

A Chaplain's War

A Case Study of Rev. Arthur Hamilton Boyd



Rev. Boyd's Military Cross, used with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Museum of Army Chaplaincy.

By Simon Machin

Introduction

The Military Cross (MC) that is second from left in the photograph on the front page of this Case Study is remarkable for being won by a man who was, through his calling, unable to carry a weapon. Its recipient, Reverend Arthur Hamilton Boyd, OBE had no personal objection to fighting; in fact, his first thought was to enlist, but this proved impossible. In the event, he was able to demonstrate personal bravery of a different sort as a military chaplain, receiving one of the 487 MC awards to them for gallantry in the First World War. His medal is displayed on a regular basis at the Museum of Army Chaplaincy at Ampport, Hampshire, which chronicles the history of those clergy who have for centuries served in uniform as non-combatants amongst soldiers in theatres of war. The story of Arthur Hamilton Boyd and how he exchanged the life of a rector in the quiet country parish of Slaugham in West Sussex for a role at the Front provides an opportunity also to throw a sidelight on the role of chaplains in the Great War and the spiritual and physical challenges they faced.

The Pre-War Life of Arthur Hamilton Boyd

For the information that I have been able to gather about the Reverend Boyd's early life I am greatly indebted to the insights of his grandson Bill Boyd, now resident in Ontario, Canada; the practical assistance in genealogical research of a friend, Charles Harries; and the kind intervention at various points of the curator of the Museum, David Blake. Arthur Hamilton Boyd was born into the landed gentry in Scotland, in 1869, the fourth son of Sir John Boyd of Maxpoffle, Roxburgh. Census records in 1871, 1881 and 1891 show that the family lived in Edinburgh, Arthur's father being between 1888 and 1891 Lord Provost of the City. Arthur was educated at Edinburgh Academy where he distinguished himself at sport. The London Gazette for 1 May 1888 shows him confirmed as a Second Lieutenant in Edinburgh's Volunteer Corps and the 1891 census reveals his occupation as an insurance clerk. Whether this occupation was only a temporary measure before he embarked on the preparation for Holy Orders is unclear; we have only the record of training undertaken. A wartime newspaper article states that he attended the Theological College of the Episcopal Church in Edinburgh, which was a necessary prelude to becoming an Anglican clergyman, and this is

confirmed by his entry in Crockford's Clerical Directory, 1932, which shows that he graduated in 1894. One option would have been to serve in the Scottish Episcopal Church, but at some point he decided that his future lay in the south. He was ordained priest at Chichester in 1897. Curacies at Chailey and Hurstpierpoint followed, and in 1898 Arthur Hamilton Boyd married Penelope Elizabeth Blencowe, the youngest daughter of John Blencowe of Bineham, Sussex. Soon afterwards he was appointed Rector of nearby Slaugham, a large parish in the sparsely populated Wealden countryside, whose church, St Mary's, dates mainly from the 12th and 13th centuries. The Boyds had two sons, William and James, and in addition to his parish and domestic responsibilities, Reverend Boyd became attached to the Royal Sussex Regiment as a Chaplain.

War Service as a Chaplain

In view of the commitment, evidenced in Edinburgh and Slaugham, to voluntary and professional involvement with the armed forces, it is no surprise when Bill Boyd confirms that on the outbreak of war his grandfather volunteered for a combat unit and was offered a commission as a major. The Ecclesiastical Authority refused to give the required approval, and so he went to France as a chaplain. Curiously, when the Imperial War Museum checked the Army Lists for the First World War, they appeared to show him serving with the 4th battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, the infantry, throughout, but this is clearly contradicted by a series of other records, including the British Army WWI Medal Roll Index Card. For whatever reason, Reverend Boyd was posted in wartime to serve with the cavalry. His entry from the Handbook to the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire 1921 shows him appointed in 1914 Acting Chaplain to the Forces 4th Class, posted to Divisional Troops, 3rd Cavalry Division, British Expeditionary Force, France; appointed in 1915 Senior Chaplain, 3rd Class, 3rd Cavalry Division; and in 1916 appointed Deputy Assistant Chaplain-General, 2nd Class, Cavalry Corps.

