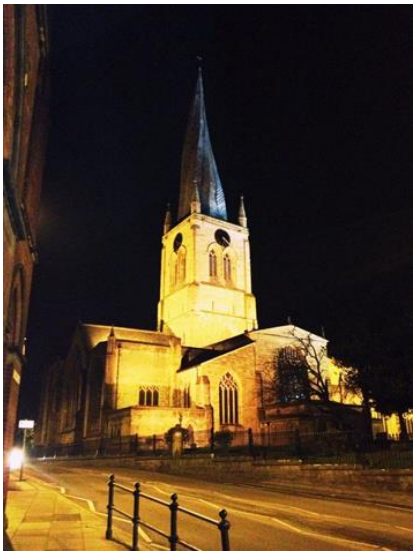
The Spire Sentinel



The Newsletter & Magazine of The Chesterfield Branch of The Western Front Association

ISSUE 79 – September 2022

Our aims are 'Remembrance and Sharing the History of the Great War'.

Western Front Association Chesterfield Branch – Meetings 2022

Meetings start at 7.30pm and take place at the Labour Club, Unity House, Saltergate, Chesterfield S40 1NF

January	4th	.***Branch AGM and Members Evening*** - 3 short presentations by Jon-Paul Harding, Andy Rawson and Grant Cullen
February	1st	***`Steaming to The Front`- Britain`s Railways in The Great War*** by Grant Cullen
March	1st	***`They Think It`s all Over`….*** By Andy Rawson . Plenty has been said about the breaking of the Hindenburg Line. This presentation looks at the pursuit of the Germans which occurred during the final weeks of the war.
April	5th	***Soldiers and Their Horses - Horses and Their Soldiers*** by Dr Jane Flynn - a sympathetic consideration of the soldier - horse relationship 1914-18
May	3rd	***`Finding Deborah`*** by Mike Tipping. How the team that discovered tank Deborah D-51 went on to find me, and my journey to Deborah
June	7th	***The Cost of the War'*** By Roy Larkin. Hansard tells us that the Great War of 1914-18 increased the National Debt to £7,435,000,000 or £377,144,063,927 at today's value which took 100 years to pay off.
July	5th	***The Italian Front 1915-1918*** by John Chester. Covers the fighting in Italy from beginning to end. Includes the contribution of the British and their part in ending the war.
August	2nd	Peter Hart returns to Chesterfield - last time was just before the first lockdown in March 2020. The title of Peter`s talk is **Rupert Brooke and the `Glitterati` at Gallipoli`**
September	6th	***The Inventions Department*** by Richard Godber. A little known part of the Ministry of Munitions. Based upon Richard`s dissertation for his Wolverhampton MA, previously a very under researched area about which little was known.
October	4th	**`The Fighting Fifth`…..**and the attack at Bellewarde Ridge 16th June 1915 by John Beech. John has a strong personal connection with the Northumberland Fusiliers in this action
November	1st	***`Shell Shock and the History of Psychiatry`*** by Jill Brunt. Based upon sessions on this subject presented to students at Northern College, Barnsley
December	1st	***`British League of Help`*** by Dudley Giles. Nearly 90 towns, cities, and organisations in the UK, Australia, Canada and Mauritius signed up in the period 1920-1922 to 'adopt' a village, town or city in the Devastated Zone of France. Some of these adoptions lasted only a few years, some (like Sheffield's adoption of Bapaume, Serre and Puisieux) survived until after WW2

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September meeting – Richard Godber

Richard. Is 51, with 3 children and very understanding wife. Born and bred in Chesterfield. Started work in joinery and progressed to be a Project Manager and finished working in Dubai for 3 years. Came back to UK in 2009 just as financial crash happened. Started working as a taxi driver which gave him the space to undertake his BA and MA.

Did his MA at Wolverhampton with Gary Sheffield and Spencer Jones, where he got a meritorious pass with a distinction on his dissertation

The presentation will be on the establishment and work of the Inventions Dept from 1915-1919. This is a very under researched area. It was part of the Ministry of Munitions and was originally intended to be a recipient of 'war winning' Inventions from the public, but it rapidly pivoted to become the driving force for war innovation. The presentation will go on to show the history of its existence, its key players and notable Inventions, together with some of the more outlandish, left field suggestions that were received.

Any opinions expressed in this Newsletter /Magazine are not necessarily those of the Western Front Association, Chesterfield Branch, in particular, or the Western Front Association in general

Secretary`s Scribbles

Dear Members and Friends,

Welcome to the September 2022 edition of our Branch Newsletter.
On Tuesday, for our September meeting we welcome local man – and occasional attendee to Branch meetings when his work permits, Richard Godber. Full details are on page 3 of the newsletter.

The outings to the Redmires Camp area west of Sheffield where the Sheffield Pals Battalion did their training have taken place and we acknowledge our thanks to Andy Rawson for his detailed planning of this and his informative guiding on the evenings. Ten branch members took part, six on the first night, and four on the second. A brief photo feature is included in this newsletter.

The more sharp eyed of you will have noticed a change in the calendar of meetings for the rest of the year. Dudley Giles who was due to present in October cannot now do that date and will now fill the December slot. His place is being taken by John Beech, Chair of East Midlands (Ruddington Branch) who will talk about the Northumberland Fusiliers attack at Bellewarde Ridge 16th June 1915. John has a strong personal connection to this action which I am sure will add a bit of emotion to his presentation. John has been a great supporter of our Branch over the years and although we don`t see so much of him now due to his duties as Branch Chair at Ruddington, I am sure our members will accord him a warm welcome. Personally I am grateful to John for fill this gap which unexpectedly opened in our calendar.

Your committee looked into the possibility of running our own transport – minibus? – to the WFA Commemoration Parade at the Cenotaph in London on November 11th. Member Rob Nash, who is now the WFA Parade Marshall at this event was asked for his considered opinion and he concluded that given ongoing security issues, parking etc., in this Whitehall area would pose insurmountable problems and it is now suggested that we could look at a group train booking although that too is fraught with uncertainty given the spate of strikes across our railway system.

We will continue to look into this as it would great if there could be a solid representation from Chesterfield Branch at this event, the most important one in the Western Front Association Calendar. If more details or information comes to hand, members will be advised by e mail.

Again, I would ask for a good attendance on Tuesday evening to hear Richard`s talk – it`s his debut as a speaker – not the last by any means as he already has an invite to speak at another Branch.

Best wishes, Grant Cullen Branch Secretary 07824628638

BRANDED GOODS AVAILABILITY

New items are always being considered, so please check the Branded goods part of the shop for all items available.
Prices are inclusive of postage within UK (Branded Items Nos 1-11)
www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/wfa-branded-items/?p=2
or call Head Office (Sarah Gunn or Maya Shapland) on 020 7118 1914

And the (Branded Clothing, Nos 12- 18) note new prices (under) effective from 1st July.
Order direct from supplier (West Coast Workwear) **www.westernfrontassociation.com/shop/branded-clothing/**
or ring (0800 169 2228 or 01704 873301)

1	Fridge Magnet	(£5)	59mm dia, front metal plate, high strength neodymium magnetic backplate, and plastic mylar front cover
2	Anniv' Coaster	(£8.50)	4" in diameter hand crafted slate. Individually polished, screen printed by hand and backed by a baize
3	Mousemats	(£6)	196 x 235mm fabric surface and are of high quality. They have a rubberised base layer
4	Bookmarks	(£2)	(dims 55 x 175mm) rich UV High Gloss Coating provides protection against stains and damage
5	Baseball Caps	(£8)	Lightweight 5 Panel cotton cap, adjustable with velcro rip-strip, one size fits all
6	Ties	(£11)	Length 142cm, width 9cm (at widest part), 100% Polyester
7	Lapel Badges	(£2.50)	25mm Dia. Die struck + imitation hard enamel, Silver Nickel Plating, Butterfly clutch pin
8	Mug	(£10)	11oz ceramic mug (95mm high x 85mm diameter) features the bold official WFA logo design (two sides)
9	Messenger Bag	(£27)	37 x 29 x 11cm, 100% Cotton. Full cotton lining. Zippered organiser section, Capacity:13 litres
10	Despatch Bag	(£30)	40 x 30 x 12 cm, (10) Washed Canvas, dual rear pouch pockets. Multiple zippered pockets. Capacity: 14 litres
11	Shoulder Bag	(£25)	40 x 28 x 18 cm, (10) (11) Polyester. Internal valuables pocket. Zippered front pocket. Capacity: 14 litres
12	Oxford Shirt	(£27)	Kustom Kit Short Sleeve Corporate Oxford Shirt. Easy iron button down collar, 85% cotton, 15% polyester
13	Breathable Jacket	(£71)	Russell Hydro Plus 2000 Jacket. Nylon taslon with PU Coating
14	Rugby Shirt	(£25)	Front Row Classic Rugby Shirt, 100% Cotton
15	Fleece	(£24)	Regatta Thor 111 Fleece Jacket, 100% polyester anti pill
16	T-shirt	(£17)	Russell Classic Cotton T-Shirt. 100% ringspun cotton
17	Sweat Shirt	(£22.50)	Gents Russell Jerzees Raglan / Ladies Fruit Of The Loom Raglan
18	Polo Shirt	(£20.50)	Russell Cotton Pique Polo Shirt. 100% cotton

Redmires Camp and the Sheffield City Battalion

Thanks to Andy Rawson there was two evening visits to this area in August by members of our Branch. As always with Andy, this was well researched and of great interest to all participants. Great weather on the first evening walk and a bit drizzly on the second – but nobody`s sprits were dampened. Here`s a selection of pictures of our intrepid explorers from the first evening.

