



O Captain My Captain:

The Relationship Between Officers and Enlisted Men in World War One

Susan Thyne, 2006

Advised by Stewart Weaver, Ph.D.

Department of History

While the study of war is generally on a grand scale, soldiers more often remember the war for the experiences with the men next to whom they fought, or the men they followed into battle. As historian Eric Leed has said, “The analysis of war as a social experience and a human phenomenon has been skewed by the historian’s interest in the ‘significant.’”^{1a} Dates, defeats, and victories are significant, but so is the relationship between officers and their men. Indeed, it appears that their experiences together in the First World War subverted this social distinction. By examining the British army, we find an interesting juxtaposition of upper and middle class junior officers and common enlisted men ignoring the social barriers present in peace time, adapting to trench life, and catapulting themselves over the parapet to win the war for their comrades and country. Their personal letters and diaries reveal their true thoughts about each other: that men were willing to follow their officers to the ends of the earth (or the ends of their lives) and officers were moved and motivated by their men’s willingness to fight. Without the relationship that developed, the British army would not have been as successful as it was in fighting the war.

The background of the officers and men is part of what made their relationship unique. Officers belonged to the upper and middle classes, most likely gentlemen; enlisted men were regulars in the British Expeditionary Force, Britain’s army for rapid deployment, or volunteers and conscripts from all walks of life. The two social classes were distinctly different and each possessed a set of characteristics unique unto itself.

The officer class recruited for the war was officially upper class. Prior to the war, all officers in the army were recruited from British society’s elite, and once war broke out, these men continued to serve in higher positions among the senior officer staff. The officers closest to the men, junior officers, are largely remembered as the “Public School Officers” since most received their training in the Officer Training Corps (O.T.C.) at boarding schools. Historian John Keegan sums up the qualities of these men: “Officers had to be gentlemen...though education at one of the public or better grammar schools which ran an O.T.C. was in practice often found sufficient...”^{2a} These broader qualifications for officers opened their ranks to men from the middle class. Many arguments have been made as to why these officers, most coming from the academic world,

could assimilate into the role of commander. Most discussions, however, generally conclude that the competitive spirit and structure of the public schools was so similar to the army’s that there was a natural transition from school to army: “For the British regiment, with its complex and highly individual accretion of traditions, local affinities, annual rituals, inter-company rivalries, fierce autonomy and distinctive name... was an extension, indeed a creation of the Victorian public school system.”^{2b} Although these public school officers could assimilate into army life and structure, they brought a distinctly civilian approach to discipline and built relationships with their men just as they would with schoolmates.

While the officers of the upper class enjoyed the competitive games of the public school system, the newly enlisted men came from a different world. Historian Peter Liddle draws attention to the mistake of categorizing all the new men together: “It may be dubious to put forward an individual pre-1914 soldier as representative of his fellows...because so many factors might distinguish that person from those whom he might otherwise properly represent. Motivation, social background, and military rank are merely some of the variables...”^{3a} Territorials, those men who served in the British Expeditionary Force, mobilized at the beginning of the war served in the reserves, training after work, on weekends, and in the summer. New volunteers left jobs of all sorts (or no job at all; many men were unemployed in the summer of 1914 and found the army an appealing alternative to poverty), as well as wives, families, homes, and other such domestic responsibilities. These volunteers poured into recruiting centers by the thousands, called there by the new Secretary of War, Kitchener, to serve Great Britain. Many joined in groups known as the Pal’s Battalions (the men were promised that those who signed up together would stay together), while many more were complete strangers to one another.⁴

Whether the men knew each other or not, the British armies became one great melting pot of class, society, and geography.

It was almost always a meeting of strangers. It was sometimes a meeting of near foreigners...When nicely raised young men from West Country vicarages or South Coast watering-places came face-to-face with forty Durham miners, Yorkshire furnacemen, Clydeside riveters, the two sides found that they could scarcely understand each other’s speech.^{2c}

Despite unfamiliar dialects, a common cause united the army, and while the collision of these two worlds was a large factor in determining the relationship between men and officers, it must be remembered that the worlds came together in the close confines of the trench. In this maze of earth, men lived, worked, ate, rested, fought, and died. The trench, therefore, created a backdrop for the melting pot, an entirely new world for each and every man, and a new order by which to live.

