

## George Harry Drury

By Dan Hill

George Harry Drury was born in 1898 in the town of Hounslow in the county of Middlesex to a working class family. George's father Robert was a bricklayer by trade and a father of six, five of whom had survived to adulthood. At the time of the 1911 census George was a 13-year-old scholar whilst simultaneously working as a Baker Boy, a mark of the family's working class situation.

Sometime between 1911 and 1914 the Drury family made a move northwards to join the influx on Londoners to the emerging 'Letchworth Garden City' in Hertfordshire, an entirely new concept town created to balance the positives of urban and rural life.

Once here George and his family moved into a small property at No 20 Shott Lane (pictured here). Once here George picked up employment on the local horse-drawn bus route around Letchworth and the surrounding villages, acting as a conductor, doubtless becoming a familiar face with the local population.

Within a year or so of the family move George Harry Drury joined the local Territorial unit, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment. As a member of 'E Company' made up primarily of men from Letchworth and Royston, George spent weekends and an annual summer camp training with his friends for the relatively unlikely possibility that they would be asked to defend their country in times of war.



Of course we know now that war was on the horizon and as a Territorial soldier it would not be long before George would be serving his country.

Having been born in 1898, he was only 16 at the time that war was declared, although ever the keen recruit, he managed to volunteer and was duly accepted for overseas service with his friends of the Hertfordshire Regiment.

In August 1914 the British Army was tiny in comparison to the German Army which had implemented national service for years, and so, with the BEF sent to oppose the numerically superior Germans in France and Belgium, it is perhaps not surprising that pre formed and trained (partially at least) units such as the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts were called on very quickly to help redress the balance of numbers on the Western Front. As it turned out, the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts were in Ashridge Park on 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914 when war was declared, taking part in their annual summer camp, within 24 hours they had received orders to prepare for war.

E Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Herts immediately returned home from their summer camp with orders to collect their equipment, say their goodbyes and report for duty the following day. As the Letchworth detachment waited the arrival of their train at Letchworth Railway Station this photograph was taken, it shows a young Pte G H Drury (front row, 2<sup>nd</sup> man from left of centre).



It is not known how George managed to remain with the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts even though underage but contemporary records report that he sailed from Southampton on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1914 on the SS City of Chester, landing at Le Havre in the early hours of the morning on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1914.

It would be fair to say that the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts did not have the best of starts in

The Great War - suffering their first loss on the very evening they arrived due to a cleaning accident with the newly issued Short Magazine Lee Enfield Rifles. As the Herts were rushed into the line to support the stretched BEF at the closing stages of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battle of Ypres they suffered their 2<sup>nd</sup> casualty, Cpl Arthur Boardman, George's own section Corporal and fellow Letchworth resident who was tragically shot by a nervous British Machine Gunner on 18<sup>th</sup> November. The following day George's 'E Company' was badly shelled with three more of his comrades killed and a further 19 wounded by a single shell.

By the end of November 1914 George and the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts were certainly well aware of the dangers of life on the Western Front. Thankfully a month of training in the French town of Meteren and an attachment to the illustrious 'Guards Brigade' allowed the Battalion to take stock and settle in to wartime life. It is hard to imagine how a sixteen year old volunteer would have felt in the first terrifying month on the Western Front, especially as George thought on his situation and the fact that he was an underage volunteer. Nevertheless he stuck it out and prepared for four more years with the 'Herts Guards' as they became affectionately known.

George's first Christmas in the trenches was just another day on the Western Front. While parts of the line took part in an unofficial truce, the Herts certainly didn't, the Battalion lost two men to German snipers on Christmas Day.

George and the Herts spent most of 1915 in the Givenchy/Richebourg area of the Western Front, seeing action at Festubert, Cuinchy, Neuve Chapelle and Loos, as well as spending time in reserve constructing various well known trench works such as 'Hertford Street', pictured here. Sometime in 1915 Drury was lightly wounded, returning to duty a short time later with his first 'wound stripe'.



It wasn't long before Drury's natural ability and leadership skills became apparent. Promoted to Lance Corporal and then Corporal, both whilst still under the age of legal enlistment for foreign service, his rise in rank reflects the ability of a brave and steady young man.

Seen here is George (in shirtsleeves) with several of his comrades in the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshires.



1916 saw continued action for George who turned 18 after almost two years of fighting as an underage volunteer. Most notably he was involved in the latter stages of the Battle of the Somme where the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts took part in one of the most successful attacks of the entire campaign. Launched on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1916 from the newly captured 'Schwaben Redoubt' (photographed here) towards the Ancre River to the north, The 39<sup>th</sup> Division (of which the Herts were now a part) attacked alongside the

Royal Naval Division and managed to capture a highly impressive 1,600 yards of ground and occupy a line far in advance of what have been achieved anywhere in the area up to that point. As well as capturing hundreds of enemy soldiers and an entire German Medical facility, the Herts, and particularly the re-structured No 4 Company – of which George was a part, managed to take the entire German HANSA Line up to the Ancre River, losing very few men. Such was the level of surprise at the ground captured that German Officers sent eight machine gun teams to occupy an



area they thought well in the rear of their own positions. The leading outposts of the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts at first believed the Germans walking down the road towards them in full view to be prisoners, but it wasn't until the first men had started to enter their own trenches that an eagle-eyed sentry realised that the last few men were carrying heavy Machine-guns. Unsurprisingly an almighty firefight ensued, with every one of the German member of the MG teams either killed or captured in the episode; the Herts subsequently employed all 8 captured weapons to reinforce their positions and easily held off further counter-attacks. Sometime during this episode George Harry Drury was wounded and upon relief was sent back to the UK, his time with the 'Herts Guards' at an end.

The Nature of George's wound is unclear although it appears that it was sufficient to put him out of the fighting for a year, undoubtedly to the relief of his mother B??? who had seen her sixteen year-old-son march away, only to be brought home wounded two years later.

For George, his war was far from over. Once recovered from the effects of his wounds the previous year, he was drafted to serve with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Bedfordshire Regiment, a Regular Army unit who, like the Herts, had seen service on the Western Front since 1914 but at the time were in action on the lesser known Italian Front.

Sent to his new Battalion on an entirely new battlefield to shore up the Allied positions after the disastrous battle at Calleppo, George spent the next three months in action, where the Battalion acquitted themselves well, although his posting to Italy was not to last.

In the spring of 1918, with the Russians finally knocked out of the war and a Soviet Government installed, the 1<sup>st</sup> Beds were brought back to France by train on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1918 to again shore up the British defences which had been rocked backwards since the start of a huge attack on 21<sup>st</sup> March where the Germans had put to use specially trained 'Stormtrooper' units who had been previously employed on the now redundant Eastern Front.

