

**Paul Alphonse Guibout**  
**by John Bull**



**Private Paul Guibout, 26<sup>e</sup> RIT**

Paul Guibout is my wife's great-grandfather who fell at the Battle of Courcelles Le Comte (south of Arras) on 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1914.

Paul Alphonse Joseph Guibout was born in Landigou, Dept Orne, Pas De Calais, France on 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1876. His occupation is listed as a grower and he married Maria Francois Euphrasia Guibout (nee Lainé), from nearby Champsecret, in 1904. They had two children, Marcel and Henriette, in 1904 and 1906 respectively.

The Guibout family moved to Jersey and settled in St Martin in 1911. The wages in Jersey were twice what was being paid in France for agricultural workers, therefore it is easy to see why the Islands had a steady influx of French workers. There was also a famine in France which would have influenced migration.

Their home was a cottage at La Tourelle Farm in St Martin, which they leased from Mr Le Gros. They both worked for the De La Mare family at L'Abri Farm, Faldouet, St.Martin; Paul as a farm worker and Maria as a housekeeper. At La Tourelle they were closely befriended by an older couple with no children of their own and they were able to have their own small holding.

Paul's death certificate shows that he joined the 26<sup>th</sup> Territorial Infantry Regiment, (26<sup>e</sup> Régiment d'infanterie territoriale (26<sup>e</sup> RIT)) which was from Mayenne, north of Laval, in 1896, when he would have been 20. He was recruited in Argentan (near to his home town) so this would more than likely have been his national service.

According to a local Jersey historical author, Ian Ronayne:

*"By the summer of 1914, a sizeable population of French nationals were living in the Channel Island of Jersey. For the most part, they worked in the Island's agricultural industry, which had developed a considerable export market based on its cattle, and more significantly, the Jersey Royal potato. Needing to supplement local labour, the Jersey farmers had turned to nearby Brittany where there existed a willing pool of impoverished agricultural workers. Not surprisingly, once in Jersey, they were expected to work long hours and put up with fairly basic living conditions."*

While, in his memoirs, Edward Le Brocq recalls that:

*"On the farm a 'domestique' was nearly always a Frenchman. He had a pretty rough time of it; getting up early to milk the cows, working all day, go to bed late."*

But this did not seem to deter them coming - or staying in the Island: by 1911 there was some 5,610 French nationals present, representing almost eleven percent of the population. Of course, given that their principle purpose was manual labour, a considerable number of these would have been men within the Military Service age bracket; ready for the call up, if and when the need arose.

It was four o'clock on the afternoon of Saturday the 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1914 when the first poster appeared in Paris announcing the French government's decision to mobilise their army. In view of the deteriorating situation in the east, and the obvious signs of German belligerence, they could wait no longer. Whilst Parisians crowded round to take in the momentous news, the order was being telegraphed out to communities throughout France and the wider Empire. French embassies and consulates throughout the world were also to be notified: the war that everyone expected - and many longed for - was starting.'

When Paul was called up in 1914 he re-joined the same 26<sup>e</sup> RIT. This is the account of the battle, which has been translated by Mrs Kelly Vallois, from the publication, 'Compte Rendu Illustre de L'Inauguration du Monument aux Morts,' 1923.



*"The Germans, stopped in their invading march by our victory of La Marne, wanted to outflank our front by proceeding up North. We had to oppose them in successive barrages, between first of all Oise and Somme, then, all along their progress, between Amiens and Arras.*

*This role of protection was given partly to the territorial divisions of the Brugere army. On the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1914, the order was given to this army to settle on the east of Bapaume. It could not hold its position there and had to withdraw behind l'Ancre, from Bucquoy to Albert.*

*On the 27<sup>th</sup> September, at 5 pm, a German army corps, on its way from Cambrai, had its advanced guard in front of Bapaume. It extended on the 28<sup>th</sup> as far as Miraumont and took possession of Achiet Le Petit and Courcelles Le Comte as well as other villages on the right hand side of the railway track.*

