

The Estaminet Times

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Britain celebrates VE Day


HALIFAX
MILITARY HISTORY
SOCIETY

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Editor's Notes

With the 80th anniversary of the end of WW2 in Europe very much in the news this year, it is fitting that WW2 features heavily in our summer edition.

There are two articles which feature personal reminiscences and we begin with Peter Liddle who can say 'I was there'. This is followed up by an account by Ian Richardson of his father's wartime service and the way in which wartime communication was carried out over great distances in the days before the internet and even widespread household telephones. Ian also takes us through a well illustrated account of the events in Halifax following the end of the war in Europe.

There is also the dreadful reminder of the Nazi concentration camps which hit the newsreels in those closing days. Rob Hamilton graphically explains how shocking it was for everyone to discover the depths of depravity exercised by that regime.

Finally, we conclude with Rob's observation of an unusual statistic of wartime; the number of casualties due not to enemy action but to accidents.

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Wartime Communication

Ian Richardson

My parents – Charlie and Marjorie - were married in September 1939, by means of a special licence as my father had been called up to join the British Expeditionary Force, and he departed for Belgium later that month. He was to spend the following 5 - 6 years away from home in various theatres of war and Prisoner of War camps, with occasional short spells of home leave in 1940/41, and this article looks at some of the ways the newly-weds communicated. This was in the days before mobile phones and the internet, so they relied on mail, telegrams and some long-distance telephone calls. I still have some of his postcards etc. which my mother treasured, such as those sent by Forces Mail from France and Belgium in 1939/40. I have a letter Charlie sent to his sister in January 1940 thanking her for her letter and commenting on his pleasure on receiving five letters and a parcel from Marjorie, plus a letter from his brother in the Buffs Regiment (in Egypt) which helped to ease the monotony of the “phoney war” of that time.

In 1939 few households had a home telephone, and until the mid-1960's the family relied on a telephone box outside the local sub-post office a few hundred yards away, and this was one of the key channels of communication. My mother would wait outside the box at the appointed time when my father could ring - usually whilst he was home-based, such as after the dramatic return of the B.E.F. through Dunkirk. Apparently, people wanting to use the callbox would always defer when my mother said she was awaiting a call from her husband in the forces. The first mail received after the Dunkirk evacuation was a Field Service Post Card, dated 23rd May (i.e. whilst in Belgium) but not sent until his return to the UK on 2nd June 1940, which only allowed senders to delete some statements, and sign and date it.

NOTHING is to be written on this side except the date and signature of the sender. Sentences not required may be erased. If anything else is added the post card will be destroyed.

[Postage must be prepaid on any letter or post card addressed to the sender of this card.]

I am quite well.
~~I have been admitted into hospital~~
{ ~~sick~~ } and am going on well,
{ ~~wounded~~ } and ~~hope to be discharged soon.~~
~~I am being sent down to the base.~~
letter dated _____
I have received your { telegram "_____"
parcel "_____"
Letter follows at first opportunity.
I have received no letter from you
{ lately
for a long time.
Signature only } *Charlie*
Date *23rd May 1940*

Wartime Communication

A useful but now defunct method of communication was the telegram service. The first such was sent to mark their first wedding anniversary in September 1940 from Bridgend, South Wales, when Charlie's reformed Artillery regiment was deployed to defend the coast, with the very real fear of German invasion. The next one is dated 15th November 1941 and was sent from Basrah, Iraq, and said they had arrived safely there and that family letters were following. He had obviously been getting mail as he added "it's a girl" – a reference to the fact that my mother was pregnant. I should point out that embarkation leave had been given prior to the troopship journey from Glasgow to Iraq via Cape Town and Bombay (Mumbai), and that he was wrong - as my brother was born in December 1941! My father would not see him until he was 3 years old. Other telegrams dated January 1942 were sent marked "Sans origine" (no place of origination declared, although they were still in Iraq), and "Passed by censor", and indicated that letters from his family were reaching him – a tribute to the fact that the forces placed great importance on getting mail from home, as had also been true in the Great War.



