



# THE ROYAL FUSILIERS IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

## INTRODUCTION

During the First World War, 235,476 men wore the Royal Fusilier badge, and 21,941 were killed. These pages recount some of the Regiment's part in the war, and draw upon the archive material, including the official War Diaries of various battalions and also personal and other papers held in the City of London Headquarters of The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers.

By 1914, The 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) had for long been considered a 'smart' regiment. This reputation was not just a matter of the adopted style of the Regiment; it was the direct result of 229 years of distinguished service in every campaign. The first battle honour had been earned at Namur in 1695, and the most recent was the 'Relief of Ladysmith' in the Boer War. The early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been spent with battalions serving in England and India, as was usual for all infantry regiments after the major reforms of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, serving in India in 1904, had taken part in the notorious Younghusband Expedition to Tibet. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion fought in the Boer War.

In 1914, the home-based Army consisted of three elements. First, the Regular Army, of which 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Battalions The Royal Fusiliers were part, was the expeditionary element. Second, the Special Reserve, which embodied the former militia, volunteers and yeomanry units, formed the reserve to the Regular Army. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany considered these elements to be a 'contemptible little army', The Old Contemptibles. Third, the Territorial Force, which was created in 1908 for home defence only. The Territorial Force included The London Regiment, of which 4 battalions were badged as Royal Fusiliers; this would be an important affiliation for the duration of the War. From late 1914, the volunteer 'Kitchener Armies' formed a fourth element of the Army, in which The Royal Fusiliers would be prominent.

The First World War was a watershed in every respect: politically, militarily, socially, scientifically and technically; little, if anything, was the same after the War as before it. In purely military terms, huge advances were made in organisation and training, yet the front remained almost static for 3 years. The technical advances, in terms of weapons, tanks, aircraft and, notoriously, gas were unprecedented, even if tactics did not always keep pace. By 1918 the British Army had, arguably, become the most complex and sophisticated organisation in the world.

Because of good recruiting in the pre-war years, The Royal Fusiliers were permitted to have 3 regular battalions, when most other regiments had only two. At the outbreak of the War, The 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> battalions were in England and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was in India.

The story of The Royal Fusiliers in the First World War opens with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Mons.

## **MONS 22 - 23 AUGUST 1914**

### **The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Royal Fusiliers**



**The Officers of 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Royal Fusiliers at Parkhurst 11 August 1914**

*Top row:* Lt Orred Lt Dease 2Lt Longman 2Lt Mead 2Lt Russell 2Lt Hobbs 2Lt Mostyn

*Centre row:* 2Lt Hardman 2Lt Sampson Lt Steele Capt Packe Capt H Forster Lt Smith Capt F Forster Lt Harding Lt Beazley Lt Tower Capt Byng Lt Cooper Capt Ashburner DSO

*Front row:* 2Lt Barton Capt Whinney Capt Cole Lt & QM Cross Maj Mallock DSO Lt Col McMahon DSO Lt & Adjut T O'Donnell Capt Le M Carry Capt Bowden-Smith Capt Attwood

Of these 31 officers, 10 would be killed in action before the end of 1914, and at least another 3 by the end of the War.  
(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