*The 16<sup>e</sup> RIT was given the mission to protect Ablainzevelle. Colonel Genin placed the 1<sup>e</sup> and 3<sup>e</sup> battalions in to position, as the 2<sup>e</sup> had to remain in reserve in the woods of Biez, near Bucquoy, at the disposal of the general of the division. There seemed to be some hesitation, a lack of cohesion in the orders which followed one another and were inconsistent.*

*After an unequal combat during which the very violent fire of the German machine guns intervened efficiently, the 3<sup>e</sup> battalion was compelled to withdraw. There were indeed some machine gunners in the 16<sup>th</sup>, but they had no machine guns!*

*Having come from Peronne as fresh troops, their equipment had not followed them. The enemy had taken hold of it and undoubtedly, at the time, was using it against us?*

*Nevertheless, the 1<sup>e</sup> battalion came under enemy fire without moving. At about 15:00 hours, the 5<sup>e</sup> Cavalry Division, commanded by General Beaudemoulin, received the order to attack Courcelles Le Comte strongly held by the enemy.*

*The operation needed to be supported by the infantry, the 1<sup>e</sup> battalion was designated to accomplish this mission and march onto Courcelles Le Comte!*

*This combined attack was a full success, at 17:00 hours, completing the movement of the cavalry division, the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT entered Courcelles and occupied it. The action had been swift, but very quick and the enemy had to withdraw in a hurry to Ervilliers, abandoning some of its dead, injured and ammunition.*

*The following day, the 29<sup>th</sup> of September, the sun rose on a vision of horror!*

*The church of Courcelles Le Comte was destroyed and its belfry was knocked down, the vault had collapsed, burying its altar under the debris.*

*Alone and stood over the ruins an undamaged statue remained and seemed to be blessing the dead lying there on the paving of the old church, without any doubt it also remained to comfort the living! For, when the chaplain entered the sanctuary, he could see a priest and an old woman on their knees and weeping.*

*It was the cure (vicar) of the village and his sister the poor man had found, crushed, unrecognizable, the sacred vase which contained his god, a god of peace and charity and he cried. In this setting under such circumstances, the pain of these humble people, who were also pacifists, was heart breaking.*

*In a corner there were some bodies, the victims of the previous day, the ransom of success. They were the dragoons of Beaudemoulin's Division, some of which were very young! There were also some commanding officers, one of them, without apparent injury preserved in the serenity of the tomb the joy of triumph his arms stayed lifted in a victorious gesture which remained imperative beyond death.*

*In front of them the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT exposed themselves many gave slightly the traditional gesture of the picard before death they crossed, themselves furtively, awkwardly!*

*At about 9am, the enemy artillery bombarded the village and its surroundings for half an hour, without any appreciable result; another bombardment at about midday and towards the evening. An engagement of minor importance had taken place at about 16:00 hours. In its turn and for an hour, the French artillery engaged in action, but the ammunition was scarce and it had to be very economical in its blows. It was not, alas! The only inferiority the enemy was numerous and well commanded, its artillery was well stocked, it had large calibre canons...opposite those forces, there were only territorials, a few batteries of 75mm, no machine guns...too little ammunition.*

*However the precise order was to prolong resistance at all costs in order to cover the de-training of troops who had to stop the rush to the sea by the Germans. In order*

*also to provide a base of operations to the troops who to the right of the territorial divisions had the mission to recapture the left bank of the Ancre river and to free the road from Albert to Bapaume! It was under those disastrous conditions that the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT withstood the fight.*

*There were not many deaths during the day of the 30<sup>th</sup> September. The weather remained splendid throughout. A few cannon shots and a light fusillade were fired without any effort.*

*At about midday General Beaudemoulin asked for the help of the regiment in order to back up an attack on one of the cavalry brigades upon Ervillers on the East of Courcelles. However in front of an extremely violent artillery fire the cavalry withdrew. The 16<sup>e</sup> RIT which was no longer supported by it had to as well withdraw in stages and go back to its original positions. The spectacle of these cavaliers was truly picturesque! From the neighbouring heights one could see them in tight rows, manoeuvre on the plain...their pretty uniforms formed a large red stain, their helmets, their spurs, their swords shone in the sun ... in other circumstances, it would have been a marvel for the eyes. All of a sudden shells flanked them; shrapnel burst above them; horses reared and soon, when the burst of gunfire became more violent they were scattered.*