Pictures by Jon-Paul Harding

August Meeting

Branch Chair, Tony Bolton welcomed all the meeting, expressing delight at the great attendance, our largest since March 2020 – the last time our guest speaker for the evening – Peter Hart – had attended.

After the customary introductions, Tony welcomed Peter who immediately launched into his presentation – `***Rupert Brooke and the Glitterati at Gallipoli*** `with real gusto!

Peter said it was meant to be an entertaining talk about a group of young officers who attracted a lot of attention in the Royal Naval Division particularly from the Hood Battalion. They are a funny bunch, to put it mildly and Peter said he started off sneering at them – poets and all that – but ended up a big fan of them, respecting them for what they did, and they did a lot.

The Royal Naval Division started as a typical piece of military brilliance by Winston Churchill as at the outbreak of war the extra naval reservists - about 20000 of them - that they had and had no places for them on ships – could form a `makeshift` division. It is important to remember that in 1914 there was only 6 regular divisions in the British Army and this `division` consisting of unallocated seamen and reservists were put into training camps around Deal. They also had a depot at the exhibition grounds at Crystal Palace. Most of the division had little or no military experience indeed most were civilians who had volunteered to join the navy, many at land based HMS Calliope at Newcastle upon Tyne giving a large preponderance of recruits from the North East. There was also many from South Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The idea was that they would create two Royal Naval Brigades and they would also have a Royal Marine Brigade.

Peter made the point that, no matter what you called it, it was not a `division` in respect of any military terminology, particularly it had no artillery. It was a collection of battalions.

They had hardly completed anything more than foot drill when Churchill came up with the idea of sending the RND to Antwerp under the command of Major-General Arthur Paris to defend that city. The Germans were making a fast advance towards the city and the idea was that the RND with little or no military training would stop them in their tracks. It was true that many in the advancing German forces were short on military training but it was more than the RND. The two brigades sent to Antwerp were, it was true to say, not lacking in self-confidence.

A lot of people, when they talk of Rupert Brooke say that he never saw any action as he died before he got to Gallipoli, not true, he was in the Anson Battalion at Antwerp.

Brooke is an interesting character, he is not the po-faced individual that so many imagine him to be. He was born in August 1887 and educated at Rugby School and then King`s College, Cambridge.

He had an `adventurous ` love life, he was bisexual and had many, many affairs.

He was admired for his boyish good looks and was often referred to as the best looking man in Britain.

Peter then regaled the meeting by telling a story of taking a party of intellectuals to Skyros, where Brooke is buried and over breakfast one was heard to say that Skyros was where Rupert lost his *anal virginity!*

Whatever your opinion of someone with an `adventurous` love life Brooke was amusing, he

was brave and he was committee to his country by joining up and this was the theme Peter wanted to develop.

He had become a well-known poet of the `Georgian` school and gained widespread popularity for his war sonnets, including The Soldier` which was published in The Times Literary Supplement in March 1915, but more so after his death indeed his first collection of poems was published posthumously.

Many people were optimistic about the war being over quickly – Brooke wasn`t …he says *`I felt very elderly and sombre about how life flashed between darkness and how x percent of those who cheered would be blown into a new world within a few months`.*

Anyway the battalion go to the ring of forts around Antwerp and are given shallow trenches. It is immediately apparent that as far as a military force is concerned they are absolutely useless and this quote sums it up…..`*it was the first time most of us had fired a rifle but we got some practise that night when someone noticed a white thing about half way between us and the wood and the order was given to open fire at it – 1000 men firing about 200 shots apiece…about dawn the firing died away and we saw our object…..an old white cow still calmly grazing in the field….*`

This was the level of basic `rubbish` that they were at!

Rupert Brooke said…`*…there is excitement in the trenches with people losing their heads….always the rotten ones…I was incredibly brave, I don`t know how I would be like if shrapnel was bursting on me knocking the men around me to pieces, but risks and nerves and fatigue but through all this I was all right….*`

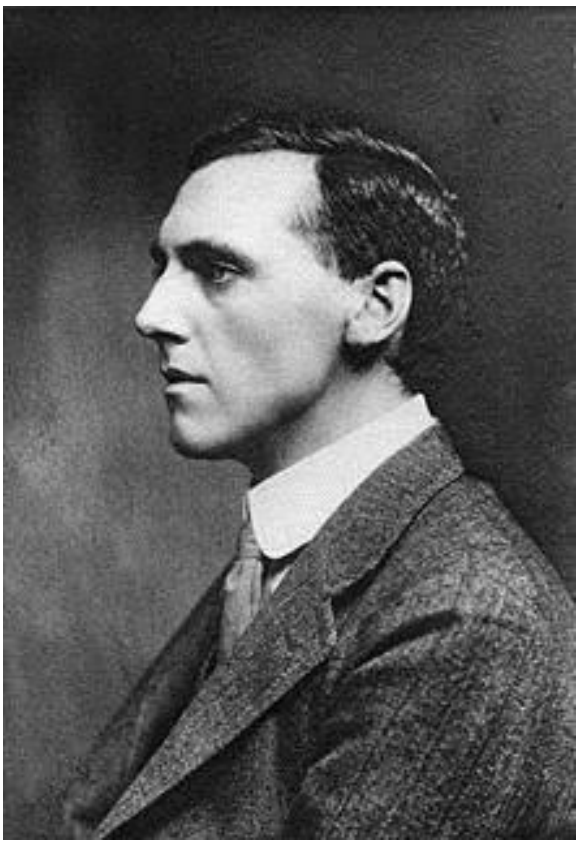
The RND had not materially changed the situation around Antwerp at all because they were an irrelevant military force and they began retreating on the 8th of October and it was a masterpiece of incompetence being unable to retreat while retaining command and control. The 2nd Royal Naval Brigade managed to get on a train and be taken to safety, the 1st was left behind due to a mixture of poor staff work and the inability to read a map. They end up interned for the duration of the war in Holland. In Peter`s opinion this was classic Churchill…come on the RND would never be flung into action again in such a stupid manner?

10th October the remains of the Division are taken back to Britain where the ranks are replaced with fresh drafts and they resume their training and during the winter are moved to Blandford Camp. By this time the RND is becoming quite interesting, particularly the Hood Battalion. Nothing special at first but then Rupert Brooke transfers to the Hood Battalion. A truly eclectic bunch of officers builds up, basically acolytes of Rupert Brooke, people who want to be with him, a truly eccentric bunch. It becomes an accident of history that all these officers, upper class twits in many, many ways – who are they in charge of? Mainly Durham miners! Neither the officers, nor the men can understand what the others are saying….!

Peter went on to look at who these men are those who would become known as the *Gallipoli Glitterati*

The first of course is Rupert Brooke himself who has previously been described

The next one is really interesting – Frederick Kelly…



Kelly is Australian, a brilliant musician, plays the piano, composes classical pieces but he is also an accomplished oarsman and had won a medal at the London Olympic Games of 1908.

He`s a hard taskmaster…the late Jon Cooksey wrote a brilliant book on Frederick Septimus Kelly..An extremely determined an committed soldier

The next one is the son of Prime Minister Asquith…..Arthur Asquith

Another committed soldier he eventually becomes a Brigadier

Patrick Shaw-Stewart – good looking but not as good looking as Rupert Brooke!

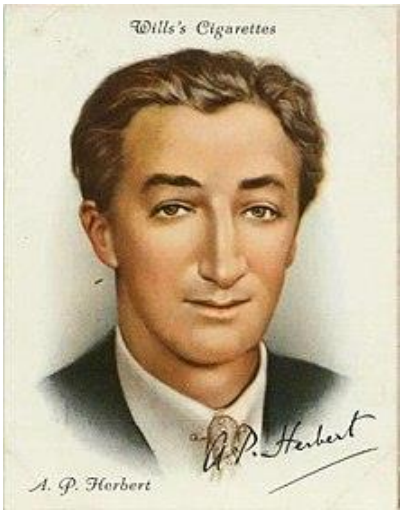
A poet – some say he was the cleverest of the whole group –and post war he ended up working for the bankers, Barings

Denis Browne is another musician could play the piano, the organ and was a highly rated composer.

