

The Search for Answers on the Missing in the Great War: Lt Hugh Henshall Williamson and His Parents' Struggle with Officialdom, 1916-2001

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ABSTRACT

The fates of a significant proportion of the tens of thousands of missing British soldiers on the Western Front during the Great War were never finally resolved and some relatives found it impossible to accept the death of their loved ones. This article examines the convoluted process of seeking answers undertaken by one grieving family. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, the parents never accepted their son's death and accused the Casualties Department of the War Office of inefficiency and ineptitude. War Office policy and practice for dealing with missing officers during the Great War are critically explored in light of the parents' struggle to discover the fate of their only son.

I
On 15 September 1916, the British Guards' Division lost no fewer than sixty-one officers killed or mortally wounded in their struggle to take the village of Lesbœufs on the Somme. The Coldstream Guards suffered particularly severely. With their three battalions attacking in line abreast for the first time, twenty-two officers died. Among the casualties of the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards was Lt Hugh Henshall Clifford Williamson, who disappeared during the battle. It is not in doubt that he was killed on 15 September. He was reported in the battalion's War Diary as having been killed in action and there were several, if contradictory, eyewitness accounts of his death. But exactly when and how he died and what happened to his body were questions that were never definitively answered. As a result, his distraught parents would never accept his death. This article focuses on their desperate and long-running responses to the news that their only child had not only been killed but had also disappeared without trace. The Williamson case therefore provides an extreme example of the occasionally strained relations between the bereaved public and the War Office. It also considers the avenues open to relatives in their search for the missing and assesses the policies of the War Office with regard to those whose remains were never found. The official military response to relatives of the missing

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was based on a rigid bureaucratic policy that did not avoid expressing a heart-breaking realism when necessary, but could also show some flexibility and sympathy.

II

The Williamsons were among hundreds of thousands of parents in Britain who mourned the loss of a son during the Great War. A significant proportion of the bereaved also suffered from the knowledge that the bodies of their soldier relatives were missing. In 1917 Max Pemberton, a veteran of the Somme, wrote that 'There is, perhaps, no penalty of war quite so heavy as this. Its burdens are the same for rich or poor. Alike in the cottage and the castle the daily thought is of the son whose fate is unknown'.¹ The Williamsons were not alone in refusing to accept that the massive firepower available to both sides in the conflict could not only totally reconfigure the landscape but also determine that tens of thousands of men could go missing and never be seen again.² Relatives of such men had to undergo a learning curve if they hoped to understand the realities of the Western Front. The Williamsons, when faced with this necessary process, balked. Their response was not uncommon, but they were, however, to be unusual both in their extended defiance of the War Office's 'rationality' and in their vituperative responses, including slander and the threat of blackmail, to what they saw as the War Office's callousness and ineptitude. The correspondence between the Williamsons and the War Office began with a telegram of 21 September 1916 announcing Hugh Williamson's death in action and ground to a halt in 1920 when, with all avenues seemingly exhausted, the protagonists met face to face for the first (and last) time. The result was deadlock, but personal contact at least drew the correspondence towards an end.

III

The Williamsons were from the professional classes on the maternal side and from wealthy ironmaster and colliery owning, Staffordshire stock on the paternal side. Edith Irene Fanny Bond's father was an architect and surveyor from Liverpool who set up practice in London, first in Hampstead and then in Wimbledon. Edith was born in the latter place in 1863 and in 1889 she married Hugh Henshall Williamson of Newcastle-under-Lyme. He was an only son, a lawyer who inherited considerable wealth in the 1880s, including a mine, an ironworks and land. Williamson was a philanthropist, who contributed much to the village of Brown Edge, Staffordshire, but he and his wife spent most of their time in London, where they sought entry to elite society.³ Their only child, Hugh Henshall Clifford, was born on 28 November 1894

¹ Max Pemberton, 'Missing!' *Weekly Dispatch*, 9 September 1917.

² See, for example, Great War Forum, <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=157177&hl=%2Bmother+%2Bwaiting+%2Bevery#entry1655273> [accessed 12 January 2012].

³ I am grateful to Peter Turner for information on the role played by Hugh Williamson in Brown Edge.

and he followed the traditional educational path of the elite: Eton, where he was an Oppidan and undertook the broader-based Classical rather than Army curriculum with no outstanding achievements, and Christ Church, Oxford. In 1914, when war broke out, he was a member of the Inner Temple, reading for the Bar.⁴

Williamson had been a member of the Officer Training Corps at both Eton and Christ Church and on 14 September 1914 he enlisted in the Inns of Court OTC.⁵ He remained there only eleven days before receiving a commission in the 11th Black Watch, a New Army unit being formed in Perth. In April 1915 the 11th was converted to a Reserve Battalion based at Nigg, near Aberdeen. It took Williamson several months to be transferred to a combat regiment. At this time, a young man's family influence and social connections were very useful if he wished to join an elite regiment.⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that Williamson was transferred to the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards on 4 August 1915 given his friendship with Edward Kenelm Digby, heir to the barony of Digby and adjutant to that very battalion.⁷ He arrived in France three months later, but did not join the battalion in the line immediately.⁸ Instead, he was posted, as were many other officers on their arrival in France, to the 7th Entrenching Battalion, which was an advanced reinforcement depot for the Guards.⁹ It was not until 3 June 1916, twenty-one months after he had enlisted and just in time for the annual Old Etonian Dinner that he reached the 1st Battalion at Marckeghem, near Poperinge, with a draft of eighteen men.¹⁰

Williamson had two tours of duty in the trenches at Zillebeke (Ypres sector) before, on 24 July 1916, he was sent on a Guards course and then, on 3 August, was temporarily attached to the 252nd Tunnelling Company, which had previously prepared a large mine for the attack on the Hawthorne Redoubt on the Somme, 1 July 1916. The Company, which was being assisted by a detachment from the 4th (Pioneer) Battalion of the Coldstream, was in the Beaumont Hamel sector.¹¹ He

⁴ The National Archives (TNA), Kew, Personal Record: Lt H.H.C. Williamson, (hereafter PR, Williamson); War Memorials, Christ Church, Oxford, <http://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/cathedral/memorials/WW1/Hugh-Williamson> [accessed 12 June 2012].