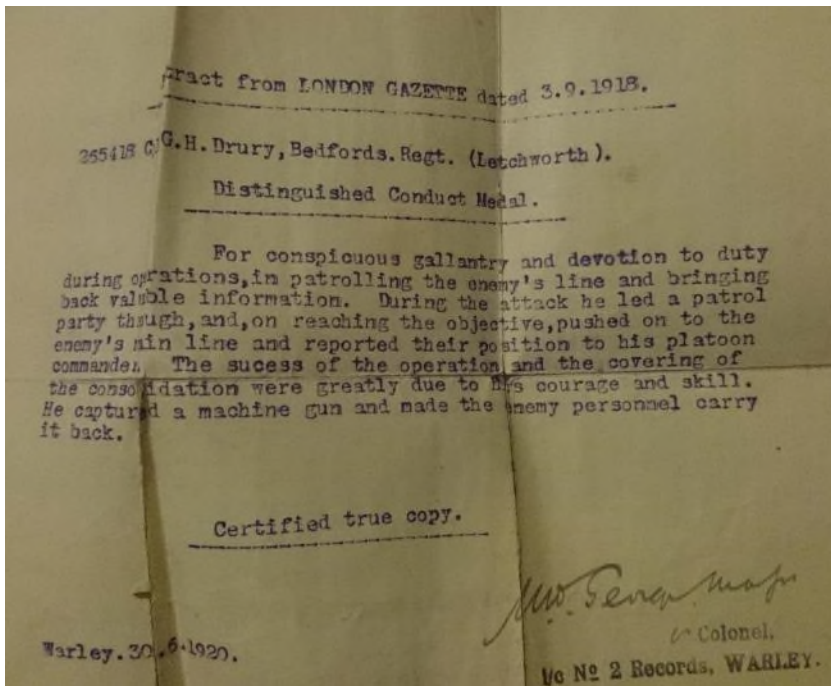
The Beds were brought into the Lys sector and were 'up the line' by the second week of April and settled in to defensive positions despite several gas and trench mortar attacks causing casualties. George, who was now a Corporal in 'B Company' (despite having been an acting Sergeant with the Herts just prior to his first wound) was in the line close to the Nieppe Forest throughout this time.

On the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> April 1918 the A Company and one Platoon of B Company (including Drury), 1<sup>st</sup> Beds, were selected to form part of an attack alongside the Gloucestershire Regiment on German positions near 'Bedford Farm'. The attack was planned as a night operation with Zero Hour being 9.30pm. The Operational Orders still exist and report the following:

"A" Coy. and one platoon of "B" Coy. will advance its line from LES LAURIERS to a line running from K.21.a.05.15. to K.21.a.50.95. Road, taking in farm about K.21.a.4.6. (BEDFORD FARM) The Gloucester Regt. will conform with a similar movement on our right as far as VERTBOIS.  
2. ARTILLERY will form a creeping barrage from K.20.b.7.6. to K.21.a.40.95. rate of advance will be 1 minutes for first 300 yards. The Barrage will stop on line of new enemy trench from about K.20.b.1.8. to K.21.c.1.9. One Newton will fire on certain targets. Four light Trench Mortars will give a hurricane bombardment from ZERO to ZERO plus 1 minutes playing on an area around BEDFORD FARM. They will then lift and play for half an hour round building and orchard on Road around K.21.a. and c. They will then stand to for S.O.S.

Large scale night attacks were notoriously hectic on the Western Front and often led to unforeseen issues which made the role of George's B Company Platoon especially important; working as a reactive force to any unseen situations arising.

The following citation recounts Corporal Drury's role in the action:



*'For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty during operations in patrolling the enemy's line and bringing back valuable information. During the attack he led a patrol party through, and, on reaching the objective, pushed on to the enemy's main line and reported their position to his platoon commander. The success of the operation and the covering of the consolidation were greatly due to his courage and skill. He captured a machine gun and made the enemy personnel carry it back.'*

The post action report of the attack states the following:

1. ASSEMBLY. "A" Coy. 1st. Bedf. Regt. and one platoon of "B" Coy. assembled for the attack at 9.15 p.m. according to plan. The barrage opened to time, some guns were firing short - 18 pounder shrapnel. About 12 casualties were caused by this including O.C. "A" Coy. **(Capt. F. Hague [Frederick HAGUE, MC])** who however went forward with his Coy.
2. THE ATTACK, was carried out according to plan. Two sections of the support platoon "B" Coy. had to be sent forward to the right platoon to replace casualties. This right platoon suffered more heavily than the remainder of the Coy. Two unwounded prisoners and one wounded prisoner were brought in, also one M.G. The RED Rocket (signal for gaining objective) was first seen at 9.38 p.m. and again at 9.58 p.m. At 10.35 p.m. message was received by Runner from O.C. "A" Coy. saying all objectives had been taken. At 11 p.m. **Capt. F. Hague [Frederick HAGUE, MC]** reported that he had been all round his line and that he was in touch with the Gloucester Regt. on his right, and "C" Coy. 1st. Bedf. R. on his left. He then came to Battalion H.Q. at LES LAURIERS, where it was discovered that he had a bad wound in the thigh. He was sent down to the Dressing Station at 11.30 p.m. Telephonic communication was obtained with Front line at 11 p.m.
3. CONSOLIDATION. "A" Coy. are holding the line of the objective as laid down in Brigade O.O. and have dug in, in accordance with attached sketch map. At 10.15 p.m. 2 Bde. M.G.'s were sent up, and took up positions in right and left corners of wood as indicated. The house at K.21.a.4.5. has been cleared and is being held at night. This house is about 50 yards in front of (i.e. S.E.) of bottom right hand corner of enclosure. The line is at present held as per attached sketch map. Our estimated casualties are 25 wounded including **Capt. F. Hague [Frederick HAGUE, MC]**, and killed at present unknown, though believed not heavy. - probably about 15. The front line has been visited, and the trenches are well sited. One M.G. has been captured. Time - 1.30 a.m. April 26th. 1918.

The leadership and skill George displayed on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1918 earned him the coveted Distinguished Conduct Medal, the citation appearing in the London Gazette in September 1918.

He remained in the line throughout April and May, forming part of the force that eventually wore out the German assault, their last major offensive of The Great War.

With the Allies probing German lines throughout early summer 1918 prior to the offensives that would eventually win the war, George was sent out in the evening of 23<sup>rd</sup> in a series of Patrols which descended into confusion very quickly and led to his squad being seriously outmanned in the dark, with George himself being wounded in the one-sided engagement that followed.