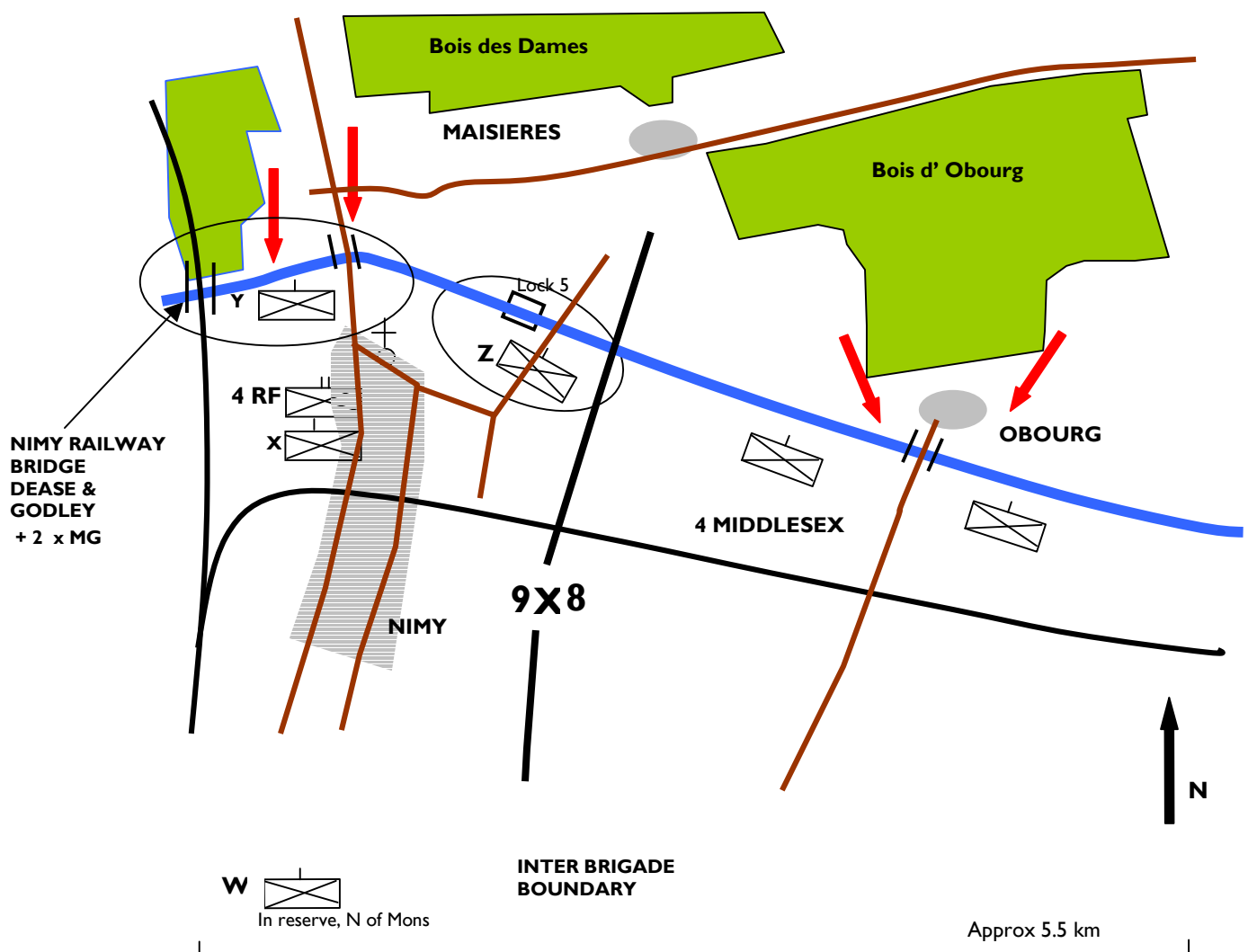
In 1914, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion The Royal Fusiliers (4 RF) was a typical infantry unit (See *Organisation 1914*) stationed at Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight as part of 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Preparations for war were underway by 5 August, when Lieutenant Dease and the battalion's vet met a Mr Jolliffe in Newport and bought 30 horses at £45 each. The horses were then branded with regimental numbers. Diary entries record that the men found it 'very hard to deal with horses'. Once mobilised on 8 August 1914, 4 RF sailed for Le Havre on 13 August, and was enthusiastically received by French crowds on arrival. On 16 August, 4 RF made a long march on the way to Mons. In the heat of summer 120 men, mostly reservists, fell out and one man died.

On the 17<sup>th</sup>, the battalion arrived at Busigny and at 7.30 am it arrived at Landrecies. The men detrained and marched about 7 miles to Noyelles.

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, 4 RF was at Taisnieres, and the following day formed an advance guard, and were billeted at La Longueville, some 20 kms south of Mons. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, the outposts of the 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade lay across the battlefield of Malplaquet, the site of Marlborough's victory in 1709. The battalion was ordered to move at 6.30.am on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, but this was advanced by an hour and a half, and they moved at 5.15, demonstrating a high level of battlecraft. The battalion again led the advance, and reached Nimy that evening. The people of Mons plied them with eggs, fruit, tobacco, and even handkerchiefs. The townspeople also offered drink, probably wine or beer, which would not have helped discipline and alertness after another long hot march. After the alarm was raised that Germans were near, the locals faded away and 4 RF marched on to Nimy, and across the Condé Canal.

