

Gloucester Rugby Football Club: A Place in Military History

'They played for Gloucester and fought for their Country'

Written by Martin Davies

From its inception in 1873, the players of the Gloucester Football Club have consistently answered their country's call and have been involved in at least three major wars – the Second South African War (Boer War) (1899-1902), the Great War (1914-1918) and the Second World War (1939-1945). In total, thirty-one players have made the supreme sacrifice whilst serving their country while at least thirteen gallantry awards have been won.

The Boer War was the first conflict which had an impact on the British civilian population. The British Army structure in 1899 meant that the regular professional battalions were supported by volunteer battalions. The latter were civilian-soldiers who held civilian jobs, but were called upon to support the regular battalions and bring them up to strength during time of conflict. In 1899, the local Gloucestershire Regiment had its 1st Battalion (Regulars) stationed in India and its 2nd Battalion (Regulars) at Aldershot. On the outbreak of the war, the 1st Battalion immediately sailed for South Africa and was involved in a serious action at Nicholson's Nek which resulted in the 1st Battalion ceasing to exist as a credible fighting force. The War Office immediately mobilised the 2nd Battalion which was brought up to strength with reservists from the 3rd Battalion. The latter contained two Gloucester players, Arthur Mills (Hooker) and Fred Goulding (Hooker). Both men fought throughout the campaign, both men were taken prisoners of war while Fred Goulding was also wounded. The latter frequently wrote home to his wife in Gloucester who passed his letters onto *The Citizen* for publication. The newspaper carried a regular feature entitled '*Letters from the Front*' and Fred Goulding, well known as a rugby player, became well known as a 'correspondent' who provided an account of his experiences in South Africa.

By 1901 the British Army required a further 5,000 mounted soldiers, the Yeomanry, to cover the vast distances in South Africa and to shoot and fight like infantry men. In January 1901, the War Office called for volunteers one of whom was Alexander (Alec) Spence (Gloucester, Wing Forward). Spence was a 26 year old who had joined the Gloucester Club in the previous season, playing for Gloucester A. In the following 1900-01 season, Spence played all his games for the 1st XV, playing seven games before joining up. After passing the riding and shooting tests required to enter the Yeomanry, he was given a brief period of training before arriving in South Africa. However within four months, Alec Spence was dead, not from battle inflicted wounds but from enteric fever which, due to the harsh and alien environment, the European soldiers were particularly susceptible.

Prior to the Boer War, the British Army was considered a refuge for scoundrels but with the call up of the Reservists and Volunteers, the character of the army changed in public perception as the latter men were ordinary citizens. In particular both Mills and Goulding helped to change the perception of the British Army for the people of Gloucester and this became a 'dress rehearsal' for the Great War, the biggest conflict ever to beset Great Britain.

Within days of Britain declaring war on Germany on 4 August 1914, the British Government, following Lord Kitchener's declaration, called for volunteers to create a New Army of a million men. Within two weeks practically all of the players from the Gloucester Club had enlisted, the majority of

the men joining the 5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment. Since the New Army would be a volunteer army, conscription not being introduced until January 1916, eligible men were shunned in the street if they did not sign up. By 2 September 1914, the Gloucester Club announced the cancellation of all fixtures whilst the current conflict lasted and *The Citizen* announced that its sporting edition would not be published and that any games played would be considered as unpatriotic and would not be reported in its pages.

Several players had previously been in the army and as reservists were immediately recalled to the Colours; this call up included once more Fred Goulding. By Christmas 1914, William Hancock (Gloucester A, Full Back) and Bernard 'Peter' Roach (Gloucester A, Centre) would be dead although Cornelius Carleton (Gloucester, Gloucestershire, Wing Forward), would have been awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for gallantry in the field – Carleton began the war as a Lieutenant but would finish as a Lieutenant-Colonel, the commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, Welsh Regiment. Meanwhile in Britain, the new volunteers were being trained in the ways of the army, of musketry and bayonet fighting and in the first few months of 1915, the first of the new recruits travelled to France, often to replace gaps which had appeared within the British Army caused by the ferocity of the new form of mechanised warfare. High explosive shells, shrapnel barrages, gas attacks and machine gun barrages would obliterate units of men on an unprecedented scale.

