

## British Officers Buried in St Symphorien Military Cemetery after the Battle of Mons: Issues in Determining their Official Fates

In the aftermath of the battle of Mons the Germans buried thirteen British officers in what was originally called St Symphorien German Cemetery.<sup>1</sup> Four had served with the 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment, four with the 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers, three with 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment, one with 1<sup>st</sup> Gordon Highlanders and one with 56 Field Company, Royal Engineers (see List 1). All had been killed on 23 August 1914 while defending the Mons-Condé canal sector of the British line. Under War Office casualty procedures, only official notification from GHQ and 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon (the BEF's administrative base) could determine the status of these officers as dead or missing. The process of determining their fates was to be complicated. Only three had been officially reported as killed in action when GHQ's third Casualty List—the first dealing with this sector of the line—reached London on 6 September.<sup>2</sup> Another five were on this list, two reported as wounded and three as missing. No reports had been received from 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. These finally arrived on GHQ Lists dated 20 and 21 September.<sup>3</sup> Only one of the four Fusiliers was reported dead. The other three were recorded as wounded. The report on the final officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt H W Holt, RE, arrived on 8 September. He was missing. Thus, when these thirteen officers were first reported as casualties, only four were officially known to be dead. Five were thought to be wounded and four to be missing. The four dead were 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt C B Gibbons, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment; Captain Walton Mellor, also of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish; Lt Leslie Richmond, 1<sup>st</sup> Gordon Highlanders; and Lt J F Mead, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers.<sup>4</sup>

As more evidence came in uncertainty began to diminish, but only slightly. By 5 October, six weeks after the battle, three more of the officers had been confirmed killed in action. One was Major W H Abell, another Lt J R M Wilkinson, both of 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex.<sup>5</sup> The third was Lt M J Dease, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers, who was soon to be awarded the war's first Victoria Cross.<sup>6</sup> Dease's name first appears on an official casualty list on 20 or 21 September as having been wounded. This is corroborated by a telegram sent to his father on 22 September saying that he was 'dangerously wounded'. But this was the third telegram from MS 2 Cas. received by the family.<sup>7</sup> One dated 5 September stated that Dease had been killed (on information sent by his CO). It was supplanted by another informing his father of a further report from the CO of 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers amending his first. Now, on 12 September, Dease was thought to be wounded and missing (strangely, the telegram is dated 30 September). A final telegram,

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of this cemetery see Commonwealth War Graves Commission, <https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/90801/st.-symphorien-military-cemetery/>

<sup>2</sup> The names were published in *The Times* on 8 September 1914.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 25 September 1914. Gerald Gliddon, *VCs of the First World War: 1914* (Stroud 2011), p.5, believes that the long period between Mons and the publication of 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusilier casualties must be the responsibility of either the battalion or the War Office. It is likely to be the former or the DAG's 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon, but not the War Office, that caused the delay.

<sup>4</sup> Richmond was the first Gordon Highlander officer killed in the trenches when casualties were still comparatively light. Lt-Col F H Neish to Mrs Leslie Richmond, Torgau [POW camp], 9 September 1914, TNA PRO WO 339/6597. I am very grateful to Andy Pay for making Richmond's file available.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 4, 5 October 1914. For short biographies of these two officers, see Colonel L A Clutterbuck *et al* (eds), *The Bond of Sacrifice: A Biographical Record of British Officers who Fell in the Great War*, Vol. 1, pp.2, 444-445.

<sup>6</sup> *The Times*, 30 September 1914, 17 November 1914.

<sup>7</sup> MS 2 Cas. was the War Office branch that sent out casualty telegrams. The sub-branch, MS 3 Cas., verified officer deaths from reports received from GHQ and the Deputy Adjutant General's Base (3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon) in Rouen. See Michael Durey, 'Preparing for and Managing Casualties in a European War, 1907-1914', on this website.

dated 26 September, informed the family that Dease was once again officially dead.<sup>8</sup> This his father accepted, for on 29 September he placed an obituary notice in *The Times*.<sup>9</sup>

By the end of the year the fate of another two officers had been resolved. Captain K J Roy, first reported missing, and Lt K P (“Uffie”) Henstock, reported wounded, were both from 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex.<sup>10</sup> A POW report confirmed that Roy had been killed on 23 August.<sup>11</sup> Henstock apparently had last been seen wounded lying in an ambulance and his status, therefore, had changed to wounded and missing in early October.<sup>12</sup> In the meantime, British Red Cross inquiries to the International Red Cross initially elicited no news, but a German *Totenliste* (death list) dated 17 October 1914 received in Geneva reported his death.<sup>13</sup> The War Office declared him unofficially KIA in December, a decision that his family—his father was a Colonel—accepted.<sup>14</sup>

