

Newspaper article by Jim Greenhalf 2nd Apr 2014 for the Telegraph & Argus

Heartbreak as father loses his son in action

In November 29, 1918, after the war was over, Richard Armistead of Bingley wrote to the War Office yet again: "I know that promotion in the TF units has been altered since, but this does not help me forget that a young life, a magnificent specimen of humanity and one who really did not know what fear was, should have given his young life to his Country and should have been so grossly unfairly treated."

This was Richard's last, heart-wrenching letter for he died shortly afterwards. His funeral was reported at length in the local papers in April 1919. He was, in fact, a well-known civil engineer who, in 1878, had been appointed surveyor to the Bingley Improvement Commissioners.

He later became clerk to the authority and served 20 years in the post during which improvements to the High Street were completed, the Technical School, Cottage Hospital and new railway station were provided and the Mechanics' Institute was converted to public use.

He had established offices in Booth Street, Bradford, and appeared in arbitration cases on behalf of Bradford Corporation. The account of the funeral includes a long list of local worthies from Bingley and Bradford; names included Hanson, Priestman, Colonel Hastings, Briggs, Platts, Priestley. The report ends: "Mr Armistead leaves a widow and two sons. There were three sons of the marriage, all of whom have seen service in the war. The youngest son, Second Lieutenant Tom Armistead, was reported missing in 1917, and is presumed to have died, no news of him having since been received. The other two sons have now been demobilised."

The three sons of Richard Armistead were born in Bingley in 1890 (James Henry), 1892 (Richard Burnie) and 1895 (Tom Elsworth). All three boys were educated at Lancing College and the two older boys had Oxbridge places.

When the war broke out in August 1914, Tom had just left school but was commissioned in the Bradford Territorials in September as a 19-year-old 2nd Lieutenant.

After training in Selby and Gainsborough, Tom crossed to France with his Battalion on April 16, 1915, and saw heavy fighting throughout that year in Belgium.

On July 1, 1916, with half-an-hour's notice, his Battalion attacked Thiepval at 4pm, having waited in crowded trenches all day with the cacophony of battle raging around them and seeing the wounded stream back to the Regimental Aid Posts.

The Battalion attacked Thiepval again on September 3. If it were possible, this was an even more disastrous day than the July attack. For several days beforehand, the men had struggled to bring up supplies across the marshy ground of the River Ancre in summer rainstorms and in view of the enemy guns.

The attack began at 5.10am, the men having assembled in trenches in the darkness. The Battalion history takes up Tom's story: "Lt Armistead, one of the most fearless and reliable officers the Battalion ever had, scrawled the following message at 5.40am: 'We got part of the front wave into the enemy line. But the rest of the front wave had stuck in front of the enemy wire, and then retired, leaving only

a few scattered men in the front line, who have had to come back. I am trying to collect men into the front parallel, but there are very few.”

Tom had stayed in the enemy line until the position was hopeless. His message was the first to be received at Battalion Headquarters at 6.10am and by 7am, the attack was over.

There were numerous casualties among the Bradford Territorials, and 55 died that morning. They included Arthur Ackroyd of the King's Head Hotel, Westgate; Fred Barraclough, husband of Annie at 13 Amberley Street; 18-year old Harry Rain whose parents came from the Island of Bute; James Leslie Oddy, son of the late Sir James Oddy MP.

Many of those who died now lie side-by-side, irrespective of rank or station in life, in cemeteries nearby, such as Blighty Valley, Aveluy Wood, Connaught and Mill Road, but the majority have no grave and are remembered on the Thiepval Memorial.

Later that autumn, Tom was invalided home with synovitis of the knee. During his recuperation he was awarded the Military Cross in the Gazette on January 1, 1917, in recognition of the outstanding work he had done during the Thiepval battles of the year before.

When he was fit to return to the front, the Regiment placed him in 2/6th Battalion which was going out to France for the first time.

In one of his letters, Tom's father wrote, "He returned to France early in February 1917 and had the badges of Acting Captain on his uniform. He was posted to 2/6th WYR who had gone out the month before and I believe was the only officer in the Battalion who had seen any fighting."

This is what gave rise to Richard Armistead's 'battle' with the War Department. The strength of feeling pouring out through his pen is acute. Not only was his youngest son to die as a 2nd Lieutenant, but his final pay settlement was to take no account of his period as Captain of a Company.

His father wrote: "He was a fine specimen of humanity and acknowledged by both officers and men of the first and second sixth West Yorks to be a first-rate officer.

"Yet on joining the 2/6th he had to take off two stars and to come down to 2Lt, after fighting for two years. I know he felt this keenly and I cannot help thinking that he has been badly treated and I do not think this is through any fault of his commanding officers.