The trench, for which the First World War is chiefly remembered, was home to the men for four years. Any account of the war includes a description of the trench system, the maze of ditches that both protected and trapped soldiers and brought the war to a stalemate. However, when Liddle describes the trenches, he cautions against the precise definition: "It is unwise to generalize about conditions in front-line trenches because so much would depend upon the geography, the season, the weather, the degree of military activity."^{3b} However, it is true that the trenches were typically six feet deep and the same in width. Sandbags were stacked brick-like as a front wall above the opening, and a firestep allowed for observation or the launching of an attack. Trenches did not continue in a straight line for very long; a zigzag pattern developed to minimize the effect of a direct hit in a trench. Dugouts in the side of the trench offered protection and a place to rest, and second and third lines were connected to the front by communication trenches that ran perpendicularly.

Ideas about the impact of trench warfare are plentiful, but A. E. Ashworth's research has drawn much attention. In examining the effects of the trench, he notes several points, the first being that "the physical structure of the trench ensured that the activities of the ordinary soldier, for some part at least, were not visible to their officers... [This] ensured that the front-line soldier was protected against over vigorous surveillance by his officers."^{5a} This point is often overlooked by the casual observer and must be remembered when examining first-hand accounts of interaction between enlisted men and officers. A high degree of trust must develop in such situations when a superior cannot always keep watch. At the same time, the subordinate must be instilled with a sense of duty in order for the integrity of the system to remain intact.

In addition to trench structure, Ashworth's other point regards morale. The war was supposed to be the Great Adventure, but entrenchment ironically immobilized the armies shortly after mobilization. Officers were to keep their men motivated by instilling a fighting spirit in them and keeping them in the offensive mindset. While there was a considerable schism between senior staff officers and the front-line, Ashworth points out that "one might expect the officer, other ranks dichotomy to have...significance in the trenches. However, this was not absolutely so...Combatant officers together with other ranks shared a situation of danger in the front line."^{5b} Perhaps the sense of duty the soldiers felt came from the fact that they were not facing the peril of the trench alone and instead their superiors, the junior officers, knew exactly what the men faced. This common environment alone would help to raise morale. Between the development of the trenches and the origins of the men serving in the army, we begin to see the foundations of the relationship between men and officers.

Fundamental to the relationship was the way in which

officers viewed their men and vice versa. Before a man had to prove himself or his worth, he simply had to be in the trenches. There, amidst the dirt and death, relationships were simple. Historian John Baynes, who himself served during the war, studied a British battalion and points to the basic nature of the war:

The main cause of this wonderful relationship between good officers and their men in the trenches was that all the trappings of life were removed, and the real worth of an individual was revealed. All the aspects of normal life which divide men from each other became of secondary importance...where a man came from and where he might go after the war was of little account; wealth, background, and education only mattered in as far as they had fitted a man to play his part in the structure of the battalion; whether he was a saint or a sinner nobody cared, but only that a man could do his job.⁶

While each man was aware of social status in peacetime, the trench eliminated social barriers and revealed each man's true worth.

The writings of men and officers in the war help further illuminate their relationship. Both officers and men offered high praise to those they deemed worthy, which in most cases, was all with whom they came in contact. Second Lt. Robert Wallace McConnell wrote to his father that "the men are all topping fellows,"^{7a} while another second lieutenant, Lionel Sotheby, wrote in his diary that "the ordinary Tommie is a most extraordinary fellow...It can be said, however, with absolute truth that he is the most wonderful, the enduring, and the most devil may care human being in existence."^{8a} The sentiment is shared by Captain Ivar Campbell who wrote, "There is one thing cheering. The men of the battalion...are cheery. Sometimes, back in billets, I hate the men...but in a difficult time they show up splendidly."^{7b} Similar entries in journals and letters by officers can be found in reference to their men. Generally, the men were perceived as good, willing fighters who put up with the worst to join the war effort. An excellent observation of officers comes from John Gibbons who served as a private during the war. In his book he writes, "As it is, from the War-time private's point of view the officer's quality chiefly comes out in the actual fighting, and I should have said that in the Line the officers on the whole were slightly better than ourselves."^{9a} Later, Gibbons writes, in a passage that seems to mirror Baynes' idea that a man's worth was judged by the kind of job he did in the field, that

