



John Wilfred HUGGONSON

Private, 1934, 1/4th Battalion, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (Culham College Company)

John Wilfred Huggonson's experience reveals yet more new aspects about the First World War, which highlights the multi-faceted nature of the conflict. Through his experience we learn about the mining activity that was undertaken by both sides during the war. The awe that these mines unleashed when they were blown up was stupendous, and Huggonson was witness to one such explosion. In contrast, the circumstances of his death reveal a very different killer of the war: the sniper.

In June 1915 Huggonson's unit the 1/4th Battalion Ox and Bucks were in the south-eastern sector of the Ypres Salient at a place called Ploegstreet Wood. The Royal Engineers were mining in this area when it was reported that the Germans were also suspected of counter-mining close by. It was decided that the British mine, in an area named Birdcage, should be made-ready to be blown-up at a moments notice. The Ox's and Buck's helped to carry 5 tons of gunpowder to the mine head in readiness. Such mining activity became commonplace throughout the war, one of the most famous mines to be exploded being the Hawthorn mine, which preceded the Battle of the Somme on 1st July 1916. In Huggonson's experience it was the 6th June 1915 when it was decided that the Birdcage mine should be blown to prevent the Germans discovering it. Captain Conybeare with the 1/4th Battalion Ox and Buck's described what happened when the mine was exploded:

"Everything was ready, and we waited anxiously. There was perfect stillness, save for an occasional shot from the Germans..At 10:20 a.m. the ground 150 yards in front of us gave a steady heave, and then suddenly rose something between 120 and 150 feet into the air. There was very little noise – only a sort of swishing sound – made by the earth as it rose and fell. Our own parapet, on the other hand, rocked as if there was an earthquake."

Huggonson must also have witnessed the awesome power unleashed when the mine went up. The Germans, most probably expecting a follow-up infantry attack, responded with heavy artillery fire. The Infantry, however, had no orders to advance. Nevertheless the Germans remained on edge, and began shelling and sniping at the British every day. The Ox's and Buck's had to live with these constant threats, and it was immediately behind the trenches at a place dubbed 'Hyde Park Corner' where Huggonson was killed on 18th June 1915. The war diary for that date is painfully sparse and impersonal

"18th – Very Hot. Nothing to report. A good deal of shelling on Trench Line. 1 Man in 'B' Coy Killed"

Huggonson was the unlucky 'B' Company man. He was shot around 8:30p.m, the offending round being attributed to a snipers bullet or a stray shot. Given the sniping activity occurring in the run up to Huggonson's death the former explanation seems the most likely. Within 30 minutes of the death his platoon commander penned a letter to John's father describing what had happened. It read:

"Your son was shot just half-an-hour ago. He could have suffered no pain. We did everything that was possible and the doctor was there a few minutes after he was shot, but he never regained consciousness" (Lieut. Hugh J. Deacon)

Huggonson was just 23 years of age, and had been victim of that unseen killer: the sniper.

Huggonson stands as one of the most academically brilliant 'old boys' that the school was to lose in the First World War. He was born on 26th May 1892 and spent four years at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School between 1905 and 1909. As a young man he was very much involved in the local Leck community in which he lived. He was a member of the Leck church choir, and took part in choral solo completions at the Kendal Festival. Moreover he was an active cricketer in the Kirby Lonsdale team. Upon leaving QES he continued his education at the Storey Institute, Lancaster, studying manual teaching, which seems to have kindled a passion in him for teaching. He subsequently spent time teaching at Grantham, before securing a place at the teacher-training institute of Culham Collage. Had it not been for the war he would have completed his training there in June 1915. In the event he had been killed by that date. When war did erupt, Huggonson did his duty and joined the Culham Collage Company of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. He spent the winter training at Chelmsford, and was sent to France with his regiment on 29th March 1915. The Battalion landed at Boulogne and was sent to the Western Front. At the front Huggonson regularly wrote home to say that he had been involved in heavy fighting, yet he remained in good sprits, which was indicative of his cheerful nature. A well liked man by all the officers and men in the regiment and in the Leck community, he was described as a man who would be "much missed." His potential as a soldier also seems to have been considerable, as his platoon commander wrote that:

"I feel his loss doubly, as I always considered him one of the best men in my platoon"

However, like many of the QES 'old boys' his potential was cut short by the war. John's brother and brother-in-law also took part in the war, serving with the 4th Border Regiment in India and Burma. Huggonson's body was taken to Hyde Park Corner cemetery where he is remembered today.

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Links

John Wilfred Huggonson's entry on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website, http://www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=94444

Click here and you can see a film of the explosion of the Hawthorn Mine on the Somme on the 1st July 1916. This film was made by Geoffrey Malins, <http://www.firstworldwar.com/today/footage/malins.mo>

Information of World War One Snipers can be found here <http://www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/snipers.htm>