In 1914, there were no radio communications and very limited air reconnaissance. Misconceptions about the enemy were frequent on both sides. Von Bulow's (the German commander) orders on 22 August show that his intelligence believed that there was no significant British force within the marching radius of the First and Second German Armies. Similarly misinformed, the British Army did not expect to meet anything more than minor opposition from the Germans around Mons. (See *Tactics 1914*)

On 22 August, as the German Army advanced through Belgium, 9<sup>th</sup> Brigade was ordered to hold the line of the Condé Canal, just north of Mons. 4 RF were initially deployed north of the canal in temporary positions with a poor field of fire. The battalion withdrew across the canal and took up positions, as shown on the map below, from which the battle was fought on 23 August.



The official history describes the 4 RF deployment as: "Y (or C) Company, Capt. Ashburner, north of Nimy, with its left a little north of Lock 6. Capt. Forster, with two platoons, held Nimy Bridge; the two other platoons and company HQ were entrenched at the railway bridge and on the canal bank to the left of it. Z (or D) Company, under Capt. Byng, held positions about Lock 6 (5?) and the Ghlin-Mons bridges. X (or B) Company, under Capt. Carey, lay about Nimy station in support, at battalion headquarters; and Capt. Cole lay with the battalion reserve W (or A) Company north of Mons. In point of fact, therefore, the two companies, Y and Z were on the defensive against six German battalions."

The Mons Salient was key part of the defence. The Nimy Railway Bridge, on the left of 4 RF's positions was considered to be the vital ground, because of its dominating position and critical importance to the German advance in an age when effectively all road transport was horse drawn. If the official description of the deployment is correct, the decision to give one company the task of holding 2 bridges illustrates the shortage of units to hold the important canal feature in such a serious situation.

The German attacks were expected and Royal Engineers (RE) had prepared the bridges for demolition, but only on orders from HQ 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. The German attack began at about 9.00 am with an hour's barrage followed by cavalry and infantry probing attacks towards both bridges and the lock. Because of the ferocity of the German artillery and infantry assaults, only one bridge was blown and an RE officer was captured. The barges on the canal had been burned out to prevent them being used as improvised crossings. In a heroic act, Pte August Niemayer of the German Army jumped into the canal to close the swing bridge defended by Y Coy, but was shot after operating the machinery to close the bridge. The closing of this bridge enabled the Germans to cross.

The Army was renowned for its shooting skills, and much credit for this was due to the Commanding Officer of 4 RF, Lieutenant Colonel McMahon (See *biographical note*). He had been Commandant of the School of Musketry at Hythe and was known as a skill-at-arms fanatic – 'The Musketry Maniac'. His soldiers put his passion for shooting to good use on 23 August, to the extent that the Germans believed they faced machine guns all long 4 RF's front. In reality, there were only 2 machine guns under the command of Lieutenant Maurice Dease. These 2 guns were on the Nimy Railway Bridge, from where they had some commanding fields of fire, but became more obvious as the Germans advanced closer to the canal.

One of the machine guns was damaged, and several crew members killed. Lieutenant Dease was wounded twice in his efforts to keep the remaining gun firing and supplied with ammunition in the face of overwhelming German numbers and firepower. The forward companies had to withdraw across open ground into Nimy. The rearguards kept up sustained rifle fire, and the last machine gun on the Railway Bridge, now manned by Pte Godley alone, remained in action providing covering fire for the withdrawal until the Germans stormed the bridge. Godley remained with his gun until it was put out of action by fire, and was captured after throwing it into the canal. Lieutenant Steele carried his friend Maurice Dease off the bridge, but Dease, if not already dead, died within minutes.

Both Lieutenant Dease (posthumous) and Pte Godley were awarded the Victoria Cross (See *citations and pictures below*), the first awards of the Great War.

The remnants of 4 RF withdrew from Nimy into Mons, and the Germans were in the town by 5.00 pm.

#### **Extract from 4 RF War Diary for 23rd. August:**

23<sup>rd</sup>. Still holding outpost position.