⁵ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson.

⁶ Harold Macmillan, *Winds of Change 1914-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 63-64.

⁷ *London Gazette*, 17 August 1915, p. 8248.

⁸ Medal Index Card, H.H.C. Williamson,

<[http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-](http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?h=11040734&db=MedalRolls&indiv=tryhttp://search.ancestry.co.uk/iexec?htx=View&r=5538&dbid=1262&iid=30850_A001695-02788&fn=H+H+C&ln=Williamson&st=d&ssrc=&pid=11040734)

[bin/sse.dll?h=11040734&db=MedalRolls&indiv=tryhttp://search.ancestry.co.uk/iexec?htx=View&r=5538&dbid=1262&iid=30850_A001695-02788&fn=H+H+C&ln=Williamson&st=d&ssrc=&pid=11040734](http://search.ancestry.co.uk/iexec?htx=View&r=5538&dbid=1262&iid=30850_A001695-02788&fn=H+H+C&ln=Williamson&st=d&ssrc=&pid=11040734)> [accessed 6 May 2012].

⁹ "O. E." [G.A. Fildes], *Iron Times with the Guards* (London: John Murray, 1918), p. 135.

¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/1219, War Diary, 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards, 3 June 1916.

¹¹ Sir John Ross of Bladenburg, *The Coldstream Guards 1914-1918*, (2 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), i. p. 465.

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rejoined the 1st Battalion on 18 August, as the Guards Division prepared to make its entrance on the Somme battlefield. In light of what was to follow, the relatively short period of ten weeks that Williamson served with the 1st Battalion was to be significant.

The battle of Flers-Courcelette, which began on 15 September 1916, was the third major phase of the campaign on the Somme. Ten infantry divisions in three Corps were to be involved in what was to be a massive attack on a broad front, in conjunction with a major French offensive to the south. It was to be the biggest assault since 1 July. Tanks were to be used for the first time. The Guards Division was part of XIV Corps and Williamson's battalion was in the 2nd Guards Brigade. He was a subaltern in No. 1 Platoon of No. 1 Company (his mother described him as the Senior Lieutenant). The ultimate objective given to the division was Lesboeufs, about two miles from their starting off position just north of Ginchy, but there were also other intermediate objectives, featured on the map in lines of colours (green, brown and blue) owing to the featureless nature of the terrain. The Guards' divisional front was about 1200 yards wide and two brigades, the first and second, were to be involved from the outset, with the 3rd in reserve. Williamson's brigade was on the right and his battalion on the left of the brigade, astride the Ginchy-Lesboeufs road.¹² His company was to be in the battalion's second attack wave on its right.

The attack began at 6.20am, with the three Coldstream battalions, in the words of an eyewitness quoted in the *Morning Post*, advancing 'as steadily as though they were walking down the Mall'.¹³ Unfortunately, four factors soon turned the operation into a desperate affair. First, most of the tanks supporting the 2nd Guards Brigade were unable to make much headway and left enemy machine gunners along their designated pathway, which was deliberately omitted from the artillery barrage, free to attack the advancing infantry.¹⁴ Second, the 1st Coldstream found that only five hundred yards from their start-off point and before their first objective, there was a trench full of Germans that had not been previously noticed. They caused considerable casualties before being overrun. Third, the complete failure of 6th Division to take a strongpoint called the Quadrilateral on the Guards' right enabled the enemy to pour intense enfilading fire into the advancing battalions. Fourth, the two Guards brigades involved in the assault were expected to make a difficult manoeuvre during the advance, changing direction. But officer casualties were very high from the outset, which, combined with the unknown trench and the intense fire

¹² C. Headlam, *History of the Guards Division in the Great War 1915-1918*, (2 vols, London: John Murray, 1924), i. p. 150.

¹³ Quoted in [Louis Starr], *The War Story of Dillwyn Parrish Starr* (New York: Putnam's, 1917), p. 88.

¹⁴ Trevor Pidgeon, *The Tanks at Flers* (2 vols, Cobham: Fairmile Books, 1995), i. pp. 92-95.

from the right, caused the battalions to lose direction, moving too far in a northerly direction, and to have a confused idea as to how far they had penetrated the enemy's defences.¹⁵ None of these factors prevented the 1st and 2nd Guards Brigades advancing to take their first two objectives, but Lesboeuvs remained beyond their reach on that day.¹⁶ Losses were very heavy, especially amongst the officers. The 1st Coldstream had more officers killed or mortally wounded on 15 September (eleven) than on any other day of the war.¹⁷

IV

In the immediate aftermath of receiving the War Office notification, the Williamsons appear to have accepted their only child's death. As confirmation, they would have seen their son's name in the list of 'Fallen Officers' published in *The Times* on 23 September 1916.¹⁸ They began the process of winding up his financial affairs, probate being granted on 23 October.¹⁹ By this point, however, they were beginning to have doubts about Hugh's fate, the result of having received a letter from a Coldstream officer. Lt Arthur Newland had been kept in the transport lines on the morning of 15 September and had only gone up to the frontline in the evening, to take over 'the remains of the company'.²⁰ He informed the Williamsons that their son had been sniped on the battlefield, dying instantaneously, and that he had been buried where he fell. Unfortunately, Newland was unable to find anyone who knew exactly where the burial took place.²¹ More suspiciously from the Williamsons' point of view, Newland gave the date of their son's death (correctly) as 15 September, which conflicted with the official telegram's date of the 16th. Such mistakes were quite common at the time, as the Casualties Department at the War Office frequently received different death dates from different military sources. Also, it was not always clear on the battlefield exactly when death had occurred. The very young Anthony Eden, for instance, found himself Adjutant of the 21st King's Royal Rifle Corps at the end of the first day of the battle of Flers. He subsequently reported most deaths as

¹⁵ 1st Coldstream War Diary, 15 September 1916.

