

Nellie's Story By Liz Walton

89 years ago, on 9th May, 1919 a young girl from Jersey serving with Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC) was murdered in woods near an army camp in Bedfordshire. The crime has never been solved.



Nellie Rault was born in 1898, the daughter of Jacques Rault, a saddler of 4 Weston Villas, St Helier, Jersey, and his wife Anne Elizabeth. The 1901 Jersey census shows Nellie Florence Ruby Rault age 3 living at Gordon House, St Aubin's Road along with her mother, Anne Elizabeth Rault, married, age 32, tailoress, listed as head of household, Annie Frances Rault, age 11, Adelena Maud Rault, age 8, and May Emeline Rault, age 5, daughters, all born in St Helier, Jersey. Anne Rault married John W. Bewhay, of Clifton Cottage, St Aubins Road, St Helier at some time between 1901 and 1919. According to the 1901 Channel Islands census he was a widower age 45, born in St Martin, and his occupation was plasterer. The only other Bewhay on that census is George, age 19,

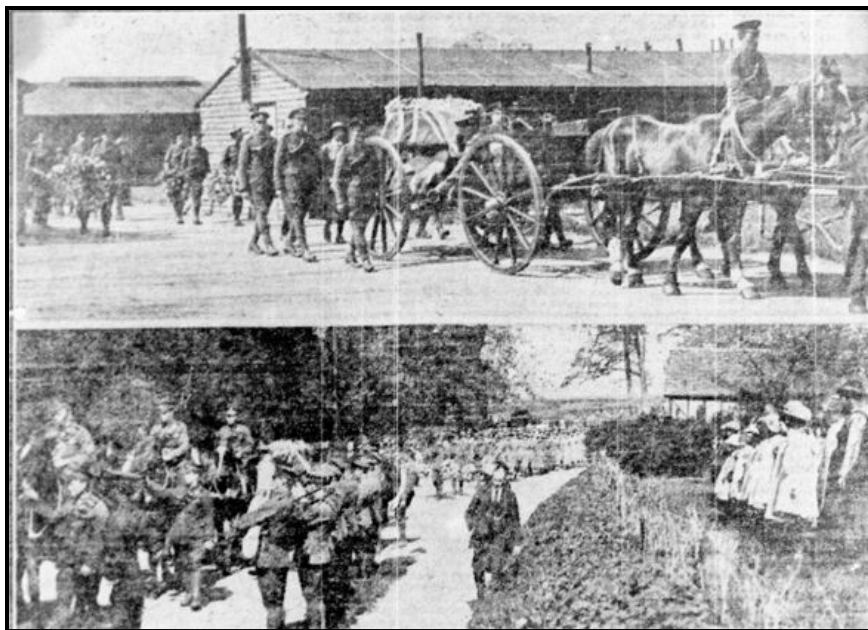
born in St Helier, who was with the Devonshire Regiment in St Peter's Barracks. 3/20602 Private Bewhay, a nephew of John W Bewhay, was killed in action at the Somme on 1st July, 1916 (Editor's Note: He is buried in the Devonshire Cemetery near Mametz).

In 1917, 19 year old Nellie joined the newly formed Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC), after having served in the Women's Legion. The Women's Legion was raised by Lady Londonderry in 1915, initially to provide cooks for the New Army. Its members transferred to the WAAC on its formation. WAACs (as the ladies were known) did not have full military status but they wore uniform, were officially part of the British Army and worked under the War Office. In April 1917, 20425 Worker Nellie Rault was posted to Haynes Park Royal Engineers Signals Service camp, located in the grounds of a stately home in Bedfordshire.



Nellie worked as a cook in the Officer's Mess and was described as being a cheerful, respectable girl. She was less than 5 ft tall, dark and "good looking", "a sturdily built young woman of a bright and happy disposition, and a great favourite with all with whom she came into contact". She was said to be a "home loving girl",¹ who kept in close contact with all of her sisters and visited her family in Jersey regularly. Her last visit was at Christmas in 1918. She returned to Haynes Park on New Year's Day 1919, having recently signed up for a further year with what was by then the QMAAC.

Four months after her return to England, Nellie Rault was murdered in Wilstead Wood, Beds. She was last seen alive at about 3.30 pm on Friday, 9th May but was not missed until roll call at 9.30 the next morning. On the following day search parties were organised but her body was not found until the afternoon of Monday, 12th May. She had been stabbed several times in the chest and back, and attempts had been made to hide the body under bundles of cut undergrowth in woodland about 150 yards outside the camp gates.