*At about 17:00 hours the enemy started a violent attack of their infantry, backed up by a very intense artillery fire of all calibres. The 16<sup>e</sup> RIT came under it without weakening or any damage but the cavalry had suffered more. After an hour of combat, Hamelincourt had been recaptured by the enemy. At dusk, the lines withdrew to the edge of the village of Courcelles. Nevertheless the railway and the station were still held by the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT; the station by one section, the railway by small posts set on the other side of the embankment.*

*On the 1<sup>st</sup> of October, at 10:35, an order arrived from General Brugere, ordaining to hold tight, but not to start any attack. The enemy artillery fire had started at about 10:30; it continued unceasingly until the evening, with a redoubling of intensity at about 13:00 hours when the station of Courcelles was seriously hit.*

*It was probable that the positions of the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT had been spotted by a German plane which had flown over them early that morning, at a very low height. All of a sudden, towards the evening, after a lull, the bombardment resumed in quick bursts of gunfire, with an extreme violence. The material damage was considerable.*

*However, the troops, which were all on the edge of the village, at the station, along the railway or in the trenches, were not too affected and there were few accidents to deplore, a few killed, a few injured. Although a report established that the power of the missiles and the violence of the bursting, the shells were of calibre superior to 77mm, most probably to a German 105mm and maybe more, the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT kept its countenance, its morale was good, but its tiredness was great. Besides, the provisioning was difficult. The proximity of the enemy made the cooking of the food impossible and the men were beginning to suffer. With time, the fight redoubled with violence and intensity!*

*On 2<sup>nd</sup> October, the brigade informed that an attack on Ervillers St Leger would be announce at about 9:00 hours and that the artillery would have to take part in this attack, but the fluctuations of the battle did not allow the realization of this plan.*

*At almost 15:00 hours, the 14<sup>e</sup> RIT territorial who met with the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT on the right, withdrew in the direction of the wood Logeast. At 16:00 hours the attack of the enemy artillery intensified on that side. The bombardment was of an incredible intensity and lasted for three hours. The calibre of the shells was surely 150mm; it was not in any way inferior to 105mm. Never before, had the territorials had to withstand such an intense fire. They were shocked and were surprised that the response from the French artillery was only weak and almost reluctant! Alas! They did not know that the cannons were few and that ammunition was even rarer.*

*During the day of Friday, 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, one had the impression that an enemy attack was imminent, vigilance had to be increased. More especially as the enemy was ready to use all means, violence and ruse! Already, an incident had happened which nearly led to some disturbance within the lines of the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT.*

*Entrenched behind the elevated embankment of the railway, the Germans were cleverly hiding in the fields which bordered the track. At the indecisive time of dusk, before darkness had completely settled, voices could be heard: "don't shoot anymore, we are your allies, your English friends, we have come to help you! ..." The astonishment from the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT was quite vivid. What if it was true after all? For one moment, they hesitated! One moment only, luckily, for they would have unavoidably been the victims of an enemy war ruse!*

*The Germans, using excellent French by the way, were trying in that way to convince the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT that they were friends, English troops who had come in support to help them!*



*First thing at dawn on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, the positions of the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT could not be held. The situation became critical, the combined fire of the artillery and infantry strongly supported by the enemy machine guns caused some considerable damage in the ranks of the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT. Nevertheless it did not produce any disorder, no swaying. The 1<sup>e</sup> and 3<sup>e</sup> battalion who were supposed to meet up with the regiment before dawn only arrived before daylight. In a column of fours, as if it was going to take part in a review! It was an all too obvious target and the gunfire redoubled; the shells swept the road incessantly.*