¹⁶ A mixed group of Grenadiers, Coldstream and Irish Guards under the command of Oliver Lyttleton reached Lesboeuvs but could not hold it. Oliver Lyttleton, 'Description of Battle [1916]', Chandos Papers, CHAN 18/4, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.

¹⁷ My calculations, based on officers' Personal Records, Commonwealth War Graves Commission records and *The Times*. The next worst day was 29 October 1914. 1st Battalion officer mortality at Lesboeuvs was almost double that at Loos in September 1915.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 23 September 1916.

¹⁹ England and Wales, National Probate Calendar, October 1916, <http://search.ancestry.co.uk/iexec?htx=View&r=5538&dbid=1904&iid=31874_222523-00317&fn=Hugh+Henshall+Clifford&ln=Williamson&st=r&ssrc=&pid=4217558> [accessed 10 January 2013].

²⁰ Lt Arthur Mansfield Newland, MC, the son of a cotton manufacturer, survived the war, dying in 1968.

²¹ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to War Office, n.d. [c. 13 October 1916].

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having occurred 'between 15 and 17 September'.²² Although the Assistant Military Secretary apologised to the Williamsons in November for giving the wrong date of death, this mistake marked the origins of the Williamsons' growing contempt for the efficiency of the War Office.²³

A more puzzling problem for the Williamsons was why there was no confirmation of their son's burial. Williamson's Eton friend Digby had scoured the battlefield on the 16th, but could find no trace of him.²⁴ The parents also used their influence in an attempt to find the grave, obtaining the assistance of an officer of the Graves Registration department. They even employed 'two men from his father's estate in Staffordshire, who had watched him grow up from a child and who should be the best searchers of all'.²⁵ Newland had sent the parents an unposted letter Williamson had written and his wallet, a cigarette case and a purse, which he had received from Williamson's orderly.²⁶ These were personal items that Williamson, it was thought, might have taken with him into action and suggested that his body had been found, if not buried. Finding the grave became an essential feature of Mrs Williamson's reaction to news of her son's death. 'I shall never believe', she wrote, 'that my son is dead until his grave is found and it adds greatly to the sorrow of his father and me that we should be left in this awful state of uncertainty'.²⁷

Like so many other desperate parents, caught in a limbo of suspense, the Williamsons used every avenue to discover what had happened to their son.²⁸ The War Office had nothing to report, but there were other sources of intelligence, both official and unofficial.²⁹ The main official organisation was the British Red Cross,

²² Anthony Eden, *Another World 1897-1917* (London: Allen Lane, 1976), pp. 97-100. The Service Records of men of the 21st KRRC killed on 15 September show Eden's uncertainty.

²³ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Assistant Military Secretary to Edith Williamson, 21 November 1916.

²⁴ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to C2 Casualties Dept, War Office, 9 October 1919.

²⁵ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to War Office, n.d [c. 13 October 1916].

²⁶ The Williamsons misread the letter, reading 'observer' for orderly, and thus were confused as to who this person was.

²⁷ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson.

²⁸ The classic case is of Rudyard Kipling and his wife, following the death of their son at the battle of Loos in September 1915. See T. and V. Holt, *My Boy Jack? The Search for Kipling's Only Son* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2001). See also, Angus Macnaughten, *'Missing'* (Bala: Dragon Books, 1970).

²⁹ Some civic leaders in major cities, such as the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, had information offices open throughout the war to help the relatives of those killed, wounded or missing. *The Times*, 29 April 1919. For the Bristol Inquiry Bureau see *Western Daily Press*, 27 September 1916. The relatives of the missing could also advertise for information in regimental magazines. See, for example, the Royal West Kent Regiment's *The Queen's Own Gazette*, passim. Some unofficial organisations were fraudulent. R. Van Emden, *The Quick and the Dead: Fallen Soldiers and their Families in the Great War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 183-189.

which, from July 1915, took on the task of 'tracing the missing' (a phrase that Red Cross officials came to regret, as many relatives construed this as finding the missing alive).³⁰ By 1916 the Red Cross had a separate section to investigate officers missing in France. Irrespective of whether relatives had asked for their help, they automatically sought information on any soldier whose name appeared on the lists of missing sent to them by 3rd Echelon, the Adjutant General's Office at Rouen that handled all personnel records and general manpower matters. Trained Red Cross searchers interviewed the wounded in hospitals in both Britain and France, making reports on each interview that were then collated at Red Cross Headquarters in London and passed on to both relatives and the War Office.³¹ The problem for the Williamsons was that their son's name was not on a list of the missing, for the War Office had officially declared him dead. The Red Cross, therefore, did not investigate his case in the months immediately after September 1916.

The unofficial reports received by the Williamsons came mainly from surviving participants in the attack on Lesboeufs. These gave them a very good idea of what had gone wrong on 15 September and sent Hugh Williamson into a rage. His first letter to the Minister of War apparently went astray, but in his second one, dated 6 November 1916, he demanded to know:

(1) the names of the officers on the Somme who were responsible for the staff directions of the Guards Division on the 15th September . . . (2) The names of the officers in charge of the three tanks allotted to the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards, two of which I understand never turned up at all at their allotted positions and the third could not start its engine with the result that of 17 officers in the Battalion attack 14 were killed and 1 wounded. (3) What was the reason the two tanks did not turn up and the third could not start its engine and whether any steps have been or are proposed to be taken to deal with this matter and who is held responsible for these terrible and costly blunders. (4) Why the Battalion under these circumstances was sent to *certain* death on that morning. (5) Why the first trenches at 250 yards were entirely overlooked and the staff directions given were that the first objective was 1000 yards away, while these two trenches were really strongly held by the Bavarians with numerous machine guns. Who is responsible for this blunder and whether and what steps (if any) are being taken with regard to it.³²

³⁰ *Reports by the Joint War Committee and the Joint War Finance Committee of the British Red Cross Society and The Order of St John of Jerusalem in England on Voluntary Aid rendered to the Sick and Wounded at Home and Abroad and to British Prisoners of War, 1914-1919* (London: HMSO, 1921), p. 366; *The Times*, 18 July 1921.