He was a music critic for several national newspapers

Bernard Freyberg, another amazing character, a New Zealander – a man with a future – he was a Lt-General in WW2

It is here at the Gulf of Saros on 25th April that he becomes a hero



AP Herbert – he was not in the Hood Battalion, always having served with the Hawke Battalion. Memorable by many for the court case series he wrote for the BBC in the 1950s and 1960s

The last of the group was Lt.Col Arnold Quilter, the Colonel of the Hood Battalion. He had under him this strong bunch of likeminded individuals

In the Hood Battalion they are commanding a group of working class lads many from the Durham area and Herbert was quoted as saying…..

" many of the lads were miners and they could understand little of what I said and I little of them…indeed there was two good fellows from a Durham valley – whom nobody understood"

Peter reminded folks that he was originally from Stanhope in Weardale and he couldn`t at times understand the accents from neighbouring valleys.

The RND annoy the army as they cling to all those `stupid` naval terms. For example instead of saying `left or right`…the RND say `port and starboard`…to the army they should FRO…..Peter left his audience to work out for themselves what this means!

The battalion moves to Blandford in January 1915 – still lacking experience, still no artillery and yet Churchill decides that this bunch of raw recruits is ready to be sent into the field, in particular we are going to send them to The Dardanelles…where there was an assumption that the Turks would not be able to fight. The RND were pleased, indeed SubLt Browne said

`…we`re not off yet – nearly – but not until tomorrow night and our destination is hardly a secret anymore – it's the Dardanelles – and ultimately Constantinople…what luck to be in the RND"

Everyone knew where they were going as the secrecy was crap but despite this they insisted on a `fake secrecy`

Ordinary Seaman John Murray said …

" We had lots of friends in Blandford – but instead of going to Blandford Station…they marched us across the downs…we missed all our friends all the people who had gathered at Blandford Station to see the lads off…it was a secret…but we all knew where we were going…"

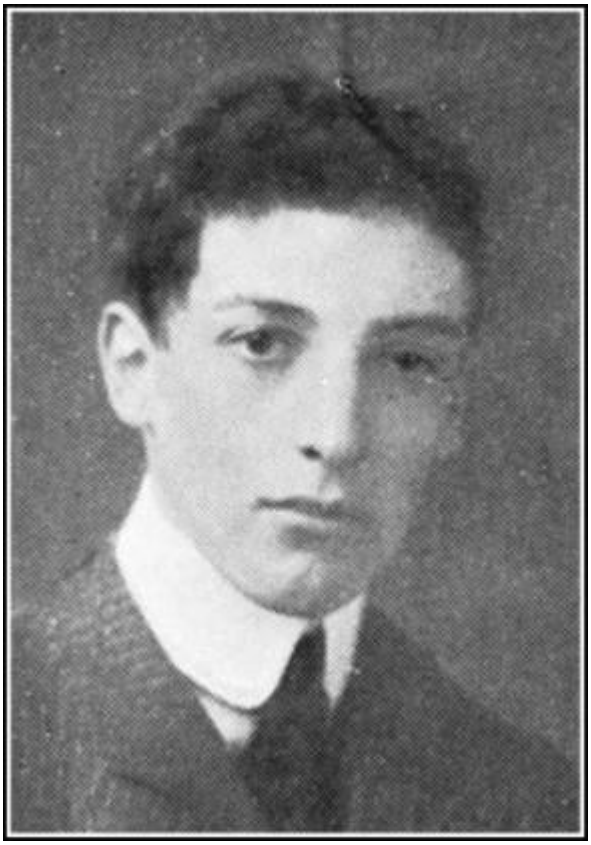
On board ship at Avonmouth there was speculation as to what their role would be…particularly amongst the public schoolboys whose heads were full of Troy and The Iliad…Hector, Achilles….

Rupert Brooke said….

." I am filled with confidence and glorious hopes…I have been looking at the maps, do you think we will make a sortie on the plains of Troy? …shall we be a a turning point in history…Oh God I have never been quite so happy in my life…I suddenly realised that the ambition in my life has been, since I was three years old to go on a military expedition against Constantinople…."

The troopships arrived at Mudros Harbour on the island of Lemnos, 60 miles from Gallipoli where they await deployment.

The naval failure of March 18th meant that serious land operations would now have to be undertaken and on 22nd March the RND is sent to Egypt – Alexandria – to sort itself out and here another player joins the band – Charles Lister..



By all accounts he is a genius…good at everything.. everything that is that is not physical.

He joined the Hood Battalion from the Yeomanry Cavalry…he wanted to join Brooke and the `Glitteratti`…a term Peter had coined for this group…but they have real talents. Lister was a son of Lord Ribblesdale, a leading Liberal politician and whilst at Eton became a fervent socialist. He took up a career with the Foreign Office and was actually in Constantinople when the war broke out in august 1914.

He is put to training the Durham lads…and this is what Patrick Shaw-Stewart said…..*"I was on the port side so I missed the spectacle of Charles drilling stokers on Yeomanry lines…and entrancing one, I am told, as he marched the body of men on to the parade ground before the eyes of the Brigadier and in resonant parade tone, tells them to halt in language more suited to the evolution of quadrupeds…."*

Basically he was giving them `horsey` commands.

He was an eccentric figure and here is what Lt.Browne says of Lister…

.." Charles Lister is a great game even to those who do not understand him….he has the kindest heart imaginable and laughable a great deal over Divisional lunches when some said they disliked night attacks…because they hated the dark and invariably slept with a night-light…"

Whilst in Egypt Rupert Brooke developed quite severe health problems – a nasty combination of sun-stroke and diahorrhea, but he was determined to stay with the men and not be hospitalised…."….*I am as weak as a pacifist"*, he said.

In April the battalion start going back to the Greek Islands and on 17th arrive off Skyros before going ashore and commencing training. Charles Lister said of him and his men…." *I hope I shall be brave and I am sure they will be….*

It is on Skyros that Rupert Brooke is struck down with severe blood poisoning caused by an insect bite. Of course in those these there was no penicillin or antibiotics and he dies on Friday 23rd April. The Battalion have orders to sail at 5am next morning so arrangements were made to bury him straight away.

Brooke`s grave

Peter told of interviewing one of them, Thomas Baker who had been in the firing party at the burial under the command of Patrick Shaw-Stewart who accorded the body with military honours. It was a most moving service late at night in the olive grove with the scent of wild sage in classical harmony with the poet being buried.

Many of the officers are *extremely* upset at Brooke`s passing and Denis Browne who is wounded later on, says later on when passing Skyros….

" we passed Rupert`s island which stood out in the west with the crimson glow of the setting sun which brought out every colour as if to do him honour and it seemed that the island must be forever shining with his glory…."

When it comes to the landings on Gallipoli the RND are kept out of the way – the army has some sense – but they are involved in conducting a diversionary operation in the Gulf of Saros on April 25th. It is here that Bernard Freyberg is the great hero.

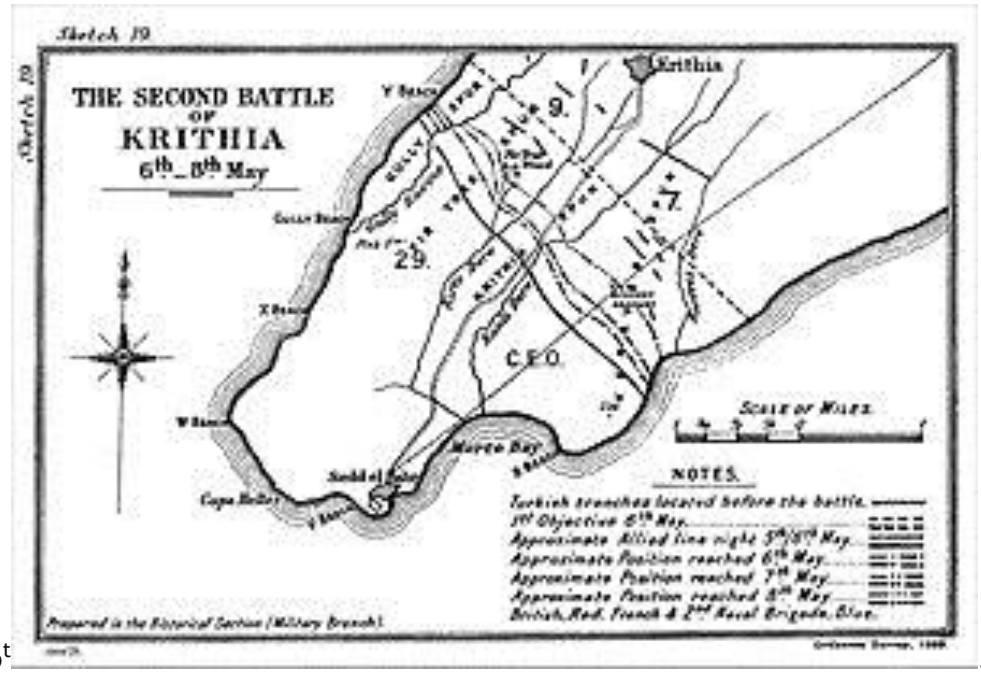
Charles Lister wrote…."*the scheme was that Freyberg should be towed out in a ship`s boat escorted by a destroyer until two miles from the shore, dropped off and swim to the beach and set off some life-boat flares. He started out at 9 o clock and I shall never forget get his toilette which consisted of the smearing of his entire person with a black oil like substance to protect him against the cold of the sea"*

Peter said Freyberg was an absolute hero – originally they were going to land a platoon but he swims on his own, lights some flares – which the Turks ignore – then swims back and somehow finds a rowing boat which picks him up…a lucky man, finding that boat in the pitch dark.

