

## 'My Friend': Major Colin B Traill, MC

(compiled by Anne Williamson)

When HW was convalescing at Trefusis (Falmouth, Cornwall) from 29 June to 29 August 1917 (when he was sent on to Plymouth until 15 October) he made a number of new friends: in particular one captioned in a photograph in his 'Trefusis' album as:

*Major Colin B. Traill, MC, West Yorks Regt, Killed March 1918, Aged 24 years "My Friend"*



Major Colin B. Traill  
M.C.  
West Yorks Regt.  
Killed March 1918.  
Aged 24 years.  
"My friend."

The information in HW's caption to the photograph as above is erroneous: Colin Balfour Traill was Major in the 10th Btn, EAST Yorkshire Regiment, one of the well-known four 'Hull Pals Bttns' and known as 'The Commercials', who were rather looked down on by the others! (Colin Traill was a stockbroker before the war.) Born in Ceylon on 2 Dec 1894 (thus exactly one year older than HW), he was educated at Rugby School and had enlisted as a 2nd Lt into the 24 Service Btn London Regt (Queens) on 14 Sept 1914 and, date unknown but certainly before May 1917, had transferred to the East Yorks Regt. Neither did Traill die in March – it was June. Other photographs (five in total) of Traill in the album are correctly assigned to the East Yorks Regt.

The 10th East Yorks had their fair share of fighting, including in 1916 taking part in the Battle of the Ancre (where Charlie Boon died). On 3 May 1917 Traill was wounded in the action at Oppy Wood on the first day of the 3rd Battle of the Scarpe, for which he was awarded an MC:

*For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during and after an attack. Although wounded in the head, and later blown into the air by a shell, he refused to retire, displaying the greatest courage and resource and it was only when the critical period was over he went to the dressing station.*

The attack on Oppy Wood (near Bailleul) was part of the Battle of Arras. It was on unknown ground with little time to prepare. The objective was to clear Germans from the wood and take their support trenches. Moving forward under cover of darkness they discovered their position exposed with no cover and no way of communication. The troops set off in the dark in 4 waves through mist

and fumes into murderous machine gun fire, enemy rockets, while Very lights lit the sky. 100 yards from Oppy Wood visibility was nil due to heavy mist.

The previous day (May 2) Capt. Traill had been hit in the face by a shell splinter but had stayed with his men. In this attack, Traill was blown up by a shell just before he reached the German line. When he regained consciousness he was confused and wandered about. At daylight he rounded up a group of stragglers and took them forward into the thick of the fighting. Eventually he went to the dressing station, and from there was sent to the hospital at Étapes.

In the summer of 2002 there was an exhibition at the Imperial War Museum entitled 'The Trench' which particularly featured the 'Pals' Battalions, and Colin Traill's part in the Oppy Wood attack. On display was a letter from him to his sister Norah written on 5 May 1917 – of which a page was deciphered (by Pam Waugh) with difficulty (it was behind glass and at an angle):

*... 6pm on the second I stoppd that unfortunate piece of 5.9 – when we moved up to the assembly position, my head was all wrapped up like a mummy. Reached positions about midnight. Sat under Boche barrage in shell holes. Lost about 20 men (twice). When zero arrived the waves were not so tidy. I got blown up as we reached the Boche trench. When I came to my wits the whole Company had gone on. Horribly fuddled and wandered the wrong way for about a mile. Sun began to rise. Eventually met men from all four companies ...*

At Étapes his wound healed but he was found to be suffering from the effects of being blown up and was sent back to England. He appears to have become worse due to a severe case of rubella and nerve strain, lost over a stone in weight, and was given first sick leave, and then sent down to Trefusis on 20 July 1917. By 24 October he was pronounced to be 'just about fit'. In December he was attached to the 3rd Battn East Yorks in England and on 7 Feb 1918 finally reported as recovered: and at some point soon after that rejoined the 10th Battn at the Front.

Action in 1918 was intense and 10th East Yorks played a full part in it. In June 1918 they took over the line north-east of Nieppe Forest with an attack planned for 6am 28 June to push the Germans further back: four waves moved forward through tall corn meeting no impediment and the men moved forward so quickly they were left vulnerable to their own artillery and many casualties resulted: including the commander of C Coy, Major Traill, who was killed in the first five minutes of the attack (nb: not in March as in HW's own caption). Ironically, the attack objective was very easily obtained with very few casualties.

So died an heroic young man, whose death in the end was caused by 'friendly fire'. He is buried at Le Grand Hazard Military Cemetery, Morbecque (south-west of Hazebrouk) – and we visited his grave on the 2006 tour, honouring his memory by reading this information about his life and death..

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There is no further information about Colin Traill in HW's archive other than those photographs and his caption. However, in *Love and the Loveless (A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight)*, Vol 7, 1958) we find in chapter 15 'Mutiny' that Phillip meets at Étapes a young major called Traill, second-in-command of Phillip's depot, with three wound stripes and an MC. Thus HW weaves into the *Chronicle* the story of the Étapes mutiny, 9-12 September 1917, via the agency of a fictional 'Traill'. At the time of this meeting between Phillip and Traill at Étapes, HW himself was still at Plymouth Convalescent Hospital (where he remained until 15 Oct., when he was posted to 3rd Bttn. Beds Regt at Landguard Fort, Felixstowe). We know therefore that he wasn't at Étapes at that time and, of course, neither was the real-life Major Traill. The mutiny was an official secret and public disclosure of it was apparently forbidden. John Homan (our erstwhile first HWS secretary) was of the opinion that HW was the first person to write about this episode in 1958 in *Love and the Loveless* (see HWSJ 16, Sept 1987, pp 37-8, and AW, *HW and WW1*, pp 188-9). But HW first mentions the Étapes Mutiny in *The Patriot's Progress* (p 127) – where John Bullock sees this: thus as early as 1930.

I am grateful to both Brian Dolan and Pam Waugh for helping find the background information about Major Traill.