³¹ *Red Cross Report*, pp. 366, 369, 531-3.

³² TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Hugh Williamson to Minister of War, 6 November 1916.

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Clearly, Williamson had gleaned some accurate information from his officer sources on the events of 15 September, but his reaction, if understandable, was naïve. The Army Council stiffly replied that regretfully ‘the information you ask for regarding the attack of the Guards Division on 15th September cannot be supplied’.³³

Other information received from Coldstream officers and men, however, fuelled the Williamsons’ desperate hopes that their son might still be alive. Kenhelm Digby, for instance, visited them while on leave in February 1917. As Adjutant (and with Lt-Colonel Guy Baring, the battalion CO, killed), he would have been responsible for reporting on losses. He apparently confessed that for three days ‘he really did not know whether to report [Williamson] as “Missing” or “Killed”’. He had similar problems with another officer and nearly sixty men, none of whom had been confirmed dead. They had last been seen fighting between what Mrs Williamson described as the two unknown German trenches sited a considerable distance in front of the first objective marked on the map. In her view, she could not see why all these men could not have been wounded and captured and her subsequent actions were aimed at proving that her son was a prisoner of war.³⁴

Mrs Williamson took comfort from an ‘old friend of ours’, Lt Horace Walpole, a Coldstream officer subsequently to be killed in action, who claimed that he had talked to Williamson on the battlefield about midday, long after the unforeseen trenches had been overrun. On the other hand, the Williamsons had also received a number of letters from Coldstream soldiers, in which they reported having seen their son killed. ‘They all’, however, ‘give a different wound, in a different place and at a different hour’ and were thus deemed unreliable.³⁵ Moreover, Hugh Williamson had travelled to Manchester towards the end of the year to speak to his son’s former orderly, now wounded in hospital. He discovered that the soldier had not taken the effects, sent by Newland to the parents, from Williamson’s body and had not seen him killed. He apparently apologised for having ‘erroneously’ reported Williamson’s death. By the end of 1916, therefore, the search for information had merely led to increasing confusion, anger and despair in the minds of the Williamsons, as every new piece of evidence further obscured rather than clarified the fate of their son.

The stupefying effects of modern battle on the minds of combatants ensured that making sense of terrifying experiences was virtually impossible. Time, space, faces

³³ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Army Council to Hugh Williamson, 19 November 1916.

³⁴ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to Netherlands Legation, 16 March 1917.

³⁵ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to C2 Casualties Dept, 9 October 1919.

and events became jumbled in a maelstrom of shot and shell.³⁶ John Lucy of the Royal Irish Rifles, whose brother went missing only one hundred yards from him on the Aisne in September 1914, found the 'yarns' and 'weird' tales told by the soldiers after combat hard to believe. 'The troops, I am sure', he later wrote, 'did not lie deliberately, but their imaginations, in the stress of battle often played strange tricks on them'.³⁷ The Williamsons learned the hard way that which the Red Cross had come to understand as early as the first battle of Ypres in December 1914: that 'Men reach hospital from the trenches in such a nerve-racked condition that their evidence has to be checked and counter-checked by questioning other men, and thus every "enquiry-case" may necessitate the catechism of four or five men'.³⁸ Even then no clear conclusion might eventuate.

With no definitive evidence of death, the Williamsons continued to pursue the faint possibility that their son was a prisoner of the Germans. At the end of 1916, while still neutral, the American embassy in Berlin was acting as an intermediary between the warring powers on the issue of prisoners of war. By-passing the War Office, the Williamsons tried to use this avenue for information, but when President Woodrow Wilson began 'to think of going to war' this channel closed.³⁹ The Netherlands Legation took over the Americans' role and in March 1917 Edith Williamson sought their assistance directly.⁴⁰ The Dutch, however, rebuffed her request, informing her that they would act only if she channelled her enquiry through the British Foreign Office, which she proceeded to do.⁴¹ The Foreign Office, predictably, sent her letter to the War Office and their response inevitably further antagonised the Williamsons, for not only was the official line that their son was dead reiterated but, owing to the complete absence of evidence that Williamson was a prisoner, the War Office refused to seek Dutch assistance.⁴²

Unbeknown to the parents, however, and despite the official position that Williamson had been killed, the War Office had decided at the beginning of 1917 to

³⁶ For an analysis of the instability of memory from a psychological perspective, see D. Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 46-60.

³⁷ J. F. Lucy, *There's a Devil in the Drum* (Uckfield: Naval and Military Press, 1993), p. 199.

³⁸ *Red Cross Report*, p. 360.

³⁹ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to Foreign Office, 20 March 1917.

⁴⁰ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to Netherlands Legation, 16 March 1917.

⁴¹ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Netherlands Legation to Edith Williamson, 19 March 1917.

⁴² TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, C2 Casualties Dept (WO) to Edith Williamson, 6 April 1917. Mrs Williamson responded with a caustic letter in which she regretted that the War Office did not think it worthwhile to discover whether her son 'has escaped the almost *certain* death to which Staff Officers' had condemned the Guards on 15 September. TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to Bertram Cubitt, Assistant Secretary, WO, 10 April 1917.