Wartime Communication

As far as I can tell communication then became more irregular. In May 1942 Charlie's regiment left Iraq on a long road journey westwards through Transjordan and Palestine, across the Sinai Desert and the Suez Canal, passing through Cairo to Tobruk in Libya. As part of the 8th Army, they were supporting the 20th Indian Infantry Brigade but were overrun in the battle of Gazala and in retreat to El Alamein they were outflanked by Rommel's Panzer tanks, and my father was wounded and captured.

No. *Coo/R/796523*. Army Form B, 104-83
(If empty, please quote above No.)

Record Office,
12 AUG 1942 19

~~Sir—~~ MADAM,

I regret to have to inform you that a report has been received from the War Office to the effect that (No.) *796523* (Rank) *Sgt*
(Name) *RICHARDSON Charles James*
(Regiment) *Royal Artillery*
was posted as "missing" on the *29th June 1942*
In the Middle East.

The report that he is missing does not necessarily mean that he has been killed, as he may be a prisoner of war or temporarily separated from his regiment.

Official reports that men are prisoners of war take some time to reach this country, and if he has been captured by the enemy it is probable that unofficial news will reach you first. In that case I am to ask you to forward any postcard or letter received at once to this Office, and it will be returned to you as soon as possible.

Should any further official information be received it will be at once communicated to you.

I am,
~~Sir—~~ MADAM,
Your obedient Servant,
[Signature]
Officer in charge of Records.

IMPORTANT.
Any change of your address should be immediately notified to this Office.

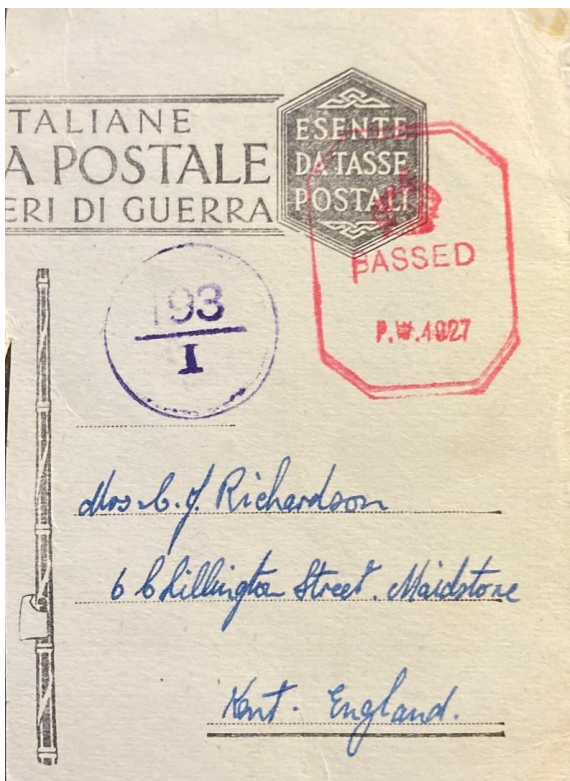
WL 2001/3248 400/000 (10) 8/58 RFL/0012 (1) 0003 Form B.104-83

The first my mother knew of this was a letter sent in July 1942 by Charlie's C.O. - which I still have - describing the strafing and direct hits on his troop's gun, and his belief that Sgt. Richardson "must have been taken POW & evacuated by the Bosch". An official letter was sent by the Army Records Office in August 1942 stating that he was posted as "missing" on 29th June, and the local newspaper published a "virtual obituary" ("Footballer Missing").

I am not sure when the news that he was a Prisoner of War was confirmed, but there is a letter from the local M.P. in late September expressing his relief at the news that he was a P.O.W. in Italy.

Wartime Communication

The first subsequent communication from Charlie was the postcard sent from the Italian POW camp for Easter 1943 – a classic of its kind, as economy dictated that it was a postcard, with home-made decoration and cut in half.



Wartime Communication

On Italy's capitulation in 1943 the prisoners were taken by train to a German POW camp, in Charlie's case the massive Stalag IVB camp near Brandenburg. Marjorie received a hand-drawn birthday card in September 1944 – a "postkarte" sent under the auspices of the Kriegsgefangenenpost system for POWs.

