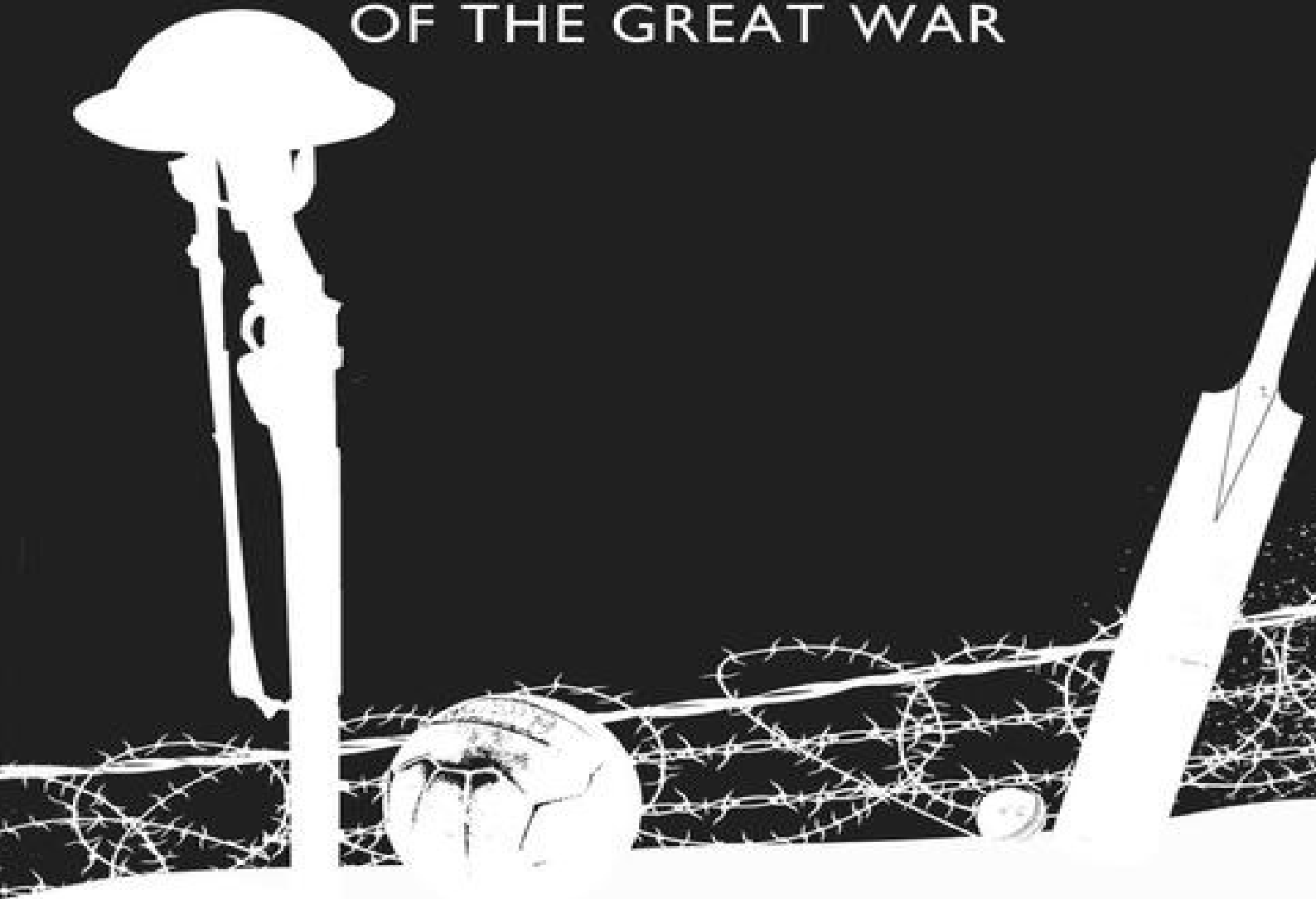


TIM TATE

# FOR TEAM AND COUNTRY

SPORT ON THE FRONTLINES  
OF THE GREAT WAR



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TIM TATE

**FOR TEAM**  
**— AND —**  
**COUNTRY**

SPORT ON THE FRONT LINES  
OF THE GREAT WAR



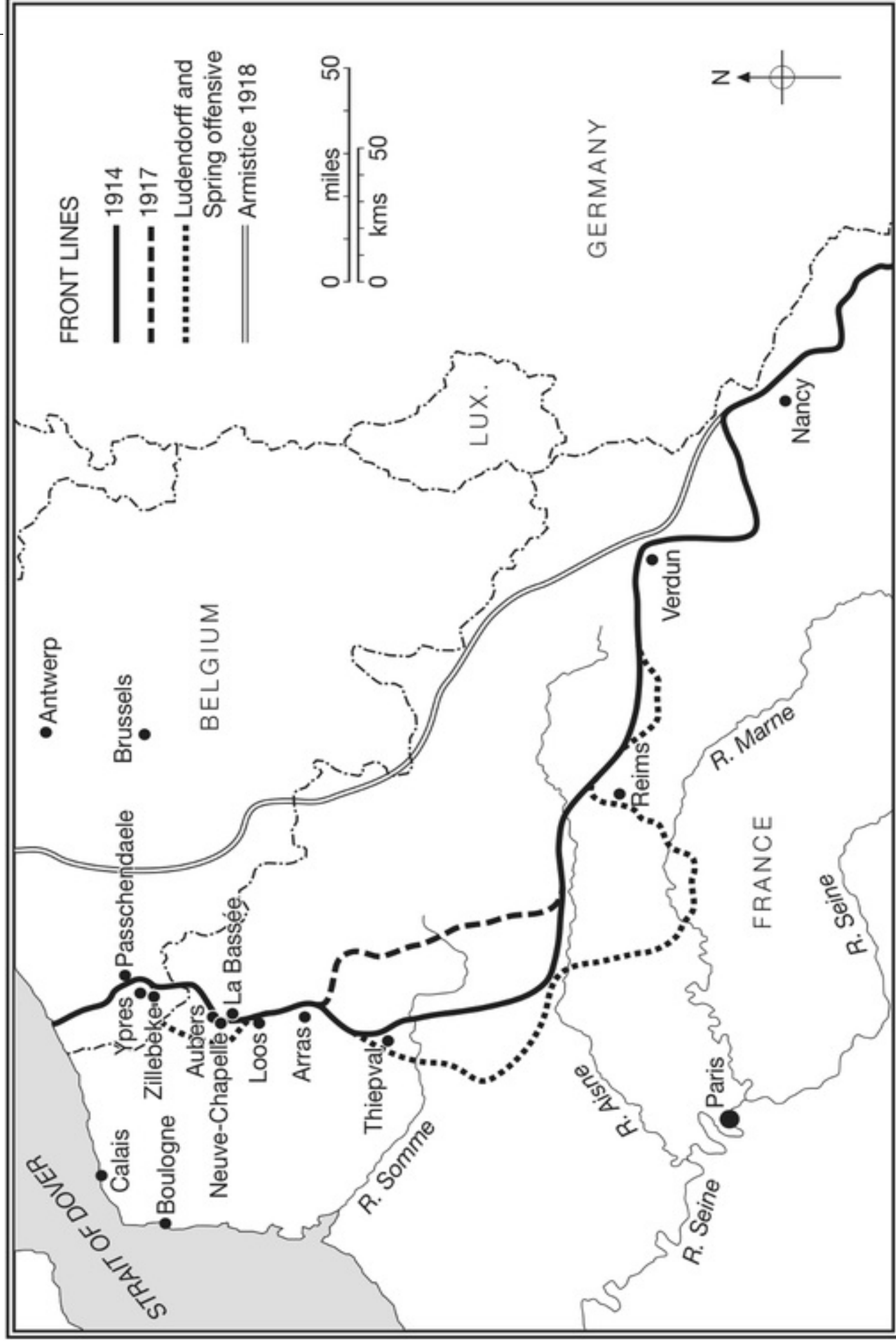
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We've watched you playing cricket and every kind of game  
At football, golf and polo, you men have made your name,  
But now your country calls you to play your part in war,  
And no matter what befalls you, we shall love you all the more,  
So come and join the forces as your fathers did before.

Oh, we don't want to lose you but we think you ought to go  
For your King and Country both need you so.  
We shall want you and miss you, but with all our might and main  
We shall cheer you, thank you, kiss you  
When you come back again.

'Your King and Country Want You' (words and music by Paul A. Rubens). Popular recruiting  
song, 1914







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## PREFACE

# THE WESTERN FRONT, NEAR LOOS, FRANCE

SATURDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 1915

Shortly before dawn along six and a half miles of front-line emplacements, British soldiers pushed scaling ladders up against the face of the trenches and prepared to go over the top.

Four days of incessant artillery bombardment had turned the terrain into a savage and brutal wasteland. Now, as men checked their rifles, tightened the webbing on their belts and muttered a last prayer, clouds of chlorine gas – released, for the first time during the war, from 5,000 cylinders – hung over the charnel fields of no man’s land. Gradually it drifted back towards – then over – the British front line. Many men, unaccustomed to the crude and cumbersome gas helmets, were slow to tuck them in below the necks of their tunics: they fell backwards, choking on the poisonous clouds.

