

# Tale of three brothers: The fate of a farming family at war



Pictures from author's collection above Harold (left top) Leslie (right top)  
and Charles

By Robert Carter

## A tale of three brothers

Can you imagine being 19 again? All those things that you dreamed of doing with your life. Most of those dreams still yet unfulfilled.

In 1914, adventure in the shape of the First World War beckoned for many 19 year olds. A sense of duty and fighting for a just noble cause, a sense of chivalry beckoned. It all seemed to paint a wonderful picture with men signing up daily to contribute and do their bit for King and country. For my Grandfather and his two brothers it must have seemed just like this. Their father had lost his wife at an early age and was bringing up the children alone. My Granddad Harold Carter and his brothers Charles and Leslie signed up in 1914, all from a farming background in the Wiston and Steyning area.

Having read some books on the First World War I have a different view now, and believe that those who sent these men to war were culpable for inflicting massive loss of life and damage to a whole generation for years far beyond the First World War. The carnage of war would have been mentally scarring for many of the men that did manage to survive. Ill equipped and in the most appalling conditions, these brave men not only had to contend with an enemy but with disease, injuries and death. I can only imagine how these men survived through some of the worst conditions that the seasons could throw at them. The heat of summer brought a plague of flies due to the rotting corpses, both human and animal. The cold of winter was endured with no nice bed to rest in and keep warm. Imagine sleeping (if you could over the noise of constant shelling) on a muddy dug out sleeping on bare earth that sapped at your body heat with rats crawling all over you. No sanitation with trench foot, dysentery and other diseases rampant. Death was everywhere and the stench of death was everywhere. The constant screams of men cut down in their prime, with shattered bodies that would never mend or worse, blown apart by constant shelling. Some souls drowned in the mud, or survived to witness dead or injured comrades being eaten by rats in front



of them. You get some idea of why those who did survive didn't want to talk about it or they were shell shocked and mentally scarred for life. Some even took that ultimate decision to end it all or ran away to be retrieved and shot by their peers - all seemed a better choice than life in the trenches. This war was anything but chivalrous and just.

In the next few pages I will try to outline the service that these three brothers gave for their country, and what it cost their family.

Lesley Carter. Picture from my own collection.

**Leslie Carter** (great Uncle) - Lesley Carter was the youngest of the three brothers, aged just 18 when he enlisted at Worthing. He was living at the time with his father Amos and his brother and two sisters in Findon. His Mother Alice had died in 1906 leaving Amos to bring up the 5 children. Leslie was enlisted in to the 2nd

Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. When he was 18 he was posted to France with the expeditionary force. On 9<sup>th</sup> May 1915 the British Army under General Haig launched an offensive against the German forces to capture Auber's Ridge. This was the second offensive against the Ridge in 1915. This time they faced strengthened German defences. The Ridge is only about 70 feet high but would have been of immense tactical value. Leslie would have been on active duty the day that the attack on Auber's Ridge took place. Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> May 1915 was a day that will be remembered for all the wrong reasons for anyone involved with the 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment and the 1/5th Cinque Ports Royal Sussex Regiment. The attack ordered by Haig to take place at 5.30am on that day would fail miserably and result in catastrophic loss of life not just for the Royal Sussex regiment but for regiments from across the country. The offensive would only last one day but would account for losing nearly 12,000 men. Leslie was attacking in the southern sector and was one of four battalions over the top first.



I can only take licence to say how Leslie probably died that day. Having read numerous books on the battle and the regiments involved we can assume that the preceding bombardment did not do its job of cutting through the German defences. Can you imagine how brave these soldiers were? The first wave went across no man's land to be met by a devastating rake of fire from well positioned machine guns that would wreak carnage across no man's land for the whole of that day. Leslie would either have been cut down by this or if he managed to get to the un-cut wire would have been a sitting target for the Germans in their defences. Many hundreds of men were killed like this in

Above Leslie Carter, bottom right, with some companions from his regiment. Picture from my own collection

Many hundreds of men were killed like this in the first wave, and Leslie was likely to have shared this same fate. He may have lain injured and died of his wounds. Many men who found themselves sheltering injured in no man's land would have lain there for most of the day and night. I believe that he would have been killed in the first assault when bodies piled up as the wire had not been breached. We know that some of his colleagues would have been killed as they got to the top of the parapets. But had he been injured or killed here then he may well have had a grave to mark him out.

