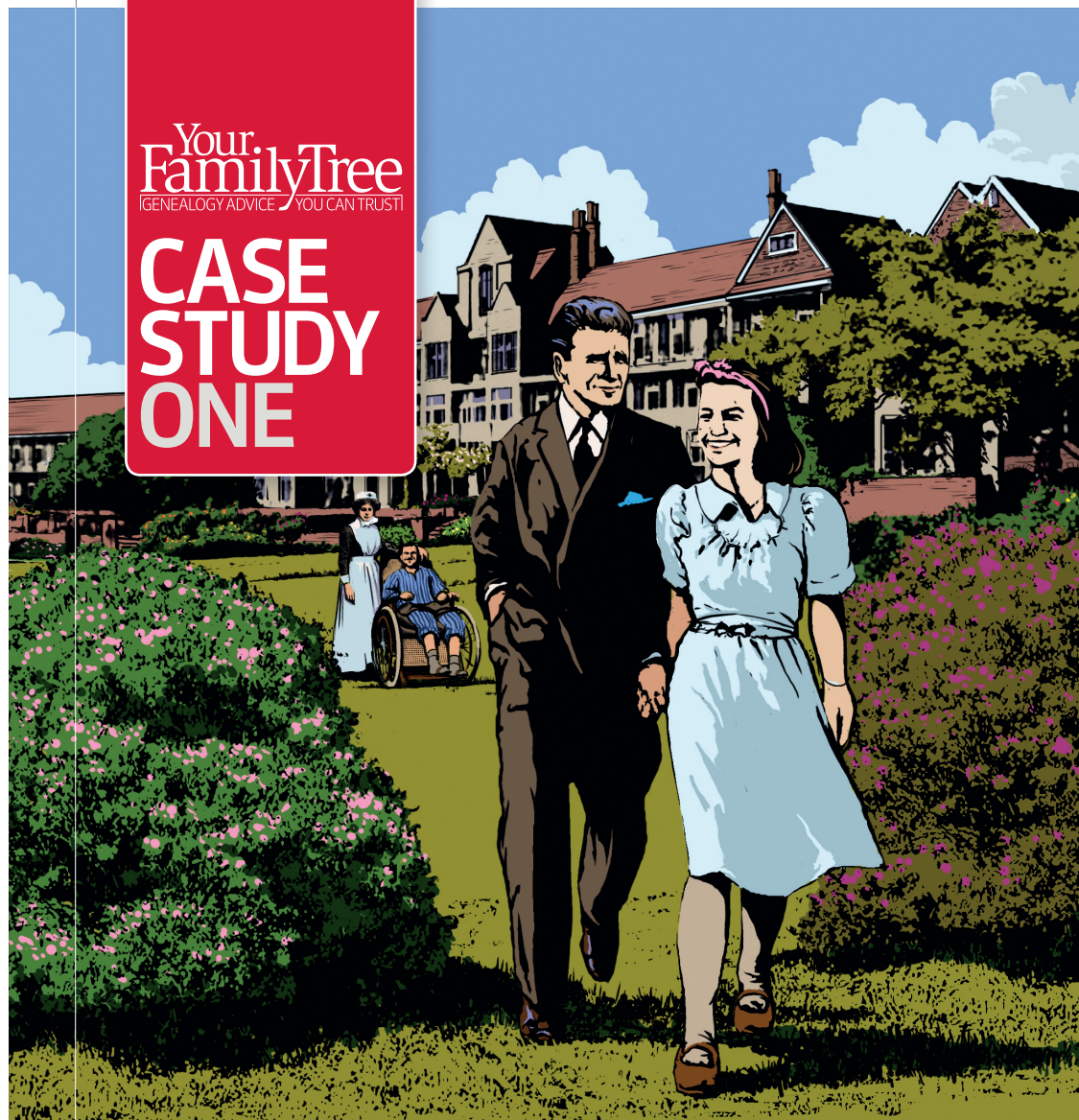


CASE STUDY ONE



Love in the time of TB

The story of how illness brought two war heroes together, only to end in heartbreak

By **Michael Lucas**



Michael has a degree in history. He's had articles published, principally on World War I, and is completing a book in the same field

My family knew nothing about my great-aunt and her Army officer husband, but my research at The National Archives (TNA) revealed how their military service brought them together, albeit for a very short time.

