



MARK CONNELLY

STEADY THE BUFFS!

A Regiment, a Region, & the Great War



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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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Oxford New York

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Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

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Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2006

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd., King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 0-19-927860-1 978-0-19-927860-2

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Preface

I arrived at the University of Kent in September 1999, but my knowledge of the geography, history, nature, and culture of the county was sketchy to the say the least, despite the fact that I was born in London and had spent most of my life in the south-east of England. Having settled in Canterbury, in the east of the county, and explained my work and research interests to many local people unconnected with the university, I became aware of a magical term: 'The Buffs'. Any mention of the Buffs in East Kent, especially among those older than thirty or forty, is enough to spark pride, interest, and attention. This reaction made a significant impression on me, and I came to spot the pervasiveness of the regiment in contemporary East Kent. The county cricket team and its Canterbury ground, are intimately linked to the regiment; a local removals company has used buff as the colour of its vans for many years; the former East Kent Bus Company ran buff-coloured buses; on Remembrance Day the regiment's Old Comrades Association plays a prominent role in the Canterbury parade; the village I now live in has a street named after a former commanding officer, and the majority of those commemorated on the village war memorial fell while serving in the Buffs. This led me to begin searches for books about the Buffs, and the regiment's role in the Great War. Aside from the history written by one of its former officers, R. S. H. Moody, and a few other, relatively slim, volumes, I found very little. My curiosity grew as the regiment was an antique one with a proud record, which implied that its involvement in the Great War would have attracted attention and discussion. Why did its battalions have such a low profile in the historiography of the Great War? Some former Buffs officers I spoke to provided a typically proud and forthright answer. All stated unequivocally that it was because of the regimental culture. They emphasised that the Buffs were never a flashy bunch, and regarded such things as medal counts as rather vulgar: a regiment had its duty, did it, and did not expect anyone to get that excited about it. Just about the only exception was the hallowed memory of Lieutenant Latham, who, during the Peninsula Campaign, maintained a firm grip on the regimental colours despite losing an arm to a French cavalryman's sword blow, an action that was subsequently immortalised in a grand piece of triumphal silverware. Otherwise, so they reminded me, the Buffs shunned publicity and simply got on with jobs as ordered. It was the final spur—I decided to begin research!

I would like to express my gratitude to all the historians, archivists, and librarians who provided help during the course of the research. As material for the study was gathered from a wide range of sources, the project relied on the assistance of many people. I would like to start by thanking the British Academy for providing a grant that not only allowed me to visit many archives, but also the

opportunity to visit key sites in France and Belgium. These three trips were extremely important and ensured a whole new perspective. Great thanks are also extended to Professor David French for kindly agreeing to act as referee for my application. I would like to thank Dr Peter Boyden, Simon Moody, and Andy Robertshaw at the National Army Museum for their expert assistance and advice on the excellent Buffs Regimental Collection now housed in the museum's Chelsea premises. This invaluable treasure trove contained private documents and official papers which, for a variety of reasons, are not available in the records at the National Archives, Kew. Other primary documentary material was found at the National Archives, Kew, and much other useful material was found at the Imperial War Museum, in Canterbury Library, and in the Princess of Wales Own Royal Regiment headquarters, Howe Barracks, Canterbury (particular thanks to Major Dennis Bradley and Major John Rogerson), and the Templeman Library at the University of Kent. BBC Radio Kent and *Kent on Sunday* also assisted by carrying my appeal for information from relatives of those who served. The people of Kent responded in an enthusiastic manner providing personal histories, anecdotes, details, and documents. I would also like to thank Professor Gary Sheffield and his colleagues for allowing me to present a paper at the Defence Studies Department, Joint Services Command Staff College, Shrivenham, and Dr John Bourne, who made helpful comments at an early planning stage and on draft chapters. My postgraduate students, colleagues, and friends were supportive; all were prepared to listen to my ideas on the subject and respond with useful criticisms. Particular thanks go to Major Gordon Corrigan, Dr Stephen Badsey, Professor David Welch, Dr Mark Glancy, Dr Roger Law (for invaluable help with the establishment of a database), Ed Rendell (for putting me up and numerous bottles of Margaux), and David Blanchard. Colonel John White of the Buffs also provided much interesting detail about the spirit and feeling of the regiment. Fellow members of the Western Front Association were, as ever, a very good bunch—thanks to Charles Fair, Hazel Basford, Major Tony and Linda Swift, and the East Kent branch. Huge thanks are due to Mick Mills, a fellow Buffs enthusiast, who supported the project at every stage, freely contributed his ideas and knowledge, and remained good humoured even when I used all the hot water after a freezing day on the Somme. Dr Gareth Smith was also an enormous help designing and creating the maps with great patience, skill, and enthusiasm. The team at OUP were also extremely helpful and encouraged the project along from the start. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Jacqui, and our families for being such stalwart allies of the work.