In the trench occupied by the 1st Battalion, London Irish Rifles, Lieutenant S. F. Major was about to blow his whistle to signal the attack. Before he could put it to his lips he saw, with astonishment, the actions of one of his men. Rifleman No.1751 Frank Edwards fumbled in his haversack then cautiously drew out a deflated leather football. He put the bladder to his mouth and calmly began to blow up the football, ‘as though,’ as a contemporary account recorded, ‘the matter in-hand was going to be a cup-tie!’

When Lieutenant Major ordered his men over the top a few seconds later, Rifleman Edwards lobbed the ball over the top of the trench: he then leapt after it and he and three other privates proceeded to kick and dribble the football through the chlorine fog towards the German lines. Around them, as they disappeared into the murk, machine-gun bullets flew and shells exploded.

The Battle of Loos was the biggest ‘push’ of the war thus far. It was also a military disaster. The initial 12 attacking battalions suffered 8,000 casualties out of 10,000 men in the space of just four hours. For many of the London Irish who kicked and passed Rifleman Edwards’s football it was the last game they played. Edwards himself failed to reach the enemy lines, going down wounded and only surviving thanks to an emergency tourniquet applied amid the carnage by a fellow private.

When the losses were finally counted the British had suffered 48,367 casualties in the main attack and 10,880 in the subsidiary attack, a total of 59,247. The death toll at Loos exceeded those of any previous battle: 385 officers and 7,861 enlisted men were killed. But by then it hardly mattered. A legend – the Footballer of Loos – had been born and, within the month, was published in the London press.

It was a story which would be repeated many times in other theatres of the war, with other heroic infantrymen from with other regiments dribbling footballs towards voracious German machine-guns, before the final whistle of the 1918 armistice blew full time on the Great War.

It was a story which encapsulated and spoke to innate and deeply held beliefs that the British soldier was inherently braver and more admirable than his German counterpart. And at the heart of this assumption was sport.

