Killed in Action

By Adrian Jones

If Alfred Welham and Percy Battle had met at police headquarters in Chelmsford, then they would have found that they had a lot in common. Apart from serving as constables in the Essex County Constabulary, they would have discovered that each was a Suffolk man. Perhaps if they talked further, they might have swapped stories about their army days: both had served his country as a private soldier and were now on the reserve list. Had it not been for the First World War then Constable 458 Battle and Constable 511 Welham might have passed into history as little more than another two of the many names neatly handwritten in the register of police officers. Yet when Great Britain entered the war against Germany on 4 August 1914, fate ordained that Welham and Battle would share one last common bond. Both were to lose their lives fighting in bloody rearguard actions within a week of one another, and so were destined to become the first two serving officers of the Essex County Constabulary to be killed in action.
Alfred Welham

Alfred Welham was born in the Suffolk market town of Lavenham in 1890, the youngest son of Harry and Eliza Welham. Alfred’s father was an agricultural labourer and his mother a horsehair weaver - typical occupations for people from a rural county. However, with such a background, Alfred would have had few career choices. He could either work on the land or, as many young men in his circumstances did, he could join the army. He enlisted into his county regiment, the Suffolk Regiment, at its depot in Sudbury when he was just 16 years old, officially three years below the minimum age of recruitment. At the time of Alfred Welham’s enlistment, the British Army was largely confined to the role of the Empire’s policeman, keeping a careful eye out for trouble. During his service Welham was stationed at the garrisons both on Malta and in Egypt, stations from where the Army could watch over Great Britain’s interests in the Middle East.

With his army service behind him, what then attracted Alfred to Chelmsford and the Essex Constabulary is unclear. The 1913/14 electoral register for Chelmsford shows an Edgar Welham, probably Alfred’s elder brother, living at Phillips’ Cottages in Church Lane, Springfield, less than a mile from police headquarters. Alfred’s decision to apply for entry to the police may have been motivated by a desire to improve his social standing, for it cannot have been for the pay or conditions. A newly appointed constable received £1 3s 4d a week at a time when a farm labourer could expect to receive at least 3s a week more. Indeed, men were being dissuaded from joining the Essex force as it was one of the worst paid in the country. It was hard work too. A working week of seven days was divided into two shifts: a day shift of three to four hours and a night shift which lasted from 10pm until dawn. An allowance of one rest day per month had been implemented only in 1914.

So it was that on 14 July 1914, Welham entered the force. He was 23 and unmarried, a necessary condition for all new recruits after 1901. The standard selection process involved an interview with the Chief Constable at the Springfield Court headquarters, followed by a medical with the police doctor and then a one-hour written examination in literacy and numeracy. Having made the grade, Welham would have been sworn in before the magistrates at the Shire Hall in Chelmsford would have started his month-long basic training. There were no training schools then, and a new recruit was left very much to his own devices to master drill, police law and procedure.

Percy Battle

By the time Welham joined the force, Percy Unsworth Battle had been with the Essex County Constabulary for three and a half years, although for only the last six or seven months of that time had he been serving in Chelmsford. Percy Battle was born in the town of Orford on the Suffolk coast on 29 December 1889 and had spent his three years in the army as a Guardsman in the elite Grenadier Guards, being discharged to the Reserve on 10 November 1910. After his initial training, he would have served under the guidance of a more experienced officer until he could prove himself capable, at which time he would be posted to a beat of his own.
Battle, described as ‘a man of smart appearance’, joined the staff at Brentwood police station on 1 April 1911 and served there until his transfer to Chelmsford on 9 December 1913. The transfer probably resulted from his marriage in 1913 to Miss Rose Grist. Officers could only marry after at least one year’s service and with the approval of the Chief Constable. Miss Grist’s details would have been scrutinised to ensure that she was suitable to become a policeman’s wife. It is possible that Battle’s name may have been fresh in the Chief Constable’s mind as only a few months earlier Battle had been up before him for failing to make a conference point on time. A conference point was a pre-arranged meeting place where the patrolling officer would meet his sergeant or inspector at a specified time, one of the few fixed duties that a constable was given. For his error, Battle was fined five shillings – almost a day’s wages.

World War I

Great Britain’s declaration of war on Germany came at the end of a particularly warm August Bank Holiday weekend, halting the studies of Alfred Welham and the footfall of the veteran Battle. As army Reservists, both men were obliged to rejoin the Colours and, as the register of officers shows, both men’s police service ended on 4 August 1914. The following day, 13463 Guardsman Percy Battle rejoined his comrades in the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards at their peacetime station at Chelsea Barracks. 7265 Private Alfred Welham rejoined the Suffolk Regiment with the 2nd Battalion, which was stationed at the Curragh outside Dublin.

Both men were part of an initial contingent of around 120,000 men shipped to France over the following weeks as part of the original British Expeditionary Force (BEF). The British and German armies had their first encounter near the Belgian town of Mons on 22 August. Despite a brave fight the following day, the BEF was forced to retreat in the face of overwhelming numbers of enemy troops, a retreat that was to continue until mid September. In the early hours of 26 August, Welham and his comrades of the 2nd Suffolks were told that they would stand and fight near the town of Le Cateau as rearguard to the still retreating British army. The battalion had time to construct only the meagrest of defences before the first German infantry appeared at 10 am. Despite a brave resistance, the battalion could not expect to survive for long under the intense German artillery bombardment. At some time between 2.30 and 2.45 that afternoon, the battalion was overwhelmed. From a nominal fighting strength of 1,000 men,
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The memorial at Shire Hall, Chelmsford

The battalion suffered 720 casualties. Welham was one of those reported missing in action, and his body was subsequently never found. He holds the dubious distinction of being not only the first Essex constable to be killed in action, but also the first man from his home town of Lavenham to be killed. He has no known grave and today is one of 4,000 men commemorated on La Ferte-sous-Jouarre Memorial to the Missing.

Battle, with the 2nd Grenadier Guards, had also been on the retreat from Mons. He survived a particularly fierce battle on 1 September in a clearing known as Rond de la Reine on the edge of the great forest at Villers-Cotterets, only to be killed three days later, nine days after Welham, as his battalion was pushed further back. The villagers of Villers-Cotterets buried the dead in a large tomb, which today is known as the Guards Grave.

Memorial

The memorial tablet bearing the names of the 22 officers of the Essex Constabulary who fell in the First World War was unveiled in the Shire Hall, Chelmsford, on 23 September 1920. Mr Harry Welham of Phillips' Cottages was invited to attend as was Percy Battle's widow, who had since remarried. However, there was to be one last sad twist to the tale. The new Mrs Rossiter, writing from her home at Weald Road, Brentwood, stated that she would be unable to attend the service for her late former husband owing to the death of her mother.

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