M. L. C.

October 2005

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Conventions and Abbreviations

The standard forms of reference to numbered/named military units made in the text of this study are as follows:

Battalions of regiments—1st Buffs, 6th Buffs etc.

Infantry Brigades—37 IB

Divisions—12 Division

Corps—III Corps

Armies—Fourth Army

Abbreviations of frequently mentioned regiments:

Beds	Bedfordshire Regiment
DLI	Durham Light Infantry
E. Surrey	East Surrey Regiment
KSLI	King's Shropshire Light Infantry
Leics	Leicestershire Regiment
Northants	Northamptonshire Regiment
N. Staffs	North Staffordshire Regiment
Queen's	Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment)
Rifle Bde	Rifle Brigade
Berks	Royal Berkshire Regiment
R. Fusiliers	Royal Fusiliers
R. Sussex	Royal Sussex Regiment
RWK	Royal West Kent Regiment
S. Foresters	Sherwood Foresters (Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire Regiment)
W. Yorks	West Yorkshire Regiment
York and Lincs	York and Lancaster Regiment

All other regiments will be given in full.

In notes all war diaries will be referred to as WD. All documents taken from the National Archives, Kew will be prefaced by their series letters; for example, War Office files are quoted with the prefix WO. All material taken from the National Army Museum will be prefaced NAM. IWM will precede material from the Imperial War Museum. For a full list of sources see the Bibliography.

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Introduction

No pen can adequately convey the true measure of the constancy and valour of those men who endured and fought through the daily hardships, the hourly perils, the nerve strain during darkness—and this under conditions of modern warfare, in battles which lasted not hours but weeks, with the added horrors of high explosives, gas poisoning, flame throwers, tanks and machine guns, delay-action mines and other mechanical and inhuman devices. Through all of these trials the spirit of the regiment—of the Men of Kent—never faltered, its certain hope of victory never wavered . . . in spite of the great increase of all the new dangers and perils, there was no change in the spirit, no weakening in the sense of duty which have always animated the Buffs; new and old battalions alike maintained, and more than maintained the glory of the name handed down to them.

Foreword by Arthur Paget, Colonel of the Buffs, to R. S. H. Moody,
Historical Records of the Buffs, East Kent Regiment, 1914–1919 (1922)

This study seeks to understand how four battalions from the East Kent Regiment, 'The Buffs', dealt with the experience of warfare on the Western Front, the role they played in the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) victory, and what the men of those battalions meant to East Kent.

Over the past twenty years or so the performance of the BEF in the Great War has received a great deal of attention. Reacting to the idea that British and imperial troops were little more than 'lions led by donkeys', historians have sought to gain a more sophisticated insight. In a terrific outpouring of scholarship military historians have set out to re-examine the war, particularly the struggle on the Western Front. The early work from this new revisionist school often took a broad perspective, attempting to place the BEF in its correct military, social, and cultural contexts. This particular angle can be seen in such studies as the pioneering Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham's, *Fire-Power* (1982), and through Tim Travers' *The Killing Ground* (1987), and *How the War was Won* (1992).¹ These approaches then spawned a fresh wave of scholarship on command and the higher-level management processes of the BEF. A fascinating reassessment of Haig, his army, corps, and divisional commanders is now in progress, which has led to some notable historiographical developments. Instead of seeing the BEF as a ramshackle organisation dominated by unthinking, doltish, aristocratic officers, the historiographical position currently dominating the military history of the Great War demands that we examine the British effort according to its gradual

progression along a 'learning curve'. John Bourne, Gary Sheffield, Peter Simkins, and others, have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the conflict by pursuing this approach.² By placing emphasis on the fact that both Regular Army and New Army officers and men had much to learn from the conditions created by modern weapons, that Britain was unprepared for a long war of mass mobilisation, that coalition warfare created distinct problems, and that military technology advanced, but often at an erratic rate, they have highlighted the pressures on the BEF, and how it came to terms with them before ending the war as a highly efficient and modern weapon of war, the cutting edge of the allied advance to victory. There have, of course, been critics of this thesis. For example, Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have recently questioned whether any kind of consistency of approach, good or bad, can be seen in British generalship during 1916 in their book, *The Somme* (2005).³ However, the thesis is generally held to be a useful way of studying and gauging the progression of the BEF in the Great War.