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# INTRODUCTION

*Our soldiers are individual. They embark upon little individual enterprises. The German is not so clever at these devices ... He has not played individual games. Football, which develops individuality, has only been introduced into Germany in comparatively recent times.*

ALFRED HARMSWORTH, LORD NORTHCLIFFE

(NEWSPAPER PROPRIETOR)

This is a book about the First World War. It is a book which tells individual stories of remarkable sportsmen – men who were heroes in a way that their counterparts today have, perhaps forgotten how to be.

Imagine the reaction – your own as well as that of newspapers and television – were the most prominent stars in sport to exchange their football or rugby shirts for army uniforms; if Wayne Rooney, Jonny Wilkinson, Andy Murray and Alastair Cook volunteered to serve indefinitely in Afghanistan or Iraq.

A century ago the brightest sporting stars of their generation did just that. Thousands of sports stars rallied to their country's colours; many never returned from the mechanised carnage of the Great War. The names of Walter Tull, Edgar Mobbs, Tony Wilding and Percy Jeeves are unfamiliar today – lost in the terrible lists of the dead of the First World War. But they belong among the pantheon of true British sporting heroes. All were at the top of their game; all made the ultimate sacrifice in 'the greatest game of all' – war.

Of almost nine million British Empire soldiers mobilised during the four long years of the Great War, around one in eight – 1.1 million individuals – were killed in battle or were posted as missing, presumed dead. Another two million were wounded. On the front line, one in five perished. Yet no one knows exactly how many sportsmen were among the terrible and seemingly endless lists of the dead. Even for the forerunners of modern international sports celebrities – men whose names were as familiar to the early twentieth-century public as Rooney and Wilkinson are today – there is often little precise information (in some cases none at all) about their sacrifice. All too often their bodies were never found – either blown to smithereens by the appalling technology of artillery or unrecovered from the all-consuming mud of Picardy and Flanders.

Instead we have glimpses of them – and hundreds of thousands of their team-mates who swapped Britain's sports fields for the devastated lands of France and Belgium or the blood-soaked beaches of the Dardanelles. Tottenham Hotspur FC staff enrolled and fought together from 1915 and the deaths of 11 of them were recorded in the club's handbook after the war.

Heart of Midlothian and Leyton Orient signed up en masse, respectively to the 16th Royal Scots (known as McCrae's Battalion) and the 17th Middlesex Regiment (the Footballers' Battalion). Newcastle United lost seven men, the same number as Hearts, three of whose players – Harry Wattie, Duncan Currie and Ernie Ellis – died on 1 July 1916 alone, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme.

Cricket suffered a disproportionate number of deaths – almost one in six who went to war. At least 34 first-class players were killed among 210 county players who served. Rugby union – a sport

which has always prided itself on valuing loyalty and sacrifice – was a standard-bearer for the war effort; by the end of November 1914, every England international player from the past season had signed up for service in France.

But there were other, perhaps less obvious, sports which gave to the cause, and not just from the ranks of players in the British Isles. Tennis lost its greatest player – New Zealand legend Tony Wilding – while American football and ice hockey's brightest star, Hobey Baker, was extinguished after fighting daring aerial battles with the German air ace Manfred von Richthofen – also known as the Red Baron.

Their stories are told here, their sacrifice pulled from the fog and pain of world war to represent the heroism of all those who gave their lives, but in particular all the sportsmen who heard the final whistle in the terrible carnage of that conflict.

But there is a deeper story. A story of how sport was, for Britain at least, a defining metaphor for the duty of war. Contemporary press reports before, during and after the four years of carnage – as well as the diaries, personal letters and official reports – repeatedly use sporting metaphors to describe the extraordinarily heroic acts of valour performed by all ranks within the armed forces. Soldiers refer to the prospect of imminent death as being 'bowled out', while 'playing the game' crops up so often as to become a cliché.

But this is also a story of how sport was the first and most vital recruiting sergeant for the British Army and yet also became a lightning conductor for wider anxieties about the war, its conduct ... and the class divisions which it began to expose.

Just as no sector of society was left unscathed by the Great War of 1914–18, so no sport was left unmarked by the slaughter that claimed so many young and vibrant lives. But just as the war changed, perforce, sport in Britain, so too did the role of sport and sportsmen shine an unwelcome light on the society which produced them. From 4 August 1914, the day when Britain declared war on Germany, nothing would ever be the same again.

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ONE

## WARMING UP

*Young Britons prefer to exercise their long limbs on the football ground, rather than expose them to any sort of risk in the service of their country.*

*FRANKFURTER ZEITUNG, 1914*

Two weeks after Britain declared war on Germany, *The Times* of London published what amounted to an editorial in the form of a poem in its august and influential pages.

*Lad, with the merry smile and the eyes  
Quick as hawk's and clear as the day,  
You, who have counted the game the prize,  
Here is the game of games to play.  
Never a goal – the captains say –  
Matches the one that's needed now:  
Put the old blazer and cap away –  
England's colours await your brow.*

R. E. Vernède's 'The Call' was neither the first nor the last time that poetry was deployed as a weapon to support war, but the patriotic doggerel laid before breakfast readers that morning of 19 August 1914 captured precisely the intense – and almost universally assumed – relationship between sport and Britain's perception of duty to the country in its hour of need.

Five weeks later, on 24 November 1914, *The Times* returned to the fray with a new patriotic verse, 'The Game', by one A. Lochhead.