After the landings the RND is used as reserve troops, you can see that Sir Ian Hamilton is worried about them, although the marines do good work at Anzac holding the line but at Helles the 2nd Royal Naval Brigade are put ashore on the night of the 29th of April, again initially in reserve to the French. On 2nd May the Hood Battalion alongside the French in a counterattack to a night attack by the Turks. They don`t know what they are doing they hadn`t been trained for this – advance to contact –

but they don't know where the enemy is. They are harassed by shrapnel and Turkish sniper fire and they begin to fall back and at this point Charles Lister is wounded for the first time who described being hit by a shrapnel ball in...`The off buttock…`. Bleeding profusely he was sent back to the beach on stretcher.

May 6th – Second Battle of Krithia



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This battle lasted for three days with the RND of the left of the French. They are in an `advance to contact`…but they never see the Turks…as Ordinary Seaman Murray said…..*"…we got to a farmhouse, ruined but serviceable…we were lying at the corner of a vineyard and a bush hedge with a little ditch on the side, there must have been at least 50 or 60 men there…we had to rush along this hedge then get through a gap – only four men made it through….we were climbing over the dead and wounded…the bullets were hitting the sand and you were spitting it out of your mouth…."*

Denis Browne said….."….*I was right there at the front and had extraordinary luck as I wasn`t touched except for a bullet which grazed the sole of my boot….we got an order to advance and we all rushed up a little hill towards a group of Turks but I and Patrick Shaw-Stewart and a handful of men made it to the top….."*

As Peter said we see these young officers becoming leaders of men. The battle raged for another two days with nothing gained, but Quilter is killed and now lies in Skew Bridge Cemetery. On the last day Denis Browne is wounded being targeted by a sniper while talking to another officer who was picked out by wearing a uniform of a lighter shade of khaki. The sniper missed the other officer and hit Browne instead which necessitated his evacuation, but he was soon back in action.

The next big battle involving the RND was the Third Battle of Krithia on the 4th of June. This time they do know where the Turks are, they are in three lines of trenches and are well dug in.

Murray says…..*"….in the firing line it was packed, you couldn`t sit down, couldn`t lie down, you just stood there…the fellow next to me was messing about with his ammunition, cleaning his rifle, looking in his magazine. Another fellow was just staring at the maggots in the dead bodies in the firing line….the sun was boiling hot…the maggots…the flies…the stench was horrible"*

Murray goes on…." *We go over the top at 12 following a Chinese (fake) attack…the officer shouting `one minute to go men`….`now men`…blowing his whistle….the moment we started to go men started to fall back into the trench or onto the parapet…there was dead all over….."*

They get to the Turkish trenches and the Turkish resistance seems to melt away followed by the RND in three lines doing fabulously well although they had lost about half their strength. The Turks counter-attack and eventually the RND find themselves back at their own front line as the right flank retired leaving them vulnerable to being surrounded.

So, they ended up right back where they started from, this was the last offensive that the RND took part in on Gallipoli.

Peter said he would give a flavour as to what these men were like. Charles Lister who has been wounded for a third time writes to his father Lord Ribblesdale….

" just think I have been wounded once more…..we were in a trench observing some Turkish trenches when suddenly they fired some shells…..I went along the trench to check on my men that`s when I got hit……in the pelvis with my bladder deranged…..been operated on but sketchy as to what has been done and am now on

a hospital ship…..I feel this will be a longish job and don't know where I will do my cure…..."

Lister died…the clue was in the comment about his bladder being `deranged`…..a `gut shot`….you rarely lived from these wounds in 1915. For Peter, Charles Lister summed up the spirit of these men.

Who buried Lister? This is a story in itself. He was buried on Lemnos by a chap called Ernest Raymond….the author of `Tell England 'Raymond said…."as Burial Officer I w went done to the little wooden jetty to receive them from the steam pinnace, each wrapped up in a grey army blanket with a scrap of paper pinned on with name, regiment and religion. Of course there was no firing party or last post, only a silence amongst the empty hills

East Mudros CWGC on Lemnos

By August there was only 129 officers and 5000 men left, most of them worn out – hollowed out by dysentery. The RND was finally evacuated in January 1916 and went on to serve on the Western Front. Patrick Shaw-Stewart became a very competent officer and was an LtCommander but was killed leading the Hood Battalion in December 1917.

Arthur Asquith rose to the rank of Brigadier General and won the DSO and two bars. Wounded twice, losing a leg the second time.

Frederick Kelly was always a good soldier – not a dilettante …everything he did in life he did properly. He was KIA November 13th 1916.

Bernard Freyberg won the VC on the same day, was wounded and became General in charge of the New Zealand Division in WW2 and later on became Governor General of New Zealand.

Peter wound up his talk with this poem by Patrick Shaw-Stewart

Achilles in the Trenches

I saw a man this morning
Who did not wish to die;
I ask, and cannot answer,
if otherwise wish I.

Fair broke the day this morning
Upon the Dardanelles:
The breeze blew soft, the morn's cheeks
Were cold as cold sea-shells.

But other shells are waiting
Across the Aegean Sea;
Shrapnel and high explosives,
Shells and hells for me.

Oh Hell of ships and cities,
Hell of men like me,
Fatal second Helen,
Why must I follow thee?

Achilles came to Troyland
And I to Chersonese;
He turned from wrath to battle,
And I from three days' peace.

Was it so hard, Achilles,
So very hard to die?
Thou knowest, and I know not;
So much the happier am I.

I will go back this morning
From Imbros o'er the sea.
Stand in the trench, Achilles,

The Attack of the Dead Men. Osowiec Fortress, Russian Empire (now Poland). August 6th, 1915.

The Attack of the Dead Men was a battle of World War I that took place at Osowiec Fortress (now northeast Poland), on August 6, 1915. The incident got its name from the bloodied, zombie-like appearance of the Russian combatants after they were bombarded with a mixture of poison gases, chlorine and bromine, by the Germans. By this time, the Allies were beginning to face a crisis on the Eastern Front. The Russians had begun a general retreat, completely abandoning Poland to the advancing Germans. German troops entered Warsaw on August 5th. After the Russian retreat, Tsar Nicholas II dismissed the Russian Army's commander-in-chief, Grand Duke Nicholas, and took personal command. It would prove disastrous for the Tsar, as he became more and more closely tied to Russian military defeat.
During the Battle of Osowiec Fortress in 1915, German Field Marshal Paul Von Hindenburg ordered the bombardment of the fortress with an artillery barrage of chlorine gas to eradicate the 900 Russian defenders, which consisted of 500 soldiers + 400 militia (60-100 in the counter attack). After the bombardment 7,000 – 8,000 German soldiers (14 Battalions) advanced upon the fortress expecting little to no resistance when 100 disfigured Russians, coughing up blood and pieces of their own lungs, surprised the Germans with a counter-charge. The zombie-like Russians opened fire and attacked the Germans with affixed bayonets causing mass panic and forced the Germans to flee back into their own traps inflicting more casualties. The remaining Russian defenders who survived the gas attacks seized the opportunity to raze the fortress and withdraw while the Germans hesitated. "The Attack of the Dead Men" spawned German legends about unkillable Russian soldiers rising from the dead to fight.
Most of the Russian soldiers had either mask or poorly made gas masks that would soon prove to be no help at all. When the Germans attacked with the fumes, the Russians had zero protection.
Because the gas mixed with the water in the air, and the water in the lungs of the Russian defenders, the Russian soldiers didn’t just choke from the gas; it turned the chlorine into hydrochloric acid which began to melt the lungs and throats of the soldiers, their skin began to peel – resulting in the entire fortress scrambling to halt their decomposition with wet rags.
Blood and skin soaked the earth, plants and birds lay dead in the field. Tree leaves turned brown, the grass became black, and men outside of the fort died shortly while the gas entered their respiratory system dissolving their lungs.
The 13th company under the command of lieutenant Kotlinsky counterattacked along the railway and forced the German 18th Regiment into flight. During the attack, lieutenant Kotlinsky was mortally wounded and handed over command of the compound to the 2nd Osovetska Sap Company B. M. Strzeminsky, who, despite severe gas poisoning, with the remnants of the company entrusted to him, carried the attack to the end, using bayonet tactics to take possession of the 1st and 2nd sections of the Sosnya position. Kotlinsky died later that evening.
The Russians did not hold the area for much longer. The Germans threatened to encircle the fortress with the capture of Kaunas and Novogeorgievsk. The Russians demolished much of the fortress and withdrew on August 18.

