

Hubert “Bertie” Podmore 1887 -1917

IN MEMORIAM



The annual Charney Hall School sports day took place in perfect weather on June 24th 1899 when eleven-year-old Bertie Podmore won the under twelve's egg and spoon race. In the closing hours of the year 1917, Lieutenant-Colonel Hubert Podmore, D.S.O. was accidentally killed by an ammunition explosion in West Flanders. This is his story.

Hubert Podmore, known as Bertie to his family and “Podders” to his contemporaries, was born on November 21st 1887, the third son of six children all born in Grange to George and Matilda (known as Mattie) Podmore, a couple who moved to Grange from London immediately after their marriage in 1882 in order to open Charney Hall Preparatory School for Boys. Two of their sons, Eric and Edgar, died young leaving George Conrad (known as Conrad), Bertie, Enid and Freda. The family resided at the school in the Eden Mount area and were regular worshippers at St. Paul's along with all the Charney Hall staff and pupils.

Headmaster and amateur meteorologist, George Podmore was Churchwarden and Treasurer of St. Paul's for a number of years and was very much involved in Grange town life.

Bertie was academically gifted and after his Charney Hall School education, won a First-class scholarship to Rugby School where he met Rupert Brooke, the son of a Rugby schoolmaster. The boys became good friends being of the same age, both sons of schoolmasters and both excelling in sports.

During his time at Rugby, Bertie became head of his house, and represented the school in the Cricket XXII and the Running VIII. In 1905 his and Rupert's paths diverged as Bertie became the first student to be granted the Lees Knowles Leaving Scholarship which enabled him to be accepted into Trinity College, Oxford University whilst Rupert won a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge.

At Oxford Bertie became a cadet in the Officer Training Corps. He obtained a B.A. Honours degree in Classics and Philosophy in 1910. On leaving Oxford he applied for and was accepted as an assistant master back at his alma mater, Rugby School. He was also appointed Second Lieutenant in the Rugby School contingent of the Officers Training Corps in March 1911 and was promoted to Lieutenant in July 1913.

At the outbreak of war, Bertie was commissioned as a Temporary Second Lieutenant with the Northamptonshire Regiment in a new battalion formed under an Old Rugbeian. The following month he was promoted to Temporary Lieutenant and almost immediately promoted to Temporary Captain attached to the 6th Battalion Northamptonshire Regiment. When news reached him of Rupert Brooke's death in Skyros, Greece, whilst on the way to Gallipoli with the Royal Navy, Bertie penned a two-page letter of condolence to Rupert's mother which is preserved today at Cambridge University King's College Archive Centre.

In July 1915 he embarked to France as Captain with the 6th Battalion to occupy a "quiet sector" at Fricourt on the Somme. During this time he was mentioned in despatches. It was in May 1916 that Bertie was awarded the Distinguished Service Order "For conspicuous gallantry and ability during a night attack by the enemy. It was largely due to Captain Podmore that his company held its own in spite of very heavy bombardment and repelled every attack".

In July 1916 the 6th Battalion played a close support role in the assault on Pommiers Redoubt and two weeks later were in the main assault on Trones Wood. It was during this attack that Bertie was reported as having been killed. One of his men upon hearing this news reported that Captain Podmore was the smartest officer in the Battalion. However, Bertie was found alive with shrapnel injuries to his back. He refused to leave his men until another Commanding Officer arrived to relieve him, so he was not evacuated from the battlefield for twenty-four hours.

On the 15th July he was promoted to Temporary Major and two days later he was shipped back to England for medical attention and subsequent appearances before medical boards. He was deemed unfit for general service but fit to be attached to a Home Service Garrison Battalion. At the end of September 1916 as soon as was passed fit enough for active duty he was given 48 hours leave and ordered to embark from Folkestone to rejoin the Expeditionary Force at the Front.

He arrived back with the 6th Northamptonshires on 7th October 1916 and was appointed second-in-command. Again he was mentioned in despatches for various operations and on the 20th March 1917 the battalion was part of the scouting spearhead probing the Hindenburg Line and later in the main attack on the Hindenburg Line on May 3rd. Bertie received his third mention in despatches just prior to the 3rd battle of Ypres (also known as Passchendaele). On the 10th August at the battle of Glencorse Wood, of which an observer wrote "the infantry were falling like corn before a sickle" and another reported "men were sinking and dying in the mud", Bertie was wounded again and returned to England. Whilst recuperating he served with an officer cadet battalion but embarked again to the Front at Christmas 1917 promoted to Acting Lieutenant-Colonel attached to the 12th Battalion Middlesex Regiment but only eight days later on the night of the 31st December, there was an explosion of ammunition and thirty-year-old Bertie was killed.

His body was taken to Casualty Clearing Station 62/63 referred to by the men as Bandaghem (another two were nicknamed Mendinghem and Dosinghem). Within 48 hours of his death his remains were buried and the ground marked with the wooden battlefield cross. His rank inscribed on the cross is described as Major, however, at the time of his death Bertie was an Acting Lieutenant-Colonel but being such a recent promotion the paperwork was still being processed.

The Brigadier wrote to the Podmores "He was universally very popular and loved by all. We can ill afford such a loss as this. A gallant soldier and a loyal friend has been snatched away from us". A fellow master at Rugby wrote "There was something extraordinarily great about him, but he was so unconscious of itnobody has ever made goodness more attractive and there was a noble

simplicity about him, a complete absence of egotism which made his very strength seem like some form of gentleness”.

On January 10th 1918 a large and sympathetic congregation gathered at St. Paul’s for Bertie’s Memorial Service where he was described as an upright, keen and zealous soldier who served his God as earnestly and faithfully as he served King and Country. The Rev. Deakin read the Charney Hall Roll of Honour, containing the names of 21 Old Boys who had, so far, fallen in the War. Bertie was so typical of the young officers of the Great War who had an average life expectancy of only six weeks once they reached the Front. They were mostly boarding-school educated boys brought up in a regime of Christianity, team games, cold showers and immersion in history and the classics. In the front line trenches these young captains and lieutenants were determined not to show fear in front of their men and tried to live up to the ideals they had been taught.

The wooden grave markers stayed until the Commonwealth War Graves Commission set about making the cemeteries permanent, replacing the crosses with stone memorials. The CWGC paid to repatriate some of these battlefield crosses if the families so wished. The Podmores donated Bertie’s wooden cross to St. Paul’s and there it still hangs today.



*“The soldier, whose fight is done,
Who strove with his face to the morning sun
Up and up to his God”*

To conclude his story, Bertie’s brother, Conrad, survived the war and returned to Grange and in due course succeeded his father as Churchwarden of St. Paul’s. Their sister, Enid, married Sir William Palin Elderton, and in 1921 gave birth to a son, named Hubert in honour of his uncle. Charney Hall School closed in 1973.

Bertie’s grave is Number I.C.7 at Haringhe (Bandaghem) Military Cemetery, Belgium.

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