Little is known of the nature of his third wound but records indicate that he was returned to the UK and spent two months in Hospital in Chelsea before taking a short (and very well deserved) period of leave, destined to never see the Western Front again.

Whilst in hospital recovering from his third wound in four years of frontline service in France & Belgium, young George met nurse Cissy Goodwin, a Birmingham native. George and Cissy seem to have hit it off immediately and began a relationship whilst he was still recovering. With the stalemate on the Western Front broken and the German Army in retreat, it seemed that the future for young George, a celebrated Veteran of 1914, DCM recipient and still only twenty years old, was rosey indeed...



This photo shows the couple in Autumn 1918.

Sadly the British Army was not yet done with Corporal Drury. Once recovered he was re-posted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, Bedfordshire Regiment and instead of being sent to the Western Front as he might well have expected, found himself heading for an altogether different location, one from which he would not return.

The Russian Campaign in 1918/19 is something of an enigma in the annals of twentieth century history, usually occupying no more than a cursory mention in articles and textbooks. Although for those men posted there in late 1918 it was certainly no small campaign, and the dangers were certainly no less real.

Sent to Russia as an experienced and decorated NCO with real leadership qualities, George was attached to the NREF headquarters for deployment to 'White Russian' units who were fighting the 'Reds' in hopes of displacing the new soviet government and installing a

more traditional regime.

It was in a windswept Northern Russia that Drury first heard of the defeat of The German Army and the end of hostilities in Europe. One can only imagine his feelings on hearing the news, particularly as his entire adult life had been spent in the conflict. Perhaps he thought about those comrades who had left Letchworth train station with him in 1914 never to return, maybe he reflected on the fact that whilst others went home, he was still facing the prospect of combat in a part of the world that was entirely unfamiliar to him.

Thankfully we can reach back into the past and hear George's thoughts from late November 1918 onwards in a series of letters written by him in Russia and sent to his family home in Shott Lane, Letchworth.

On Saturday November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1918 he writes:

*"My Dearest Mother,*

*Just a few more lines for you, trusting this will find you all at home keeping well. I am pleased to tell you that my knee is much better now after resting it for these last few days so now I think I shall be quite fit for*

*duty by the time Monday rolls around once again. After all I shall not be sorry to start again as the time hangs so heavy on one's hands with nothing to do, and what makes it worse is that we have nothing much to read. Well mum we are still waiting for that ship to come from Blighty with the mails, so as usual our question each day is 'any mails in yet from home?' and the answer is still no. But so long as you at home are getting our letters and know that we are getting along alright we won't grumble because we can manage to look after ourselves. But mum you bet we shall be a happy crowd when a mail does arrive and lets us know how things are going at home. Well mum here's another weekend rolled around so I suppose you have not got Dad home by any chance only I was just thinking it's about time he got another leave. And now Mum it has just gone 3 o'clock by our time and I am having to finish this letter by candlelight and looking out on the streets all we can see is snow and sledges out on the streets instead of carts. Mum I don't intend to make you feel cold only when we go out now we need our large fur coats on to keep us warm, and my word you have not got to hang about once you are out or you soon know all about it and now both of the big rivers here are frozen over and it seems funny to look across the river and see the boats stationary in mid-stream with ice all over them. So I expect very shortly they will start to employ the ice breakers to keep the river open for the boats coming from England. And perhaps you shall get a better idea of the class of weather we expect as they lay a railway track across the ice and run the trains across into town for about four months of the year. 265418 Cpl G Drury 3<sup>rd</sup> Battn Bedford Regt, Elope Infantry Instructors Att G Hqrs NREF Russia. And now Mum I have to try to get some cards to send you for Christmas but I have not seen any suitable so you will have to take my very best wishes in writing. Well Mum this is all for this time, I will conclude now trusting you will all have an enjoyable time this coming Christmas.*

*I remain, your ever loving son,*

*George xxxxxxxx"*

It is believed that George was based in Archangel at the time of writing as part of the ELOPE Force occupying the Peninsular. The River he writes of was the Dvina. At the time of writing it is clear he was well in the rear of the fighting area and awaiting an assignment. A week later, Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> December he writes:

*"My Dearest Mother,*

*I now have the pleasure of letting you have a few more lines just to let you know I am still getting along alright out here and sincerely hope that everyone is keeping quite well and fit at home. Say we have not been lucky enough to get any letters from England yet but of course we all hope to get a mail in the near future. As at present we are all about fed up with waiting for any news, but of course we won't mind so much after we get our first letter so we will then know at least you got our first one to say that we had arrived here safe. Well Mum Christmas is beginning to draw very near so I hope all of you at home will have a very enjoyable time and you need not worry about me because I think we shall manage to have a good time enough ourselves and up to now nothing whatever stands in our way as we can obtain nearly anything we wish from our own Canteens and now we have two YM's (YMCA Huts) to spend our evenings in besides pictures, theatres etc. so we can generally knock an evening's fun out of one or the other for instance Friday we had a good concert party at the Y.M here, and on Saturday evening I went to the Y.M in town where a party of Russian Ladies gave us a very enjoyable concert so you see we don't do too bad taking things all around. Well Mum I suppose you hear from Ciss now and then, at least I hope so because I think having a letter from each other helps to pass things off a bit and I expect you all miss having the regular letters from me, but of course you know it is not my fault and at present I know you all have a letter in the mail here waiting to come to England so with this one you will have two arrive at the same time cos I think a boat leaves here sometime this week. Well Mum our cold weather is still holding out but it is dry thank goodness and now I see the people here are just starting to lay the tram lines etc. across the ice so you can just guess what sort of frosts we have been getting. But in spite of this weather I have not really felt cold out here yet, of course the rain has that sharp nip in it but walking about you can always*

*manage to keep warm. 2654188 Cpl G Drury 3<sup>rd</sup> Battn Bed Regt, Elope Infantry Instructors Att G Hqrs NREF Russia. Well Mum I think this is all for this time so I think I will conclude now, trusting this will find you all intending to have a good time this Christmas. And I hope you are still getting good news about Roy. Good-bye.*

*I remain, your loving son*

*George xxxxxxxx”*

George writes again to his mother on December 9<sup>th</sup> finally reporting the receipt of many letters and sending his best wishes home. Three day later he writes to his father:

*Dear Dad,*

*Here are a few more lines for you to read trusting this finds you all quite well as I am pleased to say this leaves me. I have been writing to mother and Ciss B’Ham this morning and quietly roaming about, not recovering the parcels they sent me. I had only just had my dinner when the post corporal came and brought me two parcels which had been roaming about the town for about a week. I had one from the Spirella Needle Guild as our Ciss is a member containing a shirt, two pairs of socks, a towel scarf and a tablet of soap, also a Christmas Card so all of these things will come in very useful for me out here, so I am writing tomorrow thanking them for their kindness in sending me it. The other came from my Fiancee and she sent me the articles I wrote from here and a few extra things. Her parcel contained a writing pad, soap, chocolate, cigs, three papers and the most important of all, a letter. Well Dad I think I am a lucky chap in getting such a good girl as Ciss for instance in Today’s letter she mentions that she has been buying lots of things for our home so it is up to me to buy the extra things to make us a good home and as you know we are both working together for that day when I return to England to make her my wife and I don’t see what is going to stop us and I don’t want to give you too much of a surprise but if the Army pays up what it owes me I wont be bad off, for instance I have only drawn a sovereign since I have been out here and I still have enough money to last me for at least another two months without drawing out. When you are writing to mother you can just mention that to her, say that’s the results of being steady and I don’t think it’s so bad when one considers how dear things are out in this country. Wish you were here to read the letter from her dated Oct 27<sup>th</sup> as it would do your heart good to read it if you were out in a forsaken country like this. Well Dad the wedding will come off as soon as I take my discharge and get a decent job. Well now I have been gassing to you about that subject I will ring off and tell you a little news about myself although it is not much. First off it is beginning to get very cold out here and we are getting very little of what you in England call daylight as it does not get light until 9AM and you want to have the lights on again directly after dinner and what’s more they tell us after Christmas they only have about three hours daylight so what a cheerful outlook for us. 265418 Cpl G Drury DCM 3<sup>rd</sup> Battn, Bedford Regt, Elope Infantry Instructors, Attd G Hqrs NREF Russia. Well Dad I think this is all for this time so I think I will ring off. Wishing you all the best of luck and buck up and get your discharge.*

*I remain, your loving son,*

*George xxxxxxxx*

Three days later George again writes to his father, this time informing him of a pay rise of sixpence a day due to the weather conditions in the Arctic Circle. He mentions the temperature being 30 degrees below zero.

The next letter written be George is dated Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> February 1919 and is as follows:

*My Dearest Mother,*



*At last we have run into luck's way again as we have had a mail in and I have had 6 letters and parcels from Ciss, one from Fred, two from our Ciss and three from Dad, three from you and four lots of papers which I thank you for. And Mum don't go sending me any more cigs in the letters as it smashes the letter up and they arrive out here to me all unsealed. Well you will see I am sending my letters to Dad to home as I am expecting by now he will have taken his discharge and as of now I will just carry on and write one letter for both of you. Well for now Mum I don't think we shall be coming home just yet so or now just let things take their course and don't worry about me as I am getting along out here alright and I have plenty of work to keep me amused. And now I am just sending you on a check of what money you ought to have of mine by now. I know you have got the first two lots all correct so the next lot should have been £7.00 £5.00 £5.00 so you should have £20 in cash for me, also in the last mail I sent you home 700 roubles to be changed amounting to £17.10.0 and you should have received from Warley £20.00 off my account so if Dad has been able to change the roubles you should have £57.10.0 for me. If you ever want any cash you always know where to go for it and tell Dad to deduct his money from that amount and also his expenses if he has to go to London to change that money for me. Well dear Mum I am very sorry to hear you have been unwell of late but I surely hope this will find you much better. And now Mum know I intend to get married as soon as I return home, that is of course if I can get hold of a decent job to walk into. But that's going away from the point I want to tell you about so here goes, I want you to look on Ciss as a Daughter-in-Law as she has written to me saying that all is not going as well as she would like them to be in B'ham, you see now Fred's back home you can easily see the reason why the girls are not wanted and I expect it is hitting Ciss pretty hard poor kid. So Mum will you do me favour and write to her as often as you can, but whatever you do don't mention this news to her as it is our own secret. By the way I have bought her a complete fur skin which I am sending with this mail and if I have enough money I will bring one home for you as they cost £6.5.0 each and I have not enough money in Roubles to send you one just yet and I don't want to part with my English cash. This is about all, trusting this will find you at home keeping well.*

*I remain, your loving son,*

*George xxxxx*



Along with one of his letters home at this time George sent a photograph of himself and other NCO's of the Elope Infantry Instructors, complete with fur boots and hats. George can be seen here with three 'wound stripes' and a marksman's badge on his left sleeve (front row second from right).

On the 24<sup>th</sup> February George wrote to both his mother and father at their home in Letchworth:

*"My dearest Mum & Dad,*

*At last I can settle down and let you have a little more news about myself as I don't suppose you have received many letters from me just lately and you know that is no fault of my own. First of all I am very sorry to think I have caused you a lot of trouble and worry by being so abrupt and telling you I was going up the line, so now I will try and straighten things out and explain to you more fully. So to start with we are bound for the front but I cannot tell you when we are likely to get there as the Bolsheviks are going back now so we are standing by to see what is going to happen. At present we have about another 200 miles to go before we come in contact with the enemy so I don't think you will need worry about me for at least another few weeks. And then Mum I shall be quite alright as I like my job and there is not much danger to worry about. So now we are staying in this village for at least another month for training and my company consists of all Russians and Chinese. I am in charge of this company as Sergeant Major and I am the only English Warrant Officer and I have Russian Sergeants and of course I have two English Officer's a Captain (Captain Card) and Lt and the Colonel back at Headquarters (Edwards) so I do just as I like. And I have my own two servants, one as a cook and the other as my orderly. And I have a topping Billet in a private house with two rooms for myself so I am quite comfortable. So now I will tell you about my journey here on the sleighs, it takes us 4 days to do 72 miles and the first day was very cold, 42 below zero and in spite of all my furs I was cold and the second day it was worse as we started off in a gale and what with the wind and snow we couldn't see a yard ahead of us. And of course I have my own two sleighs, one for my kit and the other for riding in. I got in my fur sleeping bag and then my face and left hand got frost-bitten so I stopped the convoy and rubbed them with snow so now I am alright again and still laughing. I have three English chums of mine back at headquarters but I don't see them very often so tonight is my first night with not much to do so I have ordered my sleigh and I am going to pay them a visit. And now you have to be careful with what you send me and see that the letters are sealed etc. as they have a long way to come and tomorrow my orderly has got to take these letters 72 miles to get them posted and buy me some cigs so you can just see how I am fixed. Well Mum I hope you have Dad at home now and everything running smoothly and I hope Dad will be lucky enough to get a job as it seems to me that there is not much work at home just yet. I think this is about all for this time so I will close now with my fondest love to all at home.*

