

Ernest George Richardson



Private Ernest George Richardson on enlistment in August 1914 (source: West Sussex County Archives: RSR MSS 4/57)

By Jaqui Ball

Summary



**Commemorative plaque in Streat Parish Church
 (author's photograph)**

In the Parish Church of Streat, near Hassocks in West Sussex, there is a memorial to the men from the parish who died serving their country in the First World War.

Among the names is that of Ernest George Richardson who, with his brother, Albert Thomas Richardson, joined the Royal Sussex Regiment at the very start of the War.

One of the brothers – Albert - survived the “War to end all wars”, the other – Ernest – lies in an unknown grave in France. This is Ernest’s story.

Background

Albert and Ernest were the sons of George and Louisa Richardson (nee Barber). George worked as a farm labourer for the Fitzhugh family, at Marchants House and Streat Place. He married Louisa who was born in Frome in Somerset in 1888 and they had four children, two of whom died in infancy.

Ernest was born on 18 April 1892 and christened in Streat Parish Church on 29 May 1892. The 1911 Census shows the family living in four rooms in Brocks Cottage. Elder son, Albert, is 21 and working as a domestic gardener, while Ernest, then 18, is waggoner on a farm.

Even today, Streat is a peaceful place. It is hard to imagine the contrast for the brothers as they headed off to battle in foreign fields. At the same time it is easy to understand why their letters home reflect often on what is happening at home, how their father is coping with the workload, whether the harvest has been a good one, what is going on at the “big house”. There is a clear sense of a close-knit and loving family.

Ernest served for over three years in Egypt and the Dardanelles. He never had a chance to come home on leave, something he reflects on constantly in his letters. Towards the end of the war, in the summer of 1918, his regiment was posted to France and there, on 29 July 1918, he died in the Second Battle of the Marne.

Among the records in the West Sussex Records Office are a collection of twenty letters which Ernest wrote home, mostly to his “Dearest Mother and Dad.” This case study includes excerpts from the letters to illustrate the course of Ernest’s war experiences while a full transcript of all the letters is attached as an Appendix.

Detail

The Richardson brothers joined up at the start of the War. Ernest (No 200374) signed up on 24 August 1914 and was assigned to "B" company, 4th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment.

On 17 July 1915 his Battalion embarked at Devonport on HMT Ulysses. Ernest's letter home on the same date, with the address of Mediterranean Expeditionary Force, reads: "You will see by the address that we have moved. I don't know where we are going, we are on board ship.....I must not tell you where we are it is forbidden." His thoughts are clearly still with home: "How is the haying getting on round there, have they nearly finished?"

On 28 July the battalion arrived at Alexandria, leaving for Port Said on 30 July and then on to Gallipoli. Ernest's name is included in the Nominal Roll of NCOs and men who landed at Suvla on August 8 1915.¹

In November 1915, the Fourth Royal Sussex Regiment was still in Gallipoli. On 13 November 1915 Ernest writes: "I am glad to say I am feeling much better than I have been it is not much here without you are feeling alright but we keep struggling on the best we can as we hast (sic) to look on the bright side of things in this country. We still get fairly good weather here had it a bit showery the last few days but nothing to speak of much but I dare say you are getting it a lot colder now and perhaps very wet." He adds, poignantly: "I shall not be sorry to get back there with you all again" and asks his parents to remember him to "the girls at Streat Place."

On 27 November 1915 Ernest writes to his "Dear Mother and Dad" to wish them both a Happy Christmas. "I hope you will enjoy yourselves as we must make the best of it out here." He continues: "I am keeping well at present but the weather is very trying here it is wet and cold now (sic) much different than it was when we come out."

In December 1915, the battalion left Gallipoli for Egypt, travelling first to Mudros Harbour then to Alexandria on HMT Haverford. January 1916 was mostly spent in training and musketry and the War Diary² notes: "all ranks show marked improvement in smartness and drill generally." By June 1916, Ernest's company has been on the move: "We have moved from where we was about 200 miles," he writes on 2 June 1916, "but it is a rotten place right out on the desert you cannot see nothing but sand for miles and it is the worst place we had for flies they are enough to eat you but I don't think we shall be there long of course I don't dare to tell you where it is but we have been in the trenches. It is very quiet at present but one never knows what is going to happen but we must hope for the best it will be a good job when it is all over." He ends this letter apologising for its brevity and saying: "Excuse a short letter. The flies won't let you write."