By researching the battalion diaries, I have managed to find that in ref RSR MS 2/66<sup>1</sup> there is a record of Leslie having been found and buried by a Lance Corporal McKay of the 1st Battalion Seaforth Highlanders. The record shows that he was killed at Richbourg L'Avoue. The battle was a disaster for foot soldiers. The lack of high explosive shells and repeated

bad decisions by men in command lay waste to the best part of 12,000 men, including officers, killed or badly injured. I take great comfort in knowing that Leslie was afforded a burial even if it is not recorded on a grave and that he was given time, by someone he probably never knew, to lay him to rest. Leslie has a memorial not far from the site of the battle at Le Touret memorial. He is also remembered in the Royal Sussex Regiment chapel in Chichester Cathedral West Sussex in the Regiments Chapel. Finally he has a memorial in the village church of Findon. I can only admire the courage of anyone who fought in the First World War. Leslie Carter would have been awarded the Star medal and the family still has his memorial plaque (also known as dead man's penny) given to families of those who had fallen.

The courage of these men and the ultimate sacrifice that many paid should never be forgotten. Leslie Carter "so much given by one so young".



The memorial at le Touret in France close to the place where he fell on 9th May 1915 (Right) and Lesley Carters name on the memorial wall ( left) . Leslie Carter's memorial plaque (dead man's penny in the middle). Pictures from my own collection.



### Harold Carter SD 155. (Grandfather)

Harold Carter was born on June 3rd 1883. The second son of Amos and Alice Carter, he was born in Buxted, East Sussex. He joined the 11th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment (Southdowns Battalion) on September 14th 1914. His regimental number was SD155 and he would have been one of the early recruits. Harold was assigned to Cooden Camp outside Bexhill, a makeshift camp in the early days where men were billeted in tents. By June 1915 Harold was an unpaid Lance Corporal. The training at Cooden or Witley continued until March 1916 when they finally were sent to serve in France. They carried out mixed trench work up until August 1916 when they

Above: Harold Carter picture from my own collection.

took part in the second battle of Auber's Ridge, suffering in excess of 400 casualties.

The battalion then moved to the Somme and spent some 35 continuous days in the trenches without relief. The Battalion was then used in the battle of Boars Head which in itself is not a battle honour you'll find in any history of the Great War. It was a diversionary tactic for the push on the Somme the next day, so for the men, the battle itself proved fruitless.

On the morning of 30th June 1916 the attack began - after 5 hours it proved to be a total disaster and massacre which would have consequences for years to come. One of the reasons I am now writing this is that by some quirk of fate the 11th battalion was demoted to a reserve battalion, following a disagreement between their commanding officer and the high command, where Colonel Grisewood stated that he would not sacrifice his men as cannon fodder. He was immediately relieved of his post and fearing that men of the 11th might have overheard his disagreement, the 11th Battalion were demoted to a reserve battalion. At the end of this battle the casualty list was 134 killed, 723 wounded and 344 missing.

The consequences for families in the Sussex area were quite devastating and had massive connotations where so many men were lost. No wonder they called this the day Sussex died. In the book 'The Day Sussex Died' by J.A. Baines, page 199 has a link with my family. It states that "the Bristow's Frederick L/Cpl and Edward Private SD3300 were listed as killed in action 30th June 1916" whilst serving with the 13th Battalion. This is probably the same Bristow family that were at my Great Granddad's wedding and these brave men would have been their sons.

My Granddad would now have gone on to serve with the regiment at the Battle of the Somme from 3rd September 1916 to November 1916; the Battle of Ypres 31st July to November 1917; the Somme March 1918; and Battle of Lys April 1918. On 12 August 1918 he was seconded to the 1st/4th Brigade Royal Sussex regiment joining them on the 14th August. On the 18th September he was procured as a batman to 2nd Lt Bartholomew to the 19th Corps school. He was here for a couple of months and re-joined his unit on 27th November 1918. By this time the war had officially ended. I like to think that someone took a shine to my Granddad and got him out the way for the last two months of the war. He finally left for the UK in late March 1919. I have read his active service form and casualty card and admire the fact that he was hospitalised several times during his time in France.



He was wounded on two occasions and survived mumps and dysentery. What I find even more remarkable is that during his time served he only had two weeks leave to the UK that I can find. I have to admit to feeling very humble whilst writing this. I knew my Granddad as a quiet man, softly spoken. One can only wonder as to the horrors that he saw whilst serving and how he survived the horrors of trench warfare as explained at the beginning of my story and how that would have affected him in later life. In a modern era where PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is a described and accepted

Above: Harold Carter picture from my own collection  
 condition, how did these poor men come home from this theatre of war hiding their scars with such dignity and pride. He received both the British and Victory medal but quite what meaning these would have had for him I am unsure. Above

For someone to sign up just after the war started and for him to complete his service to the end of the war is quite a remarkable feat for any soldier. I am only glad that my Granddad survived in order for me to be able to tell this story.

