

## **John Kipling's grave**

*'Come with me,' he said, 'and I will show you where your son lies.*

Many readers will be familiar with the controversy which first arose in 1992 when the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) concluded that a grave in St Mary's Advanced Dressing Station cemetery near Loos in France, containing a body exhumed in 1919 and previously attributed only to an unknown lieutenant of the Irish Guards, was that of Rudyard Kipling's only son, John. A new headstone was subsequently installed.

John had been killed on 27 September 1915, the third day of the Battle of Loos. He was a second lieutenant in the 2nd Battalion Irish Guards, which was part of the 2nd Guards Brigade attack on Chalk Pits Wood and some nearby mine-head buildings. The attack failed, with many casualties, and the brigade withdrew. John did not return. As is well known, Rudyard and his wife Carrie spent much time over the next few years making enquiries about the circumstances of that day, Carrie at least not giving up hope that John might have been taken prisoner despite receiving eye-witness reports from members of the regiment that he was almost certainly dead. Eventually, after the war was over, they reluctantly accepted the inevitable, and John's name was removed from the Army List in July 1919. In due course, John's name was inscribed on the memorial to the missing of Loos at Dud Corner cemetery.

The 1992 CWGC conclusion was based on two assumptions. Firstly, that of the officers of the battalion missing on 27 September, John, whose promotion was gazetted (i.e. reported in the *London Gazette*) after his death but was retrospective to June, was the only full lieutenant, the others being second lieutenants. Secondly, that the trench map square in which the body was found had been incorrectly recorded as G25 by the Army Labour Company exhumation team, when it should have been H25. This would then correspond to the position of the Irish Guards' attack (rather than being several miles away behind the lines).

John's biography was related with meticulous detail in 1998 by the battlefield historians Tonie and Valmai Holt in *My Boy Jack?*<sup>i</sup> In the book, the Holts cast doubt on the CWGC reattribution for two main reasons:

- The grounds for the exhumation team's attribution of rank and regiment were unrecorded, but if it was based on fragments of uniform and was correct then the body could not be John's, as his uniform would still only have borne the single star of a second lieutenant. This was because it was not the practice to put up the badges of the new rank until a promotion had been gazetted. Indeed, in one of his final letters home on 19 September, John had asked Rudyard to send him a replacement metal identity disc showing his rank still as second lieutenant. The battalion's war diary also attributes the lesser rank to him in its account of the action on 27 September.
- It was not credible that so egregious a mistake could be made in recording the map squares, for reasons related to the systematic nature of both the search team and the recording methods. Moreover, one of the other bodies found by the exhumation team in the same area on the same day had been identified as Private Blaber of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion, The London Regiment (Civil Service

Rifles), which the Holts concluded had been near G25 but not H25 when Blaber had been killed.

They added that if the body was that of an Irish Guards second lieutenant, then it could have been any of the three second lieutenants missing on that day: Clifford, Kipling or Pakenham-Law (although there was an unsubstantiated record noting the latter's burial elsewhere). Moreover, it could not be ruled out that the remains were of an 'other rank' or even that the soldier was not an Irish Guard.

In 2007, prompted by revived interest in John's story from the TV drama 'My Boy Jack' and an associated exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, the Holts published an updated edition of their book.<sup>ii</sup> In it, they described how they had approached the CWGC with their concerns about the reliability of the reattribution, but that having reviewed the matter the CWGC declined to reverse the decision. Internal correspondence at the time showed concern within CWGC about the validity of the original conclusion, but that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) still firmly supported it. The MOD considered that the recorded 'lieutenant' could have encompassed second lieutenant, and that misidentification of regiment or of the remains of a private soldier as an officer was unlikely. It added that the records of Clifford and Pakenham-Law stated that they had been buried elsewhere, the former behind the German lines and the latter between Chalk Pit Woods and Loos. It also commented somewhat confusingly on location, seemingly saying that it was conceivable both that a transcription error had been made, and that in the confusion of retreat Kipling and some other Irish Guardsmen could have come or been taken to G25.<sup>iii</sup> The MOD also offered to facilitate an exhumation for further examination, although recognising that this would be contrary to CWGC policy.<sup>iv</sup>

The Holts proposed a different solution to the question of how, if the map reference was correct, remains of soldiers identified as Irish Guards were found in the unlikely map square G25. They suggested that the exhumation team could have recorded 'Irish Guards' in error for 'London Irish', a battalion of which regiment advanced through map square G25 on the opening day of the battle, losing a Lieutenant Hamilton-Jacobs that day, whose remains may therefore be those of the unknown lieutenant.

Matters rested there until the battle's centenary neared, when two separate investigations into the mystery were begun, unknown to each other. One was by members of the Canadian Expedition Force Study Group, who discovered two things. Firstly, the military records of a Private Thomas McPherson recorded that his body had been exhumed in map square H25, at a junction in an allied trench called Railway Trench, which was indeed in that map square in 1917, the year McPherson was killed. Yet he had been shown on the exhumation records as being found in G25, on the same page as the other exhumations that day including that of the unknown lieutenant. Hence the exhumation records must have been incorrect after all.<sup>v</sup> Secondly, they discovered from Red Cross records that Second Lieutenant Clifford had been buried behind the German lines (which the MOD had identified in 2002), meaning that the unknown lieutenant, if indeed an Irish Guards second lieutenant, could only have been one of Pakenham-Law or John, the only other second lieutenants of the regiment never found.<sup>vi</sup>

