



World War 1 Officer

The following account describes how John Sly investigated the military history of an officer who was killed in the First World War. The account is taken from an article published in "Ancestors", Issue 3 - August / September 2001, and is produced with the permission of the author.

"Ancestors" is a family history magazine of the [National Archives](#) and is produced by the National Archives and Wharncliffe Publishing. The magazine is available by subscription, and enquiries are welcomed. For the purposes of this web site the account below is edited. For the full text you are recommended to read the original article.

PRO records classes referred to in the text and used to study the the military careers of Army Officers at the time of the First World War include:-

WO 25 - Records of Officers commissioned before the First World War.

WO 339 - Records of over 140,000 men who were mainly Regular, Special Reserve, and Emergency Officers.

WO 374 - Records of over 70,000 Officers, mainly those commissioned into the Territorial forces.

WO 95 - War Diaries or Intelligence Summaries. Records of daily events for units on active service.

Trying to Establish a Connection

by John Sly

My main research interest, apart from my own family, is the Green Howards, once the 19th Regiment of Foot, after 1881 the Princess of Wales's Own (Yorkshire) Regiment. This was one of the regiments in which my father served in the 1930s and 1940s, and with which he earned his three medals.

In 1980 a fellow enthusiast came across some old negatives of photographs of Army officers of the First World War. Three of these were of officers of the Yorkshire Regiment, and I was only too ready to buy copies of them. From my researches at that time I was able to identify and discover much of the background of two of the officers, but the third turned out to be a bit of a mystery. This was **Eric George Wellesley**, of the 8th (Service) Battalion of the regiment.

The photograph of this young man was typical of so many taken at the time. Standing facing the camera, in uniform, he looked no older than 15, and he was probably only about 19 (he was born 1 May 1896) at the time this portrait was taken. I was surprised that I could find no mention of him in the regimental war history (The Green Howards in the Great War by H C Wylly, Richmond, Yorks, 1926), but a routine check in Officers Died in the Great War showed that he had been killed in action on 21 December 1915.

This was a comparatively early date for the 8th Battalion, which had arrived in France only on 26 August that year as part of 69 Brigade, 23 Division, and which had not taken part in any major action since that time.

Out of curiosity I then undertook basic research in the Army Lists and the London Gazette, and found that he had been commissioned into the Army on 1 February 1915, and transferred to the 8/Yorkshire Regiment on 19 February. However, the fact that the battalion history had omitted him entirely made me suspicious : I started to doubt whether he had ever served with the battalion, but had instead been attached to another unit.

Indeed, the battalion history almost glossed over the months which included the date of his death. Referring to the period just after the end of the battle of Loos (late October 1915), the history talked about the need of this New Army division for 'further experience and training in working in large bodies', and about 'the comparatively quiet sector of Armentieres' which was suitable for this purpose. The next date mentioned is 'towards the end of February 1916'. The historian of the 23rd Division, Lt-Col H.R. Sandilands, was equally unforthcoming. This apparent mystery reduced my curiosity somewhat, and I filed the photograph away.

In June 1992, out of the blue, I was offered Eric George Wellesley's First World War medals by a London dealer. The fact of these medals coming on to the market was quite remarkable, and my interest in this enigmatic story was rekindled after twelve years. The first thing I now wanted to do was to establish whether Eric Wellesley served with the 8th Yorkshires or not.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission data was of no help. It simply confirmed the date of death, that he was an officer of the 8th Battalion, and was commemorated on the Ploegstreet Memorial, but it contained no additional contextual or family information. When I researched the death certificate at the Family Records Centre, the 'cause of death' section was blank.

By this time the first tranche of the First World War records had been released to the Public Record Office, including medal index cards, medal rolls and war diaries. The best information came from the **war diary** of the 8/Yorkshires (WO 95/2184). This recorded, under 21 December 1915, that the battalion was at La Rolanderie: '0600 2/Lt E.G. Wellesley reported missing when out with a patrol opposite 1.26.3. Casualties:-3 wounded'. The entry on the next day at 1730 read: 'The Battalion was relieved by the Northumberland Fusiliers...2/Lieut Wellesley was still missing when the Battalion left'.