This left four officers unaccounted for: Lt the Hon. F G A Forbes, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment; Holt of the Royal Engineers; and two Royal Fusiliers, Captain F A Forster and Lt E C Smith. On 1 January 1915 the War Office issued a list of 227 officers who ‘were originally reported “missing” [with] no further information showing either that they are prisoners of war or dead’.<sup>15</sup> Only Forster and Holt were on the list. Forster had been reported wounded in September, but with the initials of his colleague Captain H C Forster.<sup>16</sup> This unfortunate error was soon rectified and in October, with the correct initials, his status changed to wounded and missing.<sup>17</sup> He had last been seen seriously wounded at Mons and taken to a private house, after which he had disappeared.<sup>18</sup> As there is no Personal Record for Forster, it is difficult to determine when he was presumed dead. The short biographical note in de Ruvigny’s *Roll of Honour* merely states that he died of wounds on 23 August 1914.<sup>19</sup> A newspaper report in April 1915 announced that Forster had ‘unofficially’ died of wounds, by which time the War Office Accounts Branch, Accts. 4, had begun the process of winding up his financial affairs.<sup>20</sup> Yet his Medal Index Card gives his date of death as 23 October 1915, suggesting that this may have been the date of his presumption of death.<sup>21</sup> No additional news of him appeared until a Graves Registration Unit examined the German cemetery at St Symphorien after the war.

<sup>8</sup> Personal Record, Maurice James Dease, TNA PRO WO 339/7579.

<sup>9</sup> *The Times*, 29 September 1914. See also Gliddon, *VCs of the First World War: 1914*, pp.5-8, for unofficial information that the family received.

<sup>10</sup> *The Times*, 8 September 1914. See also *Bond of Sacrifice*, Vol.1, pp. 343 (Roy), 183 (Henstock).

<sup>11</sup> *Middlesex Chronicle*, 5 December 1914.

<sup>12</sup> *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 9 October 1914.

<sup>13</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross [ICRC], Prisoner of War Archives, <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/File/Details/332830/3/2/>

<sup>14</sup> *Manchester Chronicle*, 12 December 1914; *Broad Arrow*, 25 December 1914. A short biography of Henstock in de Ruvigny’s *Roll of Honour* states that he was KIA leading his platoon. *de Ruvigny’s Roll of Honour 1914-1918*, Vol.2, p.165.

<sup>15</sup> War Office Missing List No.1, 1 January 1915, printed copy in TNA PRO FO 383/499.

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 25 September 1914.

<sup>17</sup> *Birmingham Daily Post*, 15 October 1914.

<sup>18</sup> ICRC POW Archives, <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/File/Details/1547/3/2/>

<sup>19</sup> *de Ruvigny’s Roll of Honour*, Vol.2, p.123.

<sup>20</sup> *Reading Mercury*, 10 April 1915; UK, Army Registers of Soldiers’ Effects 1901-1929, Record Number 9751, [https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/60506/42511\\_6117462\\_0263-00070/58136?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return](https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/60506/42511_6117462_0263-00070/58136?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return)

<sup>21</sup> British Army WW1, Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920, [https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/1262/30850\\_A000556-00056/5344898?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return](https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/1262/30850_A000556-00056/5344898?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return)

Wilfred Holt had twice been reported missing, in September and November.<sup>22</sup> No further news was received of his fate and he was presumed dead in February 1915, when Accts. 4 began to finalise his financial affairs.<sup>23</sup> Some new information appears, however, to have come to light by July 1915, for a short statement in the illustrated newspaper *The Sphere* claimed that he had recently been reported as having been killed at Mons.<sup>24</sup> Confirmation of Holt's death came soon afterwards from the International Red Cross, following a report received in Geneva from Charleroi Hospital administration that two graves had been discovered between Nimy and Mons. They contained the remains of Holt and of 9422 Sapper F Johnson of 56 Field Company, RE.<sup>25</sup> Johnson, like Holt, was to be re-buried in St Symphorien Cemetery.<sup>26</sup> Unlike Forster, therefore, Holt did not remain in the missing category until the end of the war.