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treat the case as one of a missing officer. The Red Cross was asked to seek possible eyewitnesses and two were found. One was Private Walter Smith, who was recovering from wounds in a hospital in Chichester. Although he was in No. 2 Company, he claimed to have been 'quite near' Williamson when he was hit in the heart and chest by three machine gun bullets and died instantly. Smith had continued to advance, but insisted that Williamson was carried to the rear and given a 'proper burial'. The second man interviewed, Sergeant A.E. Simcox, was not an eyewitness but claimed to know some of the stretcher-bearers who buried the body, one of whom, Private D. Harding of No. 1 Company, had spoken to him about it. From the War Office perspective, these interviews confirmed the battalion's original report that Williamson had been killed. Smith had even given a reasonable description of Williamson: a 'tall, slight man, pale complexion and dark hair' (Williamson was 6 feet 1 inch tall, lean, with dark hair).⁴³ Although these reports corroborated the official position on Williamson's death, for reasons that subsequently perplexed senior War Office officials they were not given to the Williamsons at the time.⁴⁴ Instead, the Williamsons were left with the impression that a hidebound and unsympathetic War Office was rigidly adhering to a view of their son's fate that relied exclusively on a battalion report of his death that they felt was doubtful and disputable.

V

There the matter rested until the war ended when, under the terms of the 11 November Armistice, the repatriation of all allied prisoners of war immediately began. Those with missing relatives held their breath as the prisoners of war poured home, hoping against hope that their loved ones might be among them. By the first days of January 1919 130,000 POWs had been repatriated from the continent, with only 20,000 still *en route*.⁴⁵ Rumours began to circulate, however, that not all allied prisoners had been found and that some were still being held in secret internment camps, despite the German government's solemn denials that they had ever existed.⁴⁶ Public anxiety was fuelled by the fact that the deaths of so many missing soldiers could not be confirmed.⁴⁷ In a written answer to a query by Sir William Joynson-Hicks in the House of Commons in February 1919, Winston Churchill admitted that 'about 64,800' servicemen remained missing without any trace, even

⁴³ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Smith's report is dated 12 January 1917, Simcox's 28 February 1917. A photo of Williamson can be found in *The War Illustrated*, 4 Nov. 1916.

⁴⁴ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, War Office Memo, n.d [1919?].

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 4 January 1919.

⁴⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 27 January 1919; *The Times*, 20 June 1919; General Dupont to General Nudant, 15 January 1919, TNA, FO 383/499. For evidence that rumours of secret camps were spreading before the war's end, see Personal Record of Acting Lt-Col H.C.R. Saunders, DSO, 1st East Yorkshire Regiment, TNA, WO 339/6366.

⁴⁷ See, for example, *The Times*, 18, 26 November 1918.

after trained medical teams had scoured 'every camp, prison, mine, asylum, hospital, or anywhere else' in German territory.⁴⁸ No evidence from any source was available to confirm their fates. Churchill, however, inadvertently gave some credibility to the rumours by adding that 'The suggestion that many of the missing are in Germany in secret camps, asylums etc., has not so far been substantiated in any case although every supposed case has been investigated as far as possible'.⁴⁹

The internment camp rumours were in part responsible for many anxious relatives continuing to seek help to relieve their uncertainty. As late as six months after the Armistice 'large numbers of pathetic letters of inquiry [were] still being addressed to the War Office and the Central Prisoners of War Committee'.⁵⁰ The rumours were fuelled by sensationalist newspaper reports throughout 1919. One account was of a French soldier, Fernand Mauger, who claimed to have escaped from Germany. Under the headline 'ALLIED SOLDIERS STILL DETAINED', the *Liverpool Evening Express* declared that:

indisputable proof that Germany, in spite of repeated assurances to the contrary which she has given to the Peace Conference, is still secretly retaining Allied soldiers as prisoners of war, is afforded by the return home of a French soldier named Fernand Mauger, who has just escaped from their hands. Mauger, who is twenty-four years of age, was taken prisoner in 1916, and since that date has been refused all means of communication with his friends. A few days ago he succeeded in escaping from the subterranean prison where he was confined, and yesterday he reached his home . . . a few miles from Meaux. . . . He gives frightful details of the cruelties still being inflicted on Allied prisoners by the Germans, and states emphatically that others are still being detained by the Boches. These men, he says, are shut up in underground prisons and are given the scantiest possible amount of food only every two days. . . . It is suggested that . . . it is very possible that many British and other Allied soldiers, as well as French, are enduring similar conditions.⁵¹

⁴⁸ This figure did not include the 97,000 who were missing but officially presumed dead (Williamson was one of these).

⁴⁹ Hansard, House of Commons Debates, Vol. 112 cc298-300W, 13 February 1919, <<http://hansard.millbankssystems.com>> [accessed 13 February 2013]. My italics.

⁵⁰ *Liverpool Courier*, 24 May 1919.

⁵¹ [Liverpool] *Evening Press*, 26 Sept. 1919, copy in TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson. See also, *The [Adelaide] Register*, 29 Sept. 1919. The French Government's denial of the truth of this report was published in the *Morning Post* at the end of September.

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Another case, raised in the House of Commons in December, related to a group of Belgian soldiers who arrived in Mons, having escaped from a prison camp in the Harz Mountains more than a year after the Armistice. The government response was that their military mission in Berlin would make enquiries, but were confident that no British soldiers would be found.⁵²

The government's confidence was based on the information they had received from a number of sources throughout 1919. In January a bureau to coordinate information on the missing was established at Frankfurt-am-Main, with a sub-office in Berlin liaising with the German War Office. On the ground, widespread searches were made of all regions where POWs had previously been held, including many farms and other small workplaces that had been identified.⁵³ Expecting that any found would be sick or crippled, motor ambulances were used in the searches. The official number of former prisoners found in this way, all in some way incapacitated, amounted to 121.⁵⁴

At home, the Inter-Departmental Committee on Prisoners of War (IDCPW), based at the War Office, had asked the public for any information on missing officers and men that had not been previously communicated.⁵⁵ Returned prisoners of war, especially officers, were interviewed about the fate of missing men in their battalions.⁵⁶ Liaison continued between the British and the International Red Cross until the latter closed its Geneva Inquiry Agency in April 1919. The British were represented on a Special Committee established to give advice on tracing the missing.⁵⁷ In addition, a Special Mission, which included the peace activist Dame Adelaide Livingstone, was sent to Belgium and northern France in July.⁵⁸ Its primary purpose was to gather information about isolated and unmarked graves for the Directorate of Graves Registration, but the mission members also approached

⁵² *The Times*, 9 December 1919.