...we were more or less friends with our sergeants, some men more so and some men less; in general if the private soldier did his very easy job fairly properly and did not get the name for any too obvious dodging of duties and letting down his neighbors, then a great deal would be forgiven him, and his relations with his non-commissioned officers would be quite fairly decent.^{9b}

While Gibbons' description of his officers is not as colorful as the officers' opinions of their men, it certainly displays the same sentiment: unexpected admiration for each other.

Although the trenches subverted the peacetime social hierarchy, the backgrounds of both men and officers affected their behavior. In commenting on his captain, Gibbons wrote, "I believe that normally he was a solicitor with a suburban practice, where opportunities for self-expression would presumably be rare."^{9c} Here, the war allowed the upper and middle classes to break free from the restraints placed on them by social norms and expectations; in the trenches, an officer

could live up to his potential amongst his men as long as he maintained discipline. Officers also noted that social class influenced the attitudes of the men. Lt. Hugh Butterworth wrote home to his colleagues that the men “will go like lambs as long as they’ve got an officer with them. The curious thing is that in civilian life they’ve probably cursed us as plutocrats, out here they fairly look to us.”^{7c} For many officers, it was not just the opportunities to lead their men that brought them to the realization that their men saw the world differently. In censoring their men’s letters, the officers had an eye-opening experience that revealed the lives from which the men came. On censoring, John Manwaring wrote, “What an insight into human nature a day in the Censor’s office gives one. Here one touches as it were upon the fringe of human emotion, one reads the thoughts of those with whom one would never come in contact.”^{10a} By reading his men’s letters, the officer further connects with his men. Manwaring understood that neither he nor his men would be the same after the war and being exposed to other parts of society. He further wrote,

Oh, the many sides of life that lie in these soldiers’ letters! The pathos of the men whose dear ones are lying ill at home; messages to children they have never seen and may never see; words of comfort and hope to mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, wives and sweethearts... Truly one dips below the surface of life, and we who have seen all this can never be the same careless pleasure-seekers again.^{10b}

Regardless of whether social backgrounds were apparent in how men acted, the trench brought a level of equality unparalleled in British society.

The trench may have deemphasized class structure, but at the same time, upper class officers helped to foster a sense of equality. Leed theorizes that:

...in this war those sons of the bourgeoisie who were initially defined by their idealistic expectations became familiar with activities and human relationships that were wholly unfamiliar to them...but perhaps the most significant effect of the social experience of war was the diminution of both the guilt and the romanticism with which morally uncomfortable sons of the bourgeoisie had formerly regarded their social inferiors.^{1b}

In war, class conflict was no longer an issue. What mattered was the will to succeed.

Surviving trench warfare was not the only goal, nor was it necessarily the main goal; winning the war had supreme importance. Officers received training in keeping up men’s spirits and in boosting morale, but the ultimate goal was getting men over the parapet in an attack. Here lay the heart of the relationship between men and officers: enlisted soldiers had to be willing to follow their officer onto the battlefield. With their officers as their ultimate inspiration, the men of the British army were willing to leave their trenches and bring the army to success. Keegan characterizes the leadership as more important than the fellowship between ordinary soldiers and argues that

...self-confidence and credulity were certainly present, and powerfully effective at persuading the Pals to jump the parapet. But to emphasize the populist character of the Kitchener armies is to minimize the importance which leadership played in taking it into battle. And arguments can be found to suggest that leadership – conscious, principled, exemplary – was of higher quality and greater military significance in the First World War, at least in the British army, than before or since.^{2d}