A certain amount of desultory firing took place in the early morning. We wounded and captured 2 Uhlan officers.

About 11 am. The Germans started to attack us seriously with apparently at least four battalions of Infantry, also Cavalry, and Artillery. We suffered severely on the bridges over the canal by rifle and artillery fire. The machine guns had a particularly trying time. Practically all the detachment including Lieut. M Dease and Pte Godley both displayed the most conspicuous gallantry in working the guns, after they had been wounded. The guns having finally been disabled by artillery fire had to be abandoned.

1.10.pm First order to retire was given

1.40.pm Final order to retire given

About 3.30pm Successful retirement through Mons accomplished. The battalion carried out this most difficult manoeuvre with the greatest steadiness. The total casualties sustained were about 150 killed and wounded including 7 officers. Most of the casualties had unfortunately to be left behind.

About 7pm. Arrived at Ciple and bivouacked there until about 2am on the 24<sup>th</sup>.

The Royal Fusiliers had been fully involved in one of the first engagements of the War and emerged with great credit and 2 VCs.

4 RF then took part in the famous 'retreat from Mons', an action that would eventually stem the German advance on the Marne during 5-9 September 1914, thus preventing the fall of Paris. Six weeks later, the British had raced north to prevent the Germans taking the channel ports and had started digging the positions that would see little change for 3 years, despite fierce fighting and unprecedented casualties on both sides.

## **HONOURS AND AWARDS**

**Victoria Cross: Lieut. M J Dease, Pte S F Godley**

### **Mentioned In Despatches:**

Lt Col N R McMahon DSO, Major T R Mallock DSO, Capt L F Ashburner DSO, Capt L Le M. Carey, Capt H C Forster, Lt. F W A Steele, Lt. M J Dease, Lt. G G Thomas O'Donel, Sgt Major Tyler, Sgts H Savill, M Lindsey, W Osborne, L-Cpl Evans, L-Cpl G Moore, Pte S F Godley

### **Crox de Chevalier Legion d'Honneur**

Lt. Beazley 3<sup>rd</sup>. November 1914

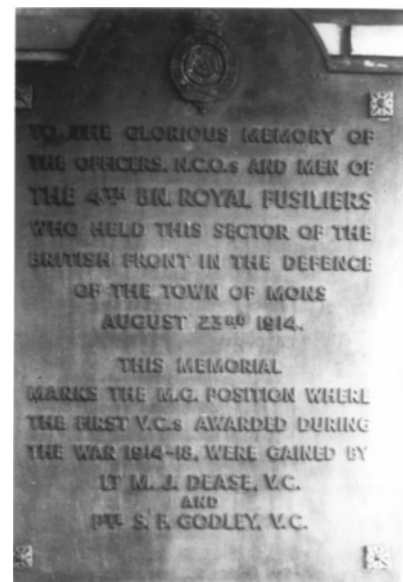
### **Directions**

Nimy lies immediately north of Mons on Route 7. The railway bridge is to the west of Route 7. Today, an *autoroute* runs east-west north of the Conde Canal (now called Canal du Centre). The NATO HQ site is just north of Maisieres. Michelin Map 302 Nord (1:150,000) is a good route finder for this and many other Western Front battlefields.

## **Relevant Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemeteries:**

**St. Symphorien Military Cemetery** – includes the grave of Lieutenant Dease, and other members of the Royal Fusiliers and Middlesex Regiment killed at Mons, as well as German soldiers. The cemetery is SE of Mons on Route 2.

**La Ferte-Sous-Jouarre Memorial** – a memorial to those killed in the Retreat from Mons and Marne battles, who have no known grave. The memorial is located SV of La Ferte-Sous-Jouarre, 66 km east of Paris on the route N3, and near the Marne river. Every year, The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Association takes part in an Anglo-French commemoration of the 1914 battles and a wreath is laid at the Memorial.



**The memorial plaque on the Mons Railway Bridge to the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn The Royal Fusiliers**

## **BACKGROUND NOTES**

### **Infantry Battalion Organisation 1914**

An infantry battalion in 1914 was a much simpler fighting machine than its equivalent in World War II. The 19<sup>th</sup> century origins of its structure were still recognisable. The battalion was organised into a headquarters consisting of the Commanding Officer (Lt Col), Second-in-Command (major), Adjutant (captain) and the Regimental Sergeant Major (Warrant Office Class I) and a few clerks and runners.