The final letter received was sent by Air Mail (the only such communication) on 19th April 1945 from Stalag 357 at Fallingbomel, where he had been transferred in late 1944. The camp had been liberated by British troops on 16th April, and he described the arrangements for repatriation: POWs were being flown home in groups of 20 according to length of captivity but there were 3,000 waiting! The letter, which was almost manic in its tone, described the luxury of smoking NAAFI Woodbines and eating Arrowroot biscuits with their tea, and promised a phone call to the local Sub-Post Office's callbox when he landed, as he still had the number in his paybook! He was flown over to Hertfordshire on 24th April, and telephoned his old employer, who notified my mother that he would be home the next day.



Then commenced the process of resuming and adjusting to normal life after the trauma of warfare (being strafed etc. on Dunkirk beach and wounded at El Alamein) and captivity.

Thoughts on the 80TH Anniversary of VE Day 1945

Peter Liddle

THOUGHTS ON THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF VE DAY 1945

Here we are, eighty years after the end of the war with Nazi Germany and how do we THINK about the war!

Can we really grasp that VE DAY marked the end of nearly SIX YEARS OF STRUGGLE AND NOT YET the end of the wider war against a foe in the East?

Can we grasp that the DEATH TOLL, from all countries in that war, is but conservatively estimated at 50 MILLION with BRITISH DEATHS approximately 450,000.

We speak of STANDING ALONE on the fall of France in 1940 but that was not the case, we had the loyal support of our EMPIRE AND COMMONWEALTH. India would in fact contribute the largest volunteer army EVER raised, two and a half million men.



VERY WELL, ALONE

Do we ever consider that WE COULD NOT have defeated the terrible menace of Hitler without the aid of the EQUALLY TERRIBLE MENACE OF STALIN'S SOVIET UNION: and the grim irony of actually GOING TO WAR TO SUPPORT POLAND, which was in fact quite impossible, AND THE END RESULT BEING POLISH SUBJECTION TO FOUR FURTHER DECADES OF DREADFUL TYRANNY, THAT OF THE SOVIET UNION.

Thoughts on the 80TH Anniversary of VE Day 1945

And how SELECTIVE are our national memories! YES for the miraculous escape for so many at Dunkirk, YES for the Spitfire and Hurricane pilots of the Battle of Britain, YES for EL Alamein and D Day but so much less for the actual military DEFEAT in France in 1940, DEFEATS in North Africa, in Greece and worst of all, Singapore – I clearly remember my knowledgeable Auntie Gladys telling all of us in our family in February 1942, THE WAR IS LOST.



Humiliation for the British at Singapore

There is the forgetfulness too, the lack of interest and credit to those who battled through the draining slog of the Italian Campaign, even at the time referred to infamously by a shameless Member of Parliament as 'the D Day Dodgers.

I think we should be aware too as we see film of the unbridled VE Day celebrations in London and lovely happy street parties throughout the country that this should not obscure the reality of there being families for whom a son, a husband, a father, would never be coming home, and then there were those still away in Europe including many of the recently liberated PoW's and of course those serving in the Far East and the Prisoners of War there of whom so little was known.

The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society

Thoughts on the 80TH Anniversary of VE Day 1945

One more sobering thought is that the British public had little idea of the sheer depth of evil of the Nazi regime being fought until the extermination camps were being liberated not long before VE Day. How CHILLING it is to CONSIDER THE FATE OF BRITONS HAD THE WAR BEEN LOST!

In conclusion, as one of our very few VILLAGE DINOSAURS , may I share with you some vivid wartime memories sadly illustrating that though I knew important things were going on, I had of course no real understanding of them. I was just short of six as I sat on the arm of a chair with my mother and brother listening to Mr Chamberlain on the radio telling us we were at war.

Despite being in a heavily bombed town and then at school near London I never saw anything which frightened me. I was too young and found everything rather interesting and, in any case over the long six years, it all became sort of NORMAL.