Title: 'They don't like it up 'em!': Bayonet Fetishisation in the British Army during the First Word War

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Abstract:
The bayonet was widely fetishised in the British Army in the First World War era, both 'from above' and 'from below'. A vibrant, rich and quickly transmitted culture grew around this, that had real effects on the battlefields of the war. Supreme confidence was placed in British masculinity in efficiently wounding and killing with this brutal weapon. Training frequently focused on it. Both this confidence and training focus were misplaced, as in fact the bayonet was not a particularly useful or effective weapon. The combination of this strong fetishisation of the weapon and its ineffectivity had a tendency to encourage atrocity and prisoner killing, as the main opponents on which it could be used successfully, which soldiers were keen to do, were those who were unarmed or wounded.

Keywords:
First World War, British infantry, training, bayonets, atrocity, prisoner killing

Author Biography:
This article is based on a talk given at GWACS Body at War Conference, June 2004. I am grateful for useful comments from attendees and other readers, particularly Joanna Bourke, Gary Sheffield, Adrian Gregory and Jessica Meyer. I completed a Ph.D. titled *The British Infanty and Atrocities on the Western Front, 1914-1918* in 2007 and hope to publish this shortly under the title: *Cold and Hard*.

Text:

It is not often that comedy catchphrase pearls have a grown from a piece of grit of historic military culture, let alone one based on wounds and wounding. However, Corporal Jones' stock epithet, 'They don't like it up 'em!' from the popular sitcom *Dad's Army*, seems to have done so. The character and his catchphrase had origins in the co-writer's Jimmy Perry's experiences of the Second World War and roots further back. Jones was based on an elderly, experienced Lance-Corporal that Perry served under aged 15 in the 19th Hertfordshire Battalion, Land Defence Volunteers (the Home Guard's precursor) and his catchphrase came from an instructor in the Royal Artillery that Perry was later called up to (Webber *et al* 2001: 7-8; Croft and Perry 2003: 15). But certainly the catchphrase would not have sounded out of place in the British trenches of the First World War and would not have been laughed at. Confidence in the British infantry's prowess with the bayonet was high and, indeed, compared with many contemporary soldiers' texts, Corporal Jones' love of 'cold steel' is positively anaemic. Such texts are highly revealing, displaying a self-supporting military culture, one that was uncompromising in its attitude to opponents.

British military training at the time of the First World War had a strong emphasis on the usage of the bayonet. This standard piece of infantry equipment was difficult to use in open combat other than against prone opponents. Almost by definition, these prone opponents could have been considered potential prisoners. Despite this and other practical inadequacies, the bayonet retained its elements as a standard-bearer, a shibboleth and, indeed, rather a fetish for the British army. A fetish – defined as 'something regarded with irrational reverence' – is an apt description for the esteem in which the bayonet was held in the British army despite its battlefield inadequacies. Other definitions of a fetish – 'an object believed to procure for its owner the services of a spirit lodged within it' and even 'an inanimate object to which a pathological sexual attachment is formed' – are not that far off the mark in some statements about bayonets made by troops. The latter can be discerned in a letter dated 25 April 1915 written by Lance Corporal W. Francis that described him and his comrades swarming up a hill and the lust to kill is on us, we see red. Into one trench, out of

it, and into another. Oh! The bloody gorgeousness of feeling your bayonet go into soft yielding flesh – they run, we after them, no thrust one and parry, in goes the bayonet the handiest way.
(Gammage 1974: 96-7)

The reported sergeant-major's training ground cliché along the lines of 'Fix bayonets! Don't look down! You'd soon find the hole if there was a fucking tart on it,' (Vansittart 1981: 33) also carries a similar sexual charge.

Unlike other weapons, the bayonet was a universal part of all infantrymen's equipment and concomitant with this status there had been a long-established emphasis on bayonets in the training of the infantry soldier of the British Army. The standard training manual frequently described its importance alongside the rifle. These assertions confidently began by stating that

The rifle and bayonet, being the most efficient offensive weapons of the soldier, are for assault, for repelling attack or for obtaining superiority of fire. Every NCO and man in the platoon must be proficient in their use.
(War Office 1917: 91)

Individual and team bayonet fighting were two of the five events making up the annual Divisional competition known as the Grand Assault at Arms, fiercely competed for by the regular soldiers over the years.

The bayonet, however, represented much more to the British army of the First World War era than a 'simple' weapon of assault. One of its major functions was (and continues to be) to inculcate the correct attitude in troops. In training, the bayonet's ability within the army's teaching and practise regime to demonstrate the correct, aggressive approach to the enemy seems to have been the key reason for its frequent and pivotal role in courses of instruction. It could also be argued that even by the First World War, troop motivation had become the primary purpose of the bayonet, as the stances and moves taught were applicable only to earlier situations where the infantry formed tightly gathered close ranks. Technically, the bayonets issued were not well designed and often were simply not strong enough to carry out the actions that soldiers had been trained to perform with them. A report by the British Small Arms School that investigated their efficiency in 1924 made this clear. Its expert authors testified that during the First World War the utility of the bayonet as a cutlass or dagger proved to be negligible, hence the demand for trench knives, clubs, etc. As a means of clearing brushwood, etc. it is one of the most futile instruments imaginable. Even for cutting up duckboards and ammunition boxes for firewood it was ineffective, and it generally suffered severely in the contest... As a killing shape it makes a very nasty wound, but is of a bad section for penetration and worse for withdrawal. Owing to its great length and the leverage exerted it frequently breaks or bends, even against straw-filled sacks and in spite of being kept properly sharpened. (Carter 1969: 9-10)[i]

Other criticism in the report makes it clear that British lives were lost due to bayonets' unwieldiness in a fight, their propensity to glint or reflect at night and their deleterious effect on shooting accuracy and ability, particularly snap and sharp shooting.

Moreover, the seventeen inches or so of bayonet affixed to a four-foot Lee-Enfield rifle, with an overall combined length of 5ft 3½ inches, was singularly unsuited to the narrow confines of most trenches. In such circumstances it was exceedingly awkward to handle and often downright dangerous, as the medical officer Captain J. C. Dunn described in his well-known amalgamated journal of the Royal Welch Fusilier's war. As well as the mud that debilitated rifles in October 1914 he reported that in an entry for 27 October 1914 that 'some of our bayonets too were broken owing to the various uses to which they were put. In those hastily dug trenches the fixed bayonet was an encumbrance' (Dunn 1938: 85). Moreover, the

technical deficiencies of the bayonet as a combat weapon forced soldiers to use it in a brutal manner, as mentioned by this anonymous commanding officer recounting the planning of an attack on a troublesome enemy position with some colleagues. Three of his companies advancing in two waves were to deliver a rapid assault, capture the enemy's machine-gun emplacements at the point of the bayonet, and drive any remaining Germans out of the wood. To those present it appeared to be a clear case of neck or nothing, and so it was to prove. (Officer 1918: 182)

The classic image of the First World War infantryman eviscerating enemies with a bayonet to the chest or stomach (see figure 1 for a typical example) is therefore somewhat fictional. These images, even before their romanticisation of a brutal form

Figure 1: Medallion art beloved by soldiers.
[Author's collection; date of manufacture unknown but circa late 1916 to 1919]

of combat is considered, should be considered as largely false as they do not depict the manner in which the bayonet was recommended to be used in the field. When attacking the chest with a bayonet it risked bouncing off the ribcage without inflicting the necessary debilitating injury, or breaking the bayonet's tip or shattering it completely on a rib. Sticking the enemy's belly risked getting the bayonet stuck fast there, even with the quarter-twist to remove that was practised in training, as the strong stomach muscles sealed and gripped tight around the faces of the weapon. John Lucy's platoon commander, interestingly depicting the 'blooding of bayonets' as almost a passive act, warned against this risk in his pep talk before the Battle of Mons on 22 August 1914. He told his platoon they were bound to be successful but do not forget that when blooding your bayonets, yes rather, blooding your bayonets, do not on any account bury them too deeply. Damn nuisance you know, endeavouring to withdraw an unnecessarily deep bayonet.
(Lucy 1938: 99)
Alarmingly soldiers could discover how wise this advice was in the field, although it did not necessarily reduce their verve and excitement at using the bayonet successfully. One Second Lieutenant reported in a letter home dated 11 June 1915 that his regiment did damned well, and our men fought magnificently, especially when they could get in with the bayonet: I myself had the extreme satisfaction of bayoneting three… only in the excitement of the moment I left it sticking in the third, and ran on with only a revolver: anyhow it must have hurt him, when he pulled it out, if he was still alive, and I hope it did.
(Savory 1915)

The neck, while presenting a much smaller and more difficult target to strike, posed no blade retrieval problems for the infantryman and very little risk of any weapon breakage. That it was a more instantly deadly and gushingly bloody method played a part in the popularity of this method. The advice to be found in training manuals to slash at the groin is interesting and similarly telling; it seemed to have been an allusion to the role of bayonet fighting in emasculating the enemy in the most basic castrating manner. It was couched in rather coy terms though – a 'Rio blow' to the 'lower part' for McLaglen and a 'lower stomach' blow or 'low left or right parry' for the Officer (McLaglen 1916: 11; Officer 1915). By 1931 official

advice was not so coy, with the groin and neck the only 'pointing' targets mentioned in standard drill (War Office 1931: 157).

