880-1939* (Oxford 1999), p. 46; *Daily Mail*, 30 September 2013; Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 170.

³⁵ Roy Douglas, ‘Voluntary Enlistment in the First World War and the Work of the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee’, *Journal of Modern History*, 42 (1970), p. 570.

³⁶ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, p. xi.

³⁷ CKS, Royal West Kent Records, WKR/B.11/A.1.

³⁸ *The Era*, 8 July 1899; The Music Hall and Theatre Website, www.arthurlloyd.co.uk.

³⁹ Pragnell to Morley, 26 July 1915.

⁴⁰ Russell, *11th Battalion*, p. 9.

⁴¹ Walvin, *Child’s World*, pp. 187-88; Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi, *Sport and the Military. The British Armed Forces 1880-1960* (Cambridge 2010), pp. 15-49; David French, *Military Identities: The Regimental System, the British Army, and the British People c. 1870-2000* (Oxford 2008), pp.114-15.

together'.⁴² The focus on boxing and football was sensible. The former was particularly popular in South London, especially in Bermondsey, and thrived in the battalion, while the latter was the most popular working-class sport of all and was to remain so among the soldiers in the trenches.⁴³ Although cricket may have been closer to the hearts of the officers than to the men's, except when outsiders strengthened the battalion team about half the players came from the ranks.⁴⁴ For working-class teenagers, sporting heroes were part of a popular celebrity culture that they had first begun to imbibe when collecting cigarette cards while still at school.⁴⁵

According to Paterson, South London adolescent males first demonstrated an interest in the opposite sex at about the age of sixteen and 'will have quarreled with half a dozen possible brides before they are twenty-one'.⁴⁶ The roles of women during the Great War, as patriots, workers, mothers, wives and girlfriends, have been the subject of considerable study in recent years.⁴⁷ Contemporary promoters of the war effort viewed women as potentially a major conduit for recruitment. 'Wives, sisters and sweethearts', suggested one MP at a 11th Battalion recruiting meeting, should 'urge the men to go', while a member of the local recruiting committee beseeched young women to 'have nothing to do with those lads who were not prepared to do their bit'. Sweethearts, he went on, should not be influenced by young men who bought them chocolates.⁴⁸

What Pragnell thought of chocolates as an anti-recruiting device remains unknown, but he certainly appreciated the potentially valuable role young women could play in filling the battalion's ranks. His programme involved having recruiters visit every shop in the borough, where they would not only attempt to persuade owners to encourage their young male staff to enlist, but also canvass the shop girls. 'In nearly every case', Pragnell perhaps naively believed, 'it is either an employer or a girl who stops a man from joining'. He could not, however, decide who would best influence the girls. Should it be the suave, sophisticated recruiting officer, with his impeccable manners and smart uniform, or the recruiting NCO, who probably had much more experience of chatting up working-class girls?⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Pragnell's final decision remains unknown.

Some young women had experience of working among the public for a cause. These were the Alexandra Day girls, who once a year in June sold artificial flowers for sixpence in the streets. The Alexandra Day was a charitable event, established in 1912 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Queen Alexandra's arrival in Britain.⁵⁰ A number of these girls (as Pragnell called them) were prepared to help the recruiting campaign. Pragnell was delighted. They showed 'an excellent pretence of innocence' and could 'push their way into all sorts of sacred places' (that is, rough pubs and clubs). He gave them promotional material and 'let them

⁴² Russell, *11th Battalion*, pp. 7-8.

⁴³ Ross, *Love and Toil*, p. 73; Russell, *11th Battalion*, p. 9; Mason and Riedi, *Sport and the Military*, p. 14; Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge 2008), p. 72.

⁴⁴ Russell, *11th Battalion*, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, p. 145. So varied were the collections of cigarette cards that they became known as 'the working man's encyclopaedia'. <http://www.cigarettecard.co.uk/history-cigarette-cards.html> (accessed 3 October 2013).

⁴⁶ Paterson, *Across the Bridges*, p. 147.

⁴⁷ Nicoletta F. Gullace, 'White Feathers and Wounded Men: Female Patriotism and the Memory of the Great War', *The Journal of British Studies*, 36 (1997), pp. 178-206; Susan R. Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War* (Chapel Hill 1999); Nicoletta F. Gullace, *"The Blood of our Sons": Men, Women, and the Renegotiation of British Citizenship during the Great War* (Basingstoke 2002).

⁴⁸ *Catford Journal*, 21 May, 11 June 1915.

⁴⁹ Pragnell to Morley, 26 July 1915.

⁵⁰ Horrall, *Popular Culture*, pp. 26-27.

loose to do their worst'.⁵¹ Thus feminine allure was used to encourage enlistment among young men, a more tempered ploy than the unofficial distribution of white feathers in which more aggressive young female patriots were indulging at the time.