Throwing stones into a sooty-banked stream in Sunderland to see the rising plumes of seeming smoke as in tank battles viewed in Newsreels concerning dramatic things happening in somewhere called North Africa.

Sharing space in our damp-smelling garden Anderson Air Raid Shelter with our elderly fearless lady neighbour who wanted the shelter door left open so she could see the pretty lights of the bursting anti-aircraft shells and flares dropped by the German planes to assist their bombing. In the morning, we knew she would totter off to town to look at the DEBRIS as she called it.

Thoughts on the 80TH Anniversary of VE Day 1945

Then, at Boarding School near London, actually watching a V1 Doodle Bug flying towards its target, stalling, then dropping to explode not far away. We were on a hockey pitch and stopped playing to watch. I remember thinking about what had actually happened in that place from which I had seen the rising smoke and heard the crump of the explosion.

Diligently and competitively we planted and watered our individual compulsory school allotment with its radishes and lettuce.

Seeing the sky so often criss-crossed at night by searchlights, and then one day filled with aircraft towing gliders, which we later learned, had been towards Arnhem.

Then there was our school dayroom with its European war map, flags showing us the progress of the Allies after D Day.

On a train to London shocked at seeing a serviceman, the whole of his body encased in a plaster cast, on his knees in distress, and my finding a Guard who had the train stopped to get the poor man taken off.



A doodlebug falls to earth

Thoughts on the 80TH Anniversary of VE Day 1945

FINALLY, AN AWARENESS IN MY OLD AGE of the burden borne by my Mum who was widowed in Spring 1939 and had to struggle through those long years of war. I remember her, somehow carrying in on her own, quite a large kitchen table to the front room where my brother and I slept during air raids before we had a shelter and placing it on a single bed occupied by my brother and me, cushions and a counterpane on top, and our feeling completely safe from any bombing.

I have been belatedly filled with respect and admiration for her and for all the mothers with little ones, those caring for the sick and elderly, and then for the work of the schoolteachers, shop assistants, dustmen, train, tram and bus drivers who kept things going.

Unsurprisingly, I often think of the servicemen doing what was required of them and of the fact that for so many it could require sterling resolve, sometimes selfless courage. It may have been what they had been trained for, but my goodness HOW did they do it?

Civil defence people, firemen, Bomb Disposal too. I don't forget the brilliant decoders and all those who served at Bletchley Park and other research establishments, those in the shipyards, the miners, those in munitions, industry, farming, EVERYONE who worked to bring us to the victory we so gratefully commemorate today. That generation certainly faced and passed the sternest of tests. How blest we were and how grateful we should be!

The Month after VE Day in Halifax

Ian Richardson

The month of June 1945 saw the country adapting to the new world after May's Victory in Europe (VE Day), with demobilisation of the armed forces beginning, but World War Two continued in the Far East, and particularly the Pacific region. American forces continued fighting the last major battle of the war at Okinawa, and victory there was finally achieved later in the month, but an armistice did not come until August.

Other events included the capture in Hamburg of Joachim von Ribbentrop – the Reich's Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Ambassador to Britain by British troops, and of William Joyce, the U.S. born fascist who became known – and detested – as “Lord Haw-Haw”, who broadcast propaganda for Nazi Germany.

The main event of the month in Halifax took place on Monday 18th, locally deemed VE Day 3 (Day 2 being the service of thanksgiving on May 13th). This was when the Duke of Wellington's Regiment (whose headquarters were at Wellesley Park, now the site of the Halifax Academy) received the freedom of the Borough of Halifax. They exercised their rights to march through the town, watched by large crowds which the Evening Courier said exceeded those of the general VE Day. The two principal battalions were still in front-line service in Palestine and India, so the 300 plus troops on parade were from the 5th/ 7th battalions, the Territorial units from the Huddersfield & Milnsbridge area. The salute was taken by the Mayor of Halifax, Alderman Chambers, the Dukes' C.O. Col. Pickering, and Lt. Col. the Duke of Wellington.