The 4 rifle companies were commanded by captains, and consisted of 4 rifle platoons, each of some 35 men, commanded by lieutenants or 2<sup>nd</sup> lieutenants.

The principal weapon was the bolt-action .303" Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) rifle. This was reliable, bolt-action rifle and capable, in good hands, of a high rate of accurate and sustained fire. The bayonet was an essential part of the rifle and was afforded substantial training time.

The battalion had only 2 Vickers machine guns, a heavy and complex water-cooled weapon first introduced in 1912, but a very effective system that, with only a few modifications, remained in British service into the 1960s. The light machine gun, the drum-fed Lewis gun, was not yet in service. In 1914, the British Infantry had no hand grenades, although the Germans had them, and the famous Mills Bomb was not made fully reliable until 1916. The Stokes trench mortar was another enduring design deployed in the forward areas, but was not introduced until 1916. In 1914, 'organic' fire support was minimal.

Communications depended on rudimentary field telephones and, in the forward areas, principally on runners carrying written or even verbal messages. Runner was an important and dangerous role.

There were no motor vehicles and all unit logistic transport was horse-drawn. Riding horses were provided for many of the officers for use in liaison and reconnaissance tasks. Even in the infantry, the provision of forage, water and shoes for horses would have been a significant daily task for the Quartermaster in 1914.

### **Infantry Battalion Tactics 1914**

Infantry fire production was centred on the rifle companies and the private soldier, each with his SMLE rifle, rather than machine guns, mortars or other heavy weapons. Therefore, deploying the companies to engage the enemy with rifle fire was the aim in all phases of war. Positions were selected that offered appropriate fields of fire, and it was usual for rifle fire to be employed at ranges out to 500 yards.

Because, in any mobile operation, there were no communications other than the human voice and runners, infantry manoeuvred within much smaller boundaries than would be considered today. Even in the open warfare of 1914, all companies of a battalion would have expected to operate generally within line of sight.

Infantry Divisions were supported by the Royal Field Artillery (RFA), with 18-pdr guns. Artillery frequently employed direct (aimed) fire, while indirect (observed or predicted) fire was mostly used during defensive operations. Getting the horse-drawn guns into positions from which to support the infantry was often difficult. Extraction could be even more difficult and guns were sometimes lost – notably at Le Cateau on 26 August 1914.

Overall, tactics in 1914 were centred on the advance and attack. Cavalry carried out reconnaissance. The cavalry also protected the flanks, or, in attack, charged lighter opposition and then exploited forward. The infantry attacked in waves to dislodge other infantry. Defensive operations, including withdrawal, were considered temporary phases, and not much practised. Night operations, other than movement, were infrequent, not least because of the need for horse-drawn transport to catch up with cavalry and even marching infantry, as well as the need to feed, water and rest all horses at the end of the day.

### **Lieutenant Colonel Norman Reginald McMahon DSO Commanding Officer 4<sup>th</sup> Bn Royal Fusiliers**

As Chief Instructor of Musketry, Hythe from 1905 to 1914, Lieut. Colonel McMahon urged that each battalion be equipped with six machine guns, but the Army Council declined for financial reasons. McMahon was a soldier of rare vision who came from a long family line of fighting men. He was the son of General T W McMahon, who had served in the Crimean War, and had several brothers who had served, or who were still serving when he joined the Royal