⁵³ Notes by Gen. Ewart, 13 January 1919, TNA, FO 383/499, fo. 243; Telegram No. 308, War Office to Robertson, The Hague, TNA, FO 383/499, fo. 240.

⁵⁴ *Lancashire Evening Post*, 8 April 1919, quoting Churchill in the House of Commons.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 4 January 1919.

⁵⁶ For examples of the fate of officers being resolved following interviews with returned prisoners of war, see TNA, WO 339/45313, Personal Record of Lt E. A. Andrew, 1st East Yorkshire Regiment; TNA, WO 339/56307, Personal Record of 2nd Lt J. S. H. Palmer, 1st Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. The father of the latter, who had been missing since September 1916, had refused to accept his son's death until receiving the prisoner of war report in 1919.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 4 Jan., 10 Apr. 1919.

⁵⁸ Jane Potter, 'Livingstone, Dame Adelaide Lord (c.1881-1970)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004

[<http://o-www.oxforddnb.com/prospero.murdoch.edu.au/view/article/52029>, accessed 4 May 2011]; *The Times*, 4 June 1918, 24 July 1919. The possibility of such a mission was first discussed at a meeting of the Interdepartmental Committee on Prisoners of War on 25 March 1919. Minutes, 25 March 1919, TNA, FO 383/499, fos. 311-14.

'eminent Belgian personages and functionaries, with the view of accelerating the work of tracing the missing'. By the end of 1919 the War Office tried to reassure the public that 'all that can be done has been done to trace the missing'.⁵⁹

The Williamsons were not impressed. They had received no information about their son as the prisoners of war streamed home, but had taken some comfort from the IDCPW's admission in January 1919 that a few soldiers previously reported dead might still be alive in German hands.⁶⁰ At almost the same time they received a letter from a Sergeant F. Andrews of the Coldstream, who was at the base depot in Le Havre. He informed them that their son was one of several men from the platoon taken prisoner on 15 September 1916. Andrews and one other had managed to escape after two days and thus he could not say where Williamson had been taken, but he hoped 'that ere long you will receive word that your son is quite well, or even better that you will receive your son in person'.⁶¹ The Williamsons took this letter to Lady Lucan at the Red Cross, who asked a searcher at Le Havre to re-interview Andrews. Unfortunately, the searcher found the wrong man, a Private G.F. Andrews, who gave 'a cock and bull story which did not tally at all with the other'.⁶² Sergeant Andrews could not be found and a letter sent to him was returned address unknown. Nevertheless, the Andrews letter allowed the Williamsons to retain their hopes of their son being alive, even as the flow of repatriated POWs shrank to a trickle without Williamson being found. They were to cling to its message, even though they had so much information that contradicted it.

The failure to find Sergeant Andrews reinforced in the grief-distorted minds of the Williamsons the belief that a conspiracy, initiated by the military authorities in the aftermath of the attack by the Guards at Flers, continued to flourish. Andrews 'had probably been sent on [from Le Havre] at once' in order to cover up the 'absolutely incompetent Generals' who sent the Guards 'to be uselessly and wantonly massacred on September 15th 1916'.⁶³ Still unable to comprehend the realities of industrialised warfare, the Williamsons could not conceive that so many soldiers, as Churchill had confirmed in February, had just vanished. 'We have no reason to suppose', Mrs Williamson told the War Office, 'that [our son] is not alive and in one of the secret internment camps where so many of the 61,000 (sic) "missing" men must be. Not all could have been killed.'⁶⁴

⁵⁹ *The Times*, 9 December 1919. See also the statement by Capt. Guest, Secretary to the Treasury, to the House of Commons. *Yorkshire Post*, 5 August 1919.

⁶⁰ *The Times*, 4 January 1919.

⁶¹ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, F. Andrews to Edith Williamson, 8 January 1919.

⁶² TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to WO, 26 August 1919.

⁶³ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to WO, 26 August, 14 September 1919.

⁶⁴ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to WO, 26 August 1919.

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With this in mind, the Williamsons asked the War Office if their son's name could be added to a list, of the names of about one thousand supposed prisoners of war whose fate was still unknown, that was being sent for investigation to the British military mission in Berlin. As had happened before, the War Office, stating the official line that Williamson was confirmed killed in action, refused the request.⁶⁵ They also enclosed copies of the 1917 reports by Simcox and Smith to support their opinion, which caused the Williamsons to explode with rage and bitterness. Edith was first over the top, forensically exposing the perceived weaknesses of the accounts and comparing them with the other sources that she had accumulated (in the process, disclosing that her son's 'own NCO' and his brother saw Williamson 'killed by a Minenwerfer which buried him under a mound of earth as high as a house!'). Quite correctly, she queried why she and her husband had not received these letters earlier. 'Surely we have a right', she insisted, 'to know *everything* that concerns our son. We did not hand him over to the War Office "body, soul and spirit", although they certainly did their best to destroy his body'.⁶⁶

