

Reverend Geoffrey Harold Woolley VC, OBE, MC, MA

Some 90 years after the armistice that brought the first world war to an end it is worth noting a little known link between the local parish church and the battle of Neuve Chappelle in 1915.

Whereas we, quite rightly, remember the men who died in this and subsequent wars, the bravery of those who fought and survived should also be remembered. One of the men who managed to survive the carnage of the western front was a man by the name of Geoffrey Harold Woolley, born in Bethnal Green on 14th May 1892.

As the Reverend Woolley VC, OBE, MC he was appointed Rector of West Grinstead Parish Church in 1952 and remained at this post until his retirement in 1959. But it was his exploits on Hill 60 in Belgium in 1915 for which he is remembered and for which he received his VC, becoming the first Territorial officer to do so (and the first of five men to win the VC at Hill 60).

He was studying for holy order at Queen's College, Oxford when the war broke out, but despite 'being a clergyman at heart', he felt that he had a duty to fight for his country.

Second Lieutenant Woolley was commissioned into the 9th Battalion London Regiment, popularly known as the Queen Victoria Rifles and after training at Crowborough, he and his regiment set off for France in November 1914.

During the night of 20-21 April 1915 the Germans mounted a fierce attack on the trenches held by the Queen Victoria Rifles on Hill 60 (The number refers to the height in metres above sea level; Hill 60 was nothing more than a man-made spoil dump from when a nearby railway cutting was dug out in the 1860s, but it commanded a view over the surrounding area and so in the eyes of the High Command had to be taken).

One by one Lieutenant Woolley's superior officers had been killed, until he was the only officer surviving along with 150 of his men. Although still some weeks short of his 23rd birthday he remained calm and led his men with tremendous bravery.

His VC citation reads "For most conspicuous bravery . . . Although the only officer on the hill at the time [all the others had been killed], and with very few men, he successfully resisted all attacks to his trench and continued throwing bombs and encouraging his men till relieved. His trench during all the time was being heavily shelled and bombed, and was subjected to heavy machine-gun fire by the enemy."

Proof of the intensity of the fighting Lieutenant Woolley and his men were engaged in can be gathered by the fact that when finally relieved, the company of 150 men had been thinned to 20 — 14 Territorials and 6 Regulars.

After the war he was one of the VC holders chosen to form the Honour Guard at the funeral of the Unknown Warrior. He resigned his commission in 1923 and was ordained into the Church of England.

In 1940 he was commissioned into the Royal Army Chaplains' Department and reached the rank of Chaplain to the Forces 3rd Class (Major). His son Rollo, a Spitfire pilot, died in the same year. He resigned his commission in 1952.

The Reverend Geoffrey Harold Woolley VC, OBE, MC, MA died in December 1968 and is buried in St Mary's churchyard, West Chilington.

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