*Come, leave the lure of the football field  
With its fame so lightly won,  
And take your place in a greater game  
Where worthier deeds are done.*

*No game is this where thousands watch  
The play of a chosen few;  
But rally all! if you're men at all,  
There's room in the team for you.*

*You may find your place in the battlefield  
If you'd play the forward game,  
To carry the trench and man the guns  
With dash and deadly aim.*

*Oh, the field is wide, and the foe is strong,  
And it's far from wing to wing,  
But we'll carry through, and it's there that you  
May shoot for your flag and King ...*

*Then leave for a while the football field  
And the lure of the flying ball  
Lest it dull your ear to the voice you hear  
When your King and country call.*

*Come join the ranks of our hero sons  
In the wider field of fame,  
Where the God of Right will watch the fight  
And referee the game.*

With the crystal vision of 100 years' hindsight, this patriotic poetry, with its apparent belief that war was simply an extension of sport, seems tragically naïve. Within a few weeks, reality, wearing the drab uniform of mass and industrialised slaughter rather than the clean whites of the cricket pitch or the bright jerseys of football teams, would blow away the comforting images of sporting fair play. But the umbilical link between war and sport – or at least the British perception of sport – would not break. Indeed, it would be vital in the coming carnage. And, given the way the Great War began, it could hardly have been otherwise.

On Tuesday, 4 August 1914, the front page of the *Daily Mirror* was dominated by the long-awaited news that Britain was at war with Germany.

### **GREAT BRITAIN DECLARES WAR ON GERMANY**

Great Britain is in a state of war with Germany. It was officially stated at the Foreign Office last night that Great Britain declared war against Germany at 7.00pm. The British Ambassador in Berlin has been handed his passport.

War was Germany's reply to our request that she should respect the neutrality of Belgium, whose territories we were bound in honour and by treaty obligations to maintain inviolate.

Speaking in a crowded and hushed House the Premier yesterday afternoon made the following statement: 'We have made a request to the German Government that we shall have a satisfactory assurance as to the Belgian neutrality before midnight tonight.'

'The German reply to our request, officially stated last night, was unsatisfactory.'

The King and Queen, accompanied by the Prince of Wales and Princess Mary, were hailed with wild, enthusiastic cheers when they appeared at about eight o'clock last night on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, before which a record crowd had assembled. Seeing the orderliness of the crowd, the police did not attempt to force the people back and went away.

A little later the police passed the word around that silence was necessary as the King was holding a meeting in the Palace, and except for a few spasmodic outbursts there was silence for a time.

Afterwards the cheering was renewed with increased vigour and soon after 11.00pm the King and Queen and Prince of Wales made a further appearance on the balcony and the crown once more sang the National Anthem, following this with hearty clapping and cheering. After the departure of the royal party some minutes later many of the crowd dispersed. Several

enthusiasts, however, stayed outside keeping up the demonstration by shouting and waving flags.

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*The Times*, meanwhile, informed its readers that the ‘demonstration of patriotism and loyalty became almost ecstatic’. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, observed how, while he travelled between Parliament and Downing Street, he was ‘always escorted and surrounded by crowds of loafers and holidaymakers’.

In the century since 1914, this outpouring of enthusiasm for a war which, had the celebrating crowds but known it, would ultimately kill more than 8.5 million men (and maim or cripple 23 million more) has often been portrayed as one of the more bizarre aspects of a conflict which, in its brutality, would stretch the word to its very limits.

But by far the strangest part of the declaration of hostilities was not its popular appeal but the fact that, given the protracted build-up to a war the entire country expected, the British Army was so disastrously ill-prepared for it.

Unlike Germany, Britain did not have (nor had ever had) a conscripted army. Instead it had operated its armed forces on a voluntary – and, frankly, often amateurish – basis. Commissions into the officer ranks were largely available for purchase, thus ensuring a steady stream of battlefield leaders whose chief attributes were a sufficiently large bank balance and the skill to pass the message round the table in the correct direction.

Throughout the various bloody wars fought across Africa for Queen and Country in the late nineteenth century it had become glaringly obvious that to defend and expand the British Empire soldiering needed to be put on a rather less capricious footing. Between 1906 and 1912, Richard Burdon Haldane, Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for War, gradually reshaped the country’s military might.

The major element of his reforms was the creation of a professional ‘expeditionary force’, a relatively small army specifically prepared and trained for intervening in a major war. Behind them were a full-time reserve army, and a new (effectively part-time) Territorial Force.

By the summer of 1914, the total strength of the Regular Army was 125,000 men in the British Isles, with 75,000 in India and Burma and a further 33,000 in other overseas postings. The Army Reserve boasted 145,000 men with another 272,000 in the Territorial Force.

Immediately after the declaration of war, Field Marshal Sir John French began transporting the British Expeditionary Force across the Channel. By September he had 164,000 men at his disposal. French’s confidence that this would be quite sufficient to drive the German armies back across the Belgian border was not shared by his new enemies. Kaiser Wilhelm issued an order to his troops to ‘exterminate ... the treacherous English and walk over General French’s contemptible little army’. The German High Command would, within two months, oblige their monarch by wiping out the BEF almost entirely.

Sir John French’s blithe assumptions about the war and the number of men Britain would need to fight it had not been shared by the newly appointed Secretary of State for War, Horatio Herbert, 1st Earl Kitchener. Almost alone in the government, he correctly predicted a long war that would last at least three years, require vast new armies to defeat Germany and suffer huge casualties before the end would come. Kitchener, a soldier to the core and the British Empire’s ‘Hero of Khartoum’ after his victory at Omdurman in 1898 had secured control of the Sudan, bluntly warned that the conflict would plumb the depths of manpower ‘to the last million’.