Gibbons cites this model of leadership as part of his reason

for not wanting to be more than a private: “[the officers] had an outward and visible standard of courage that I think was higher than our own. As a coward, I could just manage to do as I was told and to keep myself from running; I do not think that I could have managed the responsibility of other men’s lives or the standing up by myself.”^{9d} This admiration for the job the officers accomplished carried a soldier far. Keegan cites an officer’s opinion on the criterion for a successful officer: “Were they or were they not braver? That was your criterion...For the act of being brave compelled the utilization of the whole reserve of moral force that lay in a man...every battalion had its own little core of officers around which the battalion clung. Wounds or sickness might get them but sure enough they’d return...”^{2e}

The admiration men had for their officers’ courage was returned by the officers in their admiration for their men’s persistence. One officer wrote that men coming off of the battlefield had a certain look about them, and it was understood from where they had come. Beyond their physical appearance, though, “a triumphant smile on their haggard faces tells of a duty well and truly done. They have cut their notch still a bit higher, and have earned their rest, as well as their place on the scroll of fame.”^{7d} Officers were quick to give credit where credit was due. Sotheby similarly praises his men after an attack: “It was truly wonderful...Not a man hung back, all charged as far as possible. A finer set of men than these, and mostly Reservists, could not be found anywhere.”^{8b} In these short descriptions of battles, officers rarely wrote of their own courage or deeds. Instead, their letters and journals relate their admiration for their men independent from their own leadership.

In the privacy of correspondence, officers doled out their highest praise and deeply personal feelings for their men. One captain wrote of possibly changing companies, but both his superior officer and his servant did not want to work with anyone else; the captain was pleased to learn that “evidently my love of men is not wasted here. I think I know the ways and peculiarities of every man of mine; it surprises them, and they like it and work well for it.”^{7e} Another captain gives similarly high praise to his men: “What impresses and moves me above all is the amazing faith, patience and courage of the men. To me it is not a sort of looking-down-on but rather a looking-up-to appreciation of them. I pray and pray and am afraid! – they go quietly and heroically on. God bless them and make me less inferior to them...”^{7f} One would be hard pressed to find an instance of an officer making such a statement in any context but private writings. Furthermore, Sotheby writes of being removed from his men by a promotion to command several companies for almost two weeks but is uninterested in continuing: “...I have no wish to be anything than a second Lieut. out here – one is part of the men themselves then, and that is what I like.”^{8c} Unable to display their admiration and affection for their men in the trench, the officers’ writings become our best source for understanding their true feelings for their men.

But was it only admiration and the primitive nature of the trench that helped the relationship develop? Certainly not; the officer was paternalistic, but even more so, he was a Christ-like figure. In support of this, many historians cite a prominent passage by Donald Hankey from an essay for the Spectator in which he refers to the ideal leader in the context of being the

soldier's Christ.^{2c} Officers walked the same ground as the men, lived with the same danger, and yet took the time to make sure even the simplest comforts were provided. Men did not simply admire their officers; they worshipped and exalted them, and for this, the men were more willing to follow their officers onto the battlefield.

Other hopes of a utopian world extending beyond the trenches arose. Here, where every man was equal, the men and officers could be comfortable in their relationships since they were necessary for survival, not merely for military structure. Leed cites the socialist F.H. Keeling, who believed that "soldiering was a ritual that he celebrated as a kind of civil religion to be prized precisely because it was the antithesis of the privacy, individuality, and family-centeredness of civilian life."^{1c} Keeling goes so far as to call the trench-phenomenon "communistic." The sentiment was not confined to socialists alone, but rather it was supported by concurrent social change in Britain.

A rising public literacy and an expanded role for public opinion in government also played their roles. For some an expectation arose that when the working-class Tommys and the upper-class Nigels fought together for England there would be social egalitarianism as well. Despite differences in class, ethnicity, and background, the comradeship of a volunteer army engaged in the great cause of national honor would create an almost utopian social world, or so the hopes went.¹¹

Regardless of postwar social movements, we can conclude that the equality developed in the trench overpowered any class segregation, and men saw past social distinctions in an urge to survive, cope, and win.