*I remain, your ever loving son,*

*George xxxxxxxx"*

The final letter in the recently discovered collection, and quite possibly the last he ever wrote was sent to his parents on March 11<sup>th</sup> 1919 and reads:

*"My Dearest Mother and Dad,*

*Here is just a few more lines for you trusting this will find all at home in the best of health as I am pleased to say this leaves me. I have just returned from another five days patrol in the Forest and I feel just about knocked up as it is very hard work tracking in the snow. Well I have received no letters or papers for some time now so I really don't know at all how things are going at home or in England. As you know my time expires in three days from now and I don't see any hopes of returning to England just yet. Of course I shall see my Colonel again about returning home but I suppose that is just about as far as it will get as no troops will be leaving the country for at least another two months. And I am beginning to think that us poor devils are having the worst part of the deal now, and those that waited to be called up are having the last laugh.*

*At times I start thinking about different things and I feel just about fed up with everything. Anyway just wait until I do come home and then I will have the time of my life for a few weeks. Well Mum I think I have told you all about my troubles so I will tell you about my travels etc. Well I have been working very hard and I have managed to get 40 miles through the Forest and found what I was after so after I have had a few more days rest I am starting out again so if everything still goes on smoothly I shall be doing myself a good turn as the Colonel is very pleased with my latest success. Say I am getting quite an expert on my snowshoes and I can travel fairly quickly, you see they are made more like a tennis racket so you can walk on any depth of snow without sinking in. But if you fall over then one starts to say some nasty things about them. Well Mum I am sending on a cable-gram to you today just to let you know how I am getting on and I will forward them on rather often as I am unable to write as often as I would like to.*

*I remain,*

*Your ever loving son.*

*George xxxxxx”*

A final telegram dated 12<sup>th</sup> March 1919 written from Leonova, Russia and addressed to Mrs Drury of 20 Shott Lane, Letchworth stated simply “*Don’t worry quite well. George*”. Little did she know at the time but this was the last time Mrs Drury would ever hear from her son.

About ten days later, on or around the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1919 21 year-old Company Sergeant Major George Harry Drury of Letchworth set off with his makeshift Company of Russian soldiers, commanded by Captain John Victor Card MC, a man who had risen from a Private in the Grenadier Guards to Officer Rank and who, like George was a veteran of four year’s fighting on the Western Front. The Company’s objective was to attack and capture a soviet held village of village south of Archangel. After a march of an incredible 80 miles in very deep snow the Company arrived on the outskirts of the village late in the evening of 25<sup>th</sup> March. During the day George had met CSM Tovey, one of his few fellow British NCO’s. The pair had exchanged greetings and joked about being ‘back in action again’ but according to Tovey “considered it little more than a scuffle”. Wishing each other luck, the two men parted and prepared to lead their troops forward into the attack with several companies of men, George’s Company forming the left flank of the advance.

95 Year’s on, little is known of the North Russian conflict, let alone this one small action, although the few surviving records shed some light of the events of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1919.

The order to advance was given about 11.45pm and Captain Card’s Company of Detachment A, Elope Forces emerged from the tree-line to see the enemy held village illuminated only by the snow covered ground in the middle distance. As was his style, Card led the Company from the front and as they advanced towards the enemy village the silence of the night was broken by a burst of machine gun fire from a concealed position 30 yards away from the Company Commander. Card fell gravely wounded in the snow as the surprised Company took to ground and returned fire.

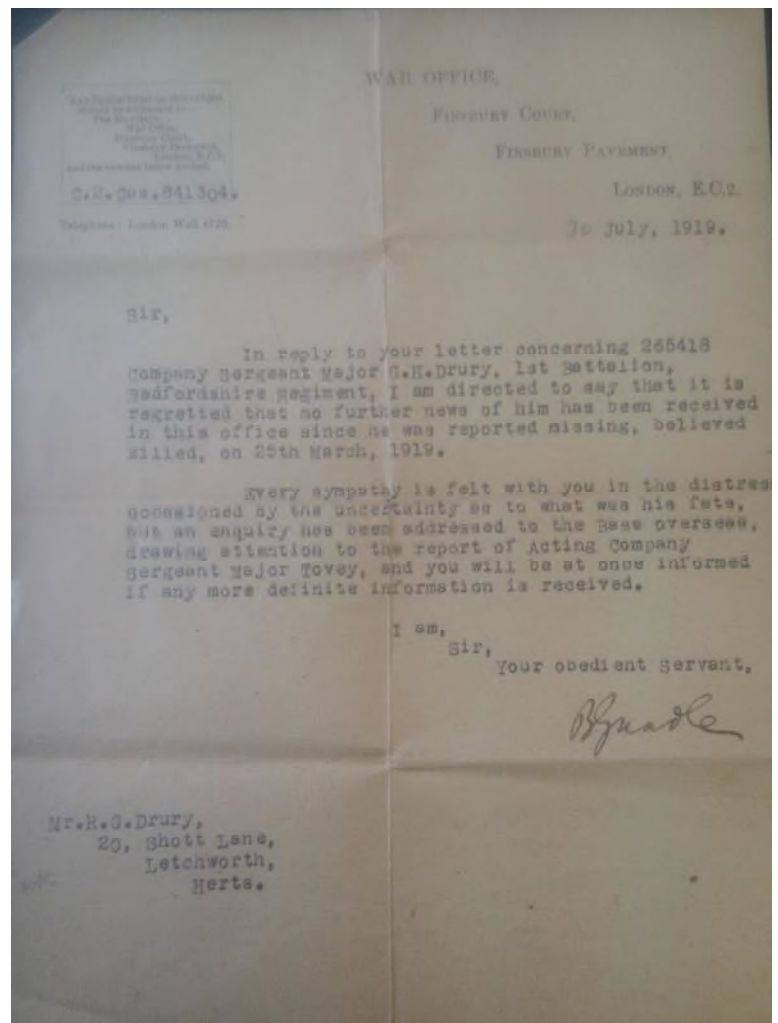
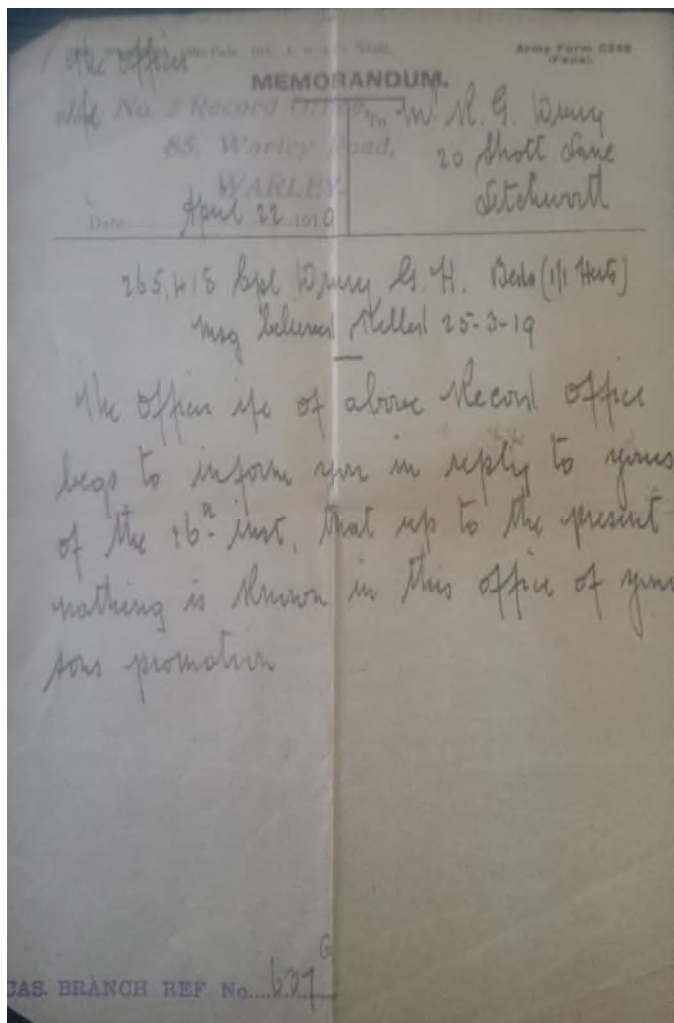
As Captain Card fell, command of the company devolved to CSM Drury. Quickly taking stock of the situation, George decided that his Captain must be brought in, and at around midnight he left his company back in the tree-line on the approach to the enemy village and ventured forward alone. He was never seen again.