Nellie's Funeral Cortège
(Courtesy of the Ampthill and District News)

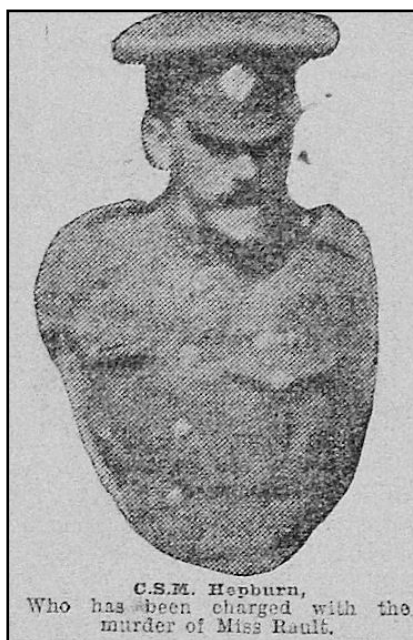
Nellie's funeral took place on Wednesday, 14th May at Haynes Parish Church, with full military honours. Her coffin went to the church on a Royal Engineers cable wagon, covered with the Union flag and topped with huge cross of flowers from her colleagues. The lengthy procession was led by the RE Regimental Band. Her mother in Jersey had been informed of the tragedy by telegram but was not able to attend, presumably because of the time scale. The chief mourners were her uncle, Mr Tarbet and Miss Hickson who was in charge of the QMAAC contingent at Haynes Park. The *Jersey Evening Post* of

¹ *The Ampthill and District News*, May 17 1919.

May, 1919 features a letter which Mrs Bewhay received from Queen Mary, stating that:

"The Queen has heard from the headquarters of the Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps of your daughter's fine record of good behaviour and splendid work since her enrolment, and Her Majesty cannot help hoping that the knowledge that your daughter in her short life was able to render such honourable service to the Corps may be some consolation to you in your bereavement."

The inquest into Nellie's death opened on Wednesday, 21st May and over a period of four days evidence was heard from work colleagues and local residents, as well as specialist witnesses such as the doctor who performed the post mortem. Meanwhile CSM Montague Cecil Keith Hepburn, of the Royal Engineers, Haynes Park had been arrested on Tuesday, 13th May, charged with her alleged murder and remanded in custody. He attended the inquest but declined to give evidence at any stage. The Coroner, in his summing up, noted that the crime was not premeditated and that he did not want the jury to be influenced by the fact that Hepburn had been arrested by the police. He also mentioned Hepburn's popularity in the camp, and his "long and honourable career" in the army. The official wording of the final verdict was that Nellie had been "...brutally murdered by being stabbed to the heart by some person or persons unknown".



CSM Hepburn had been out with Nellie on previous occasions and they had danced together at the YMCA Hut on the evening before she died. He had also arranged to meet her on the day of her death. He was described as "a well set up man of somewhat taciturn appearance... wearing the ribbons of the Military Medal and the 1914-18 Star", "on his right arm he wears four chevrons".² 14149 Sergeant Montague Hepburn, 2nd (HQ) Signals Company, Royal Engineers, had had a distinguished military career. His Medal Index card shows that he had been awarded the standard trio of Service Medals, plus the Oak Leaf Clasp (Mentioned in Dispatches³) and Rose which means that he had been under fire as early as 1914. He had also been awarded the Decoration Militaire avec Croix de Guerre by the Belgian authorities⁴.

The 1891 census has Hepburn living with his parents Walter, a commercial clerk, and Alice, at 13 Garfield Road, Battersea in London. By 1901, when he was 11 years old he was an inmate of the West London Poor Law School at

³ Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 18 May 1917, p. 4880.

⁴ Supplement to *The London Gazette*, 24 October 1919, p. 12998.

Ashford, in Staines, Middlesex. No parents are listed, and his place of birth is given as unknown. Children brought up in Poor Law schools were usually either paupers or orphans, and usually went into domestic service or the Armed Forces on leaving school. Hepburn was to spend his entire adult life in the Army.

When charged by the police with Nellie's murder, Hepburn is reported to have said "I can say that I am innocent - quite innocent. A mistake has been made." The trial evidence was lengthy, confused and often conflicting and much was made of whether Hepburn was wearing puttees or leggings, whether two schoolboys could have heard the attack (one of them was the son of an old Regular Army colleague of Hepburn's), whether Hepburn had travelled on a particular lorry into Bedford and exactly who had or had not seen Hepburn at various places and times.