Edith's husband Hugh, since his angry letter in the aftermath of the attack on Lesboeuvs in 1916, had played a low key but supportive role as his wife went into battle with the War Office. He appears to have been suffering from guilt because he had given his consent in September 1914 to his son enlisting underage (Williamson Junior was nineteen and thus not underage, which suggests that the father was, rather unfortunately, possibly mistaken in his memory).⁶⁷ Perhaps under pressure from Edith, but certainly in response to the War Office letter that included the 1917 reports of Simcox and Smith, Williamson in November displaced his guilt by targeting the staff of the Casualties Department. He could not understand why Sergeant Andrews' account of Williamson's capture was given less weight than the other reports in the department's decision-making process. It obviously resulted from 'the slack way' that 'you evidently do your work'. Intemperately, Williamson claimed that 'the way the record class men who are employed in the British War Office do their work is common talk everywhere and the sooner the whole staff of the War Office is sacked and a more competent lot set to do their work from the highest to the lowest the better'.⁶⁸ Charitably, one must assume that Williamson was unaware that many wounded soldiers were employed in the department at the time.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, WO to Edith Williamson, 6 October 1919.

⁶⁶ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to WO, 9 October 1919.

⁶⁷ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Williamson to Minister of War, 6 November 1916. There is no evidence in Williamson's attestation papers that his father gave, or needed to give, his consent. He also misremembered the month of his son's enlistment.

⁶⁸ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Hugh Williamson to WO, 28 November 1919.

⁶⁹ Churchill's statement in the House of Commons, 6 July 1920,

Edith Williamson had ended her tirade with a menacing postscript: 'Unless proper search is made by the War Office for our son we are in possession of damaging documents respecting the Staff Officers' work in the Battle of the Somme which will be published throughout the length and breadth of the land'. This threat disturbed Chief Clerk Bernard Grindle, who had overseen the correspondence with the Williamsons, and he contacted Bertram Cubitt, the Assistant Secretary at the War Office. Cubitt, shortly to be knighted in the New Year's Honours List, swiftly reviewed the whole correspondence.⁷⁰ He showed considerable sympathy for the Williamsons, criticising the Casualties Department not only for failing to pass on the 1917 reports but also for unwarranted inflexibility in regard to Williamson's name being put on the list of missing POWs sent to Berlin. He rejected Grindle's argument that adding Williamson's name would create a precedent, instead optimistically believing that the inevitable failure to find evidence of Williamson's name in the German records might finally convince the parents that he was dead.⁷¹

At the same time Cubitt ordered another search for possible eyewitnesses and a re-examination of those who had previously given evidence. The Williamsons' own correspondent, Arthur Newland, told the War Office that he could give no 'official information'.⁷² Simcox and Smith could add nothing but some contradictions to their earlier statements, but the latter offered the vital information that a key eyewitness, a stretcher-bearer called Harding, whose name had been mentioned in 1917, had been a policeman in Darwen, Lancashire before the war. This enabled Grindle to contact him and, finally, first-hand evidence of Williamson's fate was presented to the War Office. Harding wrote:

The Lieutenant was killed during the advance on Les Boeufs [sic] on 15th September, 1916 about 7am while advancing with his Company. He was walking round a shell hole when he was shot through the head by a German sniper. Afterwards his body was blown to pieces by a shell that exploded in the ground where the body was, leaving no trace of him. I witnessed this occurrence.⁷³

For Cubitt, this was conclusive evidence of Williamson's fate; Harding's experience as a policeman made him a reliable witness. The clincher was the anticipated report

<<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1920/jul/06/war-office-officers-casualties-department>> [accessed 24 February 2013].

⁷⁰ *London Gazette*, 30 December 1919, p. 11.

⁷¹ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, WO internal memo string with comments, October 1919.

⁷² TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Newland to War Office, 14 October 1919.

⁷³ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, PC 149 D. Harding to WO, 16 November 1919.

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from Berlin that they had found no trace of Williamson in the German records of prisoners of war.⁷⁴

Needless to say the Williamsons refused to accept this new evidence, forcing Cubitt to conclude that 'it would appear futile to argue with Mrs Williamson any more'.⁷⁵ Surprisingly, however, the Williamsons did accept an invitation to meet their *bêtes noires* at the War Office. This meeting occurred on 3 February 1920 with Grindle, who reported to Cubitt that:

Mr and Mrs Williamson called and were friendly, but merely repeated all that is in their letters and apparently still think Lt Williamson is alive. They entirely discredit Harding's statement, as they say friends saw him alive later. I told them what is the general experience of the War Office in these cases and what has been done generally; but it is hopeless to argue with them, or with Mrs Williamson at any rate. Her point seemed to be that she wanted search made ignoring the "living".⁷⁶

The Williamsons' final roll of the dice was to ask the widow of Horace Walpole to inform the War Office of what her husband had told her of his colleague's death. Unfortunately, Dora Walpole could only confirm that her husband had seen Williamson on the battlefield, but could not fix the exact time, which, she said, he thought might have been after 11am.⁷⁷ On such slender memories did the Williamsons' hopes repose more than three years after their son's disappearance.

VI

In the conflict between the Williamsons and the War Office there could be no winners. On the one side the War Office, faced with the unprecedented increase in the size of the army and the number of casualties, as well its dramatically changed composition—now essentially a citizen army—had to establish a huge and expanded bureaucracy to cope. A bureaucratic, regulatory response was inevitable, to avoid complete chaos. Moreover, for the clerks—many of whom were unfit or recovering veterans—the bitter experience of closing files on multitudes of soldiers who seemingly had just vaporized required the development of a sense of detachment that needed to be buttressed by a set of policy rules that helped to reduce the

⁷⁴ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Warburton to WO, 14 January 1920.

⁷⁵ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Cubitt to Grindle, 16 December 1919.

⁷⁶ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Grindle to Cubitt, 3 February 1920. Grindle's final point, that Edith Williamson wanted resources spent on the dead rather than on the living, may be seen as prophetic. In the post-war years considerable sums were spent on commemorating the dead, while the promise of 'a land fit for [surviving] heroes' remained a chimera.

