



John William RICHARDSON

Private, A/36150, 4th Battalion Canadian Infantry
(Central Ontario Regiment)

John William Richardson, the final man listed on the Queen Elizabeth School War Memorial, is a figure shrouded in some mystery and scandal. Unfortunately only a limited amount of information about his life and service are known, yet despite these constraints we are still able to sketch a picture of what happened to him

In October 1916 the Somme campaign, which had begun on the 1st July 1916 was still very much active. The fighting had, however, become bogged down, and countless skirmishes took place across the front in an attempt to strengthen the line. In these attacks the dominions played central roles, and, in October 1916 it was the Canadians, and Richardson with them, who were asked to help renew the offensive. The immediate objective of the Canadian Corps was to capture Regina Trench, which could subsequently be used as a 'jumping-off' position for future attacks. The first attempt to secure the position occurred on 1st October 1916, but an inadequate artillery bombardment had left Regina Trench untouched and barbed wire defences intact. Therefore as the men advanced they were cut down by German machine-gun fire. The day was a bitter story of allied defeat, with echoes of the disastrous opening day on the Battle of the Somme. However, following the defeat, new preparations were made for a second attack. Accordingly on the 8th October the 4th Battalion moved into the assembly trenches in readiness for the second attempt. Zero hour was set at 4:50 a.m., when a creeping barrage chaperoned Richardson, and the rest of the 4th Battalion, across no-mans land. This part of the operation was relatively successful despite navigational issues, and few casualties were suffered. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Richardson made it to the wire alive. However, even though initial objectives were reached, wire defences again proved to be untouched by the artillery. The Germans once again used machinegun fire to hold the enemy off. The allies, unable to attack over ground due to the wire, attempted to 'bomb' their way along the front line trenches that they had secured. These attempts expended much of their ammunition, and thus a German counter attack at 1.45 p.m. pushed the Canadian's back to their original starting position. When the 4th Battalion had time to assess the cost it was found that only 220 troops, out of nearly 600, had made it back. Richardson was one of the missing. When no news of Richardson had been received by the following year (12th July 1917) he was presumed dead. Strangely, sometime after this date an isolated grave for Richardson was found. The following was noted on his service record:

"Isolated grave about 4 miles W.S.W. [West South West] of Bapaume"

This is rather mysterious. It is not known who buried him, and the Canadian's obviously had no record of the burial. All that is known for sure is that the discovery confirmed that Richardson had been killed on the 8th October 1916 during the assault on Regina Trench.

Why Richardson came to serve with the Canadian Corps is also a shadowy affaire. He was born in Westmorland on 15th October 1883, the son Irvine Richardson. Irvine was a pillar of the local community, being Kirkby-Lonsdale's Butcher and running a shop on the Main Street. John would have attended Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in the years preceding the turn of the century. Upon leaving he spent some time training in the family business becoming a butcher by trade. In 1906 he married Ellenor Harrison, and it was following this marriage that scandal erupted. What happened is clouded, but it seems that the marriage to Ellenor collapsed. John consequently decided to leave despite the fact that Ellenor was pregnant with his child. He disappeared, and attempts were made by Ellenor's family to track him down, but these failed. It is now apparent that John eventually went to Canada, although it is unclear when. He was later to cite his sister Mrs T.V. Pretty of Leicester as his next of kin, so he may have spent time with her before leaving England. The whole affair was somewhat of a scandal for the age, and it seems that those involved attempted to forget about it and get on with their lives.

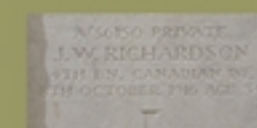
Indeed when war came, and Richardson enlisted at Edmonton on 5th January 1915, he declared that he was not married. Following his enlistment Richardson returned to Shorndiffe in England to train, before being transferred to the 4th Battalion as the first reinforcement draft. Accordingly he sailed aboard the S.S. Eagle Point on 14th June 1915, bound for the front. Once in theatre, Richardson had a very rough time. Within only a few months, on the 14th October 1915, he received a gunshot wound to his right leg as his battalion was stationed in reserve near Hyde Park Corner. The wound, although only 'slight' required hospitalisation of a month, following which Richardson rejoined his unit. He continued his soldiering, but then around the 12th April 1916 he was injured once again when he was literally 'blown up'. At the time the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion were near Dickebush, at an area named "The Bluff." The war diary for the 10th April revealed the perils of the area:

"Enemy very active and aggressive both in sniping and artillery fire. The Huns are using a new form of trench mortar or aerial torpedo which is very effective in blowing down parapets."

It was such artillery, possible Minenwerfer, which caught Richardson, leaving him with severe bruising to his back. As before Richardson was hospitalised for just over a month, before he rejoined the Battalion on 9th May 1916. The next time Richardson was injured, during the attack on Regina Trench, his wounds would be fatal.

The Harrison's hitherto blissfully unaware of the whereabouts of Richardson, now learnt that he had fallen for his country. However, there was little that could now be done. Subsequent attempts form Ellenor to claim a war pension were denied, chiefly because of John's failure to disclose his marriage when he had enlisted. The episode was resigned to a 'skeleton' in the family's closet. Richardson meanwhile was laid to rest in Adanac Military Cemetery, Miraumont. He was also remembered on the Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church, and, of course, Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, remember one of its sons on their memorial.

Click on the images below to enlarge and for more information



Links

John William Richardson's entry on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website, http://www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=183895

John William Richardson's entry on the Veterans Affairs Canada, including his appearance in the Roll of Honour, <http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/remembers/sub.cfm?source=collections/virtualmem/Detail&casualty=183895>

This site by the Imperial War Museum allows you to learn more about the Somme, and see what the Battlefield looks like today. It included sections on Regina Trench, <http://www.iwm.org.uk/server/show/nav.00o003003003007>

For further information on the Canadian's in the First World War and especially their role on the Somme see, <http://www.militarybadges.info/canada/pages/03-1916.htm>

For an informative MA Thesis on the 4th Canadian Infantry Battalion during the First World War please see, <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp05/MQ65199.pdf>