

## ***A biographical Essay – Pvt Lionel Dennis (c1880-1916)***

It was at 2am in the deep dark recesses on an early morn in July that Pvt Lionel Dennis finally succumbed to his wounds and died.<sup>1</sup> Only one hundred and thirty days prior, four months, one calendar season, he was despatched to the Western Front, France in 1916, during World War I. Like thousands of other young men, he disembarked from the safety of the family home to fight for Country, on foreign land across the seas. Courageous, full of vigour yet ill-equipped and unprepared for the brutality of war these young men embraced the call to arms from the home front. One can only imagine what those four months presented Lionel. Yet his family back home would endure a lifetime of mourning for a young man whose life was cut short in service to King and Country.

I recall the day Lionel revealed himself to me via ancestry.com back in 2018. He was the elder brother of my great grandfather Harry, who I was researching. The Dennis ancestral line is my direct maternal line, yet I never met any of them. My grandfather Alfred (Harry's son, Lionel's nephew) left my mother's life when she was but four years old. She never knew her father and subsequently I never knew this Dennis family. The fact they originated from Eastbourne, a seaside town in England on the other side of the planet, did not help. There was an unspoken bitterness towards this family that we never knew. As a family historian they had a veil around them that I wanted removed. I needed to know of them, their stories and the intergenerational influences in play. Both Harry and Lionel enrolled in World War I. Harry was gassed in battle the August of 1917. This caused health issues that would have a severe impact upon him as a husband and father.<sup>2</sup> A story for another time. Yet Lionel, a great, yet distant uncle captured my attention. His life whilst brief deserved to be told. He did not leave behind a wife or children. At 2am when he died his ancestral line stopped dead in its track. Our paths crossed through ancestry.com, he found me and I am glad he did. Through this biographical essay his story can be told, reminding us that one life is valuable. I hope in the deep slumber of death he feels this embrace of appreciation and homage from his great niece who lives on a distant land with freedoms he fought for.

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<sup>1</sup> Casualty Form - Active Service for Lionel Dennis, July 1916, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920', ancestry.com, accessed July 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Military History Sheet for Harry Dennis, August 1917, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920', ancestry.com, accessed August 2018.

The Dennis family lived for many years in the parish of Willingdon, district of Eastbourne in the county of East Sussex. Thomas, the father was a market gardener and his sons Lionel and Harry followed in his footsteps.<sup>3</sup> Yet it seems Lionel had yearnings for more. Between 1901 and 1913 he was engaged as a seaman in the Royal UK Navy. For nine years this red headed, 5 ft 3” young man with a fresh complexion served onboard numerous vessels.<sup>4</sup> In fact, for the 1911 England Census conducted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April he was on board the ‘Melpoment’ serving as a 1<sup>st</sup> Class Stoker Engineer.<sup>5</sup> When War broke out in 1914 it was the Army he headed for. Perhaps he had enough of being at sea, seeking the stability that land could apparently provide? Lionel, then aged 33, was one of the first five hundred men to enlist. He was eager. Still living at home and single I sense his sense of adventure was strong. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1914 Lionel signed his attestation papers swearing ‘by almighty God... will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth’. The service number 409 was assigned, and he was placed into the Royal Sussex Regiment, 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion.<sup>6</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion along with the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> became the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> South Down Battalions, also known as ‘Lowther’s Lambs’.<sup>7</sup>

His war story starts with training at Cooden Camp, a military training camp established at Bexhill, England at the start of the war.<sup>8</sup> Here they were apparently equipped and trained for the brutality of war. It seems Lionel was not always keen on staying in the camp. His Regimental Conduct Sheet reveals he was absent from camp for four days in the summer of 1915. His punishment included four days confined to barracks and forfeit of 3 days’ pay.<sup>9</sup> The next line in his war story is revealed through the ‘Casualty Form – Active Service (army form B. 103)’. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of July 1916 we find him placed at the 33 CCS, a casualty clearing station established in Bethune, France.<sup>10</sup> Casualty Clearing Stations were

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<sup>3</sup> 1901 England Census for Lionel Dennis, ‘1901 England Census’, ancestry.com, accessed July 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Lionel Dennis, ‘UK Royal Navy Registers of Seaman’s Service 1848-1939’, ancestry.com, accessed July 2021.