My mother asked me to look for material on her aunt Jessie Palmer, as she only had basic information about births, marriages and deaths. Jessie was born in London in 1887, the second of nine children of John and Agnes Palmer. John and Agnes lived in Portsmouth, where John made a living as a naval and military outfitter, and the 1911 Census shows Jessie as a nurse at the Royal Portsmouth Hospital. I was also lucky enough to receive a photograph

DIVISION

Ulster volunteers

The 36th (Ulster) Division, raised from Ulster volunteers, distinguished itself on the Somme in July 1916, but lost heavily. There were insufficient replacements from Ireland (conscription was never introduced) so numbers were made up with Englishmen

of her from an American cousin. Meanwhile, I discovered that Reg Howship, Jessie's future husband, was born in 1897 in Wallington, near Croydon, Surrey, son of Frank and Fanny Howship.

War service

At TNA, I found a medal card and a thin service file for Jessie. These showed her serving in the Territorial Force Nursing Service (TFNS) from the outbreak of WWI in August 1914 until January 1919. She stayed in the UK, so only received a badge for her service. She started off at the 5th Southern General Hospital, Portsmouth, in the Royal Hospital's Military Annexe. Her Principal Matron said she was "an excellent nurse".

Jessie sought a transfer to London, reporting to the 1st London General Hospital, St Gabriel's College, Camberwell on 5 December 1917. A colleague directed me to a website called Lost Hospitals of London (www.ezitis.myzen.co.uk) and it showed that St Gabriel's was taken over in August 1914 as a temporary hospital. Although it was a modern building, sanitation was poor and facilities for staff were limited, with nurses sleeping in cubicles. The hospital was also greatly expanded to cope with increasing numbers of patients. The King and Queen visited in April 1918, during a particularly testing time following the German Spring Offensive.

Jessie's file showed that she'd received a pension after contracting tuberculosis (TB) while on service. Only a few pension files survive, but luckily hers was one of them in PIN26 (20116). It showed that as early as 1915 she developed lung problems while nursing patients, and a later report stated that she'd contracted TB in 1917.

Hero in the making

While at TNA I also found Reg's officer's file. He'd volunteered for



Nurse Jessie in her
TFNS uniform

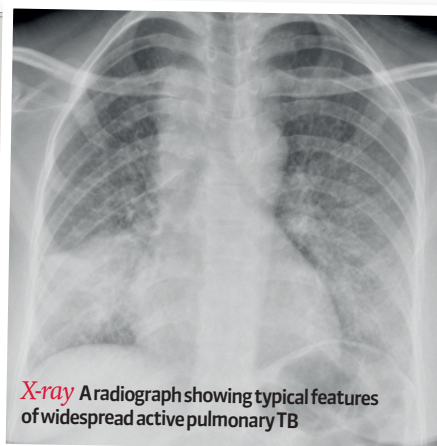
“As early as 1915, Jessie developed lung problems and a later report stated she’d contracted TB”

A major killer

How tuberculosis spread and struck

Tuberculosis (TB), also known as consumption, was a very common disease and a major killer until the end of World War II. The infection spreads through droplets when infected people cough, sneeze or spit. It attacks the lungs and can spread to other parts of the body, such as the joints. Following initial exposure, the disease can lie dormant for months or years. Indeed, not all of those infected go on to develop symptoms.

Before the introduction of antibiotics, treatment options were limited, and around 50 per cent of those with active TB died of it. The treatment for many was good food and fresh air. By isolating patients in sanatoria, the spread of TB was reduced, although staff treating them weren’t immune to the disease.



X-ray A radiograph showing typical features of widespread active pulmonary TB

Image © iStockPhoto.com/WILL SIE

the Army in December 1915, aged 18, shortly before conscription. Because he’d volunteered, he could express a preference for the unit he joined, and he went for the Queen Victoria’s Rifles. He was noted as 5’5” tall, with a 36” chest.

In May 1916, Reg was mobilised and sent to the QVR’s training battalion, arriving in France in October 1916. He was transferred to 1/12th Battalion London Regiment (The Rangers), then again to the 13th Irish Rifles in 36th (Ulster) Division. They had a relatively quiet time until the Messines offensive in June 1917, and continued the bitter fighting through the Battle of Passchendaele that summer. Luckily, it seems Reg came through this unscathed.

Reg applied for officer training for a second time in August 1917, and on returning to England in October he was posted to No 16 Officer Cadet Battalion, Kinmel Park, Rhyl, from 7 December. He passed out on 30 April 1918. His report noted that his special qualification was ‘bombing’ (throwing hand grenades) and that he “should make a sound platoon commander”.