Having faded in usage somewhat during the Boer War, British observations of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5 renewed interest in the bayonet. Interest in the force of the mass, spirited but attritional Japanese bayonet charges was reflected in the culture and language of British First World War soldiers, with the phrase 'And if Turkey makes a stand / She'll get Ghurka'd and Japann'd' cropping up in the chorus of the song *'When Belgium put the Kibosh on the Kaiser'* (Ellerton 1914: 50-2).

Did British interest in the Japanese method of massed bayonet charges result in atrocity when contact with the enemy was made during the First World War? Euphemistic hints in this direction were contained in contemporary bayonet training manuals, such as when Captain McLaglen details advice on 'delivering 'point' to the downed opponent' (McLaglen 1916: 12-3). 'Downed' indicates that the opponent was probably disarmed or wounded but certainly little threat and thus protected under proper application of military law. The British *Manual of Military Law* was clear-cut on this (War Office 1914: 248).

Denis Winter goes as far as to assert that 'no man in the Great War was ever killed by a bayonet unless he had his hands up first' (Winter 1978: 110). John Keegan opines, with particular reference to the first day of the Somme, that 'edged-weapon wounds would have almost disappeared, for though the marks of bayonets were found on a number of bodies, it was presumed that they had been inflicted after the victim was dead; the best statistic available is that edged-weapon were a fraction of one percent of all wounds inflicted in the First World War' (Keegan 1976: 264). Although this is a widely-quoted piece of a hugely influential work, Keegan's source,
or possibly sources, are obscure and both the rather vague statistic and the notion of all bayonet wounds seen being post-mortem injuries can be doubted. Reports of the full-scale desecration of bodies in this manner, while not unheard of, were rare, although the checking of the status of bodies using bayonets to prod might well be rather more commonly expected (an atrocity in itself since this amounts to the killing of wounded soldiers). Both Winter and Keegan do then overstep the mark; neither paints an accurate picture of bayonet usage during the war.

The disappearance of edged-weapon wounds was not the contemporary impression. Indeed, the major medical manual of the war thought that wounds caused by bayonets, knives and so on were on the increase. The manual's author stated that 'cold steel' was the cause of 5 per cent of soldiers' wounds; compared to well under 1 per cent in the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, but less than the 10 per cent rate sometimes reached during the 1912-3 Balkan wars (Delorme 1915: 1-2).

There were certainly occasions when bayonet wounds among the opposition could be very common, as reported by Dunn after his battalion conducted a large raid on The Warren, south of Festubert, on 5 July 1916. It is possibly significant that the raid was in retaliation for the deaths suffered by the regiment when a large German mine created Red Dragon crater on 22 June. Dunn, a medical officer, states clearly that 'Most of the wounds were from shell and bomb splinters, and occurred in A-Company, whereas bayonet-wounds were commonest among the German-prisoner wounded' (Dunn 1938: 221). There were certainly many further actions that were widely and authoritatively reported to have been carried by use of the bayonet. It is perfectly correct to suspect that the vast loss of life during the course of the war due to bullet, shell and disease did massively outnumber these small-scale, isolated bayonet wound-causing incidents. So Keegan's overall fraction of well under one per cent of deaths caused by bayonets might be correct. However, it is worth recognising that the pattern of warfare was by no means even. At different times, in different units, and in different places bayonet wounds could even have been common.

The foundations of the fetishisation of the bayonet were built upon its role in supporting troops' self-confidence. In part, this comfort was derived from the fact that the bayonet could indeed sometimes be effectively used. In some circumstances, its real power as a psychological weapon could melt enemy resistance with little real fighting required. Thus the bayonet's relatively rare but hugely psychologically impressive role in a rout was central in its fetishisation. Similarly, an effective, successful bayonet charge could sometimes be far more enticing a method of victory than other means of achieving it, such as outflanking or prolonging trench warfare. On other occasions there was little real offensive alternative to a bayonet charge (Griffith 1981: 70).

More comforting still was the bayonet's utility as a last-line of defence or offence, as in this incident proudly recorded in an official Brigade war diary on 26 December 1914: 'In the wake of a British attack on December 18-19, the Germans reported that most of their wounds were caused by bayonets, because their opponents rifles were jammed.' (20th Infantry Brigade 1914: 102) There was some truth in the conceit that whatever the situation, whether it was wet, muddy weather, non-appearance of ammunition and so on, you *could* rely on your trusty bayonet. Such beliefs could haunt British soldiers, as described here by an officer who was advancing with his troops to a vicious ongoing skirmish when he encountered a few retreating, ragged survivors of the battle described as shattered, nerveless men whose human nature had been tried past endurance – now came surging back in twos and threes. Especially memory recalls the drawn haggard face of an officer who was making rather pathetic attempts to reform these twos and threes. He chattered wildly, disconnectedly, yet with a method of sense like a drunken man; "The bay'net!" he kept repeating, "that's the thing for them. Show them the bay'net, get at them with the bay'net, and they'll run…" (Officer 1918: 178)

The major contribution that their presumed prowess with the bayonet made to supporting British soldiers' self-confidence were their thoughts of Germans greatly fearing bayonets. 'They don't like it up 'em!', indeed! This comforted the troops, reassuring them of their supremacy as soldiers and men. If the popular, patriotic adventure stories that had helped form a myth of empire that was 'the story England told itself as it went to sleep at night' (Green 1980: 3), then the stories of easy slaughter and terrified Germans in the press and between soldiers themselves formed a myth of the bayonet that helped 'soldiers as they went to sleep at night'. Immediately on the outbreak of war, *The Times* was keen to reassure its readers that German infantrymen were jittery and eminently defeatable via the bayonet. The third headline after 'First French Battle' on its main news page for Monday 10 August 1914 was 'Germans routed with the bayonet', a report on French troops occupying Altkirch 'after a sharp action in which they drove the defending German force before them with the bayonet' (*The Times*, 10 August 1914: 6). Similarly, four days later, the fourth main news headline after 'French Frontier Success' was 'Village taken by bayonet charges', reporting that Lagarde 'was carried by the French infantry in bayonet charges with great dash' (*The Times*, 14 August 1914: 6). When the war dispatches carried by the newspapers grew in depth and length, a focus on the Germans' inadequacies as men is noticeable. The report of the thoughts of a Lieutenant Deppe, in charge of a small group of Belgian troops who had landed in Folkestone having escaped from Namur, before his enthusiastic return to the front, is typical. He described the opponents as very well organized but German soldiers were great cowards. 'They are very much afraid of the bayonet, especially the French bayonet,' he said. 'When they see a bayonet they turn and run. The Turcos say, "When we hit one German with a bayonet five fall down." and that is perfectly true.'
(*The Times*, 28 August 1914: 7)

Undermining German masculinity seemed key to supporting Allied masculinity. It was when the British forces got into action that the press really went to town with their bayonet fetish. A report on 'Tournai and after' on the 29th August produced this remarkable paragraph entitled 'BAYONET WORK':

'I'm not boasting,' a sunburnt youth from the North Country confided to me, 'but I'm worth twenty of these chaps any day.' The German infantry fire here, as elsewhere, appears to have been very bad though the artillery work was deadly. At times the fighting was hand to hand and repeatedly our troops made excellent use of the bayonet. 'Man,' said a stalwart Highlander, almost with glee, 'ye should hae seen them rin miles frae the wee bit of steel.' (*The Times*, 29 August 1914: 8)