**Ernest George Richardson in 1916
 (Photograph from RSR MS 4/57)**

Later the same month, on 22 June 1916, he tells his parents: "I had a day leave last Saturday and went to Cairo and I had my Photo took hoping to send you one or two if they come out alright." He adds: "To look round Cairo you must have a lot of money in your pocket but I enjoyed myself it takes off a bit of the monotony of the desert."

It is possible that the photograph to which he refers is the one on the left. A note on the back reads: "Taken in Egypt after the Gallipoli evacuation 1916." Comparison between this photograph and the one on the title page, taken in August 1914, shows very clearly the effects of the war on Ernest.

In 1917 the battalion moved into Palestine. On 4 February 1917 Ernest writes to tell his parents that he has been in hospital with diphtheria: "I was in Isolation.....I have had diphtheria but I wasn't very ill with it. I had 9 days in bed, only getting milk, but I am fairly well again now and I expect to be out again in 10 or 12 days time if all goes well." He goes on: "I think things are looking a bit brighter now. I hope it will come to an end before the year is out any way we must look on the bright side of things and hope for the best if the worst comes." As usual, his thoughts are with the family at home: "I hope you have not been worrying about me. Well I must finish up with my troubles now as I expect you have got enough at home."

The War Diary notes a number of cases of diphtheria among the Battalion, including at least one death.

The Battalion was engaged in the First Battle of Gaza (March 1917) in which the casualties included the Battalion's Commanding Officer, Lt Colonel H.S. Ashworth, and in the Second Battle of Gaza (May 1917) but no letters from Ernest have survived from this period.

During October and November 1917 the Battalion was engaged in the Third Battle of Gaza (27 October - 7 November), the capture of Beersheba (31 October) and the capture of Tell Khuweilfe (3-7 November.) On 26 November 1917 Ernest writes: "...we have had a rather hard time since we have been back but at present we are having a rest." He continues: "One day last week we had a very storm also thunder and lightning which is very much heavier than we get in England only it don't last so long and it is a good job it don't as we don't have overcoats here, but I was a bit lucky to have one the last storm which I had picked up on the field."

On 1 December 1917 he writes to thank his parents for a “very acceptable” gift of a tin of cigarettes. “I am so glad you got the things I sent home you say I look thin but of course that is nothing out in this country it is better than being the other way the only thing one wants is to look after is there (sic) health which is the most important thing in this country.” He continues: “We have had two concerts close to us this week. We have a concert party with the division which are very good we get them occasionally when we are having a rest of course it is not to often.”

A few days later the battalion was involved in the capture of Jerusalem (7 – 9 December.) Ernest reflects on the success in his letter of 23 December 1917. He writes: “Just lately we have been having some very rough weather wet and cold both but some days we have been lucky we got in empty houses but it has not been the case always. I daresay you have seen the account of things in the paper and as you say our Batt has had a good share of it and I think everybody else had. I have seen a lot of the big towns out here of course later on I shall be able to tell you more about it but one more thing it has been a bit more interesting lately as there is not so much desert here.

“Well, dear Mother, once more it is Xmas time again and the war is still on I don’t think we shall be getting many extras this year but it don’t matter much as long as we are alive and kicking that is the main part.”

Having successfully captured Jerusalem, the Battalion was then involved in its defence from 27 – 30 December. The War Diary for New Year’s Day 1918³ reports: “Effective strength of Bn at commencement of month 21 officers 711 OR. The Battalion was relieved in the outpost line by the 2/15th LONDONS and marched to HAMALLAH, and bivouacked for the night. The day was very cold and wet.”