His solution was a 'New Army', made up entirely of volunteers to be recruited in a nationwide campaign. The iconic image of Kitchener's heavily mustachioed face appeared on posters, with an accusingly direct finger pointing outwards and the equally unforgiving instruction: 'Britons. Join Your Country's Army! God Save The King.'



Parliament sanctioned the enlistment of half a million volunteers, but in the first month of the war Kitchener asked for just 100,000 to put themselves forward; so great was public enthusiasm for the fray that it seemed the target would easily be reached. In some towns queues up to a mile long formed outside recruitment offices. Reports in regional papers, filed by news agencies, described a rush of London's young men to join up.

The HQ of the London recruiting district in Great Scotland Yard was besieged from an early hour yesterday by hundreds of applicants anxious to enlist. Towards the forenoon, the numbers increased, and the sight of the ever-increasing stream pouring into the building

attracted considerable interest.

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It was not – could not be – enough. By the time of the Battle of the Marne in September 1914 (the first major encounter of the Great War) both sides had dug themselves into defensive trenches and the pattern for four long years of slaughter was set.

Kitchener's New Army would need all the men it could get. It was time to close the pavilion doors, swap football boots for those of army-issue, cricket bats for Lee-Enfield rifles. The whistle had sounded. Britain needed its sportsmen.

#### GERMANY REACTS TO THE NEW VOLUNTEER ARMY

The new British Minister of War, Kitchener begins his new career as Minister of War in London famously. He has asked to be given at one stroke half a million soldiers, and Parliament has consented. Bravo! Here in Germany we coolly ask 'Why only half a million? Why not a whole million at once?' That would be much wiser.

Germany will be enchanted when this half-million advances against us. We will put some old military man, so decrepit that he can hardly sit his horse, in command of the squadron of semi-invalids and he will soon capture these English and turn them over to a Barnum to be shown at fairs as the latest wonder of the world.

It is with undisguised merriment that everyone in Germany reads of this new English vote of Parliament, and we have the right to be amused! Half a million soldiers!! Do they realize in London the absurdity of this grant? Is it possible there is no-one there who knows the cost of this enormous preparation that is needed to equip and train a force of 500,000 men? Do the English imagine that all that is required is to borrow boots in Paris, gunpowder in France, clothes in Russia and Officers in Serbia? Has England then fallen so low that she can jest in this serious hour?

For with the best will in the world we can consider anything else incredible. Half a million soldiers require half a million rifles, 50 times that many cartridges and half a million coats, trousers and knapsacks. Where in England to get all these? And the new paper army requires at least 500 new barracks, rifle ranges, drill grounds etc. and were it possible to conjure up all these things overnight, where could the recruits' instructors be found? Where are the necessary 20,000 officers and 60,000 non-commissioned officers? We could ask a legion of questions on this new English statute did we not know it is not worth the paper on which it is written.

MATTHIAS ERZBERGER, LEADING GERMAN POLITICIAN:

*Germania Journal*, AUGUST 1914



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## TWO

# PLAY UP! AND PLAY THE GAME!

*Wellington said that the playfields of Eton won the battle of Waterloo, and there is no doubt that the training of the English boys in the cricket and football field ... taught them how to stand up and how to take and give a blow.*

HEADMASTER OF RIPON SCHOOL

Speech Day 1884

The great and the good of Edwardian England had a very clear perception of the role of sport in what was then a strongly class-based society – and, in particular, of its symbolisation of the very essence of what it meant to be British. Fair play and good form; the importance of ‘playing the game’ over the vitality of winning; the character-forming obedience to authority and its orders – to the Edwardian mind these were the habits bred on the sporting field and to be placed unquestioningly, at the service of King and Country.

That this vision was not, in August 1914, the experience or outlook of large swathes of the nation’s sportsmen does not appear to have greatly intruded on the collective consciousness of those charged with running the game of war. In time it would, and thereby cause bitter divisions within the sporting establishment. But, as Britain and Germany took to the fields of Flanders that summer there was an assumed progression from the changing room to the trenches.

Throughout the nineteenth century the private educational establishments, which catered almost exclusively to the fee-paying sons of the country’s titled and wealthy (yet which were called, with typical English ellipticism, ‘public schools’), began to introduce team games into their educational curricula. And they did so for distinct moral reasons.

Until then, these privileged establishments had been, in many cases, places for the titled scions of the Establishment to run riot out of sight of their parents. Guns were more commonplace than lessons; drinking, gambling and tormenting the communities in which they squatted (along with the equally character-forming practices of domestic slavery and sexual abuse imposed by the elder boys on their juniors) were the norm.

Gradually, Victorian educationalists began to wrest control of these schools back from the teenage hooligans sent to them. And they began to realise that through regular team games they could foster discipline and self-control in their unruly charges and simultaneously develop the temperament of young men who were, after all, supposed to transfer seamlessly from school to positions of privilege and authority in the ever-expanding British Empire. By the middle of the nineteenth century a simple equation, *sport + teams = character*, had become the accepted wisdom inside England’s public schools. Sport fostered loyalty and selfless sacrifice for the team, and simultaneously promoted the holy trinity of courage, strength and comradeship.

If, a century later, this seems like rose-tinted nostalgia for a ‘better’ age, it should be remembered that until the end of the nineteenth century two of the three team sports (football, rugby and cricket) in which so much hope for their young players was invested were very different

from the versions played today. Both rugby and association football were, as often as not, the youthful equivalent of close-quarter warfare. Broken bones and the spilling of blood were the norm and, indeed, were celebrated as essential for the development of true English character.