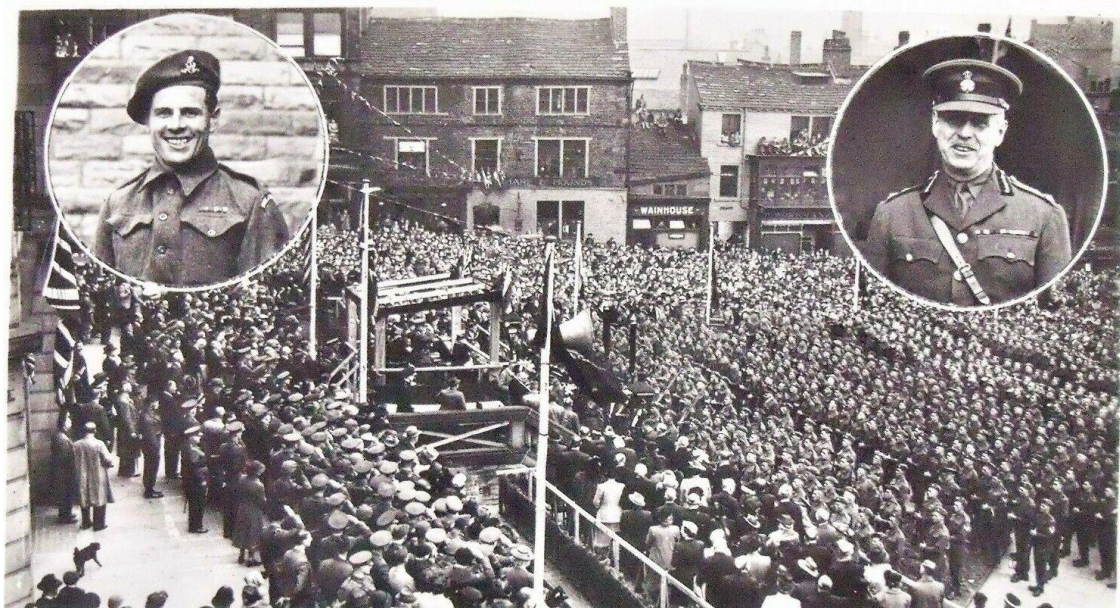
The Month after VE Day in Halifax



The Month after VE Day in Halifax

A varied programme of events was arranged – at People's Park, Manor Heath and Shibden Park, with bands, donkey rides and swing-boats etc. The Ministry of Food initially refused the Borough Council's request to make refreshments available at Shibden, where 15,000 people were expected, but reluctantly agreed "a limited supply", although the public were asked to bring their own cups!

Further signs of a return to normality included the restoration of basic petrol rations, which led to happy anticipation of trips to Harrogate or Ilkley for those with cars (and petrol), but sadly there was insufficient petrol for the Halifax Welfare Home's day trip to St. Annes. Child evacuees were returned to London by special trains, including 30 children from Halifax, and the Norland Children's Holiday Home reopened on 23rd June to provide a fortnight's holiday for those who might benefit..



Photo

Pte. R. BURTON, V.C.

VE. DAY. 3 June 18th 1945

A Birds Eye View at the
Freedom of the Borough Ceremony, at Bull Green

Halifax Courier

The Duke of Wellington

The Month after VE Day in Halifax

The nation was preparing for July's General Election, and the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, came to Halifax to give a speech from an open car on 27th June, although the Borough's Parks Committee refused permission for him to use Bull Green for this purpose. The Courier noted that only 50 of the 1,700 or so national Parliamentary candidates were women.



VISIT OF MR. WINSTON CHURCHILL TO HALIFAX. June 27th/45
The Prime Minister speaking at the bottom of Lister Lane

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The British Army and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps

Rob Hamilton

By April 1945, British forces under Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery were engaged in the final push into Germany. The 21st Army Group, comprising British and Canadian forces, had crossed the Rhine in March and was now driving north-east toward Hamburg and the Baltic coast. As they moved deeper into German territory, they encountered stiff resistance from remnants of the Wehrmacht and SS units. However, with the German military in disarray and suffering from severe shortages of manpower and supplies, British forces continued to make rapid progress.