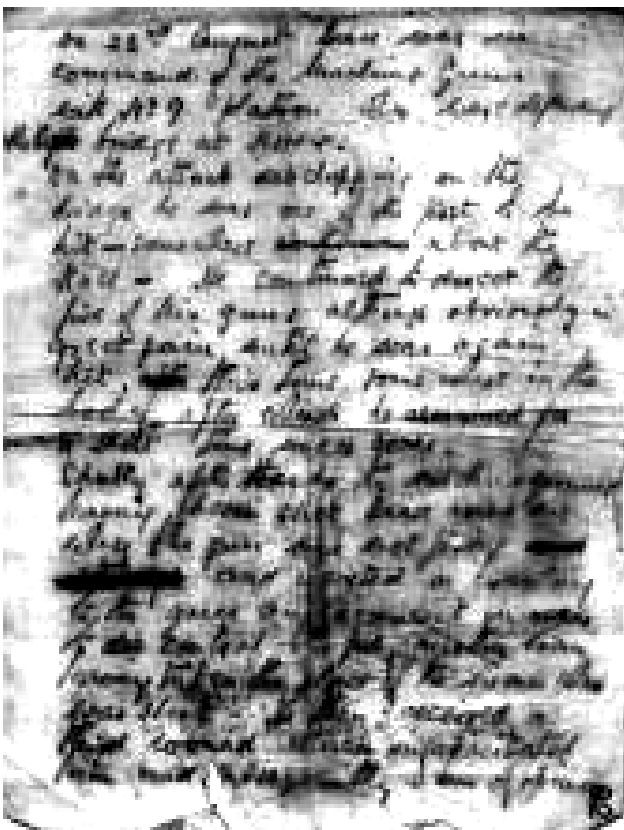


**Lieutenant Colonel NR  
McMahon DSO**

Fusiliers in 1885. He served in the Burma Campaign of 1886-7, and in the Boer War 1899-1901 was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He viewed with increasing alarm the German menace of the 1900s. He noted that the Germans, although well equipped with machine guns, had neglected to train their men in musketry. Demonstrating to his instructors the firepower of the SMLE rifle when used by trained men, enabling one man to fire thirty-six rounds in one minute at 300 yards in the prone position, Sgt Instructor Snoxall fired thirty-eight rounds in one minute at 300 yards - a world record at that time for a hand loaded rifle. This was due to the insistence of McMahon that every man in the British Army should be efficient in the use of this weapon, and what would become known as "The Mad Minute". McMahon became known as the Musketry Maniac. He lived just long enough to see his efforts come to fruition when the firepower of the British soldier in the early days of 1914 convinced the Germans that the British had a new type of machine gun. Having been promoted to Brigadier, he was killed in action whilst leading his men at Ypres on 11 November 1914.

### Extracts from Citations

LIEUT. MAURICE JAMES DEASE VC: As the battalion machine gun officer, Dease attended the guns when they became jammed or crews were depleted. The gun crews were so cramped in their positions, that when a man was down, he had to be removed before another could take his place. To get to the guns, Dease had to cross open ground, and to do this once called for no ordinary courage. To repeat it several times could only be done with real heroism. Dease was badly wounded several times on these journeys, but insisted on remaining at duty as long as one of his crew could fire. His final wound proved fatal, and a well-deserved Victoria Cross was awarded posthumously.



### The original recommendation that earned Lieut Maurice Dease the Victoria Cross on 23 August 1914, the first to be awarded during the First World War

On 23<sup>rd</sup> August, DEASE was in command of the machine guns with No 2 platoon who were defending the bridge at NIMY. On the attack developing on the bridge, he was one of the first to be hit, somewhere about the knee. He continued to direct the fire of his guns, although obviously in great pain, until he was again hit, this time somewhere in the body, after which he remained, for a short time, under cover.

Shortly afterwards, the machine gunner, having been shot, DEASE asked me why the gun was not firing and insisted on crawling to the gun emplacement in order to control the fire, another man having taken the place of the man who was shot. He then received a third wound, which incapacitated him and I am of the opinion that he received other wounds but on this point I cannot speak definitely.

F.W.A.S.

This note can be seen in The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum at HM Tower of London.



Lieutenant Dease's medals can be seen in The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum at HM Tower of London.



13814 PRIVATE SIDNEY FRANK GODLEY VC : In response to an inquiry whether anyone else knew how to operate the guns, Pte Godley came forward. He cleared the emplacement under heavy fire and brought the gun into action, enabling his comrades to evacuate the bridge. He had been firing for at least two hours before the gun was hit and put completely out of action. The water jackets of both guns were riddled with bullets which rendered them useless. Godley was wounded in the head, and was later taken prisoner by the Germans, but not before he had broken up the guns and thrown their parts into the canal.