Association football (in itself a misnomer, since the Football Association came late to a game which had been fostered and developed in the so-called 'Great Nine' public schools) was characterised not by skilful passing but by mass rushes at the opposition by a group of burly forwards who were encouraged to hack brutally at their opponents' shins at every opportunity. When, following the FA's earliest bids to control the unruly sport, it was suggested that such 'hacking' be outlawed, one of the sport's grandees, Francis Campbell from Blackheath FC, countered that 'hacking is the true football' and that it encouraged 'masculine toughness'. He argued that the proposal to ban hacking emanated from 'those who like their pipes or grog or schnapps more than the manly game of football' and for good measure warned that 'if you do away with hacking you will do away with all the courage and pluck of the game, and [...] bring over a lot of Frenchmen who would beat you with a week's practice'.

The application of violence was, then, seen as essentially English – and its fostering in sport was what set the English apart from plainly less courageous continentals.

Rugby football, more even than its soccer forebear, worshipped at this shrine of righteous and somewhat unthinking violence. But as it developed and its players moved seamlessly from school or university into the British Army it began to mimic – or perhaps shape – what passed for military strategy. Rugby then was about throwing wave after wave of attackers at defensive lines with little more than the assumption that, at some point, one of the waves would break through. As a metaphor for the coming carnage on the Western Front, rugby was without equal.

To the great minds behind the development of public school sport there were two other major benefits in team games for their pupils – benefits which would, it was believed, prepare them well for adult lives in the service of their country. Firstly, by requiring the boys themselves to organise the matches, a sense of responsibility was inculcated in young and privileged adolescents, previously noteworthy for their lack of it. This responsibility required them both to lead by example and to obey authority with appropriate deference and – most crucially – without asking too many awkward questions.

Secondly, team sports fostered an appreciation for order, good form and fair play (although, given the unrestrained violence involved, this term was remarkably elastic).

Above all, sport was there to be played for sport's sake; a boy was expected to give all within the confines of his abilities, but never to stray over the line into pursuing a result at all costs.

Since these defining characteristics were to mould a boy's character and shape his approach to adult life in the armed forces, fostering loyalty, honour, patriotism and that self-defined English quality of 'fair play', it is hardly surprising that the qualities valued most highly for a potential officer were those which had been honed on the cricket field or football pitch. Field Marshal Sir John Burgoyne, one of the most celebrated soldiers of his day, summed up this attitude in 1857:

At a public school will be found one set of boys, who apply to their studies, and make the greater progress in them, another set take to cricket, boating, fives, swimming etc. Now, of the two, I should decidedly prefer the latter, as much more likely to make good officers.

Nor was he alone. Another officer pronounced his firm belief that, although knowledge of the principles of gunnery was desirable, 'activity of body, proficiency in field sports and qualification

for commanding men' were all of 'almost equal importance to the artilleryman in the field'.

~~This belief in the almost mystical qualities of team sports to produce the right sort of soldier reached its apogee in one of the most popular poems of the late Victorian period.~~

In 1898, on the eve of the Boer War – Britain's last military campaign before 1914 – the archetypal patriotic poet Sir Henry Newbolt celebrated the obsession with good, honest English public school sport as a metaphor for all that was best in war in 'Vitaï Lampada':

*There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night  
Ten to make and the match to win –  
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,  
An hour to play and the last man in.  
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,  
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,  
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote –  
Play up! play up! And play the game!*

*The sand of the desert is sodden and red –  
Red with the wreck of a square that broke –  
The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,  
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.  
The river of death has brimmed his banks,  
And England's far, and Honour a name,  
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks;  
Play up! play up! And play the game!*

Little wonder, then, that as the First World War approached, the Kaiser's professional armies viewed with contempt the British equation of war with good honest sportsmanship.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on which end of the Continent this was viewed from) by August 1914 the reality of sport in Britain was markedly different from the rosy public school image promulgated in poetic doggerel and the national press. Significant sections of it had abandoned the cosy privilege of amateurism: boxing, tennis, cricket and football had all, with greater or lesser degrees of success and controversy, gone professional.

#### SPORTING POETRY

The Great War is now often remembered for producing an outpouring of harrowing verse which cast an unflinching eye on the carnage. Of all twentieth-century British poems, Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est', with its graphic description of 'blood [...] gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs', is the best known. It and those like it are often taken as evidence that soldier-poets condemned the war and the manner of its fighting.

In reality, the poetry which was most popular during the Great War – and indeed for more than a decade after the final whistle blew – was overwhelmingly pro-war. Some of the greatest names now loosely known as the War Poets – Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke and Julian Grenfell – were heartbreakingly eager to go to war, and celebrated it in poems that became hugely popular on the home front. Grenfell, an Old Etonian and captain in the Royal Dragoons, was typical of that generation of young and privileged men whose view of war as an opportunity for glory was forged on public school playing fields. He wrote one of the two most popular poems of the conflict, 'Into Battle', which was swiftly published in *The Times*. Less well publicised – but equally telling – was his written assessment of life on the Western

Front:

I adore war. It's like a big picnic without the objectlessness of a picnic ... The fighting excitement vitalises everything ... One loves one's fellow-man so much more when one is bent on killing him.

Grenfell's war service was brought to a sudden halt in May 1915 when, as he reported phlegmatically in his last letter to his mother, he 'stopped a Jack Johnson with [his] head'. A 'Jack Johnson' was slang for the German 15cm artillery shell, which burst with a cloud of black smoke; it was named after the American boxer who became the first black world heavyweight champion.

