The Guernsey Quarrymen

In January 1917 the 321st Quarrying Company, Royal Engineers was formed from working quarrymen from the Bailiwick of Guernsey who had volunteered for service overseas. Service and pension records show that most of them were mature family men, mainly of local or French origin, living in the North of the island where most of the quarries are situated. They left Guernsey on the 25th January and first travelled to Buxton in Derbyshire via Weymouth. Here they were issued with standard Royal Engineer uniforms, but as with other Quarrying Companies did not receive any military training. One survivor, interviewed many years later by Parks¹, said that the men had expected to work under civilian conditions when they volunteered, and they were surprised to find when they arrived that they were soldiers, complete with uniform, ranks and officers.

They arrived in France on the 15th February 1917, the first Quarrying battalion to be sent overseas, and travelled by train from Le Havre to Marquise, near Boulogne where the quarries were located. They were then sent to Highcliffe or Haut Banc Camp at Rinxent, which was the headquarters of the Marquise group of quarries. Here they worked alongside quarrymen from Wales and Ireland, plus German prisoners of war working under guard. Officers were quarry owners and managers in the main who were commissioned into the RE on enlistment. Guernsey officers included Captain Herbert Brookes, manager of Manuelle’s Quarrying Company and Second Lieutenant G.H. Lock, manager of Mowlem’s Quarry. The quarrymen worked in eight hour shifts, with production continuing round the clock, and had to produce a set quota of stone before they could finish their shift.

Quarrymen supervising German prisoners of war at Marquise
(Picture courtesy of Pete Wotherspoon)

As well as being given a service number with the Royal Engineers, all of the quarrymen also had a number beginning with WR. Strictly speaking the WR prefix was for units within the Royal Engineers Transportation Branch but it also

came to include the Roads & Quarries Troops. All of the men from the Guernsey contingents had the rank of Sapper. This indicated that they were men with recognised trades and skills and that they had had passed the requisite Trades tests so were entitled to a shilling (5p) a day's pay. Unskilled labourers were ranked as Pioneers and earned only 6d per day. The skilled men had the opportunity to take further tests which, if passed, entitled them to a higher rate of pay and service records show that many of them did this.

Typical of the members of the Guernsey Quarrying Companies, if slightly older than some, was Joseph Quemard, who lived at Brookdale Cottage, L’Islet, St Sampson – a house that I can see from my home. Sapper Quemard was 50 years of age when he enlisted, and had previously been in the French Army from which he had been discharged in 1889. He was born in the Cotes du Nord Department of France, an impoverished area where work was hard to find and from which many men migrated to the Channel Islands. Sapper Quemard was only 5ft 2 ins tall – about 1m.58 - and of slight build. His service record shows that he was a skilled worker and that on the 1st of November 1917 he “successfully executed a piece of work” which allowed Captain Brookes to arrange for him to receive an enhanced rate of pay as a higher grade craftsman. Many of his colleagues took these tests and were similarly rewarded. He suffered a minor injury from stone chips but apart from that and a brief period of home leave in late 1918, worked in the quarries in northern France until demobilisation in 1919 when he returned to Guernsey.

Sapper N Le Poidevin, standing far right in the *Weekly Press* photo, was my Great Uncle Nico
A number of Guernseymen also served in the 329th Company, RE raised on the 20th May 1917 at Boulogne. They too worked in the quarries at Marquise, mainly at Noir Banc, but were also employed in the construction of defence works during the 1918 German offensive. Both groups were employed in producing stone for ballast on the railways. Many miles of track were laid in the course of the war as military railways were essential to the task of moving vast quantities of supplies, ordnance and troops on a daily basis. The equipment used by the Quarrying Companies consisted primarily of pneumatic compressors, pneumatic drills, pneumatic jack-hammers, rock crushers, and side-tipping wagons. The work typically involved first removing the overburden, or soil, from the rock to be quarried. The rock was then drilled and blasted from the quarry face and the blast rock was transported to the crusher to break it down to a suitable size for use as road metal, railroad ballast or concrete aggregate. Screens may have been used in conjunction with the crusher to obtain a suitable grain size distribution. The processed stone was then stockpiled until it could be hauled away by railroad, truck or wagon to its intended place of use. All of these were processes with which the men were already familiar, though many were now working with limestone rather than granite.