Back home in Letchworth Garden City Mr & Mrs Drury would, for some time at least, have been unaware that their son was Missing in Action. Due to the sporadic nature of Mail coming home from Russia, they may not have been unduly worried about the lack of contact from George. Sadly, the fear’s that Mrs Drury had expressed in a letter to George several months before, were to come true.

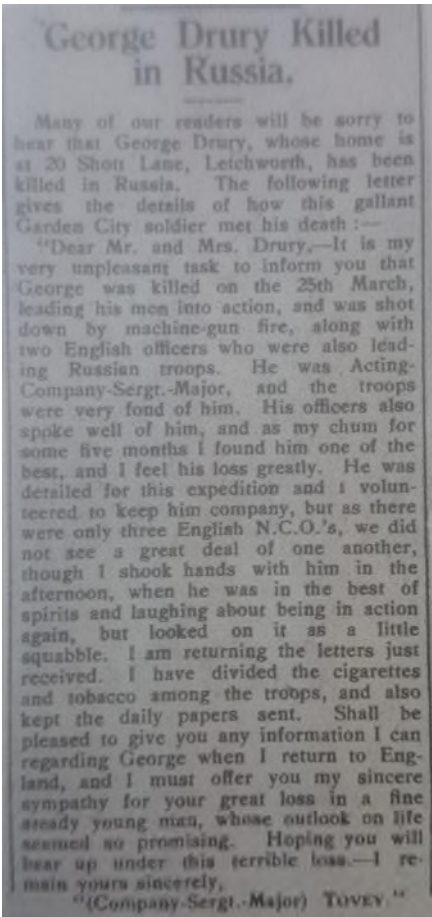
Official news probably arrived in April 1919 that CSM Drury was reported as 'missing, believed killed' on or about 25/26 March 1919. It is hard to imagine the devastation felt by George's parents at the realisation that their son might never be coming home. After enduring daily worry for his safety for over four years, it must have been bitter indeed to see other sons and loved ones returning from Europe, only to find out four months after the end of the Great War that George was presumed lost.

As one might imagine, the Drury family embarked on a frantic search over the next few months, contacting government departments, fellow servicemen and anyone who may be able to help, asking for news of their son.

The letters below highlight the increasing desperation of Mr & Mrs Drury who were to be left in what must have been an agonising state of uncertainty.



When news finally did arrive it was in the form of a letter by Company Sergeant Major Tovey, one of George's "chums" and sadly confirmed the death at young George, aged only 21. Details of the letter appeared in 'The Citizen' newspaper in June 1919 (pictured below).



On the 18<sup>th</sup> July 1919 the following letter was delivered to No 20 Shott Lane, Letchworth.

"Dear Mrs Drury,

Owing to having been moved about, I have only just received your letter. Firstly I want to let you know that I asked Sgt Tovey to give me your address so that I could write you a letter sympathizing with you on your loss and giving you details. The Russian Company with English Officers and English NCO's did a wonderful march for 80 miles through forest and then a very strong enemy village had to be taken, to do this there were Russian troops and English Companies also. The Russians attacked on the left, and their Officer, Captain Card, got under machine gun fire & was wounded in thick snow, thirty yards from the village, then your son went to his assistance and was killed by the same machine gun fire. This was about 12 o'clock at night, in morning a patrol was sent out and saw the dead bodies of your son and Capt Card, quite near together in the snow. He died giving his life for his beloved Officer. Now I will answer your question, it was hard to lose your son, after his wounds in France, but we are fighting the cause of common humanity here, the atrocities of the Bolsheviks are almost uncreditable, and his tyranny far worse than the German, in the same Company as your son was an Officer who had been wounded severely four times and who joined in 1914, and never had any leave, his spirit,

like your son's was to serve his country, your son's letter was quite accurate and he was in the right groove for very high promotion. His unit was very much appreciated, always cheery under the most trying circumstances. His promotion came out properly in orders and War Office can look it up. The Russian Company, after its losses, got broken up, and he had his fur helmet and wristwatch with him. I gave orders for his personal belongings to be looked after by Sergeant Tovey, and I trust you have received them.