### Charles Carter

Charles Carter was the eldest son born to Amos and Alice Carter. Born in 1890 he joined up at Hastings on 13th August 1914. He was assigned to the 5th Cinque Ports battalion (territorials) Royal Sussex Regiment. Private Carter regimental number 240393 was embodied into the 2nd/5th Cinque Ports battalion from 13th August 1914 to 4th September 1915 when he joined the 72nd division. He stayed with them until 29th April 1916. The 13th August that year saw him assigned to the 4th Reserve Battalion. Whilst here he was awarded the good conduct badge for two years "good" service which meant it was service that was trouble free. In December 1916 he was again reassigned to the base depot in France. This would have been a change from life at the front and was to see Charles reassigned under AO 2041. He then spent a number of months in various depots before he was reassigned to the 4th reserve battalion Royal Sussex, and therefore posted back to the UK.

At this time he was transferred compulsorily to the Labour Corps based in Maidstone in Kent. This compulsory move to the Labour Corps was probably necessitated by not being medically fit for work on the front line. The Corps always suffered from being "second class" as an organisation. Men who died in the Corps are commemorated under their original regiment with Labour Corps being secondary. From June 1917 Charles was in hospital with Gastritis, and on 27th November 1917 Charles Carter went before a medical board at Shoreham camp and was classed as category B2 by no3 travelling medical board. In July he was admitted with pleurisy which was very severe and meant him being transferred back to Shoreham camp where in September he was diagnosed with trench fever, pleurisy and UDH.

He was assigned to 572 Company for one year which was an Agricultural Company special service section attached to headquarters Dover Garrison. He was from a farming background so I can only assume that he was re-assigned to work on the land. The Labour Corps were formed to support the massive war effort going on in France at that time. He was reassigned to 696 Company in January 1919 and by this time the war had ended, but we still had hundreds of troops still overseas needing logistical support. While serving with 572 company he was absent without leave from midday on 25.6.1918 to 7.20pm on 26.6.1918. He was placed under open arrest and forfeited 3 days' pay as a result of his actions.

Charles saw out the remainder of WW1 with the agricultural corps at Maidstone. He was discharged at Crystal Palace depot 3rd April 1919 having served four and a half years for his country. He received the British, Victory and Star medal.

I believe that my other Great Uncle suffered a lot with illness during the second part of the war. Having been out with the BEF at the start of the war he ended up in the agricultural corps to help with the war effort in this country. He went back to farming for a while after the war before pursuing other avenues of work.

### Conclusion

Having never known the horrors of war I can only glimpse into a world that my Grandfather and his Brothers lived in. When war came they answered the call for King and Country. For Lesley his war was short. Cut down in his prime he may have been blessed compared with those who had served in the trenches and lived. Those surviving whose war experience encompassed not only appalling living conditions horror, frustration and death around every corner were then left to fend for themselves both physically and mentally in whatever way they could when the war ended. They answered the call to arms only for their calls some four years later to their country to fall on deaf ears. But those who did return were survivors. For all that they had been through they had survived. I'm glad that my Granddad and his elder brother did survive the war and that they lived their lives to the full. I would have liked to have had a conversation with my Granddad as painful as it would have been for him to ask him about the war and how he felt about it and all that had happened to him and his Brothers. The one question that I would have asked is how did you survive? I'm sure it would have been an emotional conversation. The futility of war can be summed up by the idea that WW1 was the war to end all wars. The sad thing is that it only laid the foundations for another bloody conflict some 20 years later. I was struck by a poem that I found in a book which seemed to sum up the horrors of the war and the feeling between those dead and those left to survive. The second part of the poem is very poignant.

And when that hole was filled in again. It wasn't with soil but with  
Flanders rain.  
Then came a dose of snow and ice. The weather was almost too  
cold for the lice.  
The Howitzer hole froze up like glass - we slid over it when we  
wanted to pass,  
And dead Jerries' stared through with glassy eyes, as though they  
were wanting to sympathise  
With us who were left on Flanders plain - to endure its Hell all over  
again.

<sup>2</sup>Private A.V.Simpson. 7th Duke of Wellington's Regiment



Pictured above is Lesley Carter (bottom left) and some of his colleagues 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. Picture from my own collection.

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<sup>1</sup> List of men of the 2nd Battalion, The Royal Sussex Regiment, killed during the First World War West Sussex Record Office RSR/MSS/2/66 1914-1918

These documents are held at West Sussex Record Office

<sup>2</sup> Poem by Private A.V.Simpson – 7<sup>th</sup> Duke of Wellington's Regiment. Voices and images of the Great War by Lynn Macdonald page 256.