Ernest tells his brother Bert, in a letter dated 7 February 1918: “I shall never forget New Year’s Day 1918 as we had to do about 12 miles march and it poured in torrents all day but thank goodness we got a tot of rum at the finish. I have got a bivouac which consists of two sheets but they are not always water proof and we are behind a nice wall which keeps a lot of rain out and thank God we have got plenty to eat and drink more than thousands of poor people in England perhaps. ”

In the same letter he comments: “How do you like the new part of the world you are in? Is it better than France. I expect you will find it very rough country it was a good job you got your leave before you went. I should like to get home very much I have been out here 2 years and 7 months I think it is time they give some of us leave to England but I suppose it is a job to get the transport. I expect you have read the account of things going on this front of course it has been a great success so far but at present it is fairly quiet as we are getting some very rough weather it has been raining for 3 days now and today it is pouring wet and very cold..... ”

On 4 February 1918 he writes to his parents: “I have been to Bethlehem and also Jerusalem. Had about two hours in the latter of course there was

not a great lot to see of course it is well worth seeing the old ancient places."

"We have had some very rough weather here lately," he writes on 24 March 1918. "... it has been very wet and cold but the last few days it has been like summer of course these quick changes it not much good for one but still we can get over these trifles alright."

In his letter of 31 March 1918 Ernest tells his parents: "I expect you see in the paper that Jericho was taken I have been through there but it (is) not a very large place but it is rather pretty one but any more for that I think old England wants a bit of beating. I suppose there is a big battle going on in France now which I think will make a great difference towards the end of the war. Let us hope it will be over this year. I have not heard from Bert just lately. Think myself he is better off where he is than in France of course there is something to put up with everywhere."

Responding on 12 April 1918 to a letter from his parents with news of his brother Bert's exploits, Ernest writes: "You said he had a 20 mile march that was only a small one to us, we have just had about 5 days march which was about 60 to 80 miles so you can guess we had enough of it but it don't come very often thank goodness. I was looking at a very interesting place a few days ago which you read about in the Bible it was where Our Lord fasted forty days and nights, it is situated on a big hill. I went all over the building it did not look much from the outside but inside it was splendid."

Several of Ernest's letters at this time reflect this view that both he and Albert, by then serving in Italy, are lucky not to be on the battlefields of France.

"I have not heard from Bert just lately," he writes on 26 April 1918, "but the last time he wrote he told me he was L/Corporal quite a rise for him. I have had the opportunity to be several times but did not fancy it. As you say, I think it is a good job Bert went to Italy as it must be awful in France the last few weeks but I hope it will soon be over. ...We shall soon have been out here 3 years. I think we deserve a leave in England but the risk of bringing us home is not worthwhile. I expect Dad gets very tired now as he is busy sowing..."

Again, in his letter of 7 May 1918: "I am glad he (Bert) is in Italy. I think it is much better than being in France at present it must have been awful there...We have just had the new rate of pay through which makes my money 2 shillings per day."