As well as examinations of the style and nature of higher command levels, historians have also turned their attention to the many, seemingly smaller, factors that influenced the flow of events on the battlefield. Training, tactics, equipment, and the relationship between officers and men have been explored in a series of significant works which have provided detail and nuance to the 'learning curve' thesis. Again, there have been critics of this approach, but few would go as far as John Keegan, who has condemned all such investigations as 'a pointless waste'.⁴

This work aims to link, and test, the various aspects of the current historiography sketched out above by presenting a comprehensive analysis of four particular battalions of the East Kent Regiment, tracing their relationship with their immediate host society of East Kent, their social complexion in terms of both officers and men, their combat effectiveness, how this effectiveness changed during the course of the conflict, and finally, how the battalions, and those connected with them, remembered the war. In fulfilling these tasks, the study will help to fill a gap in the current revisionist literature. The gap has been created by the fact that much of the scholarship falls into two categories, which can be labelled macro and micro perspectives.⁵ The first category, such as Gary Sheffield's *Forgotten Victory* (2001), deals with the higher levels of command concerning itself with armies, corps, divisions, and, occasionally brigades. In these studies the names of individual regiments or battalions may be mentioned, but the main aim of the piece is not to examine the war from a detailed perspective so much as to draw attention to the broader developments and underlying themes. Works in the second category are much more concerned with battalions, brigades, and divisions, their weapons, tactics, and personnel, but the usual method is to draw evidence from a broad range of units. For example, Paddy Griffith's *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* (1994), a book very much about the war at the cutting edge, refers to fifty-five individual divisions, seven infantry brigades, and ten infantry battalions.⁶ In a similar vein, Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman's *Command and Control on the Western Front* (2004), a collection of essays from various military historians,

makes reference to forty divisions, sixty-six infantry brigades, and twenty-six different infantry battalions.⁷ As noted, these studies are highly valuable, and have been used to inform and illuminate my research, but they have a slightly different aim and intention to this work.

The objective of my research is to examine these two perspectives through the battalions of one regiment, and by using this methodology to seek to address a number of significant issues. The nature of command will be assessed, and by looking at the role of the Buffs it will be possible to illuminate the way the BEF's higher command structures shaped the experiences of those in the front line. The BEF has often been criticised for its rather contradictory and confusing command structure, which was, according to this particular position, by turns and often at one and the same moment, an ironic mixture of the overly prescriptive, and vagueness, compacted by ignorance of the reality on the ground. At the same time, and from the opposite perspective, this investigation will seek to identify the nature and role of the Buffs' battalion commanders, and whether they had any real possibility of directing an action in a meaningful, lasting, and potentially decisive way. Intimately connected with this point is the extent to which the BEF experienced either a tactical evolution or revolution. The study will ascertain whether tactical development was a top-down or bottom-up process. It will investigate the extent to which the higher command coordinated, led, and dictated the pace of change, and the freedom of initiative, innovation, and manoeuvre left to individual battalion commanders. This will then determine whether these developments actually helped to make the Buffs into more efficient units capable of defeating the Germans in 1918. Another area of great debate among military historians is the extent to which the BEF utilised effectively the technological and industrial innovations of the war. As with much of the writing enquiring into this particular aspect, it is often from a broad and relatively elevated perspective looking at the decisions and attitudes of GHQ and generals. This investigation will attempt to break the subject into two—the technologies and weapons the Buffs owned, deployed and used themselves, such as Lewis guns, light mortars, and rifle grenades, and those weapons systems they had to work in co-operation with, such as the artillery, tanks and aircraft. Of particular significance in this area is the relationship between the artillery and infantry. As a conflict largely dominated by the big guns, military historians of the Great War have tended to foreground analyses of the artillery. Partly inspired by the 'worm's eye' view taken by Paddy Griffith and others, this study will assess this topic from the perspective of the Buffs' soldiers, and explore how their role fitted in with, and was influenced by, the actions and development of the artillery.

It is also important to identify whether the high casualties and nature of combat forced the BEF through a social and cultural evolution or revolution in terms of the backgrounds of its officers and men. In 1914 the Buffs were strictly delineated by class, rank, and age. The officers came from the upper and upper-middle classes, whereas the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and other ranks (OR) were of the lower-middle class, and the working classes. The extent to which the

demands of war, and its high casualty rates, forced any changes to this original structure will be determined. Finally, and strongly linked to this point, is an examination of the battalions' relationship with their parent community of East Kent. The demographic variations imposed on the battalions by the circumstances of war were factors people in East Kent had to accept, and which then forced them to consider closely the concept of 'their boys' in the trenches.