Undoubtedly the most popular of all First World War war poems was Rupert Brooke's 'Peace'. An unashamed paean to the glory of war, it was first published in January 1915 and ran to 11 further impressions that year; by June 1918 it had reached its 24th impression. The opening lines encapsulate the pro-war public school ethos of the times:

*Now, God be thanked Who has matched us with His hour, And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping, With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power, To turn, as swimmers into cleanness leaping.*

The transition had begun with boxing in the 1820s. What was once viewed as a gentleman's art had become a way for the poor and underprivileged to make some kind of a living. The change had not been easy or particularly popular. The sport had gone into serious decline precisely because of the lure of money to those who would otherwise have seen little of it, leading to the Victorian bugbear of gambling and, in its wake, widespread fight fixing. By the time R. E. Vernède called on the 'Lad with the merry smile' to exchange his cap for a soldier's helmet it is safe to say that neither he, nor the majority of the readers of *The Times*, would have associated boxing with the quintessential sporting spirit.

Some sports – notably rowing – took a hardline stand against any form of professionalism. The Amateur Rowing Association not only barred any of its members from being paid to take to the river but prohibited from its august ranks anyone 'who has been by trade or employment for wages a mechanic, artisan or labourer, or engaged in any menial duty'.

But cricket, the quintessentially English sport, had also experienced the rising tension between money and playing the game for the game's sake. From 1819 onwards, the centrepiece of the English season was the annual Gentlemen v Players match – a distillation of the social changes sweeping through the country on the coat-tails of the Industrial Revolution and of the problems which would haunt Kitchener's recruiting of the New Army from British sport.

Tennis, too, had fallen to the siren call of money; not in Britain, where home-grown players at the All England Lawn Tennis Club's annual Wimbledon fortnight were still resolutely amateur, but in international pro tennis tours were doing good business and some of its players had already made their way on to the hallowed grass of SW19's Centre Court.

But, in domestic terms, football was both the dominant game and the litmus paper for the changing relationship between sport and Britain. Payments to players had begun by stealth during the 1880s and had led, in the 1884–5 season, to a bitter war which threatened to tear the game apart.

Only last-minute arm-twisting by the (then) relatively new Football Association – itself riven by internecine warfare over the issue – brought some limited acceptance of the inevitability of professional football. The terms of even this very modest reform were too much for the self-proclaimed gentlemen of the game. They broke away to form their own, strictly amateur organisation. But professionalism also set at loggerheads the game's *soi-disant* rulers and the coming force of commercial football clubs. It was a battle for the very soul of the game – and one

which would, on the outbreak of war, ensure football and footballers were placed in the unforgiving cross-hairs of those who demanded sport subjugate itself to the national need.

Of all the major sports, only rugby remained determinedly aloof. In a repeat of the war over wages which had so nearly torn football asunder, rugby tore itself in two during the dying years of the nineteenth century. While the largely working-class players of the Northern Union insisted on their right to be paid, the public school-dominated gentlemen of the Rugby Football Union itself refused to countenance anything so sordid as money: the two sides split into rival factions becoming the separate and radically different games of rugby league and rugby union.

The class and financial divisions which characterised all these sports – and which distinguished the rival sects even within what was notionally the same team game – would be thrown into harsh relief on that August afternoon in 1914 when Prime Minister H. H. Asquith blew the whistle which started the Great War.

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## THREE

# THE GAME IS AFOOT

*All Varsity men, Old Public School Boys – men who are hardened to the soldier's life by strenuous pursuit of sport – should enlist at once.*

*THE TIMES, AUGUST 1914*

On 4 August 1914 the Imperial German Army had, at the Kaiser's disposal, 3.8 million mustered men. By contrast, the total strength of the British Army was 733,514. Small wonder, then, that the new Secretary of State for War instituted the urgent appeal for volunteers. If the British Expeditionary Force, now being hurriedly embarked and shipped to the Continent, should fail, Britain's pretension to be the world's most dominant superpower would fall with it. Kitchener's New Army would be desperately needed.

The physical qualifications for enlisting, however, were at first remarkably restrictive. Volunteers had to be between the ages of 19 and 30, at least 5ft 8in (1.72m) tall and have a chest size of at least 34in. Even for a population whose health and diet were considerably better than 50 years earlier, the regulations excluded a substantial pool of potential recruits.

Despite this, Kitchener's campaign got off to a good start. Over the first weekend of active recruiting more than 10,000 men throughout Britain took the King's Shilling.

But that figure, impressive as it appeared at first glance, was just 10 per cent of the target Kitchener had set. More worryingly, after the initial 100,000 volunteer total was reached, the Secretary of State knew that by Christmas a further 400,000 able bodies would be needed. Very quickly the restrictive physical requirements were relaxed: the minimum height was reduced to 5ft 3in (1.6m), and the maximum age raised to 35 (and subsequently 38).

By early September, *The Times* was able to report that in the space of 10 days 27,231 men had enlisted in London alone. Yet the correspondence columns of the same newspaper reproduced angry letters from readers alleging that for every man who volunteered a further 10 had failed to do so. A belief began to take hold – at least in the pages of the newspapers – that a sizeable section of British manhood was shirking its moral and patriotic duty. A typical, and prominently displayed, proclamation sought to put them on the spot.

### 4 QUESTIONS TO MEN WHO HAVE NOT ENLISTED

If you are physically fit and between 19 and 38 years of age, are you really satisfied with what you are doing today?

Do you feel happy as you walk along the streets and see other men wearing the King's uniform?

What will you say in years to come when people ask you 'Where did you serve in the Great War?'

What will you answer when your children grow up and say, 'Father, why weren't you a soldier, too?'

Very quickly sport became the lightning conductor for this perceived malaise. In part this was due to the obvious match between the army's need for fit, strong, young men and the physical make-up of almost all team-game sports. By their very nature footballers, rugby players, boxers, rowers even cricketers, closely fitted Lord Kitchener's bill.