From a Gloucester Football Club perspective, the 23 July 1916 would be the most disastrous. Although the Somme Offensive was three weeks old, the British Army had advanced only 2 miles and before them, along the Albert-Bapaume Road, stood the fortified village of Pozières. On the morning of the 23 July, the 1st Australian Division was to attack from the south-east simultaneously with the British 48th (South Midland) Division from the north-west. The 48th Division consisted of several brigades, one of which was the 145 Brigade which was composed of four battalions including the 5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment. At 6.30 am the Gloucestershires left their trenches but the preliminary artillery barrage had not been totally effective, leaving several German machine gun emplacements untouched. As the British Official History states *"In the 144 Brigade, the 1/6th Gloucestershire was literally mown down....[and]....these gallant men were soon overwhelmed.....The 1/5th Gloucestershire, the left battalion of the 145 Brigade fared little better."* Amongst the dead, whose bodies were never found were Sydney Sysum (Gloucester, Centre), Syd Millard (Gloucester, Second Row) and James Griffiths (Gloucester A, Second Row). Amongst the wounded were Alec Lewis (Gloucester, Centre), Percy Simmons (Gloucester A, No.8) and William Pearce (Gloucester, Wing Forward/Wing). Alec Lewis would go on to win the Military Cross and Bar (a second Military Cross) for gallantry whilst William Pearce would be killed in 1917 and Percy Simmons in 1918. In the actions around Pozières, Alec Lewis's two younger brothers, Tom and Melville Lewis, both rugby players, were listed as missing. As a family tragedy, Sydney Sysum's sister, Eliza, was married to another of the Lewis brothers. The bodies of the rugby players listed above were never found and identified and all are commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the Somme, 1916.

By the end of the Great War, twenty-two players who had represented the Gloucester Football Club were dead - Henry Berry, Henry Collins, Ernest Cummings, George Griffiths, James Griffiths, Ronald Grist, Walter Hancock, William Henderson, Henry Lane, Syd Millard, William Parham, William Pearce, Trevor Powell, John Price, Alfred Purton, Bernard Roach, Arthur Russell, Arthur Saunders, Percy Simmons, Syd Sysum, Thomas Truman and Edwin Wootton; all of the men who died in the war,

served with the British Army. Although all of the players were brave, some of them had their bravery recognised – Cornelius Carleton (Distinguished Service Order), Gilbert Collett (Distinguished Service Order), William Egerton (Mentioned in Despatches), Henry Lane (Distinguished Conduct Medal), Frank Stout (Military Cross), Percy Stout (Distinguished Service Order), Alec Lewis (Military Cross and Bar), Arthur Saunders (Military Medal) and William Washbourne (Military Medal)

With the onset of the Second World War, the British Government immediately introduced conscription, having learnt the lesson from the Great War. Initially the Government banned all rugby and football games, but rapidly relented and as a result the Gloucester Football Club continued with a series of fixtures, a lot against service sides, until April 1941. These games maintained both civilian morale and an air of normality to create the impression that despite enemy action, life in Britain continued as per normal. However at the start of the 1941-42 season, the Gloucester Club ceased playing matches due to the difficulty in obtaining regular players who were usually only available when home on leave. The rugby club Committee continued to organise games at Kingsholm, for example the England versus Wales 'International' between Service sides in 1943 which attracted a crowd of 12,000 spectators and raised £2,000 for charity.

Eight Gloucester players would be killed in the Second World War and, as a reflection of the nature of the warfare, six would serve with the Royal Air Force and two with the Royal Navy. The players were Peter Brown, Clifford Dibden, Nigel Gidney, William Hughes, Sydney Mabbett, Fred Mustoe, William Stephens and Christopher 'Kit' Tanner. As with the Great War, some of the brave deeds performed by the players would be officially recognised – Charles A'Bear (Military Medal), Peter Hordern (Air Force Cross) and Kit Tanner (Albert Medal).

All of the above players, in an age devoid of the Internet and television, were household names during their playing careers and their loss would have been deeply felt by the people of Gloucester. The story of Gloucester Rugby Football Club's place in the military history of Great Britain is complex and detailed and it is planned that a full account of this will be published in 2012 in a book entitled "*Gloucester Rugby Football Club: A Place in Military History. 'They played for Gloucester and fought for their Country'*" The research for this is currently underway and the story will be based on contemporary sources including local newspapers. However personal accounts of players' experiences would greatly enhance this story – if you are a relative of a player, not just those mentioned above and have information relating to their service experiences, it would be greatly appreciated if you would share that information and contact me at martin191418@hotmail.co.uk - making sure that you identify the player. I will respond in due course to discuss the details.