The final two officers, Forbes and Smith, were not on the War Office January 1915 List for the simple reason that they were no longer thought to be missing. Both had initially been reported missing in September, but further reports had changed their status. On 1 November 1914 the U.S Consul informed the British authorities that Forbes was a POW in Recklinghausen Hospital near Münster.<sup>27</sup> Support for this report came from information received by his family from POWs.<sup>28</sup> In July 1915 Forbes' sister Lady Eva informed Captain Harold Stanton, Controller of MS 3 Cas., that 7668 Private A M Byrne, who had lost a leg at Mons, had described how a German hospital orderly had mentioned her brother's name when asking how many from the Royal Irish Regiment were in the ward. Another soldier, a POW, had informed her that her brother had been wounded in the face by a shell splinter. He was last seen being treated by a German doctor for a severe wound.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, War Office inquiries to Berlin on behalf of Lady Eva after the American Consul's report had been received elicited the reply that Forbes was not on any captive list.<sup>30</sup>

Forbes was a cousin of Evelyn, Princess Blücher, née Stapleton-Bretherton. In 1914 she and her husband were living in London, but in August, with the staff of the German Embassy, they left for Berlin, where Evelyn took rooms in the exclusive Excelsior Hotel. Together with a number of other English aristocratic ladies exiled in similar circumstances, she joined the Red Cross and began taking an interest in tracing British soldiers reported missing or prisoners of war. One of the first names on her list was Forbes'. Evelyn recorded in her diary on 7 September:

This morning quite early I received a telegram from one of my sisters, asking for news of a young cousin of ours, who is missing from the English Expeditionary Force. I had been inquiring every day to see if any relations' names were on the lists of the wounded, but now I wired every hospital on the Rhine, entered his name at

<sup>22</sup> *The Times*, 9 September, 20 November 1914.

<sup>23</sup> Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, Record Number 8647. No Personal Record survives for Holt.

<sup>24</sup> *The Sphere*, 17 July 1915.

<sup>25</sup> ICRC POW Archives, report dated 21 August 1915,

<https://grandequerre.icrc.org/en/File/Search/#/3/2/224/0/British%20and%20Commonwealth/Military/holt>. The report incorrectly says Nimes, not Nivy.

<sup>26</sup> Johnson's plot is I.A.28.

<sup>27</sup> Personal Record, The Hon. Fergus George Arthur Forbes, TNA PRO WO 339/5908.

<sup>28</sup> Forbes was the youngest son—a twin—of a prominent Irish family. His late father was the 7<sup>th</sup> Earl of Granard.

<sup>29</sup> Lady Eva Forbes to Capt Staunton (sic), 23 July [1915], PR Forbes. Letters from officer POWs also gave the impression that Forbes was in German hands.

<sup>30</sup> WO Inquiry Report No.243, *ibid.* This was probably received in early 1915.

every centre, and went to the War Office personally. Everyone is kind and sympathetic in helping us to trace him, but we have heard nothing as yet.<sup>31</sup>

Evelyn was the source of the US Consul's statement that Forbes was in the German hospital at Recklinghausen, for Lady Eva informed the War Office in November that Princess Blücher had spoken to a Royal Irish Regiment prisoner who claimed to have spoken to Forbes at the hospital gates as they marched past.<sup>32</sup>

As was very common among relatives of the missing, the Forbes family preferred to accept the circumstantial evidence pointing to the survival of their son and brother rather than giving credence to official information that suggested otherwise. Forbes continued to be regarded as a prisoner of war; he was paid monthly as a POW and his name remained on the Army List. More than two years later, however, in December 1917, the German authorities sent the International Red Cross a death list on which Forbes was mentioned: he had died on 23 August 1914 and was buried in St Symphorien cemetery. The grave plot number was attached.<sup>33</sup> The family was informed on 18 December.

Owing to Forbes' mother, the Dowager Duchess of Granard, being frail (she died in 1920), the family refused a War Office offer officially to publish his death. MS 3 Cas., of course, changed his status to 'Died (in German hands)' in their records, but Accts. 4 did not proceed to finalise his accounts. Inadvertently, however, MS 3 Cas. failed to inform the Army Agents Cox and Co.—who were the bankers for most officers—of Forbes' change of casualty status, with the result that his pay was continued until 30 November 1918. When this was discovered there was a testy exchange of views between the bankers and the War Office. In 1919 Forbes' executors were asked to repay more than £700.<sup>34</sup>