In the photograph that is being used with the permission of the Trustees of the Museum of Army Chaplaincy, the country rector, here depicted in his uniform of army chaplain, cuts an imposing figure clearly at ease in a military setting.



The guest list from the Boyds' wedding, which includes the nobility, reveals a popular couple comfortable mixing with the County set. It is possible that Reverend Boyd's social status made it natural for him to serve within an elite military institution, the cavalry, from which a disproportionately large number of

senior commanders in the British Army were drawn, including the leader of the British Expeditionary Force, General Sir John French. No chaplain, however, remained immune from the challenges that were faced by the body of men who chose to provide spiritual support to servicemen in the unparalleled conditions of the First World War.

The most notable change that war brought to how army padres had operated in the decade before the outbreak of war was that they suddenly had to serve a much larger contingent of volunteers drawn from many diverse walks of life who now filled the ranks of a force committed to overseas trench warfare. Previously, the army chaplaincy had not been central to the experience of either the clergy or laity in Britain's religious denominations. The army had been a small, well-trained professional force, policing colonial territories; its officers had been recruited from the peerage, the landed gentry and select sections of the middle classes and its other ranks from the urban and rural poor.¹ The clergy of the pre-war period serving with the Army Chaplain's Department (AChD) had undertaken duties focused on garrison life, presiding over regular church parades, giving instruction in army schools, visiting prisoners in military detention and overseeing recreational and welfare facilities. The Department had been small, with perhaps 170 commissioned or acting chaplains serving 250,000 officers and men.

So, since its formation in 1796, the AChD had evolved along lines of operation where its functions were well understood by all parties, since officers, the ranks and the clergymen themselves knew what they had signed up for. This state of affairs changed at the declaration of war when over 2 million men enlisted, joining the divisions of Lord Kitchener's new armies and turning the military from a small, homogenous force into a vast citizen army, whose diverse experience of many religious traditions and none suddenly needed to be catered for. The impact on the structure of the Department alone is evident from the fact that by November 1918, no fewer than 5,503 new commissions had been granted to clergymen drawn from a range of denominations.² In a very short period of time, the chaplaincy service had been obliged to change out of all recognition in a war whose appalling conditions and attritional rates of loss were completely

new, whilst absorbing into its ranks an overwhelming number of clergy volunteers who were themselves utterly unused to army life.

The Imperial War Museum has in its book collection some manuscripts that tell the story of this momentous shift. They are written by chaplains either for those about to join the service or as personal testimonies of the experiences, good and bad, they passed through as a result of their unique and complicated relationship with the army. *Tips for Padres: A Handbook for Chaplains* by Everard Digby is a most practical introduction by a temporary chaplain 4th Class (CoE), who clearly found his attachment to a battalion of The London Regiment inspirational since he dedicates his book to those “amongst whom two of the happiest years of my life have been spent”. Digby takes a no-nonsense and worldly-wise approach to the work, providing a great deal of advice on the type of kit and equipment a chaplain should travel to the Front with. He outlines the complexities of being attached to an officers’ mess, which was effectively a gentleman’s club, carrying with it the obligation to employ a batman, and the requirement to dine with fellow officers once a week on Guest Night. A chaplain, despite receiving no separation allowance for his wife and children, was expected to conform to the norms of an officer, albeit as Digby concedes self-deprecatingly only “an old fool of a padre”³, and the Handbook laments the predicament of those whose conscience prevented them from continuing to draw a stipend, for whom severe financial straits were added to the other strains of the role. Because of his familiarity with a chaplaincy within the garrison life of the Royal Sussex Regiment, the life of the mess may have been less of a challenge to Reverend Boyd. Indeed, the ease with which the Slaugham Rector moved through the different ranks of chaplain from 4th class (Captain, normally requiring 10 years’ service, according to Digby), 3rd class (Major, requiring 5 years) and 2nd class (Lieutenant-Colonel, requiring 5 years) marks out a man destined for senior status within the service. Yet however marked out his pre-war service may have made him, Reverend Boyd would have been faced with the same logistical challenges as other chaplains: of being attached as an officer to a military unit but only nominally under the control of its commanding officer; of being classified as hospital staff under the terms of the Geneva Convention, so unable to bear arms; and of struggling to establish the provision of amenities such as

private rooms that enabled him to consult with and officiate spiritually amongst the ranks without getting in the way of fellow officers.