Although Pragnell's strategy would not have been wholly original, it represented best practice recruiting in mid-1915.⁵² Despite his efforts, however, the battalion struggled to fill its ranks. Table 1 shows the data for the 1037 recruits in the original battalion whose dates of attesting can be found or inferred.⁵³ (These include the recruits who, for various reasons, did not go to France with the battalion in May 1916.) The average number of recruits in the second half of May, when there was widespread public outrage at the fate of Edith Cavell and early enthusiasm for the new local battalion, was nearly ten per day. If that had been sustained, the battalion's ranks would have filled by the end of July, which would have been a respectable performance (although the local newspaper was initially unimpressed).⁵⁴ But in the following two months average recruitment per day nearly halved, so that, despite expressions of confidence in the campaign, at best the ranks of only two of the four companies required were filled by the end of July.⁵⁵ In August numbers dropped again and in September recruitment was reduced to a trickle. It appeared that raising a new Lewisham battalion was going to be impossible. At this point Pragnell was given the role of battalion Adjutant and handed over responsibility for recruiting to his deputy, Lt Balls. The move was not an admission of defeat, nor did the September figures reflect badly on Pragnell's strategy. The collapse of enlistments in September was a national, not a local, phenomenon and it was soon to be replaced by an upsurge in numbers that enabled Lewisham Council to hand over the battalion to the War Office in December.

Table 1: Recruits by Month (N = 1037)

Date	No. Recruits	%
May (2 weeks)	133	12.8
June	162	15.6
July	162	15.6
August	140	13.5
September	58	5.6
October	131	12.6
November	234	22.6
December	17	1.7

National developments in the conscription debate determined the eventual success of the 11th Battalion's recruitment drive in South London. The momentum towards compulsion built in September 1915 when the results of the National Registration Act became known. This census, an attempt accurately to measure Britain's manpower levels, was widely viewed as a necessary preliminary to conscription (the 11th Battalion's recruits were involved in

⁵¹ Pragnell to Morley, 26 July 1915.

⁵² For recruitment to other South London battalions in 1915, see Paul McCue, *Wandsworth and Battersea Battalions in the Great War* (Barnsley 2010), pp. 24-35, 170-75; John Aston and L.M. Duggan, *The History of the 12th (Bermondsey) Battalion East Surrey Regiment* (1937: Uckfield 2010), pp. 3-4.

⁵³ Where attestation records are unavailable, I have used soldiers' regimental numbers to gauge their dates of enlistment.

⁵⁴ *Catford Journal*, 28 May 1915. The time taken to raise units varied considerably. The 16th Sherwood Foresters, for instance, began recruiting on 29 April 1915 and its ranks were filled by the end of May. Germains, *Kitchener Armies*, p. 149.

⁵⁵ Russell, *11th Battalion*, p. 7; *Catford Journal*, 18 June 1915; *Queen's Own Gazette*, Vol. 34 (1915), p. 3357.

delivering registration forms to households in the district). It showed that there still remained a very large number of men capable of military service not working in industries vital to the war effort who had failed to volunteer. The publication of the results had an immediate effect on enlistment into the 11th Battalion. The numbers attesting in the second half of October were nearly twice those in the first half.

What had been a trickle in September turned into a flood in November (see Table 1) with the promulgation of the Group or Derby Scheme, which encouraged men either to enlist as usual or to attest and wait to be called up later (probably within a few months). At the same time it was announced that voluntary enlistment would soon stop, a sure indication that, despite the coalition government's continued prevarication, conscription was looming ever closer. For men still clinging to their civilian status, one advantage of volunteering rather than waiting to be conscripted or participating in the Derby Scheme, was that they could choose which military unit to join. A local battalion like the 11th RWK was probably an attraction to many South Londoners, who preferred to mix with their own kind rather than with complete strangers. The local statistics again show the impact of national events. The 18-24 age group was most vulnerable to the establishment of conscription; they could expect to be called up almost immediately the Act was passed. Of the 384 young men of this group who enlisted in the 11th Battalion, 49.2% did so after 1 October. The real probability of compulsion had a much greater effect on recruitment in South London than Pragnell's campaign. In the end his early gloomy prognostication of the inevitability of conscription was proved to be correct.

Pragnell was not part of the original officer contingent of the 11th Battalion that sailed to France in May 1916, nor did he survive the war. The battalion was part of 123rd Brigade, 41st Division and Pragnell was appointed to the staff as Brigade Major. On 23 July 1917 he was walking with his Brigadier-General, C.W.E. Gordon, along a rough track between Spoil Bank and Voormezele, south-west of Ypres, when they were hit by a shell. Gordon was killed instantaneously. Pragnell died five minutes later.⁵⁶ He was buried at Reningheist New Military Cemetery, Ypres. He was twenty-six years old. His Death Plaque was sold on eBay in 2012.

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⁵⁶ Frank Davies and Graham Maddocks, *Bloody Red Tabs: General Officer Casualties of the Great War, 1914-1918* (London 1995), p. 65.