Class distinctions shaped attitudes towards each other, but the melting pot that was the British army and the danger of the trenches strengthened the bond between men and officers as a sense of equality took hold. The experiences of World War One subverted any distinction between officers and men, and we are left today with a legacy of admiration and motivation that propelled men to leave the relative safety of the trench and follow their officers to no man's land.

References

1. Leed, Eric. No Man's Land. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
 - a. Pg. 5.
 - b. Pg. 94-95.
 - c. Pg. 26.
2. Keegan, John. The Face of Battle. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
 - a. Pg. 220.
 - b. Pg. 274.
 - c. Pg. 221.
 - d. Pg. 272.
 - e. Pg. 275-6.
3. Liddle, Peter. The Soldier's War, 1914-1918. London: Blandford Press, 1988.
 - a. Pg. 11.
 - b. Pg. 58.
4. Lt.-Col. Green, Howard M.C. Kitchener's Army. Army Quarterly and Defense Journal, 92: 87.
5. Ashworth, A. E. The Sociology of Trench Warfare, 1914-1918. The British Journal of Sociology, 19:4.
 - a. Pg. 408.
 - b. Pg. 420.
6. Baynes, John. The Officer-Other Rank Relationship in the British Army

- in the First World War. Quarterly Review, 304: pg. 449.
7. War Letters of Fallen Englishmen. Ed. Laurence Housman. Philadelphia: Pine Street Books, 2002.
 - a. Pg. 186.
 - b. Pg. 61.
 - c. Pg. 55-56.
 - d. Pg. 98.
 - e. Pg. 282.
 - f. Pg. 167.
8. Sotheby, Lionel. Lionel Sotheby's Great War. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997.
 - a. Pg. 15.
 - b. Pg. 102.
 - c. Pg. 103.
9. Gibbons, John. Roll On, Next War! New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1936.
 - a. Pg. 72.
 - b. Pg. 175.
 - c. Pg. 19.
 - d. Pg. 69.
10. Manwaring, John. If We Return. New York: John Lane Company, 1918.
 - a. Pg. 21.
 - b. Pg. 69.
11. Braudy, Leo. From Chivalry to Terrorism. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. Pg. 377.

About the Author

Susan Thyne, a senior majoring in History, did her research for her major seminar under the guidance of Dr. Stewart Weaver. Susan plans to take a year off to work after graduation before attending graduate studies in Library Science and History

jur: What is your research all about? (What applications does it have?)

This research examined social relationships in the British army during World War I. War is more than just dates or battles and this research strives to prove that war is significant to the individual for very different reasons: in this case, it was the encounters between social classes that both enlisted men and officers remembered and repeatedly mentioned in their personal writings. While I examined only the war period, this research could be followed with research about British society in the interwar period and how class culture began to change.

jur: What motivated you to do this research project?

This project was for the History major seminar and the idea for the topic was sparked after reading Robert Graves's war memoir, "Good-bye to All That."

jur: What was the biggest obstacle of this project and how did you overcome it?

The hardest part of the project was finding secondary resources that related to the specific topic. I wasn't sure how to go about using different databases to find articles in different journals. I met with Alan Unsworth, the History librarian, and he helped me navigate different databases and gave me many ideas about how to search for what I wanted.

jur: Any advice you could give to fellow undergrads who would like to undertake similar research (or any research in general)?

This research has taught me a few key points. First, the narrower the topic, the better your research will be. It's easier to start with a small idea and be able to build on it as you find information in your research; it's much harder to start with a vague generalization and expect to find specific evidence to support your argument. Second, after working with Alan Unsworth, I've realized how much easier research can be if you work with a librarian. By not tapping a librarian's knowledge, you're making your own work harder; the librarians know how to find the resources you need much better than you do.