

## **How metal identified two soldiers from the first world war**

### **By Samantha Whitehall**

#### **Slide 1**

My talk is on some of the research I did for my master's dissertation. Which is hoping to show how metal artefacts, which are normally dismissed, can be used for identification, even if only to country, county and regiment, if not to an individual. I showed that everything from shoulder title to a cap badge and the occasional odd thing such as a ring from a Canadian soldier, a spoon from an English soldier and homemade identification tags, can help with or confirm their identification. I looked at 100 case studies and 63 soldiers were identified to an individual or regiment.

This is just two of the case studies, one from Devon and one from Dorset.

#### **Slide 2**

##### *Metal tag*

While on holiday in Devon, we visited a museum in Torquay. While looking at the items they had for sale I came across this piece of metal. I realised it was a homemade identification tag but at the time not knowing if it was real or fake and from the first or second world war. After some research and help from others, the tag was dated to the first world war, made of aluminium and hand punched with a nail possibly while in the trenches.

The punched details are as follows: JH Beer, Pte, COE, 10 Bat, Dev, 14044.

The following three slides show how, using this basic information on the tag, I was able to trace the soldier from baptism to death.

#### **Slide 3**

##### *Census*

This shows the 1911 census for England and Wales. It shows John Beer age 23 and single, working as a cellar man. He lived with his mother and father, four brothers and two sisters.

The other census is from the parish records, which shows John Beer age 18 and an errand boy.

#### **Slide 4**

##### *Medical record / burial record*

This shows the medical records of the servicemen from no 31 casualty clearing station. This shows J H Beer had been in service for two years and he was originally admitted on 19/11/1916 with shell wounds to the spine. He was transferred on 20/11/1916 to the sick convoy.

The second record shows that he fought in the Devonshire Regiment 10<sup>th</sup> battalion from Torquay and shows he died on 25/11/1916, six days after being wounded in Salonika, Ballan, part of the battles in Gallipoli on the Eastern Front.

## **Slide 5**

### *Baptism and death notice*

This shows he was baptised in Devon on 25/11/1887 as John Henry Beer to parents John and Maria Beer.

The other shows the death notice, which appeared in the newspaper. He was 29 when he died and married to an A F Beer who lived in Babbacombe, Torquay.

So, from a small piece of metal I was able to find out the following:

His name was John Henry Beer. He was 29 years old when he died. He was married. He was born in Torquay and continued to live there when married. He enlisted in Exeter as a private. His religion was Church of England. He died from shell wounds to the spine on 25/11/1916 (the same day and month of his baptism 29 years earlier). He served for two years. He died in Salonika during the battles in Gallipoli and buried at the Salonika Anglo French military cemetery in Greece.

## **Slide 6**

### *Metal artefacts*

This photograph shows the remains of metal artefacts a hundred years later. A pen knife, buttons, shoulder tag sliders and shoulder tags with Dorset on them. This small piece of metal help to identify a soldier to one of six who had not been identified before.

In 2014 two sets of remains were uncovered near the town of Albert in France; two bodies were found while widening the road. North east of Albert they were found in a shell hole that had been covered by the blast, covering the two bodies where they fell.

The Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (JCCC) undertook war records and data. They revealed that the soldier found with the Dorset tags had served with the 6<sup>th</sup> battalion and his death would have been between 29-31/03/1918 at the Battle of Albert. Seven members of the battalion were killed between these dates and have no known grave. DNA was taken but the result was inconclusive as the bones had degraded in the soil too much.

## **Slide 7**

### *Grave stone*

A burial service took place at Bouzincourt Ridge Commonwealth War Grave Commission Cemetery near Albert. The grave stone has the Dorset crest with a soldier of the war (Dorsetshire Regiment) known unto god.

## **Slide 8**

### *Wreath*

The two poppy wreaths from the two soldiers' regiments, the Bedfordshire and the Dorset. The soldiers are now laid to rest alongside each other. They will now be remembered and have been recognized that they lost their lives for us. All from a small piece of brass.

This was just a small part of my research but shows how metal artefacts could be used as a form of identification and could help family members to have closure; and give these soldiers who gave their lives for us their identity back and can finally rest in peace.

Hopefully my talk has showed how using something as simple as a piece of metal as a starting point, from a shoulder tag, homemade identification tag or a mass-produced pin, can lead you on a trail of discovery and research into the history of a soldier from the first world war.