<sup>5</sup> 1911 England Census for Lionel Dennis, ‘1911 England Census’, ancestry.com, accessed August 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Attestation papers for Lionel Dennis, September 1914, ‘UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920’, ancestry.com, accessed July 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Peter FitzSimons, *Fromelles & Pozieres In the Trenches of Hell*, Penguin Random House, North Sydney, 2015, p. 222.

<sup>8</sup> The First World War East Sussex, ‘Cooden Camp’, <http://www.eastsussexww1.org.uk/cooden-camp/index.html>, accessed 10 August 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Regimental Conduct Sheet for Lionel Dennis, ‘UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920’, ancestry.com, accessed July 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Casualty Form - Active Service for Lionel Dennis, July 1916, ‘UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920’.

part of the casualty evacuation chain and often located on or near railway lines to facilitate movement of casualties. The 33CCS was in Bethune, France between September 2015 and March 2018, the time of Lionel's injury.<sup>11</sup> It is recorded he suffered a gunshot wound to the side which penetrated his shoulder, thorax and abdomen.<sup>12</sup> Two days later he died.

The war records do not indicate where he was located or what battle he was involved in. My subsequent researching of the Royal Sussex Regiment war diaries and records, reveals it is highly likely, and I surmise that Lionel was involved in the Battle of the Boar's Head, Richebourg. The 11th Battalion were involved in this Battle, which took place on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1916, one day before the Battle of the Somme commenced.<sup>13</sup> Richebourg, lay between Bethune (the location of the casualty clearing station Lionel was taken to) and Armentieres. This battle in June 1916 became known as 'the day Sussex died'.<sup>14</sup> It lasted less than five hours, resulted in 349 men dying and over 1000 being wounded or taken prisoner.<sup>15</sup> The date of Lionel's injuries is one month after this battle. It seems Lionel survived this battle only to die one month later in the other offensive initiatives undertaken by the British and French during the Battle of Somme. To this date I am unable to ascertain the geographic location he was when inflicted with a gun shot.

At the end of the day and after endless hours of researching it probably matters not where someone dies. We can get swept up in dates, in numbers and evidence. Lionel, like so many young men went to war without any idea of what that would look like or entail. In total Lionel served 306 days as part of the armed forces, only 130 of those in battle at the Western Front, France.<sup>16</sup> Like thousands of other Brits who died in the First World War, he never made it back home across the Channel from France to British soil. Lionel is buried in the Bethune Town Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France, not far from the casualty clearing station

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<sup>11</sup> The Long, Long Trail, 'Locations of British Casualty Clearing Stations', <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/locations-of-british-casualty-clearing-stations/>, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> July, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Casualty Form - Active Service for Lionel Dennis, July 1916, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920'.

<sup>13</sup> Battlefields 1418, '11<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment', <http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/11sussex.htm>, accessed 30<sup>th</sup> July 2021.

<sup>14</sup> FitzSimons, *Fromelles & Pozieres In the Trenches of Hell*, p. 225.

<sup>15</sup> Royal Sussex Living History Group, 'Battle of the Boar's Head', <https://www.royalsussex.org.uk/richebourg-30th-june-1916/battle-of-the-boars-head/>, accessed 7 August 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Military History Sheet for Lionel Dennis, September 1916, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920', [ancestry.com](https://ancestry.com), accessed July 2021.

where he died.<sup>17</sup> A headstone the lasting physical reminder of one man's war story. His name is scribed on a memorial in the Willingdon Parish Church.<sup>18</sup> His father Thomas, by now a widower living with his daughter, was the sole recipient of his son's war medals and commemorative scroll.<sup>19</sup> Little comfort for a father who would never see his son again.

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<sup>17</sup> Find A Grave, 'Pvt Lionel Dennis', <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56164922/lionel-dennis>, accessed July 2021.

<sup>18</sup> International War Museums, 'Willingdon Parish Church – WW1 and WW2', <https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/17322>, accessed 7 August 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Lionel Dennis, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920', [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com), accessed July 2021.

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