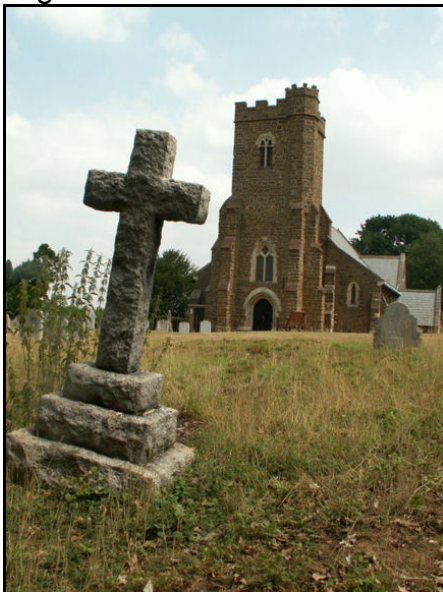
After two formal remands the Bedford Divisional Court assembled on Friday for a magisterial hearing against Hepburn, who was charged with murdering Nellie Rault "feloniously, wilfully and with malice aforethought." However instead of following the expected course, the Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions, Mr Sims, made a statement to the effect that "The Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) has carefully considered the evidence thus far obtained in the case and has arrived at the conclusion that the best interests of justice would not be served by immediately proceeding further with this inquiry". Directions had been given for further police investigations but in the meantime Hepburn was discharged and the case dismissed.

The CID was called in on 7th June, but officers were unhappy that it had been left so late as the inquest had concluded and the body been buried by then. However an enquiry took place under Superintendent Wensley, who reported to the Director of Public Prosecutions in July, 1919. The DPP's response to this stated that "...upon the evidence available it is not probable that Hepburn would be convicted of wilful murder if he were to be charged with this offence." However the case notes go on to say that "I regret to have been obliged to come to this decision because I entertain a strong personal opinion as to the identity of the person who committed the murder". Hepburn's alibis, his only real defence, were also totally discredited.

National and local newspapers in Jersey and Bedfordshire had made much of the murder and subsequent trial, and interest was rekindled on 10th February, 1924, when the *News of the World* carried a "cool, calculated and detailed confession" of Nellie's murder. This was reported to come from an anonymous writer who called himself "Frenchy". The Montreal Police had also received letters from a Mr P Peter, c/o the Montreal Tramways, which stated that he knew who had killed Nellie from what he had seen in Haynes Park Wood, and that the person involved was currently in Montreal. These letters were sent on to the CID in London. The "confession" letter in the *News of the World* received much public attention because the facts in it tied in with what was known about Nellie's death.

The writer said he was a married man with a wife in America, and was an American army deserter who had been working at Shorts Brothers Aircraft factory at Cardington in Bedfordshire at the time of Nellie's death. However none of the people from Shorts whom the police interviewed could identify "Frenchy", though a letter to the *News of the World*, which was passed on to the CID, named him as Leroy Morey of Illinois. A Corporal Atkins of the RE was also investigated after allegations were made against him, and there were further enquiries in Scotland.

Despite all this no-one was charged with Nellie's murder, and who killed her and why remains unknown nearly ninety years on. Nellie is buried in St Mary's Churchyard, Haynes, near where the camp used to be. A stone cross with the words "In loving memory of 20425 Member Nellie Rault, WL & QMAAC, age 21, died May 9th 1919. Erected by her fellow workers in QMAAC, Officers, WO, NCOs and men of Haynes Park Signal Depot, RE. "In the midst of life we are in death" marks her grave. This is one of three headstones maintained in perpetuity here by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, who recognised that Nellie was a casualty of war.



Nellie's headstone in St Mary's Churchyard, Haynes Park.



**Nellie Rault's 'Death Penny'
One of less than 800 awarded to women.
(Courtesy of Stuart Elliott)**

Hepburn continued with his military career until his death in 1943, at the age of 54. By this time he had been promoted to Captain (QM) with the Royal Corps of Signals. He had served in India in the 1920s, and had been awarded the Indian General Service medal, with clasps for service in Waziristan from 1919 to 1921 and 1921 to 1924, and Mahsud from 1919 to 1920. He died during the Second World War and is buried in Streatham Park Cemetery, London, where his grave bears a standard CWGC headstone.



**Captain Hepburn's Headstone at Streatham Park Cemetery
(Photo by Roger Frisby)**

Notes

- Amptill & District News is available at the Bedfordshire & Luton Archive & Records Service, Bedford.
- The Metropolitan Police files are available at the National Archive, Kew.
- Jersey Evening Post archive is available at the Jersey Public Library, St Helier.