⁷⁷ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Dora Walpole to Grindle, 5 February 1920.

emotional stress that the department's daily work undoubtedly must have caused, particularly in the aftermath of major assaults such as that on 15 September 1916. On that day, of the 402 officers who were killed or died of wounds, at least eighty, and probably many others, were reported missing before being, eventually, officially declared dead.⁷⁸ Williamson, of course, was not one of these and this was to be the main source of the conflict.

If Digby had reported Williamson missing, his case would have followed a set routine. He would only have been declared officially dead either 'if definitive evidence' was subsequently forthcoming or, if no information was found, on 'the grounds of lapse of time'.⁷⁹ Lapse of time was usually defined as at least six months for officers and seven for other ranks, which was long enough for Red Cross reports to become available and to ensure that the victim had not been made a prisoner of war.⁸⁰ Before the Army Council declared an officer dead, the War Office contacted the next of kin to discover if they had received further news from unofficial sources. A negative answer, the most common response, usually triggered an official ruling of death, which enabled probate to proceed and pensions to be paid. If, however, the relatives objected, the War Office would not act, being prepared to wait in some circumstances for years. Lt B.S.C. Hutchinson of the 1st East Yorkshire Regiment, for instance, who was reported missing on the Aisne in September 1914, was not officially declared dead until July 1919. His widowed mother only accepted his death once it was clear that he had not been a prisoner of war.⁸¹ In Williamson's case, had Digby not reported him dead, his parents would have provided evidence that he might still be alive and it is thus highly likely that his case would have remained open, although the Smith and Simcox reports would have been used as evidence of his death. At least these reports would then have been sent to the Williamsons in 1917, which might have reduced the heat that misunderstandings and mistrust between the two sides had fuelled.

On the other side of the conflict the Williamsons, faced with the loss of their only child, had become stuck in the early stages of the cycle of grief. Since Elisabeth Kübler-Ross first published in 1969 her book *On Death and Dying*, an authoritative analysis of the psychology of grief, it has been generally acknowledged that the

⁷⁸ This figure, based on my own calculations, is one-third of those officers about whose immediate fate information is known.

⁷⁹ As an example of how this War Office policy on the missing was explained to relatives, see TNA, WO 339/27989, WO to Rev. E. Clapton, 23 April 1917.

⁸⁰ Pemberton, 'Missing!'; TNA, WO 339/21273, Personal Record of Lt. V.V. Jacob, 2nd Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry.

⁸¹ TNA, WO 339/7188, Personal Record of Lt B.S.C. Hutchinson, 1st East Yorkshire Regiment. See also, TNA, WO 339/76723, Personal Record of 2nd. Lt. L.W. Forde, 6th Dorsetshire Regiment; TNA, WO 339/484, Personal Record of 2nd Lt A.S. Morley, 15th Durham Light Infantry. Morley was killed in 1916.

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bereaved normally pass through five stages of grief before the full acceptance of loss is achieved.⁸² These stages are anger; denial; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. They are not necessarily endured sequentially and the bereaved can revert to an earlier phase, omit a stage, or even never achieve closure. Pain, guilt, loss of faith and loneliness are common features of the process of bereavement. The Williamsons' correspondence with the War Office demonstrates their continued oscillation between anger and denial and they were never to break out of this tragic cycle. In the autumn of 1920 they took their search to the battlefields of France. They scoured the hospitals of the Somme region, in vain hoping to find their son suffering from loss of memory.⁸³ They also visited many of the new cemeteries springing up on the battlefield. The controversial headstones erected instead of Christian crosses led Mrs Williamson to thank God that 'our son is not in any of your "Pagan" cemeteries'. England's heroes, she wrote, were being buried 'like dogs'.⁸⁴

The Williamsons' failure on the continent did not, however, bring closure, despite every avenue of inquiry now having been examined. When both Eton and Christ Church sought their help in completing their Rolls of Honour, they refused to acknowledge that their son was dead.⁸⁵ As late as 1930 V.R. Sinclair, Hon. Secretary of the Navy League and formerly a Commandant in the Red Cross, sought information from the government on behalf of Mrs Williamson, who remained 'convinced that [her son] is alive'.⁸⁶ The Imperial (now Commonwealth) War Graves Commission found the Williamsons to be as intractable as had the War Office. Their records of private correspondence are not open to researchers, but it has been confirmed that letters from the Williamsons were received from October 1916 until the husband's death in 1937.⁸⁷ Hugh Williamson's name was not on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing on the Somme when it was dedicated in 1932. Edith Williamson died in 1952, but her son's name was carved on an Addenda Panel at Thiepval only as late as 2001.⁸⁸

Soldiers who were killed in the Great War were often remembered on a variety of memorials: their school's; their church's; and in the wider community or

⁸² Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

⁸³ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to WO, 10 October 1920.

⁸⁴ For the headstone controversy, see Philip Longworth, *The Unending Vigil: The History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2010), pp. 46-55.

⁸⁵ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, Edith Williamson to WO, 14 September 1919.

⁸⁶ TNA, WO 339/18542, PR, Williamson, V.R. Sinclair to WO, 10 February 1930.

⁸⁷ Private letter from Commonwealth War Graves Commission dated 16 February 2011 and further email correspondence dated 12 April 2013. I would like to thank for their assistance the following of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission: Rev. David C. Kettle, Deidre Mills and Mary Boland.

⁸⁸ No members of the Williamson family were involved in this decision, owing to the absence of contact details.

communities in which their family lived. Williamson's name can be found in the Rolls of Honour of Eton College and the Inns of Court and on the large memorial in the porch of Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, but there is no family memorial, not even in the church in Brown Edge where his grandfather is memorialised. Nor was Williamson ever the subject of a newspaper *In Memoriam* notice inserted by his family. After all, as far as they were concerned, he had never died.