It was the ability to mix freely with servicemen of all ranks which appears to have been the principal motivation of those chaplains who relished the demands of the role. It is sometimes forgotten how distanced clergymen had become from the ordinary population in Edwardian Britain, particularly working men. With all the difficulties of the chaplain's role with its motley collection of tasks from conducting interesting religious services, to running social clubs, getting up entertainments, visiting the well, wounded and sick, refereeing football matches and time-keeping at boxing matches, writing letters home on behalf of wounded or barely-literate rankers or officiating with the utmost reverence at burial services, some clergymen found that their services were welcomed by all conditions of men in a manner that was new and profoundly satisfying. The collection of chaplaincy books at the Imperial War Museum commonly emphasize the critical importance of having the right personality⁴ for the role, an ability to connect with a range of temperaments and classes, and tremendous reserves of cheerfulness and endurance. They do not hide the psychological cost of the work: the need to get away temporarily from contact with the men that they served after a major battle, simply from the trauma of losing large numbers of soldiers whom they had come to care for profoundly. For many chaplains (of whom the best known is Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, or Woodbine Willie), their experience led to a theological shift from a sacramental form of Christianity to an incarnational form, where the chaplain needed to exemplify the self-sacrificing spirit of the historical Jesus.

Taking personal risks for the benefit of enemy soldiers, which is the reason why, in 1915, Reverend Boyd came to hold the Military Cross, exemplifies this ethos. The reason for the decoration which was awarded to some 250 Anglican Chaplains during the war (cite) was traced not from a military record or detailed citation in the London Gazette (or other formal source) but from a local Scottish newspaper, the Kelso Times. The edition for 24 February 1915 indicates that at Ypres, the German army shelled a hospital which was full of wounded French and Germans. The French evacuated their wounded. It fell to a French doctor and two

Sisters of Mercy to attend to about fifty remaining Germans. Eventually the doctor, "after heroic work", was obliged to leave. It was at this point that Reverend Boyd found them. After much strenuous work during the day and night along with the Sisters of Mercy, he succeeded in getting the wounded removed with the aid of the British Red Cross Society, but not before nearly a third of them had died or been killed by German shells.

Conclusion

At the war's end, Arthur Hamilton Boyd did not return immediately to Sussex, according to his grandson, who believes that he continued to stay in mainland Europe for a year in activities related to the Imperial War Graves Commission. Sadly, although he and Penelope were spared the loss of either of their sons in the war, unlike many parents of their generation, tragedy struck soon after, when their eldest, William, was killed in County Cork, Ireland on 16 June 1921 by the IRA at the Rathcoole Ambush, while serving as an auxiliary cadet. He is buried at St Mary's, Slaugham. Reverend Boyd remained Rector until 1928, and then lived in London. His grandson, Bill Boyd, who remembers visiting him as a small boy after the Second World War, confirms that he continued his ministry and ran a choir. He spent his final years living modestly in a small hotel close by Kensington High Street, having just two suits when he died, but keeping with him the small chalice set which he would have used at the Front. Bill retains both his grandfather's Cavalry ceremonial sword, which he is wearing in the photograph, and also another presented to Reverend Boyd by the Slaugham Company of the Church Lads' Brigade. His medals have been in the Museum since the late 1970s where they form part of a collection deposited there, paying tribute to the gallantry of those individuals decorated for bravery who had been commissioned as a 'Chaplain to the Forces.'

¹ E. Madigan, and M. Snape, *The Clergy in Khaki* Farnham: Ashgate, (2013), pp. 1.

² Madigan and Snape, *The Clergy in Khaki*, p.2.

³ Everard Digby, *Tips for Padres*, London: Gale & Polden (1917), p.14.

⁴ *Chaplains in Council*, London: Edward Arnold (1917), p.63.