But more crucially, the sporting calendar was at play. The mass recruiting drive coincided with the nexus of the two great seasons: the dog days of the summer and preparations for the vast mass of winter sports. Simply by donning cricket whites or lacing up football boots, players were making themselves uncomfortably visible.

Cricket was the first sport to find itself in the firing line, and the opening salvos came from within its own ranks. On 12 September, W. G. Grace, the epitome of a gentleman cricketer (though he had earned more money as an amateur than many of his professional colleagues), weighed in via an article in the popular *TP's Weekly*.

There are many cricketers who are already doing their duty, but there are many more who do not seem able to realise that in all probability they will have to serve either at home or abroad before the war is brought to a conclusion.

The fighting on the Continent is very severe and will probably be prolonged. I think the time has arrived when the county cricket season should be closed, for it is not fitting at a time like the present that able-bodied men should play day after day, and pleasure seekers look on. I should like to see all first-class cricketers of suitable age set a good example and come to the help of their country without delay in its hour of need.

Grace was unquestionably right in his initial observation: even before the war was officially afoot cricketers with existing commitments to the reserve forces – most notably Yorkshire's captain Sir Archibald White – had hung up their whites. Others, like the Middlesex and Nottinghamshire skippers Pelham Warner and Arthur Carr, followed when war was declared. But in calling for the sport to be suspended Grace was setting himself against its governing body. Unlike many of its players, the MCC had been slow out of the crease: on 6 August, as British troops were already en route to the front, it had decided against abandoning the County Championship. It issued a statement to the press, explaining that 'no good purpose can be served at the moment by cancelling matches'. The masters of cricket plainly underestimated the public mood; attendances swiftly plummeted.

Nor was the problem only one of public opinion. In common with other sports grounds, The Oval – probably the second most famous cricket pitch in the country – was requisitioned by the army.

Jack Hobbs, England's greatest batsman, who had just scored a career best 226 in front of over 14,000 spectators the day before war was declared, was abruptly forced to rearrange his long scheduled benefit match.

The writing was clearly on the pavilion wall: news of casualties suffered by the British Expeditionary Force in Belgium had hardened the public mood against 'business as usual' for England's 'flannelled fools' (a phrase popularised by Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The Islanders'). On 13 August, the MCC surrendered, announcing that all matches it had arranged at Lord's for the autumn would be postponed indefinitely. The remaining matches in the County Championship were abandoned 'in deference to public opinion' and the Scarborough Festival – the traditional end-of-season series of matches featuring Yorkshire County Cricket Club – was to be brought to a close as 'the continuation of first-class cricket is hurtful to the feelings of a section of the public'. The las

match to be completed, on 2 September, pitted Sussex against Yorkshire at Hove. But, as the sport's house journal, *Cricket*, reported: 'The men's hearts were barely in the game, and the match was given up as a draw at tea.' With that, cricket (or at least competitive county and international cricket) pulled up its stumps for the duration of the war.

The declaration of hostilities also caught Britain's major winter sports on the hop. Throughout the summer the Rugby Football Union and the breakaway professional Northern Union (the Rugby Football League as it would later be known) had scheduled their 1914–15 seasons untroubled by the looming clouds of war.

On 11 August, four days after the first BEF troops landed in France, the NU General Committee met to consider whether the war should be allowed to interrupt its competitions, lulled, perhaps into the popular view that the fighting would be over by Christmas. It voted to carry on as normal. The Union had also been buoyed by support from *Athletic News*, then one of the most influential sports journals in Britain. Its 10 August edition had noted that although eight of the code's leading players had already joined up:

We hope that sport will not be abandoned in these islands. Our games may only be 'trinkets' but they will tend to keep the life of the nation on old lines, and they will assist to keep the body fit and the mind calm until such as right is vindicated.

Courage, determination and patience are demanded of non-combatants, and sport tends to the development of these virtues. Let us not hastily give up that which has served a free people so well.

Further south, the NU's bitter enemy and diehard bastion of amateurism was caught equally flat-footed. Rugby union saw itself as the very paragon of the late Victorian and Edwardian imperial ideal as embodied in England's public schools – vigorous, masculine, militaristic and patriotic. Yet on 13 August, RFU secretary C. J. B. Marriott issued strict instructions to all member clubs to get on with their season, war or no war:

I have consulted my emergency committee, and they feel that they must leave it to those clubs that have sufficient players left to do as they think best with regard to carrying out their programme, but are of the opinion that it will be advisable to do so where clubs can. The committee of the Prince of Wales Fund [one of several charitable funds set up on the outbreak of war] expressed a hope that a portion of the gates may be devoted to that fund, and the English Rugby Union hopes clubs will approve the suggestion.

But the RFU was (for neither the first nor the last time in its history) attempting to stem an unstoppable tide. With its player base drawn almost universally from the great public schools and universities – each with their own strong tradition of Officer Training Corps and military reserve units – rugby union was facing a serious loss of players. Some were recalled to their reserve duties immediately on declaration of war, but many others were early volunteers to the New Army. Diaries written by Paul Jones, former first XV captain of Dulwich College, give a poignant glimpse of the lethal mix of patriotism and sporting ethos which drove this rush to the colours: 'In my heart and soul I have always longed for the rough and tumble of war as for a football match.'

Lieutenant Jones would be killed in action on 31 July 1917, during the bloody Third Battle of Ypres. But his writings, first published anonymously in the college magazine of May 1915 encapsulate the spirit that he, and much of England's elite, believed in.



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