It looked, therefore, very much as though poor young Eric had been sent out on patrol and had got himself killed, wounded or captured. The fact that the battalion left the sector for Jesus Farm the next day may have been significant, but the likelihood was that he died either on 21 December in no man's-land or soon after, possibly in German hands, before his capture could be reported. Until very recently that would probably have been all that I could have discovered, but two totally unrelated events allowed me to push this research further forward.

At a Western Front Association, Surrey Branch, meeting I was privileged to hear Charles Fair give a talk. Charles has researched deeply into his own family history, and this brought to light a large amount of correspondence between his grandmother, Marjorie Secretan, and her then fiancé, Captain Francis Dodgson, of the 8/Yorkshire Regiment. Charles very kindly allowed me to take advantage of his research and to quote the following from a letter written by Dodgson to Marjorie sometime between 26 and 30 December 1915:

'We had one very unfortunate incident [during] our last spell in the trenches, which resulted in the loss of Wellesley. He was sent out on a reconnoitring patrol to inspect the enemy's wire and, having done this quite successfully without being spotted by the Hun at all, he needs must go and start throwing bombs into their trench, after which they had, of course, to make a hasty retreat, at the beginning of which he must have been hit. This all happened at about six in the morning, just before it got light, which is all the more foolhardy, as it was impossible to send anyone out to look for him until the following evening. We spent a miserable day wondering if he was lying out there wounded and able to do nothing. However, the next night no trace of him could be found and the Huns were waiting all ready for our patrol, so it looks as though they must have got him, though whether alive or dead is useless to speculate. Personally I shall miss him very much, as I used to see a lot of him and we had many a cheery game of cards together. And the Battalion can ill afford to lose officers such as he.'

As the correspondence files of officers who served in the First World War have recently been released by the PRO, I was fortunate to find Wellesley's file in WO 339/32755.

This revealed a lot more than the published material had done, and the bonus in these files is that some of the original documents are in the hand of the subject himself. From this file I was able to learn that Eric had originally enlisted as 2221 Private, Royal Fusiliers, at Westminster on 15 September 1914. He listed his next of kin as Archdale Palmer, his guardian and uncle, whose address he gave as Gloucester Mansions SW. From here he was discharged to a commission on 29 January 1915.

On his application for commission (Army Form MT 423), dated 5 January 1915, he recorded his permanent address as Rookwood, Nazeing, Essex, and Archdale Palmer was described as his 'Guardian and Trustee', as well as being a Captain in the 9/Essex Regiment. Eric stated that he had served in the Public Schools Brigade and Winchester College OTC, and D Coy of the 18th Service Battalion, Fusiliers. On another form, 21 August 1914, his description is given, and he appeared to be a fine specimen: 6ft 2.75 ins tall, weighing 11 st. 10 lbs, with good teeth. His closest relation was shown as his sister, Violet Evelyn Wellesley, aged 19, who was living at Manor House, Froyle, Alton, Hants, when she inherited his estate in February 1917.

Perhaps even more interesting, though, were the statements from soldiers serving with Wellesley concerning the manner of his 'death'. There is an interesting point here, and it goes some way to explaining the reason for the Army taking so much trouble to establish what happened on that fatal day. If a serviceman was killed, his body recovered and buried in the traditional way, and the correct paperwork returned to the United Kingdom, a death certificate could be issued, and the surviving family could continue with their lives and their grieving. However, a large number of servicemen, particularly soldiers, went 'missing' in action, and that made it impossible for the authorities to declare these individuals dead, as they might turn up some days, weeks or months later in a hospital somewhere, or in a German prisoner of war camp, or with another service unit. This led to some very difficult consequences for the families: estates could not be settled, and as a large number of the officer casualties during the war were from wealthy families, huge sums could be tied up in administration for years, leading to extreme hardships and, occasionally, financial ruin for those involved.

Wellesley's file contains no fewer than eight separate reports from 'informants' about his fate. These range in detail from the relatively simple to the much more well-informed report.

The remainder of John Sly's article in "Ancestors" contains two of the above eye-witness reports, together with additional details of Eric Wellesley's family history. You are recommended to read the article in "Ancestors" for this information.