"I shall be obliged if you can tell me to whom to apply for the Military Cross which was granted to him when he was with the 1/6th West Yorks."

Tom was posted 'Missing in Action' on May 3, 1917. At 2.10am the men of the 2/6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment met the guides who were to lead them into the front line trenches for an attack later that morning.

Their task, in conjunction with other battalions from their Brigade, was the attack on a section of the Hindenburg Line including the capture of the village of Bullecourt. By this time the army had devised a much more sensible battle plan. During the period when men moved into the trenches the British artillery would cease fire for 27 minutes to enable the attacking groups to complete their tasks. Brigade was informed that they were in position at 3.15am.

At 3.30am, the German artillery put down a heavy barrage across No Man's Land which gradually spread down the line, and at 3.45am the British artillery commenced their bombardment of the line to be attacked with the troops moving forward at the same time.

The artillery fire was intended to keep the enemy in their shelters, but as the West Yorks men moved forwards they soon lost direction in the thick smoke from the artillery fire. One Company managed to enter the village but were not seen again. Tom was also lost.

On February 10, 1918, the War Office wrote to R Armistead Esq, 10 Booth Street, Bradford: "Sir, I am directed to inform you that it is regretted that no further report has been received concerning 2Lt TEA Armistead, 6 Btn WYR, reported missing on 03.05.1917.

"It is regretted that it will consequently be necessary for the Army Council to consider whether they must not now conclude that this officer is dead. Before this course of action is taken, however, I am to ask if you will confirm the fact that no further news of him has reached you.

"I am to add that the official action taken as a result of the decision would consist in the winding up of the office's accounts and the removal of his name for the Army List. His name would not appear again in the official casualty lists."

By this time Richard Armistead had received eye-witness accounts of his son's disappearance and replied: "Lt Armistead was in command of 'C' Company and had led his men through the barbed wire on the East side of Bullecourt when he discovered a German machine gun enfilading the trench they were to occupy.

"He called for three bombers, Bannister, Brook and Drew, and went over with them only. They put the machine gun out of action and he rushed the position, armed only with his revolver and was shot at close range by a German rifle and was seen to fall.

"His men dropped into a shell hole and later retired, except Bannister who was also shot. This information is given by Brook. Although he was in command of a company on May 3 he was posted missing as a 2Lt. Since that date he has been gazetted a Lieutenant."

The response of the War Office to this final statement appears brutal: "£90.17.9d due as pay. His promotion was not published in London Gazette until 10.07.1917 and consequently has no financial effect."

Father's reply is forthright: "I take very serious objection to the delay in granting this officer his promotion. He went to the front as 2Lt in April 1915. He was fighting for two years and then was missing at Bullecourt on 3 May 1917, still as a 2Lt although for a great part of this time he had been acting Captain.

"Then you come out with a belated Gazette notice on 10 July promoting him Lieutenant after he had been missing for two months. He was a man over six feet high and had the reputation of being a first rate officer. I cannot understand why he suffered this neglect and I am afraid I never shall.

"There were several senior to him who had never seen active service. In the Bullecourt show he was not 'Acting Captain', he was only Acting Company Commander for someone else and so went out of this life as a 2Lt after fighting for over two years.

"I know that promotion in the TF units has been altered since, but this does not help me forget that a young life, a magnificent specimen of humanity and one who really did not know what fear was, should have given his young life to his Country and should have been so grossly unfairly treated."

Almost exactly 12 months after Tom died, his older brother Major R B Armistead wrote for the last time and acknowledged receipt of Tom's Plaque ('Death Penny')

and Scroll and says: "My father has recently died so that the next of kin is now my mother."

R B Armistead continued to serve in France and was himself awarded the Military Cross. The citation reads: "This officer was in command of a company which captured an important fortified position of the enemy.

"When the objective was reached he went forward to the most advanced posts to superintend the work of consolidation, and he inspired all ranks with cheerful confidence, which enabled them to withstand the heavy enemy shelling. During the whole operation his behaviour was a fine example to everyone in the battalion."

Major Armistead went on to become Lieutenant Colonel of his Battalion.

The third brother, James Henry suffered a very serious wound in July 1916, when shrapnel pierced his tin helmet and took away part of his skull. He made a remarkable recovery and was able to complete his law studies at the Inner Temple in London and set up practice back in Bradford.

Both brothers were to marry and have families, but our thoughts are with their father, an angry, heartbroken man who must have been full of admiration and wonder for his soldier sons.

Bradford's World War 1 Group is based at the Mechanics' Institute Library on Kirkgate, Bradford.