The other investigation was by Joanna Legg and her father Lt. Col. Graham Parker. They gave examples intended to show that it was not uncommon for officers to have worn the rank badge of an ungazetted promotion. They also explained a crucial fact previously overlooked regarding the location of the exhumation. Trench map squares were normally divided into four sub-squares, labelled a and b across the top, c and d beneath. The unknown lieutenant's body was recorded as being found in G25c. However, there never was a sub-square G25c, as the Loos maps ended on its east side with 25b and d and the immediate adjacent land to the west on the next map was in sub-squares L30a and c. This confirmed the Canadian team's conclusion that the recorded map reference was incorrect.<sup>vii</sup>

They also identified that the maps of the area were resurveyed after the issue of the map they had been using. Assuming that the exhumation team were using the later maps meant that the location of exhumation, transposing H for G, now lay on the allied side of Chalk Pit Wood, exactly where a Sergeant Farrell of the Irish Guards had told Kipling he had carried John's body to and left in a shell hole.<sup>viii</sup> On the earlier map used by the Holts, the same grid reference was to open ground on the German side of the wood. Parker and Legg also demonstrated that all three bodies found that day which could be fully identified, one of which was McPherson's, all belonged to soldiers whose battalions were close to Chalk Pit wood at the time of their death, invalidating the Holts' conclusion that Blaber was killed in G25. As to Pakenham-Law, they considered it likely that despite conflicting reports of his place of burial he was not buried near where the unknown lieutenant was found.<sup>ix</sup> Legg and Parker concluded that on the balance of probabilities, the unknown lieutenant was John.

Shortly thereafter, it was identified that a second body of an unknown British officer had been found in H25c on another occasion, subsequently being reinterred in the Loos war cemetery. These remains were found close to the south-west edge of Chalk Pit Wood, so not where Sergeant Farrell said he had placed John's body, but still possibly ground which John had crossed. But they could also have be the remains of Pakenham-Law, or even of an officer from another period of the war.<sup>x</sup>



*Figure 1. Map of Chalk Pits Wood area showing location of the body of an unidentified lieutenant of the Irish Guards (X), the same grid reference on earlier map used by the Holts (star), and location of body of officer found on a different occasion (triangle). Areas reported for burial of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieut. Pakenham-Law are shaded.*

Following much discussion on the online Great War Forum, a response to Parker and Legg's paper was written by David Langley. He disagreed that John Kipling would have worn the rank badges of a full lieutenant, citing numerous contemporary examples where this did not happen. He highlighted the difference between promotion to a temporary rank in the field, where for practical purposes the new rank was usually put up before the appointment was gazetted, and a substantive promotion due to seniority which was often backdated and only put up when gazetted. John Kipling's promotion was of the latter type whereas Parker and Legg's examples were of the former. He also considered that the remains being those of Pakenham-Law could not be ruled out.<sup>xi</sup>

### *Conclusions*

There is no doubt that the original 1992 reattribution of the grave was done with insufficient rigour, opening it challenge. Had the information later uncovered been known at the time, the CWGC may well have left the headstone unchanged, or as has been done in some cases, qualified the attribution by adding 'Thought to be...'. Subsequent work has questioned some of the aspects of the challenge and made it more likely that the reattribution was, after all, correct. Nevertheless, many uncertainties remain, particularly as to the reliability of the attribution of rank and regiment. And even if the unknown lieutenant was an Irish Guards second lieutenant, he could have been Pakenham-Law. In John's father's own words, we still *know not how he fell, and ... know not where he is laid.*

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<sup>i</sup> Tonie and Valmai Holt, *My Boy Jack?* (1998, Pen and Sword)

<sup>ii</sup> Tonie and Valmai Holt, *My Boy Jack?* (2007, Pen and Sword)

<sup>iii</sup> The remains of two Irish Guards 'other ranks' had been found on the same day and in the same area as the unknown lieutenant.

<sup>iv</sup> Correspondence, with some names redacted, relating to the 2002 review of the original CWGC decision, obtained from the MOD under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 by P. Suddick on behalf of the Great War Forum (23 October 2015)

<sup>v</sup> The Holts subsequently agreed that the remains were indeed found near the site of the Irish Guard's action (<https://cefresearch.ca/canadians-lost-at-hill-70-help-unravel-the-kipling-mystery/>).

<sup>vi</sup> <https://cefresearch.ca/is-this-really-the-grave-of-rudyard-kiplings-only-son/>

<sup>vii</sup> Lt. Col. (ret'd) Graham Parker and Joanna Legg, 'The Unidentified Irish Guards Lieutenant at Loos: laid to rest', *Stand To! The Journal of the Western Front Association*, 106 (2016), pp. 3-13

<sup>viii</sup> Kipling received many conflicting reports as to his son's fate from the soldiers he spoke to but accepted Sergeant Farrell's story as the most credible (Carrie's diary entry for 12 December 1917) – or at least the most comforting.

<sup>ix</sup> Legg and Parker note that one military report stated that Pakenham-Law was buried at "Chalk Pit – between Chalk Pit Wood and Lone Tree", a range which might just be considered to encompass where the unknown lieutenant was exhumed. Other reports place his body between the wood and Loos.

<sup>x</sup> <https://cefresearch.ca/lt-wylie-and-2nd-lt-kipling-loos-british-cemetery/>

<sup>xi</sup> David Langley, 'John Kipling: On the Balance of Probability', *Stand To!*, 108 (2017), pp. 33-35