



Henry Cecil Clarke Private (L-Cpl), 40680, 23rd Northumberland Fusiliers (4th Tyneside Scottish)

The experience of Pte Henry Cecil Clarke reveals a further, yet often overlooked element of the World War One experience: The Trench Raid. Life on the Western Front is stereotypically presented as one of stalemated and inactivity. However, this image is misleading. Many dynamics functioned and developed during the course of the Great War, which meant that the war was in fact a constantly moving conflict, especially in terms of tactics and technologies, despite the fact that men remained 'dug-in' along hundreds of miles of defences. The trench raid (usually carried out at night) was one such feature, designed specifically to keep men sharp, as well as providing a vital function in gathering information. Intelligence on enemy trenches, positions, and numbers would be gathered, and often raiders would try to take prisoners, who could be interrogated to reveal information on forthcoming enemy attacks and movements. On the 11th February 1917, Clarke took his place in such a raiding party.

This was a far cry from the Manchester and Liverpool District Bank, in Sedbergh, where Clarke had been employed in civilian life. He had studied at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School for two years, his official leaving date being recorded as Christmas 1906. When war broke out Clarke was only 18 and had thus not joined up for service in the 'short' continental war that was purportedly going to be over by Christmas. Things were clearly different by April 1916, and Clarke enlisted in the West Riding Regiment. In July he was sent to France, and soon afterwards was transferred to the 23rd Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers (Tyneside Scottish). This unit had been devastated by fighting on the Somme (1st July 1916) and men like Clarke, who had only been in the army a matter of months, were brought in to get the Battalion back to fighting strength. The reinforced Battalion took up position at Erquinghem, near Armentieres, and, until the end of the year, trench raids of various scales were conducted. General Sir Henry Plummer personally congratulated the 23rd Battalion on the outcome of a raid carried out on the 30th September. In October the weather turned wet, and as Christmas approached it grew steadily worse. Raids continued, but an increasing amount of time had to be given over to 'trench fatigues' repairing the trenches, dugouts and barbed wire. Clarke wrote home during the winter of 1916, and confirmed the poor conditions, yet he also revealed the unbreakable spirit of the British 'Tommy':

"I am quite well and not having such a bad time under the circumstances. The trenches are very wretched in wet weather, but we make the best of things and keep smiling"

(Lance-Cpl. Harry

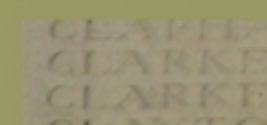
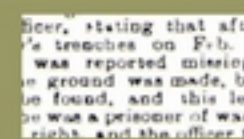
Clarke)

The New Year thus saw Clarke settling into a unit that was becoming proficient in trench raiding. He must also have been promoted at the end of 1916, so he began 1917 as a Lance Corporal.

In late January, the battalion began training for another raid South East of Armentieres, which was to be the largest undertaken by the division. The party, numbering over 250 men including Clarke, practiced behind the lines in mock-up trenches. On the 11th February, at 10:30p.m., the men were organized into four companies (left to right 'A', 'D', 'C', & 'B' companies) and moved across No-Mans land towards the enemy trenches. It is not known which company Clarke was in, each one having varying degrees of success. 'A' Company, despite meeting heavy fire, made it into the enemy trenches. Trench dugouts were bombed, but German machine-gun fire forced a retreat. 'D' Company, again met heavy fire, and was unable to enter the German trenches before withdrawing. 'C' Company was the most successful. They got as far as the German support trenches, killing and bombing the enemy en-route, and withdrawing with 7 German prisoners. In addition, with the assistance of a contingent of Royal Engineers they succeed in blowing up a German ammunition store and a company Head Quarters. Meanwhile, 'B' Company was pinned down by heavy artillery fire and forced to withdraw. Casualties numbered 1 officer missing, 6 officers wounded, 12 Other Ranks (ORs) killed, 13 ORs missing, and 37 ORs wounded. Clarke was one of the 13 ORs missing.

According to a letter written to his family by an officer of Clarke's regiment, a thorough search was made for him but no trace was found. The letter held out hope that perhaps he has been taken prisoner. His comrades expressed affection and respect for Clarke, describing him as a "splendid soldier and a very efficient NCO." Similar sentiments of affection were expressed by Queen Elizabeth School in the Christmas (1917) magazine, which remembered Clarke's interest in games, and especially football. The surviving raiders were steeped in congratulations for the raid. Medals were awarded in large numbers including 2 Distinguished Service Orders, 5 Military Crosses, a bar to the Distinguished Conduct Medal of Sgt. A.F. Jackson, 3 Distinguished Conduct Medals, a bar to the Military Medal of Pte. Wearmouth, and 12 other Military Medals. Unfortunately L-Cpl Henry Cecil Clarke was not there to share in any of the glory. When no word was received from him it became clear that he was not a prisoner, but had been killed during the raid. His body was never found, and he is remembered on Ploegsteert Memorial.

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Links

Henry Cecil Clarke's entry on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website,
http://www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=1641711