Again, the reports attempted whenever possible to undermine German masculinity and even in this article entitled 'In the fighting line', their humanity. Germans were described as more like common swine than men when facing bayonets. The author is apparently directly quoting a Private in the Black Watch, who reported that the German style of attacking in solid blocks is far less effective than our way of spreading out. You can't help shooting them. And I can tell you the Germans don't like the bayonet. If you go near them with a bayonet they squeal like pigs. When you are taking them prisoners they go down on their knees, evidently afraid of what is going to happen.
(*The Times*, 11 September 1914: 6)

Animalistic, de-humanising descriptions frequently extended to the bayonet itself, most often in the form of 'pig-sticker', but in this case as a harpoon. Sapper Edward Hughes watching the Fourth Australian Division attack on the Oosttaverne Line on 7 June 1916 thought it was a magnificent, though dreadful sight to witness... As usual the 'Ossies' made a clean sweep... To watch the Huns run out of their trenches towards us – and to see the way the 'Ossies' harpooned them one after another, it was a sight that I shall always recall.
(Passingham 1998: 131)

Concomitant with its prominent position in the popular military psychology and imagination, rituals developed around the bayonet, particularly prior to battle. Captain J. L. Jack described a typical ritualistic scene in his diary on 12 September 1915. His Divisional Reserve troops had been made aware of their participation in a forthcoming attack as company commanders have just been told Secretly and Personally to prepare for an early attack on the enemy... There is an immediate tuning up for action, the sharpening of 'swords' – as bayonets are called by rifle regiments – the practising of assaults, inspection of gas masks and special equipment, and all the other horrid ritual for battle, from which all ranks may draw their own conclusions...
(Jack 1964: 110-1)

Such rituals can be observed in the official British films of the war, as well as more mundane but tellingly prominent shots of troops just fiddling about with bayonets. Shots of cheering Tommies waving their bayonets with buoyant enthusiasm were frequent throughout all British films and newsreels of the war.

Their sheer presence seems to have inspired excitement and confidence; it is particularly striking in many primary texts that overwhelming belief was invested in the bayonet and the power of 'cold steel'. Lieutenant M. L. Walkinton provided a typical example. His 24th Machine Gun Company was in close support to the 2nd Battalion, Northamptonshire Regiment in their advance towards Bellewaarde Lake on 31st July 1917. All the men were 'very excited and elated. Bursting shells gave light to see by and it was thrilling to see the Northampton bayonets flashing as the troops advanced. Surely nothing could stop us' (Walkinton 1980: 131). Such beliefs and over-confidence could prove foolhardy and deadly, as a Scottish territorial, Harold Stainton, reported from near Kemmel in December 1914. One of his men witnessed a charge of the Gordons and told me that a fine young subaltern of theirs who led his men through the hedge carried a sword (already a most unusual thing). Waving this ridiculous toy he rushed ahead shouting 'Scotland for ever!' only to be killed within twenty yards of our hedge. It was an attack far more in common with the battles of the eighteenth-century than the battles of eighteen months later on the Somme. Here was no slow steady

advance behind a creeping barrage of shell fire, but the wild rush so dear to Highland tradition, with effective use of cold steel. Never, at any stage of the war, did I see so many bayoneted corpses as I did when, a few days later, we occupied that German trench.
(Stainton 1914: 23)

Trust in 'cold steel' as the ultimate effective intimidation, hated by the enemy, continued right up to the highest levels, as can be seen in Haig's diary, as he described the recovery of some trenches lost to the enemy in Ypres area on 23 October 1914. Their attack was very strongly opposed and the bayonet had to be used. The Germans resisted until the very end and gave way only when machine guns were enfilading their trenches at very close range, and when they were threatened by cold steel.
(Cooper 1935: 195-6)

With such high-level support it is unsurprising that bayonet training had a high profile within the base camp training troops received and in the further training exercise undertaken behind the front lines, awaiting or between actions. Notes taken by an officer in 1915 preparing to provide infantry training indicate that bayonet training in the British bases was undertaken daily and was rigorous. The notes envisaged much of the training being done on a course, the highlight of which would be a specially constructed lengthy zig-zagging trench, with at least nine dummies waiting to be bayoneted, mainly on the corners (Seys-Philips 1915). Such courses were not the limit of the bayonet in training though; the field exercises of more advanced training would always end in a bayonet charge also, as a soldier recalled:

The character of our training changed as we progressed. We were done with squad, platoon and company drill. Then came field maneuvers, attacks in open formation upon entrenched position, finishing always with terrific bayonet charges.
(Hall 1916: 28)

An identical focus was maintained at the main training base in France, the daunting Étaples. Private Frank Bass described a typical day there in a diary entry dated 17 September 1916, expressing some surprise that there was no let-up at all for a Sunday. It was apparently same as any other day. Reveille 5.30. Breakfast 6. Parade 8.00 for 'Bullring' or No. 2 Training Camp. Bayonet fighting with the Royal Scots. 8 of us, including Adams, Coulson and myself, went over final assault and went over all right, I think. After this, rapid loading and firing and then bayonet fighting again. (Bass 1916)

By 1916, bayonet training actually became more dominant in a trainee soldier's preparation for the trench war at home and abroad. Second Lieutenant Harold Mellersh was puzzled to discover this, and contrasted it with the training he had undergone just over a year earlier. He returned to his base camp in Plymouth in October 1916 upon recovery from an injury and found that there was surprisingly little for him to do, as training of recruits was now even not much in the hands of the ordinary sergeants, let alone the officers: the accent had shifted to bayonet drill, with rows of stuffed dummies strung up on wires and experts, specially trained in simulating and stimulating ferocity, in charge. 'In! Out! Jab!' I don't think we won the war at all by ferocity, or that the attempted inculcation of it suited the British temperament.
(Mellersh 1971: 105)

Mellersh's doubts over the pertinence and suitability to British troops of such prolonged and inflamed bayonet training were rare among officers or NCOs of the time. In his analysis of fears of brutalisation, Jon Lawrence (2003: 577-89) makes it clear that aside from isolated radicals and pacifists, such as Norman Angell, fears concerning troops' brutalisation did not form a major issue during the war but only exploded post-war.

Officers at the front responsible for arranging training for the troops under them during periods away from the front line often relied on bayonet training, again mainly for its attitudinal benefits. The typical attitude by those in authority is expressed here by an officer

in charge of a company, fresh from the heat of hard battle on the Somme in July 1915, who approved that activity was maintained while nominally 'resting' near the Bois de Dames. He was glad to 'use the time here to renew clothing equipment etc. and to repeat musketry, close order drill bayonet fighting etc. A very good plan I think' (Gore-Browne 1915: 6-7). Two months later, under his own initiative, he continued in the same manner: 'This morning the company was at my disposal and I did bayonet fighting and sprinting' (Gore-Browne 1915: 35).

But it was not only officers who were keen on bayonet training. Private John Jackson, returning to training after an injury in 1916 recalled that there was much practice in bombing, and bayonet fighting and we put in some hard and tiring work. But if it was hard training it was also interesting and we had great fun among the dummy figures, representing 'Jerries' in trenches, on our training ground. As a result of constant practice we became very proficient in the use of the rifle and fixed bayonet, but as a degree of proficiency in the art of using a bayonet might one day mean the difference between life and death for each of us, it was to our advantage to know all the tricks.
(Jackson 2005: 85-6)

The support 'from below' that could exist for their officers' views of bayonet training is clear in this example. It was not only in prior training and periods of spare time on the front that bayonet training was utilised as a handy filler but also more extensively and significantly it was used during the important periods leading up to large battles as the most adroit preparation. Major Jack on 15 July 1917 described his men getting strident advice during their battle training prior to the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele):

The day before yesterday a bloodthirsty fellow, Colonel Campbell, the Army bayonet-fighting expert, gave a lurid lecture to a large, thrilled audience on the most economical use of the bayonet, and to arouse the pugnacity of the men. He pointed out that to plunge the blade right through an opponent is a waste of trouble, and that three inches in the heart are quite sufficient. The cold-blooded science of the business seems to me rather horrid, even if necessary.
(Jack 1964: 227)

The ubiquitous Colonel Campbell could well have been one of the most influential British soldiers of the war (Gray 1978: 26). His memorable lectures were very well-attended throughout the war. Lectures of the type that Campbell delivered so forcefully could have a direct effect on the battlefield. An exact mirror of the three-inch advice is contained in one Private's uncompromising letter home dated 14 September 1918. He promised I shan't take many prisoners when it comes to going in the thick of it, a rifle and bayonet with three inches at each Bosh I come in contact with at close quarters. The more we send to Heaven, the sooner the war will be ended. (Spelman 1918)

Campbell's advice to use short stabs was also memorably reported by Siegfried Sassoon (1930: 6):

'The bullet and the bayonet are brother and sister.' 'If you don't kill him, he'll kill you.' 'Stick him between the eyes, in the throat, in the chest.' 'Don't waste good steel. Six inches are enough.'