On April 15, 1945, the 11th Armoured Division of the British Army reached the gates of Bergen-Belsen, a concentration camp located near Celle in Lower Saxony. What they discovered inside shocked even the most battle-hardened soldiers. The camp housed approximately 60,000 prisoners, most of whom were emaciated, sick, and near death. Thousands of corpses lay unburied, and disease, particularly typhus, was rampant. Just weeks before the British troops arrived, two of the typhus victims were the Dutch diarist 15 year old Anne Frank and her 19 year old sister Margot.



Margot Frank



Anne Frank

The British Army and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps

Unlike the extermination camps of Eastern Europe, Bergen-Belsen had no gas chambers. However, the appalling conditions and systematic neglect led to tens of thousands of deaths. The British soldiers immediately began efforts to provide medical aid, food, and sanitation, but for many, it was too late. Over 13,000 inmates died in the weeks following liberation, despite the best efforts of British medical teams. Images and newsreels of the camp's horrors, filmed by British war correspondents, were soon broadcast worldwide, leaving an indelible mark on the global consciousness.



At Bergen-Belsen and for pit burial, a British Army bulldozer clears some of the disease carrying bodies of prisoners scattered around the camp

The news of the camps was reported in the Halifax Courier with the headlines on the 21st and 23rd April respectively

'BELSEN WAS AMUSEMENT FOR SS' from a correspondent at the camp and

'ATROCITY CAMP A NIGHTMARE' from MP Tom Driberg who had visited the Buchenwald camp

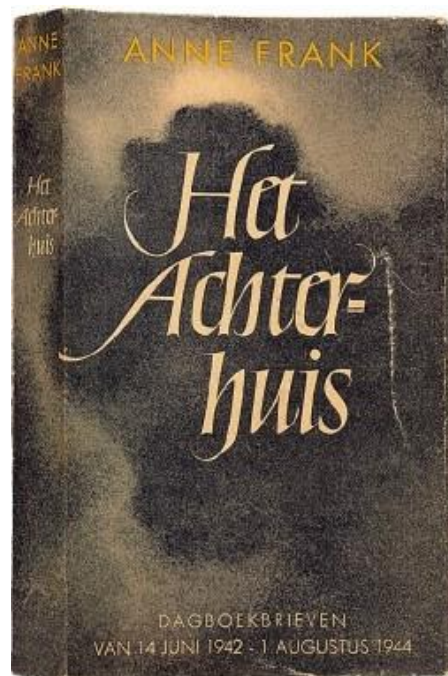
The liberation of Bergen-Belsen was not the only moment in April 1945 that exposed Nazi crimes. As British and Allied forces advanced, they uncovered further evidence of the Holocaust, including mass graves, forced labour camps, and transit camps filled with malnourished and abused prisoners. The full extent of the Nazi regime's atrocities became undeniable.

The British Army and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps

The British press and government officials were horrified. Prime Minister Winston Churchill, upon receiving reports from liberated camps, declared that such crimes must never be forgotten. The British public, already weary from years of war, was deeply affected by the revelations, reinforcing the justification for the total defeat of Nazi Germany.

By the end of April, British forces had reached the Elbe River, linking up with American troops. On April 30, Adolf Hitler committed suicide in Berlin, signalling the total collapse of the Nazi regime.

The events of April 1945 remain some of the most significant in British military history. The liberation of Bergen-Belsen and other camps served as a powerful reminder of the need to fight tyranny and ensure that such horrors never happen again. The British soldiers who bore witness to these atrocities carried those memories for the rest of their lives, serving as living testaments to the necessity of remembering history.



Diary of Anne Frank

Originally prepared for and published in the Halifax
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The Magazine of the Halifax Military History Society

Surprising Statistic of the Great War

Rob Hamilton

The First World War, often remembered for its brutal trench warfare and devastating loss of life, was not only a battleground for combat-related fatalities but also for a staggering 140,000 non-combat deaths. Diseases, accidents, and other mishaps claimed the lives of thousands of men and women serving in the British armed forces. Among these, the early aviation units of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and Royal Air Force (RAF) saw disproportionately high death rates from flying accidents due to the rudimentary nature of aircraft technology at the time. This article explores this lesser-discussed aspect of the Great War, intertwining broader historical patterns with the poignant stories of individuals from Calderdale whose lives were tragically cut short.