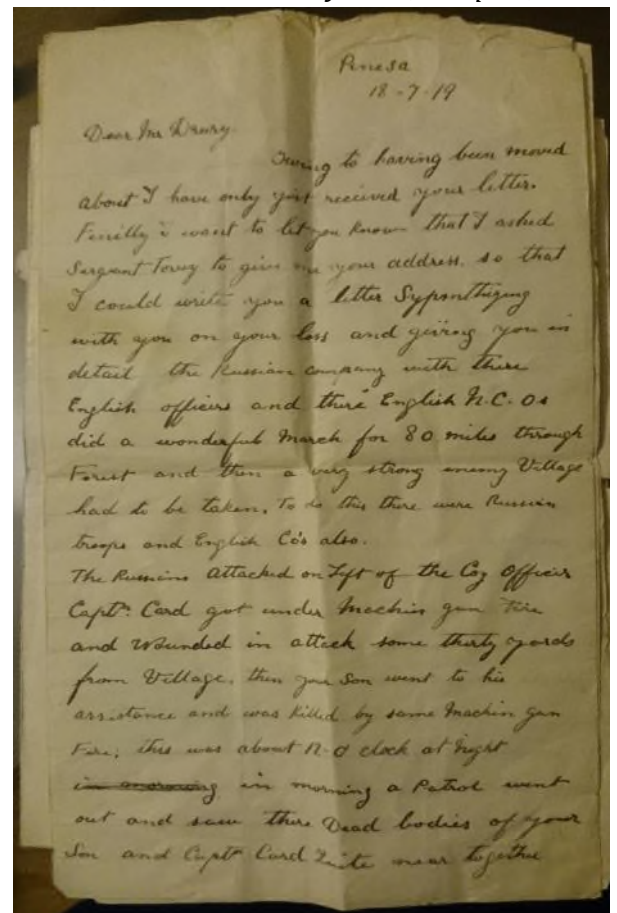
If there is any information I can give you, you must please let me know.

Once more allow me to offer my profound sympathy to you and your wife at the loss of your brave son.

Yours Sincerely,

Lt Col Edwards"

George's body was sadly never recovered and today he is remembered on the Archangel War Memorial to the missing in Russia.



Ordinarily George's story would now reach its end, a tragic tale of a young man who endured so much, only weeks away from finally coming home and marrying his young fiancée, a fairytale ending that sadly would never be.

Ninety-five years on, and for the first time it may actually be possible to add something more to this episode. By tracing through records and combining available material with what we already know, we can perhaps further this story.

We know that George was killed alongside an English Officer, named by Colonel Edwards as 'Captain Card', a search of Commonwealth War Graves Commission records reveals the following information:

## CARD, JOHN VICTOR \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Rank:</b>	Captain
<b>Date of Death:</b>	25/03/1919
<b>Age:</b>	32
<b>Regiment/Service:</b>	East Surrey Regiment 3rd Bn. attd. British Military Mission
<b>Awards:</b>	M C
<b>Grave Reference:</b>	Sp. Mem. B19.
<b>Cemetery:</b>	<b>ARCHANGEL ALLIED CEMETERY</b>
<b>Additional Information:</b>	Son of William Gordon Card and Cornelie E. J. Card, of Eastdene, Hornchurch, Essex. (buried Yemetskoe Chyd.).

This Captain John Victor Card is recorded as having died at the same time as George and in North Russia. Given the rarity of his name and number of troops in North Russia at the time, we can be sure that this is the same man.

Further searching Card's records, we find the following:

FINAL.

North Russia 55,1c.Revised.

~~YEMETSKOE CEMETERY~~ Churchyard.  
C/ INTO ARCHANGEL ALLIED CEM.

msc 20/127

Grave No.	Regtl.No.	Name.	Rank & Initials.	Regiment.	Date of Death.	Cross erected or Aspatched.
2.	Port/2609.(?)	SLATER.	Pte.H.H.	R.M.L.I. H.M.S. GLOUCESTER	11.11.18.	Headstone to be Erected. (found)
3.		CARD.	LT Capt.J.V.	3/East Surrey Regiment.	25. 3.19.	" " Buried near this Spot.
4.	155424.	HAWKER.	Pte.R.H.	201/M.G.C.	19. 6.19.	" " "
5.		UNKNOWN BRITISH SOLDIER.				Headstone to be erected.

Grave No.1. contains the remains of an American Soldier.

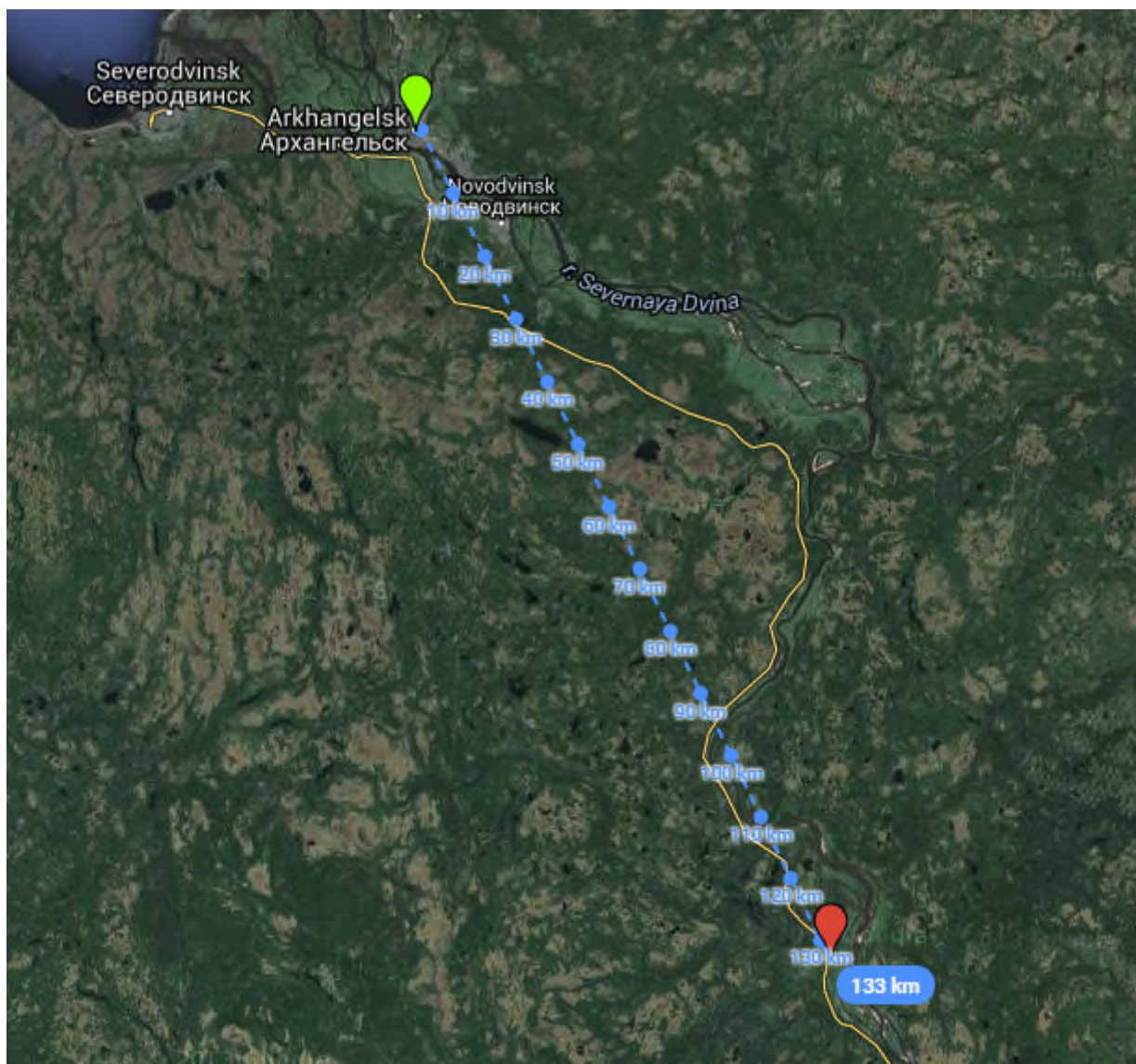
XI/3777/40.