On 27<sup>th</sup>.April 1916 he was officially listed as a Prisoner of war, and it was his German captors who told him that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross.

In the defence of Railway Bridge near NIMY. 23<sup>rd</sup> Aug 1914. This afternoon Pte GODLEY of B. Coy. shewed particular heroism in his management of the machine gun; Lt. Dease having been severely wounded and each machine gunman then shot. I called Pte Godley to me in the firing line on the bridge and under an extremely heavy fire he had to remove 3 dead bodies and 10 to a machine gun on the right under a most deadly fire. This he did & not a shot did he fire except as I directed & with the utmost coolness until it was irretrievably damaged & he was shot in the head. He then left the firing line under orders to go to the rear.

23.8.1914 W. A. Smith Lt. C. Coy. R. Fus.

The original chit commending the Valour of Pte. Godley

This note can be seen in The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers Museum at HM Tower of London.



Picture by David Rowlands



Picture by David Rowlands 1983

In 1983, the Officers of 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion The Royal Regiment of Fusiliers, then serving in Belfast, commissioned this picture of the action by Lieutenant Dease and Private Godley on the Nimy Railway Bridge on 23 August 1914; it now hangs in the Officers Mess of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. The picture is thought to present good likenesses of both Dease and Godley, as well as excellent detail of the equipment and weapons of the day. A slagheap of the Mons coalfields is on the horizon.

### **CASUALTIES 1<sup>st</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup> August 1914**

Bowden-Smith, Capt W.A.C. Died of Wounds in captivity 28-8-14

Dease, Lt M.J. **VC** Died of Wounds 23-8-14

Smith, Lt. E.C. Killed In Action 23-8-14

Mead, 2-Lt. Died of Wounds 23-8-14

L-7172, Fritz, Sgt. W.A. 23-8-14

L-11782, Johnson, L-Sgt. F. 23-8-14

L-14638, Chapman, L-Cpl. G.J. 24-8-14

L-14531, Joy, L-Cpl. P. 23-8-14

L-8202, Baker, Pte.G. 23-8-14

L-9155, Bird, Pte. S. 24-8-14

L-15220, Bradshaw, Pte.A.A. 21-8-14

L-12246, Bull, Pte. C. 23-8-14

L-12712, Clow, Pte, E. 23-8-14

L-11138, Collins, Pte.P.T. 23-8-14

L-8846, Cordell, Pte. G. 24.8.14

L-15363, Cornborough, Pte.W. 23-8-14

L-11575, Day, Pte.F.W. 24-8-14

L-11276, George, Pte. J. 24-8-14

L-10326, Hatchett, Pte. R R 25-8-14

L-13828, Kent, Pte.G. 23-8-14

L-15601, Oxenbury, Pte.H.J. 23-8-14

L-9339, Perkins, Pte. F.A. 24-8-14

L-9933, Robinson, Pte.J. 23-8-14

L-11023, Saltmarsh, Pte.C.E. 23-8-14

L-9546, Westrop, Pte.W.O. 24-8-14.

L-8045, Marmion, Sgt M. 24-8-14

L-13367, Button, L-Sgt. F. 23-8-14

L-8111, Herbert, L-Cpl. H.A. 23-8-14

L-10864, Agland, Pte. T.S. 24-8-14

L-11324, Bates, Pte. G R 24-8-14

L-6913, Blandford, Pte. A. 25-8-14

L-13268, Brown, Pte. A.H. 24-8-14

L-12834, Clarke, Pte. E.E. 23-8-14

L-9881, Collins, Pte. H. 26-8-14

L-10270, Collins, Pte.W. 26-8-14

L-10857, Coveney, Pte. S W 24-8-14

L-9749, Dann, Pte. W.J. 23-8-14

L-6499, Eatwell, Pte.J.H. 23-8-14

L-7097, Gomm, Pte.E H 23-8-14

L-9793, Jeffreys, Pte. A 23-8-14

L-10807, Leniham, Pte. A G 23-8-14

L-11799, Parker, Pte.W. 23-8-14

L-7136, Potter, Pte. W.G.H. 23-8-14

L-7584, Rudge, Pte. J.A. 23-8-14

L-15434, Steele, Pte. E.L.J. 23-8-14

## **SOURCES**

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