



William Leveson- Gower (1883-1918)

“Apart from the increased possibility of getting out, which is always inspiring, it is a great joy to be with troops again and become or have a chance of becoming more of a soldier and less of a clerk.”¹

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¹ Letter to a friend, May 1917

William Leveson-Gower was a clerk in the House of Lords Journal Office and upon the outbreak of war was commissioned with the Inns of Court officer Training Corps, a regiment he had joined in 1907. He went on to serve with the Eastern Command, 67th Division of the Southern Army and finally with the Coldstream Guards.

Born in Rio de Janeiro, Leveson-Gower experienced travel from an early age as his father was in the diplomatic service. His father's postings took him to Switzerland, Serbia and Greece before returning to England having won a scholarship to Eton (1895) and then Christ Church College, Oxford (1901). In 1907 he came top out of eight candidates in the Civil Service Commission test allowing him to secure employment as a Clerk in the Lords.

Working in the Journal Office, Leveson-Gower had a unique insight into the political developments unfolding in the years up to WW1.

"There was a scene last night in the House and things look worse than ever for our distracted country. It seems almost inevitable that within a few weeks we shall some of us have to reach momentous decisions and choose between alternatives every of which involves consequences of unthinkable horror."

This diary entry was made on the 21st May but the might of the German Army and Belgium neutrality could not be further from the minds of British politicians. Home Rule for Ireland dominated affairs, causing confusion and intense debate in the Commons as the relevant bill neared its completion. On the 3rd July, in a letter to a friend working at the Royal United Services Institute he commented:

"It is difficult to realize the gravity of the situation in Parliament.

For the last few, as it seems to me, our statesmanship, especially among the Opposition has been only wise after the event. The Lords waited until they were attacked and then only did they produce schemes of much-needed reform. Then we were overwhelmed with talk of referendum. And the rest of it. But it was too late. Now at the eleventh hour of the Irish crisis moderate men of both parties produce scheme after scheme; Federalism, Devolution, Exclusions of various brands, Conventions and Conferences are all talked of. But to what purpose at this time of day?"

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was of course to change all of this and its significance as a catalyst for war would take weeks to filter through to politicians and the public alike. Writing on the 31st July, Leveson-Gower realised the situation had changed:

"News as bad as can be. Stock Exchange closed. Spent some time buying equipment, packed kit and then home."

By August British troops had been mobilised as part of the British Expeditionary Force and in scenes across the country men prepared themselves for the great 'adventure' of war.

"I completed the purchase of a revolver and various other articles of kit at Wilkinsons Sword company: the place was crowded by subalterns choosing weapons and showing them to their sisters and mothers."

Leveson-Gower was initially tasked with training troops in Canterbury but by late 1916 had been transferred to a staff job in Brentwood, Essex. The position was very much a 9-5 role, dealing with paper work and administrative duties. These years spent in England seem to have sheltered him

from the hardship and realities of life at the front. Writing to a friend on the 3 May 1917 he detailed his conditions:

"We couldn't have a pleasanter staff and our quarters are comfortable to the verge of luxury.

I came back from a glorious week's holiday – I joined my people at Bath, spent three days and then three days at Wells."

However, throughout his diaries and letters from 1916 he expressed a strong urge to travel abroad and see combat duty. In October 1916 he wrote, "Staff work is very different and is one thing after another and it requires an effort both to keep human and to keep fit...I often wonder also whether I oughtn't to make a move and get back to regimental life and get abroad, before I become the complete civilian clerk". In the same month he attempted to join an attachment of the Indian Cavalry but was unsuccessful.

In early 1918, Leveson-Gower got his wish, transferring to the Coldstream Guards and preparing for action in France at Tidworth Barracks, Hampshire. By now news had reached him of the death of his friend Robert Bailey, a Clerk in the Commons, which understandably affected him badly.

"I suppose you heard of Robert Bailey's death and that you feel like me about it: it has left a great blank in which nothing can fill: we had seen so much of each other at the House and in Camp and he was always the same and it always did one good to be with him".²

On the 10 September 1918 he travelled to France to join the 1st Battalion. He was quickly appointed a Company Commander, "an ambition beyond his wildest dreams." On arrival life was very civilised and there was even a band to entertain troops before dinner. In a letter to his father on the 17 September he stated that "We had the most delightful four days here; nothing to do but to enjoy the good things in life." He was even dreaming of the final victory over the Germans, "What fun it would be to get to Berlin some day...That may even happen yet."

Leveson-Gower's skills were put to good use in censoring soldiers' home-bound letters. More than 12 million letters were sent home each week to friends and family and there were strict rules on what could and could not be included. The main fear for Military Command was revealing operational details that the enemy could benefit from. Other prohibited information included criticism of superiors, troop numbers and even the weather as this could indicate the conditions soldiers were experiencing.

Leveson-Gower seem to be well informed about events back home though, with the availability of newspapers at camp:

"I also got a sight of the Morning Post and read about the railway strike, a topic which is carefully excluded from the Paris Daily Mail. It makes one furious....What is the use of our victories in every theatre of war, if we are going to be done down by these selfish brutes? It would be perfectly justifiable to assume them to be in the German pay and shoot the ring leaders unless they can prove the contrary."³

² Letter to friend about death of Robert Bailey, Jan 1918

³ Letter to his father, 28 September 1918

As Leveson-Gower's company drew closer to the enemy, the destruction caused by artillery bombardment and trench warfare could not be more apparent.

"But to the East of us everything is desolation and outer darkness, trenches, and heaps of stone where there used to be villages..."⁴

On the 9 October as his troops approached German trenches, an enemy shell hit, killing William Leveson-Gower. Colonel Brand of the Coldstream Guards went on to describe the loss,

"While he was talking to an officer of his Battalion a chance shell burst within a few yards and killed him instantaneously."

Condolences flooded in and there were over 2 volumes of tributes to his life. Captain H. Meriman of the Coldstream Guards summed up it as, "he has done the finest thing in the world, given his life for others."

⁴ Letter to friend, 28 September 1918