Although Reg had very poor eyesight, he was commissioned

RECORD

War diaries

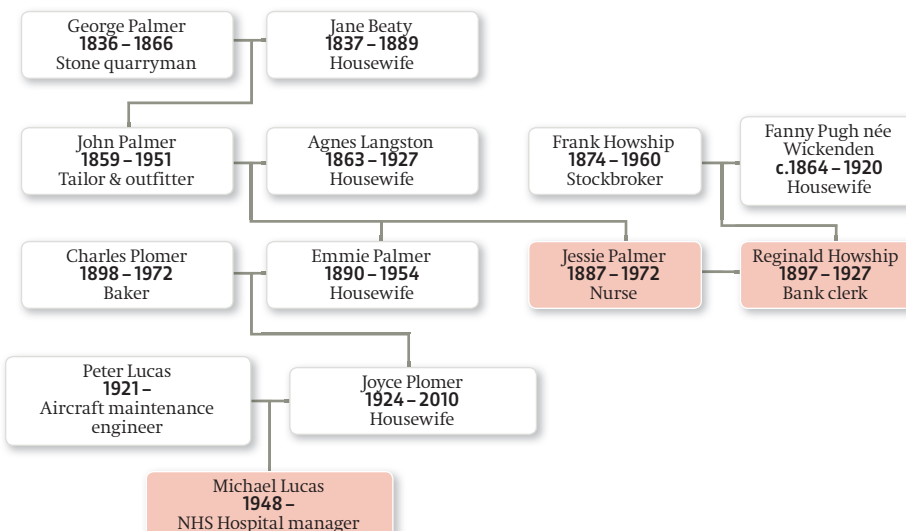
Each unit on active service kept a war diary, as an official record of its activities. One copy of a battalion’s war diary went to the War office and should be at TNA, while another copy was retained by the regiment and you should find this in the regimental museum

as an infantry second lieutenant in May, and sent to the East Surrey Regiment’s 12th (Bermondsey) Battalion. This was with the 41st Division, brought from the Italian Front to stem the German offensives in Spring 1918. I found the unit’s war diary at TNA (WO95/2634), which shows that Reg arrived at Ypres in late August, by which point the tide had already

turned against Germany, with the first Allied counteroffensives. In late September, the 41st broke out of the Ypres Salient and advanced further into Belgium. At Knokke, on 22 October 1918, the battalion crossed the Courtrai-Bossuyt canal, but the attack was held up by heavy machine-gun fire.

The *London Gazette* (www.london-gazette.co.uk) from 19 October

THE PALMER/LUCAS FAMILY TREE



(ix.) An Officer of the Royal Army Medical Corps, after reading the above declaration, and examining the candidate, complete the following Certificate:—

N.B.—Candidates who wear glasses should bring them.

I CERTIFY that I have examined R. F. Howship

in accordance with the Instructions for the Physical and Medical Examination of Candidates for Commissions in the Regular Army and Special Reserve, and find that he is Fit for Military Service.

Height 5' 5 1/2" Weight 140 lbs.

Chest Measurement: Max. 37 1/2 inches Min. 33 inches

His acuteness of vision is as follows:—

V. R. without glasses = 6/60 ; with glasses = 6/6 Reads Normal distance with glasses

V. L. without glasses = 6/60 ; with glasses = 6/6 Reads Normal distance with glasses

Station In the field Signature W. S. H. H. H.

Date 30/9/17 Capt. Rance

The application will then be forwarded:—
Through the usual channel to General Headquarters of the Army in the field;
To the Director General of Medical Services, London, S.W., in other cases.

► 1920 described how Reg earned a Military Cross for his bravery as he “carried out a most daring reconnaissance, and succeeded in locating a strong enemy post, all the while under incessant machine-gun fire”. The fighting was intense and the company lost 130 men. Four times as many were wounded or missing between Reg joining them and the Armistice on 11 November 1918. The battalion disbanded and Reg transferred to 9th East Surrey at Cologne. He was discharged in September 1919.

TB tragedy

The Army authorities enquired as to Reg’s whereabouts early in 1920, as if he’d gone AWOL. His father replied in March, saying his son had won the MC and was now in King Edward VII Sanatorium, Midhurst, Sussex “suffering from consumption as the result of Army life”. As a result, Reg was given retrospective promotion to Lieutenant.

