

Marriages Between British Service Men and
French Civilians 1914-1918.

Terry Brown

And

Judy Turner

For the Faculty of MHT and Humanities.

July 2011- September 2011

This Report Was Written in Partial Fulfilment of a
UROS Bursary Scheme.

Abstract:

The nature of this study comprises of qualitative and quantitative data handling, crosschecking names of servicemen and spouses in online records to give a comprehensive view of a life experience outside that of frontline duties for servicemen in France during the First World War. This will include marriage partners, marriage duration and any subsequent family. This is in line with current scholarly theory which seeks to reevaluate previous research which has focused almost exclusively on combative life in the trenches. The resulting information will be used to provide alternative perspectives and critical analysis of marriages between British servicemen and French and Belgian civilians during the First World War. The findings will then be written up into a paper to be presented to the Faculty Research Seminar and then further refined for publication; alongside this a poster will be produced for the conclusion of the UROS project.

Introduction:

This research project investigates British perceptions of military personnel living in France during the First World War. This study aimed to examine how relations formed within these makeshift military communities formed a significant part of the experience of life on the Western Front. Social histories of the war have started to develop an alternative perspective of experience which has resulted in the use of more fragmentary sources to illustrate a more varied scope of awareness. It has been estimated that combatants on the Western Front spent only 40 per cent of their time actually engaged in front-

line duties (Fuller, 1991) there has been little examination to date into how they passed the remaining 60 per cent of their lives. Most scholarly investigation into how soldiers experienced war in this region continues to concentrate on the experience of combat or life in the trenches (Fergusson, 1998; Sheffield 2001). Investigating how time was spent away from the trenches will allow this significant dimension of wartime life to be considered. Initial research by Professor Krista Cowman was funded by the British Academy, and has revealed four main themes for further study: shopping, food, leisure and sexual/romantic liaisons. This project is concerned with the sexual and romantic liaisons of soldiers and local inhabitants and the resulting marriages which occurred, thereby disputing claims that identifying such marriages has proved impossible because of the dispersed nature of records. That to undertake such recovery of data would be either too lengthy or that no comprehensive set of records would have survived making any coherent analysis impossible. The initial research found this not to be accurate, under Section 22 of the Foreign Marriages Act 1892, the Government issued a General Order to the effect that Commanding Officers of men entering into marriages with French or Belgian women should send the details of such marriages to the Deputy Adjutant General, 3rd Echelon, General Headquarters. This register was forwarded to the Registrar General after the war, and eventually deposited in The National Archives. It is, however, not filed with similar records and hence has been overlooked by historians to this point. Professor Krista Cowman has copied and transcribed the contents of the register (which contains over 1000 entries) this UROS project will involve further analysis of this data.

Process:

After the initial meeting in July 2011 with Professor Krista Cowman we were introduced to the contents of the register. Subject to this meeting we were given access to Ancestry.co.uk in order to initiate our research. It was decided that the register would be split equally by Terry Brown and Judy Turner. The research itself was deskbound and both participants were able to conduct the research from home. Access to the Ancestry site was facilitated until the end of September 2011, by means of hoping that the research could be completed in this timescale. Both participants kept in constant contact with one another via email and telephone as a means of communicating progress. From the register a soldier's name and military number was used to locate their records. From these initial records we were able to ascertain the confirmation of marriage of around 15% from the total recorded in the registry. As well as using military records to ascertain information, marriage bands also proved helpful as did pension records and family trees where available. However this way of researching in many instances proved futile. Further research on each individual was then completed via the father's name or from the name of the spouse. Any documents detailing the marriage, children or indeed military pension which could show the movements of the family was recorded as an image on a USB and as a typed document. The result of our data collection was forwarded onto Professor Cowman. The final instalment will be to produce a poster illustrating our findings and processes which will then be showcased at dissemination event for UROS projects on the 25th of January.

Results:

Out of a thousand entries from the register less than two hundred soldiers records were recovered, from these two hundred, the results ranged from minimal information to that of fairly detailed records e.g. family trees and in some cases immigration records (although this was an uncommon occurrence). In some instances what proved to be useful was to search in the wife's maiden name, although this occasionally resulted in no information for the serviceman it did however result in the wife being traceable within the UK. Analysis in locations of death of both spouses revealed that a number of these marriages did indeed survive.

Summary:

We were able to ascertain that marriages between British servicemen and local women did occur and in some instances survived with resulting families. However this research was blighted by many records not being available and with only twenty percent success of actual identification of the servicemen the result of the data collected proved to be sporadic at best. However there are some individual results which provide a detailed picture of their lives post war. This will aid subsequent research to be conducted by Professor Cowman.

Conclusions:

The main conclusions to this research are concerns of the dispersed nature of records which has proven to be a major factor in trying to locate evidence. This has led to some frustration at either no records or incomplete records for

much of the data. It's a process which required many hours for very little comprehensive data. Other conclusions which have been reached lie more within the nature of the study and less within the retrieval of information. However there has been some retrieval of individual stories which will hopefully provide Professor Cowman with a platform for further perspective in a social history for veterans. This will hopefully challenge previous scholarly investigation which has chosen to look primarily at the front line experience. After participation in this study it has revealed problems and inadequacies relating to the use of a resource such as Ancestry.co.uk for comprehensive Historical research. The participants of this study have taken valuable skills in the process of not only using such a resource as Ancestry but also how to organise initiation and approach to this type of data collection.

Acknowledgements:

We acknowledge Professor Krista Cowman in selecting us to participate in this insightful study. It has given both participants valuable skills and a real understanding to the process of Historical research. Thanks also to Carolyn Williams for facilitating our access to Ancestry.co.uk. Our thanks to each other for support during and after this project.