ENTERED.  
SLIPS CHECKED.

This 'Concentration Report' for the small Churchyard named Yemetskoe (today Yemetsk) in Russia shows that in 1927 five bodies were moved from the town Churchyard to the Allied Cemetery in Archangel. Among those buried in Yemetskoe prior to 1927 is the Captain Card, the man who according to Colonel Edwards, George was attempting to save when he was hit by machine-gun fire.

Looking back at the letter sent by Colonel Edwards we know that the village Captain Card's Company attacked was reached 'after a magnificent march of some 80 miles through thick rainforest'. In attempting to identify the village mentioned we can turn to modern mapping.

By measuring the distance between Archangel and Yemetsk, we find that the two are exactly 133 km (83 miles) apart, separated by a large forest. We can also tell from historical sources that the village of Yemetsk was in an area heavily fought over in the early months of 1919. Considering the various possibilities, and perhaps more importantly, the fact that Captain Card is buried there, we can at least speculate that it is possible, perhaps even probable that the village attacked on the evening of 25/26 March was that of Yemetskoe.

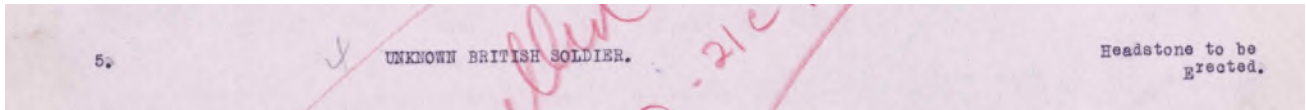


By locating the place of burial of Captain Card we can once again return to the letter by Colonel Edwards to Mrs Drury who states:

*“Captain Card, got under machine gun fire & was wounded in thick snow, thirty yards from the village, then your son went to his assistance and was killed by the same machine gun fire. This was about 12o’clock at night, in morning a patrol was sent out and saw the dead bodies of your son and Capt Card, quite near together in the snow”*

With this in mind we can further explore the Commonwealth War Graves Report for Yemestkoe which names the five graves in the Churchyard. Four of those are named, the fifth can be seen here:





*Could it be that this reference to an unknown British soldier buried at Yemetskoe is actually George Drury?*

In weighting the probability of evidence in favour of this assumption we know:

- George Served in the same Company as Captain Card.
- Their Company travelled south to take on a 'strongly held enemy village'
- Card was wounded and George attempted to save him, himself being hit in the process
- The two men were seen by a patrol on the morning of 26<sup>th</sup> March 'quite close together'
- The bodies were not recovered at that time
- They were the only two British soldiers in the Company (Drury and Card)
- Card is identified as having been buried at Yemetskoe
- Yemetskoe is 83 miles from Archangel, Colonel Edwards reported that the march to the enemy village was '80 miles through thick forest'

In arguing against this assumption we can assert:

- No explicit record says that the attack was on Yemetskoe
- There are no body recovery records for Card and the Unknown Soldier
- There is no date of death for the Unknown Soldier or identifiable rank or insignia (George was wearing a DCM ribbon, CSM stripes, overseas service chevrons, a marksman's badge and three wound stripes as well as a Bedfordshire Regiment Cap Badge.
- It cannot be proved that Card was killed at Yemetskoe, only that he was buried there.
- Card and Drury were seen 'quite near to each other', no exact distance is given
- No Contemporary account of the action on 25/26 March 1919 exists.

These facts give rise to several questions:

- If Card was found why wasn't Drury?
- Was Card found elsewhere and buried when British troops took control of Yemetskoe later that year?
- If the unknown body was that of Drury, why was he not identified?

In analysing available information there are a few possible scenarios:

1. The village attacked was Yemetskoe. Card and Drury were both killed in the fight and subsequently both buried in the village Churchyard. For some reason Drury could not be identified, possibly due to the amount of time that had elapsed before burial or that the remains may have been interfered with. In looking at this scenario we have to consider the unpleasant possibility that George, who was wearing a marksman's insignia was identified as a sniper and so his body was treated badly, possibly hindering identification. We must also consider that the men had removed visible insignia prior to attacking the village.
2. The village attacked was Yemetskoe, Card was found but George was not. It is possible that only one body was found and George still lies somewhere on the outskirts of the village.

3. The village attacked was not Yemetskoe. It is possible that Card was discovered a considerable time after the action and his body recovered to the village which was held for some time later in 1919 as a Company Headquarters. This does not exclude the possibility that the Unknown Soldier is George.

In applying a common sense solution to this intriguing question, whilst trying to avoid any claim of wishful thinking, it could be suggested that:

As Captain Card's body was eventually recovered and buried at Yemetskoe, it is reasonable to assume that Drury (who was seen lying nearby) was also recovered. Although it cannot be proved, it would seem logical that both men were buried in the same place, thus likely that the Unknown Soldier is George Harry Drury.

Although it will likely never be proved beyond doubt that George is the unidentified casualty in Yomestkoe, this article might at least go some way to recognising the life of an extraordinary man who spent his last moments trying to save a comrade as he had done so many times before.

Mr & Mrs Drury lived in Hertfordshire for the rest of their lives, rarely speaking about George but proudly displaying his medals and memorial plaque in the family living room. George never saw prized DCM, it was presented to his parents in 1920, a year after his death.

No record of George's Fiancée Cissy Goodwin can be found although it is believed she never married.



