



## **Book Review**

### **The Civil Service Rifles in the Great War: All Bloody Gentlemen**

**By  
Jill Knight  
(Pen and Sword, Hardback £19.99, ISBN 1 84415057 7)**

Those of you that know me well will believe me when I say that I have read over a hundred unit histories relating to the BEF in the Great War, and that in the course of my research work I have partially read at least another hundred. The rest of you will have to take me at my word or check me out in your own time! What I want to say at the start and without equivocation is that Jill Knight has produced the best unit history I have ever read or am ever likely to read.

Jill, while a graduate, is not an academic historian; she is that perfect kind of writer who, in her work as a civil servant, became intrigued by a war memorial to civil servants who died in the war and set about finding out what she could about them. In a genre not famous for its literary elegance, we are doubly blessed by someone who can actually write well and make the story especially riveting<sup>1</sup>.

Now, like the pioneering work of Bill Mitchinson on the London Rifle Brigade<sup>i</sup>, Jill is fortunate to have worked on one of the 'class' battalions of the London Regiment, whose ranks were filled with the most literate and educated men that Edwardian society could offer. While these units were routinely plundered for officer material, there is still a rich vein of personal reminiscences from the other ranks to make these books especially valuable.

In another unit history review<sup>ii</sup> I wrote recently for the Centre for First World History, Birmingham University, I said:

What do we want from a 1914-18 unit history?

- A good sense of the social composition of the battalion and how it reflected the society from which it sprang.
- A suitably detailed battle history, showing how the unit was introduced to the routine of trench warfare and how they performed in battle. This should always include accounts of their training and how this was adapted to new conditions of warfare. (A note to future writers – this is not boring, it is important!)
- A sense of how the battalion fitted into its brigade and division, and how those units figured in the BEF at large.
- An ongoing assessment of the morale of the unit and how it absorbed drafts after its major actions, how it rested and played, and how it kept going through the attritional battles of 1916/1917, the crisis of March/April 1918 and the new conditions of the final march to victory.

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Knight died shortly after this review was published. An appreciation is at <http://www.firstworldwar.bham.ac.uk/news/jillknight.htm> [A Proper Bloody Lady](#)



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Page 2 / 2

I had actually just read Jill's book when I devised that list and it will therefore come as no surprise that she scores 100% on every point.

In particular I was impressed by the regular assessments made of the state of morale within the battalion, showing how even an excellent unit like the 15<sup>th</sup> Londons could 'get the blues' after a costly battle or a period of bloody awful weather, but how some rest, reinforcement (by recruits drawn so clearly from the same pool as the originals – not always an option), some entertainment and the restoration of cleanliness and pride in appearance soon gets the unit back in form. The sub-title comes from an officer's groom who transferred in from the 60<sup>th</sup> Rifles. He didn't like the new assignment as "This mob's all bloody gentlemen"!

The First Battalion, as part of 47<sup>th</sup> (2<sup>nd</sup> London) Division, is followed through all the great battles of the Western front. Jill has an excellent grasp of the evolution of infantry tactics as the war progressed; indeed she does quote some particularly reliable sources in this respect(!!!)

The Second Battalion is equally well covered as it joins the 60<sup>th</sup> Division and goes from Ireland to France to Salonika to Palestine and back to France.

A word of praise for the publishers, Pen and Sword. The book is physically attractive, with excellent use of maps, illustrations and repro documents. And, as I have welcomed in other reviews, they leave a wide inner margin that is absolutely perfect if, like me, you are an inveterate scribbler of notes.

If you are remotely interested in the BEF and/or the Western front you must have this book. If you think you are not interested in 'mud crunchers' but want to know what makes a 'good' regiment good at any stage in history, then you still must have this book.

As I said in an e-mail to the author, "Well done, Jill. Well done indeed!" She has set a new standard that the rest of us have to live up to.

**John Lee, Newsletter 12 Spring 2005**

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<sup>i</sup> Mitchinson, K.W. *Gentlemen and Officers: The Impact and Experience of War on a Territorial Regiment 1914-1918* Imperial War Museum 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Clayton, Derek *From Pontefract to Picardy; The 9<sup>th</sup> King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the First World War* Tempus 2004