Non-combat deaths were a grim reality for those serving in World War I. In the British armed forces, diseases such as influenza, scarlet fever, and pneumonia swept through overcrowded barracks, troopships, and field hospitals. Poor sanitation, inadequate medical knowledge, and the sheer scale of troop movements created fertile ground for epidemics. For sailors and soldiers alike, drowning—whether during maritime operations or recreational activities—was also a common cause of death.

The RFC and RAF, nascent air services during the war, presented additional hazards. Flying training was fraught with danger. Pilots operated fragile aircraft made of wood and fabric, often equipped with unreliable engines and lacking modern safety measures. These machines required considerable skill to handle, yet many pilots received only a few hours of flight training before being sent aloft. Consequently, flying accidents became a leading cause of death in these branches. Estimates suggest that for every RFC or RAF pilot killed in combat, another was lost to training or operational accidents.

Surprising Statistic of the Great War

Amid the broader narrative of non-combat fatalities, the individual stories of servicemen and women from Calderdale bring a human face to this tragic aspect of the war.

John Bentley, a 15-year-old boy from Thornhill Road, Rastrick, holds the tragic distinction of being the youngest Calderdale resident to die in the Great War. Serving in the Royal Navy, John succumbed to scarlet fever on November 10, 1915, while stationed at a naval base. His death highlights the vulnerability of young recruits to disease, which claimed lives far from the frontlines. John's youth and untimely death serve as a stark reminder of the heavy toll the war exacted on families and communities, even far from the battlefields.

The first Calderdale man to lose his life in the war was John Lindley of Ainley Top, Elland. Serving in one of the Yorkshire Regiments, John tragically drowned in Guernsey Harbour on August 14, 1914, mere weeks after the outbreak of the war. His death underscores the dangers faced by soldiers even during peacetime activities or routine deployments. For the community of Calderdale, John's passing was a harbinger of the many losses that would follow in the years to come.

Surprising Statistic of the Great War

Ethel Fearnley, born in Rastrick, was a member of the Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. She holds the sombre distinction of being the first member of the British nursing services to die on active duty during World War I. Ethel succumbed to illness on November 23, 1914, in France, likely due to the harsh conditions and constant exposure to disease that defined life for medical personnel in the war zone. Her sacrifice reflects the critical yet perilous role played by women in supporting the war effort, often underappreciated in historical narratives.



Even at the frontlines, far removed from training bases or hospitals, accidental deaths were a sobering reality. Private George Balmforth of Elland met his end in a tragic accident that underscores the everyday dangers of life at war. While stationed near the River Somme, George drowned after jumping into the river to retrieve a duck he had shot, intending to supplement his and his comrades' rations. This incident, though seemingly mundane, illustrates how ordinary acts could have fatal consequences in a war zone.



Surprising Statistic of the Great War

The early aviators of the Royal Flying Corps and, later, the Royal Air Force faced an extraordinary set of challenges. Flying machines during World War I were primitive and often unreliable, with open cockpits and no parachutes. Engines frequently failed, and structural failures were common. Pilots flew without the modern navigation and safety features we take for granted nowadays, relying solely on maps and visual cues to navigate. Inexperience compounded these dangers; many recruits were sent into the air with only rudimentary training. The statistics paint a grim picture. Of the approximately 10,000 airmen who lost their lives during the war, nearly half died in non-combat incidents. Training accidents were particularly deadly, with crashes occurring due to engine stalls, misjudged landings, or mid-air collisions. The high fatality rate among RFC and RAF personnel serves as a stark reminder of the sacrifices made by those pioneering military aviation.

One of those victims was Reginald Warneford whose uncle was the first vicar of All Saints Church, Salterhebble. Shortly after winning the Victoria Cross, the country's highest award for valour, for destroying one of the seemingly impervious German Zeppelins by the unusual method of dropping bombs on it he was killed while test flying a new aircraft.



Reginald Warneford VC