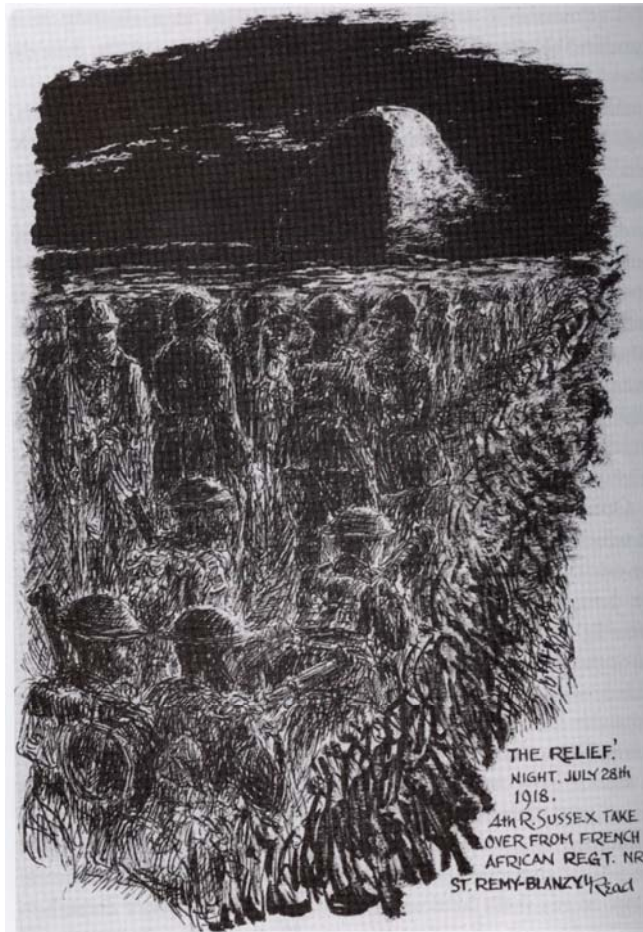
In his letter of 19 May 1918, Ernest writes: "Well when is this war going to end. It don't look much like it at present. It is fairly quiet here now. It don't look much like us getting any leave home. I have just put in for a week's leave in Cairo but I shall not be able to go at present of course the only thing one can do for to break the monotony especially in a place like we have been in and when we do get a rest there is nothing to occupy one's mind. One can have a good weeks holiday for 10 pounds of course

you have got to pay for everything except the railway expenses but you can enjoy yourself without going to the extreme there is one thing you get a nice bed to lie down in which seems a treat after been laying on the ground for 12 months."

Ernest's fears were realised when, in June 1918, his company was posted to France. In his letter home dated 4 July 1918 he writes: "There is a slight alteration in my address, the number and regt is the same but you have to put B.E.F. France, you see we have got here at last and I hope before many weeks I shall have the chance of coming home of course there is a lot of rumours going around that it don't do to believe anything at present but let us hope it will be soon, we are in a fairly decent place a present but we have been moved several- times.....I shall not be able to write for a day or two..."

I L "Dick" Read in his Great War Narrative "Of Those We Loved" wrote: "That these Sussex lads were sturdy fighting material we had no doubt, and I personally never tired of hearing the Sussex talk once more, but we came to the conclusion that Johnny Turk had not thrown heavy stuff at them in Palestine on this scale..."⁴

He goes on to provide a very detailed and illustrated account of the battle which took place on 29 July 1918 in which Ernest was killed. A particularly atmospheric drawing by Read depicts the night before the battle when the Battalion was ordered to relieve the French African Regiment. Read writes: "The French Sengalese soldiers stood silent as statues, ready to



move off, but their two officers greeted us cordially and, after pointing out our first objective, a wood dimly discernible in the misty moonlight seven or eight hundred metres in front, wished us good luck and, in gruff undertones, ordered their men to march."⁵

Image from I L 'Dick' Read book 'Of Those We Loved: A Great War Narrative Remembered and Illustrated' p356, reproduced here by kind permission of the Read Family.

In July, George and Louisa had received the very last communication from Ernest, a sombrely prophetic postcard. It was sent just a few days before his last battle. On the back he has written: "We are very busy at present, rather an anxious time I think." He ends "no news of leave at present."



Ernest's last postcard home (from RSR MS 4/57)

Written in pencil at the top of the card is the poignant note: "Dear Ern's last card."

Louisa Richardson found it impossible to accept that Ernest was dead. Hoping against hope, she had advertisements placed in the Southern Weekly for at least three weeks running in a desperate search for anyone who could provide her with any information about her missing son.

Chaplain E.C. Elliot of the 4th Royal Sussex, wrote to her on October 25th 1918 with the following account of Ernest's last day: "The Battalion was fighting near Soissons, and made an advance in the course of which he was seriously wounded in the thigh. The wound was dressed by a stretcher bearer. The battalion then had to retire and could not

bring back the wounded. Pte Richardson was seen by a Sergeant but he could not see who was attending him. A number of our men who were taken prisoner some months ago in other battalions have not since been heard of, so it is possible that Richardson may yet be heard of, but of course, it is impossible to be sure & one dare not raise false hope. I am sorry that I can tell you nothing more definite."