Through the adoption of this methodology and agenda, a historiographical experiment can be conducted via the introduction of a consistent point of reference—the use of four battalions. This concentration on four (fixed) battalions from one regiment involving the concomitant study of four (fixed) brigades and four (fixed) divisions across four years of fighting on the Western Front provides a rigorous test of the two historiographical perspectives, and is less susceptible to the suggestion that the study has ignored either the best or worst practices or examples to support its overall conclusions.

The East Kent Regiment was chosen for a number of reasons. First, although an ancient unit with a long, proud history as the Third of Foot, the Buffs was certainly not a fashionable regiment, and is therefore a good example of the general nature and quality of the British army.⁸ Second, this examination will help to redress the current imbalance in studies of particular regiments or battalions which, although very useful in their own right, often tend to concentrate on 'glamorous' units that bequeathed a large, published corpus of papers, or have inspired the popular imagination, such as the 'Pals' battalions. These studies have helped stimulate the effect known as 'the war according to the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers' among military historians, due to the highly influential memoirs of Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, and Frank Richards. Third, the regiment looked both towards the heavily populated, urban, regions of the Medway and south-east London, as well as the rural, agricultural, and pastoral regions of East Kent, and thus drew in a fair cross-section of society. Fourth, the four battalions selected, 1st, 6th, 7th, and 8th Buffs, provide the opportunity to contrast performance across Regular and New Army units, and in the process offer a representative overview of the BEF's wartime complexion and capabilities. The Regular battalion, the 1st Buffs, served in the Regular 16 Infantry Brigade, in the Regular 6 Division; the first of the New Army units, the 6th Buffs, was part of the 37 Infantry Brigade in the 12 (Eastern) Division; the 7th Buffs was in the 55 Infantry Brigade of the 18 (Eastern) Division, and both were part of Kitchener's First and Second New Armies; the 8th Buffs formed part of the Third New Army, and spent most of the war in the 17 Regular Infantry Brigade, a unit that was transferred to the 24 Division in order to provide it with a leavening of experience and leadership.⁹ The selected Buffs battalions can, therefore, be defined as typical units, and be deployed as a prism through which to look at the main issues concerning the performance of the BEF in the Great War.

Researching these battalions proved a fascinating challenge, and it certainly engaged the heart as well as the head. It is impossible not to be moved by the last

diary entry of a man killed the next day, or a letter of condolence to a grieving mother. Equally, it is very hard not to admire the intense bravery and resilience of men who clambered out of trenches to attack a determined and resourceful enemy. Although the emotions stirred by the research have not been allowed to colour the judgements, this book is, nonetheless, in part a memorial to those men as well as an academic investigation. Steady the Buffs!

NOTES

1. Shelford Bidwell and Dominick Graham, *Fire-Power: British Army Weapons and Theories of War, 1904–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982); Tim Travers, *The Killing Ground: The British Army, the Western Front and the Emergence of Modern Warfare* (London: Unwin, Hyman, 1987); Tim Travers, *How the War was Won: Command and Technology in the British Army on the Western Front, 1917–1918* (London: Routledge, 1992).
2. J. M. Bourne, *Britain and the Great War* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989); Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War, Myths and Realities* (London: Headline, 2001); Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914–1916* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).
3. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).
4. John Keegan, *The First World War* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), 315.
5. However, it should be remembered that individual military historians often work on both perspectives, and offer different levels of analysis in different works.
6. Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916–1918* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994).
7. Gary Sheffield and Dan Todman (eds.), *Command and Control on the Western Front: The British Army's Experience 1914–18* (Staplehurst: Spellmount, 2004).
8. Any wider public awareness of the Buffs is probably because of the phrase, 'Steady the Buffs!'. The precise derivation of this famous phrase is uncertain, but it seems to have originated in the nineteenth century, and was then given greater fame when Kipling quoted it in *Soldiers Three* (1881). See www.digiserve.com/peter/buffs/stbuffs.htm (accessed 22 June 2005). The profile of the Buffs in British popular culture was also revealed in Noël Coward's 1939 play, *This Happy Breed*. Born in south London, and later a resident of Kent, Coward was clearly aware of the significance of the Buffs in his community, and its rivalries with other local regiments, for he made the leading character of the play a Buffs ex-serviceman who was very proud of his old regiment, and his next-door neighbour a former member of the East Surrey:

Frank: Don't you remember me—Frank Gibbons, the Buffs, B. Company, Festubert 1915?

.
Frank (sternly): Don't interrupt. My old regiment's the finest in the world—

Bob: Next to the East Surreys it is.

Frank: Here's to the Buffs! (He drinks)