Failures in interdepartmental communications, while not common, did occasionally occur and appear to have affected a number of families whose relatives had been declared missing in 1914. Ironically, the Stapleton-Brethertons, Princess Blücher's family, was also asked to repay £700 in 1919. Lt Wilfred Stapleton-Bretherton, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers, had been reported wounded and missing on 8 November 1914 near Ypres, but some incorrect information (some supplied by the Princess) and blunders in MS 3 Cas., including confusing him with Major B C Stapylton of the Cheshire Regiment (a POW) and not informing Cox and Co. when he was presumed dead in September 1917, ensured that his pay continued until the war's end. The money was repaid to the Treasury in 1923 as 'a debt of honour'.<sup>35</sup>

Lt Everard Smith, the final member of the group of thirteen to be buried by the Germans in St. Symphorien Cemetery, was another officer whose family was asked to repay the Treasury, in their case £400. Initially reported wounded and then missing by 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon, Smith's death had been unofficially confirmed by a fellow officer by the end of September. In January 1915 the US Consul reported that Smith was in a German hospital. That the family

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<sup>31</sup> Evelyn, Princess Blücher, *An English Wife in Berlin: A Private Memoir of Events, Politics, and Daily Life in Germany throughout the War and the Social Revolution of 1918* (New York 1920), p.26.

<sup>32</sup> Lady Eva Forbes to WO, received 12 November 1914, PR, Forbes.

<sup>33</sup> ICRC POW Archives, *Totenliste* received 5 December 1917, <https://grandeguerre.icrc.org/en/List/17006/698/16946/>

<sup>34</sup> Memos dated 27, 31 January, 3 February, 15 March 1919, PR, Forbes.

<sup>35</sup> Personal Record, Lt Wilfred Stanislaus Stapleton-Bretherton, TNA PRO WO 339/6954. An account of his last movements can be found in War Diary, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers, 8 November 1914, TNA PRO WO 95/1431. Stapleton-Bretherton's body was not found and he is commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial to the Missing.

regarded Smith as missing, not dead, can be seen in Figure 1, a postcard sent to Berlin for distribution in the POW camps. This may have been an effective ploy, for in July 1916 the family received a letter from a POW, 7560 Private H Turner, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers, who was an eye-witness to Smith being hit by a bursting shell. 'He appeared dead.' A month later MS 2 Cas. officially accepted Smith's death (as presumed). Only at this point did it become clear that Cox & Co. had been paying Smith as a POW.<sup>36</sup>

An examination of these thirteen officers killed at the very beginning of the fighting in August 1914 thus shows that it was unusual for a casualty status to become clearly fixed at an early stage. For most, the situation remained fluid and could last for years. Changes of status could occur as many as four times as new information, usually unverifiable and often contradictory, became available. Final confirmation of death only came once the graves in the German cemetery at St Symphorien were examined after the war in 1919. Some of the uncertainty resulted from mistakes being made in London, but it is also clear that the War Office was wise not to have total confidence in reports that came through neutral sources overseas or, for that matter, from POWs. For the families, of course, the lack of certainty was a cause of great mental anguish. These case studies also show that, for the war generation, the category "missing" was not confined to those whose names now adorn the Memorials to the Missing.

#### **List 1: Officers Killed on 23 August 1914 now Buried in St Symphorien Military Cemetery**

Major William Henry Abell, 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment. Grave II.A.1  
 Lt Maurice James Dease, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. Grave V.B.2  
 Lt the Hon. Fergus George Arthur Forbes, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment. Grave II.A.2  
 Capt. Frederick Albert Forster, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. Grave V.B.4  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Charles Barry Gibbons, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. Grave II.A.6  
 Lt Kenneth Parnell Henstock, 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment. Grave V.B.5  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Herbert Wilfred Holt, 56 Field Company, Royal Engineers. Grave V.A.4  
 Lt Joseph Frederick Mead, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. Grave V.B.3  
 Capt. Walton Mellor, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Irish Regiment. Grave II.A.3  
 Lt Leslie Richmond, 1<sup>st</sup> Gordon Highlanders. Grave I.B.34  
 Capt. Kenneth James Roy, 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment. Grave V.A.1  
 Lt Everard Cecil Smith, 4<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers. Grave II.A.5  
 Lt John Rothes Marlow Wilkinson, 4<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Regiment. II.A.4

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<sup>36</sup> Personal Record, Captain Everard Cecil Smith, TNA PRO WO 339/6296.



**Figure 1: Postcard sent to Berlin Seeking Information on Capt. E C Smith**



Source: TNA PRO WO 339/6296

Claude Streatfeild was Smith's brother-in-law, married to his sister Rosamond