The Quarries at Marquise in 2007

The idea of Quarrying Companies came from the Home Office, which noted that the quarry trade at home was very slack. It therefore suggested to the War Office that British quarrymen be used to develop quarries in France to provide materials
that could be used for road and railway maintenance in the British sector. By the

time of the Armistice there were no less than thirteen of these companies in

France (Nos 198,199, 320-329, 348), working under the Director-General of

Transportation, Sir Eric Geddes. Sir Douglas Haig, in his fourth despatch as

British Army Commander-in-Chief, dated 25 December 1917, described the work

of the Quarrymen’s battalions thus:

“ … Quarry companies have also been formed in immediate connection with the

Transportation Services. Some idea of the magnitude of the work involved can be

gained from the fact that from quarries worked in a single locality over 600,000

tons of material was produced in the nine months ending 31st August, 1917.

Between March and October of this year the total weekly output of road metal

received in the Army areas has nearly doubled. The average area of new and re-

made roads completed weekly during October was seven and a half times
greater than the weekly average for March....... These Forestry and Quarry units

have proved of great value, and have been the source of very considerable

economy.”

Though classed as non-combatants by the authorities the Quarrymen still

suffered casualties as a result of enemy action, accidents and disease. The

quarry complex was a target for enemy action from the air, because of its

importance to the war effort and Lance Corporal C. Lancaster was wounded in

an air raid on the 26th of June 1917. He survived, but 255533 Sapper Stephen

Falla was less fortunate. He died in hospital on the 5th of October 1917 at the age

of 26, as a result of wounds received in the same air raid. He is buried in Les

Baraques Military Cemetery in Sangatte near Calais. Another survivor, 255650

Sapper Percy Renouf, is quoted by Parks as saying that the quarry was “flowing

with blood like a lake” after the raid.

One of the Quarries in France, probably Haut Banc

(Photo courtesy of Pete Wotherspoon)

Illness also took its toll. 255510 Sapper Alfred J Falla died of heart failure at the

Queen Mary Military Hospital, Whalley, in Lancashire on the 18th of January

1920, after a lengthy illness acquired whilst on military service. He is buried in the
Vale Independent Cemetery in Guernsey. 255680 Sapper Thomas Tostevin died in Netley Hospital, Southampton of tuberculosis of the kidney on 7th January 1920 and is buried in the Domaille cemetery at Guernsey’s Vale Church. 255523 Sapper William du Port, who served with the 329th (Quarry) Company was admitted to hospital in France in July 1917 suffering from pneumonia but was taken off the serious list just a week later and survived the war. In addition, the service records of many of the men showed that they were injured as a result of the “normal” accidents in a quarry. Several suffered eye injuries from flying stone fragments and at least one man suffered severe facial burns as a result of an accident with explosives. Medical treatment appears to have been good, with most men returning to work and staying with the Quarrying Companies until after the Armistice.

The men of the Quarrying Companies were sent to Fovant on Salisbury Plain for dispersal on demobilisation in February/March 1919. Sadly this coincided with an outbreak of Spanish Flu. Shift Foreman Corporal George Walden died of pleurisy in Guernsey’s Military Hospital on the 5th of March 1919 at the age of 52 according to hospital reports but age 47 on his attestation papers. This kind of anomaly appears on the papers of several of the older men, who appear to have been slightly economical with the truth about their age in order to be able to enlist. He was taken ill with Spanish ‘flu on the return journey to the island after demobilisation, and collapsed on arrival. His Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstone is now in Castle Cornet, having been rescued from a quarry fall in St Sampson’s churchyard, where he was buried. His fellow quarryman, 25580 Sapper William Le Noury died at the age of 50, of complications following Spanish ‘Flu nine days later in Fovant Military Hospital. His death has not yet been commemorated by the CWGC, though the case is now being actively pursued.

With thanks to Pete Wotherspoon for the photos of Marquise and for information about Captain Brookes, and to the Priaulx Library for access to their newspaper collection.

Additional Notes

Note 1

It was always said that very little was known about Guernsey’s Quarrying Companies but many individual service records have survived in the so called “burnt papers” collection and are now available to subscribers on the Ancestry website.

Note 2
The War Establishment for a Quarrying Company RE as of July 1916 was said to be:

Captain 1
Subalterns 3
CSM 1
CQMS 1
Sergeants 4

All of the above were to be Royal Engineers personnel with military training and were to report with complete personal equipment.

Cpls (foremen) 8
Sappers 244 including 16 L/Cpls

The above were to be issued with personal equipment with sidearms but without rifles.

Cook 1
Batmen 4

The above were to be supplied by the infantry.

Drivers ASC (Horse Transport) 1

Transport:
Bicycles - 4
GS Wagons - 1
Draught Horse or Mules - 2

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December 2010