*The injured abandoned; the two Majors, one, Major Michel, was killed by a bullet in his forehead; the other, Major Denouh, was very seriously injured. All along the line, from the station of Courcelles beyond the signal station, one resisted after all. There was bloody hand to hand fighting, bayonet combat, until 10:30 in the morning.*

*But the fight was so unequal that General Trumelet-Faber ordered the general retreat in the direction of Ablainzevelle and Alette.*

*This time the enemy was victorious; it recaptured Courcelles that the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT had conquered on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September and had resisted for five days at the cost of an immense effort and in difficult circumstances. When they were able to count themselves, more than 800 men were missing! Killed, disappeared or injured. It was a hard outcome and how valiant though they may be, the brave territorials of the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT were at the present time in distress.*

*Consequently the efforts of the command to recapture Courcelles remained fruitless.*

*In a column of fours, well aligned, the 16<sup>e</sup> RIT marched up towards the lost village, but in vain. It had no alternative but to go back straight away.*

*The 26<sup>e</sup> RIT came to the rescue, but its efforts were not anymore successful. This regiment had stayed in Hebuterne from the 29<sup>th</sup> September to the 30<sup>th</sup> of October where it had received a reinforcement of 500 soldiers from Mayenne.*

*On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, it occupied Alette, and its 1<sup>e</sup> battalion advanced to the hill 122km north of Courcelles. The 2<sup>e</sup> battalion employed to organise the terrain for the resistance, placed two companies at the Moulin (Mill) of Douchy and two companies as reserve at the North brow of the hill Alette. These companies were then sent as reinforcements to the first battalion. The 3<sup>e</sup> battalion took position in front of Courcelles.*

*These two battalions fought all day and drove an audacious reconnoitring towards the village. A man even succeeded, in spite of the intensity of the fire, on entering the houses of Courcelles and spotting the machine guns in the belfry.*

*That day was hard for the 26<sup>e</sup> RIT, but it maintained none the less its positions between Alette and Moyenneville.*

*It received the order to fall back to Adinfer on the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, after having earned the following beautiful citing:*



*General Chatelain, commanding officer of the 84<sup>e</sup> DI is happy to congratulate the 26<sup>e</sup> RIT. Having set out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October to attack Courcelles Le Comte, the 26<sup>e</sup> came near the village and kept its position until night fall, in spite of very few casualties caused by a violent fire from the enemy artillery. It only withdrew after the formal order was given to it. That order had been compelled by the arrow layout of the DI.*

*This is how this regiment responded to the call addressed to it by its chief for its hold of command:*

*As can be seen by this summary of the battle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, if the 16<sup>e</sup> and 26<sup>e</sup> RIT were not able, in spite of their bravery and sacrifice, to stop the enemy, they did not deserve any less recognition from their country and Courcelles Le Comte and we only did our duty in a modest way by solemnly paying homage to them on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 1923.'*



A memorial has been erected to the south of Courcelles Le Comte and there is an annual Service of Remembrance for those who fell at the battle. After some research on the internet, I came across a site and managed to contact the Mayor of Courcelles, who informed us the service was always held on the first Sunday in October. Arriving in the village we made our way to the church where the service is held, we met the Mayor and were made to feel very welcome.

As can be seen in the above picture, following the service the congregation assembled outside and walked to the memorial.



**Marcel Guibout and his daughter Karen laying the wreath and paying respects to Paul**



**The Guibout Wreath**



**The Memorial at Courcelles Le Comte**

Paul's name is on the French Consulate memorial in St. Thomas' Church. His name is on the left hand side 6<sup>th</sup> from the bottom. His name also appears on the St. Martin cenotaph outside the church. Precise details of Paul's death are not known and his remains were never found. His death certificate states that he fell on the 5<sup>th</sup> October, 1914 at Courcelles Le Comte, 'Mort sur Le Terrain.'

#### References:

- Ronayne, Ian; 'Pour la Patrie: The mobilization of the French reservists in Jersey, August 1914', (2006), [www.greatwarci.net]
- 'Compte Rendu Illustre de L'Inauguration du Monument aux Morts,' (1923)