It would seem that TB brought Jessie and Reg together, as they were both recovering from the illness at Midhurst. A July 1919 report in Jessie’s pension file noted she’d made some improvement. The Medical

Above Reg’s medical details from 1917 show his severe short-sightedness

Superintendent reported in January 1920 that she was “doing light work at this Sanatorium... but is not fit for full work.” However, her condition deteriorated and she was later sent for treatment to the East Anglian Sanatorium in Suffolk. She was finally discharged in March 1923.

TB clearly did nothing to dent Reg and Jessie’s relationship, as they married in November 1923 at North Mundham parish church, near Chichester, Sussex. The next month, Reg applied for his war medals, giving his address as High Salvington, near Worthing.

Sadly, Reg and Jessie only had a short life together, as Reg finally succumbed to TB and died in 1927, aged

“Reg and Jessie had a short life together. Reg succumbed to TB and died in 1927, aged 29”

Officer records

WWI Army records reveal a wealth of detail

War Office files for nearly 90 per cent of WWI officers survive at TNA, in series WO339 and WO374. Generally there’s information on family, occupation, education, military experience and basic service details. Files for those commissioned from the ranks include information on earlier service. If your ancestor was wounded, they’ll often have a medical report, too.

If your forebear was captured there’s usually a statement by the officer given on his return to Britain. Files for those killed are dominated by correspondence on verification of death and disposal of their property. You can make online searches by name, but you can only view the original documents at TNA.

BATTLE

Messines

The storming of Messines Ridge in Belgium from 7-14 June 1917 was one of the few successes of WWI, with the use of massive underground mines, creeping artillery barrage and small rapid forces to surprise and overwhelm the Germans

Below The 1920 letter about Jessie from Midhurst (left) and her 1928 medical report following Reg’s death (right)

29. Jessie was devastated and soon afterwards lost her mother to cancer. If Reg had received a pension, it would have ceased with his death. Jessie found it difficult to make ends meet. Moreover, her own TB grew worse. It was described in July 1927 as “an extensive case”, and a medical report in 1928 said there was a “very severe degree of disablement”. Jessie’s pension was periodically reviewed and finally assessed at 60 per cent disability and later, when her condition allowed, she looked after semi invalids.

It was inspiring to find that Jessie’s younger sister Doris (‘Kitty’) wasn’t discouraged by her example, and became a nursing sister herself in an Essex sanatorium, helping treat people who suffered from the disease that had disabled her sister and killed her brother-in-law. ■

KING EDWARD VII. SANATORIUM, MIDHURST.
9th January 1920.

Your Ref. Nurses 40869.

Sir,

In reply to your enquiry of the 8th inst., I have to inform you that Staff Nurse Jessie Alice Palmer, late T.F.W.S. is at present doing light work at this Sanatorium. In my opinion she is fit for light work under the suitable conditions of Sanatorium life, but is not fit for full work.

Yours faithfully,
M. H. H. H.
Medical Superintendent.

Director General of Awards,
Ministry of Pensions,
Officers' Branch,
Chester Gate Bldg.,
Regents Park, N.W.1.

MINISTRY OF PENSIONS.
Form for use by Boards on Pulmonary Tuberculosis Cases.
(To replace Questions 2 (a), (b) and (c) of M.P. 3.36 or 361D).

A.—STATEMENTS MADE BY MAN OR ON HIS BEHALF.

I. SYMPTOMS COMPLAINED OF:—
Weakness (Debility): *Occasional weakness more if nervous; Regs.*
Cough: *All day, worse in morning or evening.*
Expectoration: *Yes, worse in morning - not very profuse.*
Sweat: *Sometimes take Temp. because of the profuse.*
Shortness of breath: *Yes, easily worse on exertion.*
Blood-spitting: *Has never spat blood.*
Night sweats: *Occasional.*
Indigestion: *No.*
Pain: *Occasional L side of upper chest.*
Disorders: *No.*
Other symptoms: *Does not sleep well, worries over husband's death, this happened 10 months ago last Jan'y.*

II. EMPLOYMENT: (nature and extent in last 3 years).
Housework, doing small work. Does housework.

III. PERIODS OF SICKNESS AND NATURE OF TREATMENT RECEIVED IN LAST 3 YEARS: (for pensionable and non-pensionable disabilities).
Has not had her doctor for 3 years, but came under his care in bed with chills, in winter, herself. Last saw J.O. in 1925.

CONTACTS

The National Archives

Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU
w. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk
t. 02088763444

WEBSITES

London Gazette

w. www.london-gazette.co.uk

Lost Hospitals of London

w. www.ezitis.myzen.co.uk