An unknown soldier, writing home to his own parents in February 1919, was more specific: "All I can hear of Richardson is that he was killed outright and the chap said that he was blown to pieces by a shell."

Louisa's advertisements brought a swift and sympathetic response from Mrs Mary Slowly of Brighton whose husband served in the same company. In a letter dated February 8th 1919, she wrote: "Fortunately my husband managed to get away from this wood where the battle was. They had a

very hard time, the huns were constantly shelling. My husband got hit about 10 o'clock in the morning and he was wandering all day from place to place, the shelling was so dreadful."

A week later on February 13th 1919, having spoken to her husband, she wrote again: "It is quite true that they could not bring the wounded in. The shelling was most terrible. My hubby told me that after he came too, when he got hit, he managed to crawl to the first dressing station, and he said while he was waiting to have his wound seen to the shells was bursting close to it, he said, he got up the best way he could and got to the next one, the best he could, it is heart aching to hear how he fared. He says that first dressing station must have been blown to pieces."



War Memorial at Streat Parish Church (author's own photograph)

Louisa, heartbroken, wrote the following tribute to her youngest son in 1919:

"Into the field of battle he bravely took his place,
 And fought and died for England and the honour of his race.
 He sleeps not in his native land but 'neath a foreign sky
 Far from those who love him best
 But in a hero's grave he lies.
 Gone from our home, but never from our hearts.
 One year has passed, our hearts still sore
 As time rolls on, we miss more.
 His loving smiles, his welcome face,
 No-one can fill his vacant place.



Gravestone of George and Louisa Richardson with added inscription commemorating their son Ernest (author's own photograph)

Sleep on, dear one, in far-off land
 In a grave we may never see.
 But as long as life and memory last
 We shall remember thee."

Conclusions

Louisa died on 13 January 1926 aged 60 and six years later George moved to Eastbourne to live with his surviving son, Albert. George died on 25 October aged 79. A short newspaper article headed "Former resident's death" reports that his funeral took place at the Parish Church. "A native of Streat, he worked for the

Fitzhugh Family for many years at Marchants Farm and Streat Place. He left to live with his son in Eastbourne seven years ago. Rev H.J. Kingston conducted the funeral service. Chief mourners were Mr and Mrs A Richardson (son and daughter in law) Miss E Richardson (niece) and Mr and Mrs G Costock (cousins).

Ernest 's name is included on the Soissons Memorial in Aisne, France where nearly 40,000 officers and men with no known grave are commemorated. But with their boy lying in an unknown grave, George and Louisa had clearly determined that he would be remembered in his home village. Their gravestone bears an additional inscription: "Also of their son, Ernest George Richardson 4th Batt. Royal Sussex Regiment Killed in Action 29 July 1918 aged 26 years"

Across the churchyard wall, in an adjacent meadow, is a memorial to all the men from Streat who died in the Great War. There are no names on this memorial but it carries the following inscription:

"To remember the war 1914-1918. Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory."

Original records

RSR MS 4/57 Papers of Private Ernest George Richardson

RSR MS 4/64 War Diary 16 July 1915 – 1 August 1919

Census records held in the National Archives relating to the Richardson Family

Bibliography

I L "Dick" Read "Of Those We Loved – A Great War Narrative Remembered and Illustrated" First published 1994

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the family of I L Dick Read for permission to reproduce his drawing of "The Relief"

¹ Nominal Roll of NCOs and men who landed at Suvla on August 8 1915. (RSR MS 4/72.)

² War Diary of 4th Royal Sussex Regiment July 16 1915 – August 1 1919. Typescript of official War Diary (RSR MS 4/64)

³ War Diary of 4th Royal Sussex Regiment July 16 1915 – August 1 1919.
Typescript of official War Diary (RSR MS 4/64)

⁴ Quote taken from Page 351 of *Of Those We Loved: A Great War Narrative Remembered and Illustrated* by I L “Dick” Read

⁵ Quote taken from Page 355/6 of *Of Those We Loved: A Great War Narrative Remembered and Illustrated* by I L “Dick” Read