The effectiveness of such training at home and abroad for actual warfare is debatable, as truly practical training for using a bayonet is far harder than for other weapons of war. Throwing a grenade into a dummy trench or aiming a rifle at a target are not so different activities from the real tasks at hand in actual battle. Bags of straw – the usual target for bayonet practise – are very different from animate humans. It is interesting to note that bayonet training seems to have only relatively rarely taken the form of fighting one another with wooden replicas affixed or such like, as had previously been the case with sword fighting. Training for using the bayonet instead seemed to be singularly unrealistic.

The artificial and unhelpful pike-influenced drill stances that had been practiced and drilled during training were swiftly abandoned on the battlefield, as suggested by Lance Corporal Francis' description in a letter dated 25 April 1915 of bayonet action as being with 'no thrust one and parry, in goes the bayonet the easiest way' (Gammage 1974: 96-7).

However, bayonet training remained popular both at home and at the front and one of the major reasons for its popularity, both with the men and officers, was its aggressive content. The aggressive nature and content of bayonet training was often high. This even comes across in the official training textbooks; the later edition of the main one stated plainly and tellingly that 'bayonet fighting produces lust for blood' (War Office 1917: 97). The simple act of wielding a bayonet was popularly imagined to have an immediate and powerful brutalising effect on men. It was no accident that the limited time allowed to complete the bayonet assault course was popularly known in soldiers' slang as the 'mad minute'. Anecdotally, the extreme nature of the training based on such texts and the enthusiasm of trainers is often vividly described. Sassoon again turned to an anonymous trainer clearly based on Colonel Campbell:

The star turn in the schoolroom was a massive sandy-haired Highland Major whose subject was 'The Spirit of the Bayonet'. Though at that time undecorated, he was afterwards awarded the D.S.O. for lecturing… He spoke with homicidal eloquence, keeping the game alive with genial and well-judged jokes. He had a Sergeant to assist him. The Sergeant, a tall sinewy machine, had been trained to such a pitch of frightfulness that at a moment's warning he could divest himself of all semblance of humanity. With rifle and bayonet he illustrated the Major's ferocious aphorisms, including facial expression. When told to 'put on the killing face', he did so, combining it with an ultra-vindictive attitude. 'To instil fear into the opponent' was one of the Major's main maxims. Man, it seemed, had been created to jab the life out of Germans.
(Sasson 1930: 14-5)

The titling of such lectures with the phrase 'the spirit of the bayonet', and the frequent references to this, are interesting. Although the phrase was no doubt often used unthinkingly as a mere stock epithet, the logic behind it, conscious or unconscious, was to imbue the physical object with an emotional life of its own. The bayonet itself was thought of as aggressive, viscous, bloodthirsty and murderous, not the man wielding it. Indeed, once the bayonet was in use, soldiers' descriptions and recollections display a tendency in which the bayonet's owner appeared to have no choice but to go along with its spirit. This has the effect of placing a comfortable distance between the man and the act of killing. For example, when Private John Jackson of the Cameron Highlanders recalled his first major battle experience at the Battle of Loos he admitted that the Germans fought hard, but could not stand against our determination, and our terrible bayonets… Machine-gunners slaying us from their hidden posts, threw up their hands crying 'Kamerad', when we got within striking distance, but these deserved and received no quarter. Cold steel and bombs did their duty then, and the village was strewn with dead and running with blood.
(Jackson 2005: 54)

Here the step away from causing death, provided by the bayonets being described as 'terrible' rather than the soldiers wielding them and both cold steel and bombs as doing 'their duty' rather than the men themselves is clear.

The psychology, often running along such lines, that underpinned the strenuous training in the bayonet was understood by men in the field of combat. In a section of memoir covering the summer of 1917, an infantry Captain, Stormont Gibbs, mused on the hatred and conquering of fear needed to turn a man into an effective killer. Gibbs felt that he had learnt what it felt like to be frightened of the animate enemy, their bombs and their bayonets… In any sort of hand fighting there are the savage emotions that motivate the shot or thrust. The great horror of war is this prostitution of civilised man. He has to fight for his country and to

do so has in actual practise to be brutalised for his country; he has to learn to hate with the primitive blood lust of the savage if he is to push a bayonet into another human being (who probably no more wants to fight than he does). Need he hate? In the case of the average man he must as the counter-balance to fear.
(Gibbs 1986: 132)

Care must be taken not to react too strongly to ghoulish sentiments about the bloody physicality of the bayonet. As the above quote indicates, this was a concern for some troops contemporarily also, but one that was subsumed by the necessity not to be frightened. Frightened soldiers could not have fought with a bayonet effectively. Confidence was a vital requirement; the bayonet was useless as an effective psychological weapon without it. Only a confident bayonet charge could effect a rout. Bayonet training was thus by no means unnecessary – or at least it would not have been had the level of bayonet fighting that was expected been achieved and if the standard-issue British bayonet had been more capable of achieving the tasks expected of it.

It is also worth remembering in this context that bayonet fighting fell into the category of combat exchanges that soldiers generally found psychologically untroubling. It was not 'senseless', unlike shell deaths which soldiers frequently found very disturbing. Many soldiers summed up the sense of bayonet fighting neatly as 'him or me' and such an equation disturbed them little.

Despite these contexts, the effect of the aggression and hatred included and inculcated during training on the men who underwent it could however remain startling, approaching a 'primitive blood lust'. William Johnson, a Private in the 22nd London ('Queen's') Regiment, described the immediate preparations for an attack on 7th November 1917:

'Fix bayonets!' yells the colonel. And the shining things leap from the scabbards and flash in the light as they click on the standards. They seem alive and joyous; they turn us into fiends, thirsty for slaughter. (Johnson 1930: 323)

This conception of men undergoing a transformation by wielding bayonets was frequently and strongly referred to in soldiers' texts. Patrick MacGill described the transformation wrought on his comrades by heavy hand-to-hand action on the first day of the Battle of Loos, 25th September 1915. He found it interesting to see how the events of the morning had changed the nature of the boys. Mild-mannered youths who had spent their working hours of civil life in scratching with inky pens on white paper, and their hours of relaxation in cutting capers on roller skates and helping dainty maidens to teas and ices, became possessed of mad Berserker rage and ungovernable fury. Now that their work was war the bloodstained bayonet gave them play in which they seemed to glory. 'Here's one that I've just done in,' I heard M'Crone shout, looking approvingly at a dead German. 'That's five of the bloody swine now.'
(MacGill 1916: 84)

M'Crone is portrayed as the most transformed. MacGill had 'never heard him swear before, but at Loos his language would make a navvy in Saturday taproom green with envy'. Previously of religious turn of mind 'now, inflicting pain on others, he was a fiend personified; such transformations are of common occurrence on the field of honour' (MacGill 1916: 84-5).

But the aggressive training in the bayonet appear to have had even more grave consequences, that of facilitating atrocity and war crimes. The primary sources suggest that closing in on the enemy with bayonets encouraged the murderous killing of prisoners or potential prisoners. Wielding a bayonet seemed to reduce soldiers' faculty to grant mercy. H. E. May, a Sergeant in the Highlanders, portrayed a bayonet assault in a way that was typical

of the descriptions that head in this direction. He described a generic attack, although it seems to have been in the context of experience he had on the Ypres salient in late 1917.

You see a line of stumpy tree-trunks that, dimly, you realize is the objective. You creep up. A wild melee; stabbing with a bayonet. A gushing of blood from many wounds (oh! the nauseating smell of freshly spilled human blood in quantity), and then a cry of 'Kamerad!' and a whine for mercy. Unheeded, for all the enemy died. (May 1930: 200)

The fetishisation of the bayonet directly affected the mood and conduct of soldiers on the battlefield at times. T. H. Gore-Browne was stationed in trenches in front of Rue de Tillelay, Laventie and wrote of the expectations of some troops newly arrived at the front in August 1915. He had command of a squadron of North Irish Horse under Major Hamilton Russel, a nice person. They are awfully sick at the class of warfare we are waging at present. I haven't a notion of what they expected – a sort of orgie of shooting and stabbing I suppose – but I tell them they can have as much adventure as they like if they choose to send out patrols at night in front of our barbed wire. (Gore-Browne 1915)

What do such expectations of an 'orgie of stabbing' in fresh troops reveal? They reveal strong tendencies for bayonet fetishisation within the British infantry in the First World War, as have been shown throughout this article. Moreover, such tendencies appear to have been transmitted to new troops potently and quickly, and possibly in an increased manner. A spiral of violence is not hard to conceive from this source.

To conclude, the fetishisation of the bayonet often appeared to have been the direct result of the excesses involved in infantry training at the time. The strong fetishisation that had built up in the army around this complicated and revealing weapon had the potential for deleterious effects on the battlefield, tending to veer towards and facilitate atrocity.

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[i] British Small Arms School Report (1924) quoted by Carter; I have been unable to source the original report in The National Archive or elsewhere.