2018

A British Officer’s Responsibilities, Relationships, and Respect on the Western Front in the First World War

Katherine Kelly

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

Recommended Citation

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts. Copyright © 2018 Katherine Kelly
A British Officer’s Responsibilities, Relationships, and Respect on the Western Front in the First World War

KATHERINE KELLY

At the outbreak of the First World War, young middle- and upper-class British men were leaving their public schools and homes behind to enlist as officers in the British Army. Encouraged by the ideals of fighting for one’s country and inspired by bravery, men enlisted, many with hopes of seeing the trenches on the Western Front in France. Certain expectations and responsibilities came with joining the British Army as an officer. Paramount of these was trying to maintain the morale and health of the soldiers as time passed, ceaselessly, in the trenches. Most officers, only having seen battle on a few occasions, spent the war attempting to provide for their soldiers through the harsh conditions of trench life and warfare. Throughout the war, officers often grew very close to their soldiers, and the relationship of an officer to his “batman,” a servant who accompanied him to the trenches, is one of particular interest. Regardless of class backgrounds, friendships between an officer and his subordinates did occur. The role of officer often demanded respect, which was given to those who deserved it. Officers earned the respect of their men by showing, through their actions and behaviors, why such regard was warranted.

Often, esteem was granted to an officer who proved his masculinity through endurance, strength and a stoic countenance. The term “masculinity” grew from wartime advertisements and attitudes of the time. During the years of war, masculinity was arguably a synonym for bravery or stoicism. Historian Jessica Meyer (2011) discusses how British propaganda instilled the ideal of preserving masculinity through enlistment and defending one’s homeland. Masculinity was defined as a soldier who maintained his composure throughout battle and hid his fear. Bravery was a sought-after quality that determined one’s masculinity. Bravery characterized a man, in this era, as having true grit and strength, not displaying his fear or acting in a manner similar to a child or, even, a woman (3-5).

For years historians have been analyzing the role an officer played throughout the Great War, a role which has developed over the decades. As Meyer (2011) argues, masculinity was an important factor in a British officer gaining respect from his men. Meyer’s book focuses in depth on how masculinity was a quality respected in a British officer on the Western Front. Likewise, Richard Holmes (2005), historian and author, states that respect was given to an officer from the soldiers based on how well an officer was able to provide for his men in the harsh conditions. Holmes also draws on the specifics of an officer’s responsibilities to the men. It is through the correspondence of Major Reggie Trench to his wife and mother that primary evidence is provided of the true responsibility of an officer. Despite rarely seeing battle himself, Trench was respected by his men, the 2/5th Sherwood Foresters. Trench was grandfather to Anthony Fletcher, author of Life, Death, and Growing Up on the Western Front (2013). Martin Petter (1994), author and historian, argues the responsibilities that weighed on a British officer in the trenches was so great that it prevented men from returning to a normal life once the war ended. He also argues that masculinity demonstrated by one’s bravery played an important part in an officer maintaining morale (127-52). G.D. Sheffield’s work in Leadership in the Trenches (2005) similarly reveals how morale and discipline in the trenches was a great responsibility for officers and how it impacted the officer to soldier relationship.

Primary sources are vital in research regarding the lives of officers, and it is Vera Brittain’s memoir, Testament of Youth ([1933], 1999) that provides intimate accounts of the experiences of her
brother, Edward Brittain and their dear friend, Geoffrey Thurlow. Both men served as officers on the Western Front. Testament of Youth is the personal memoir of Vera Brittain. Within this book, one is able to witness the experiences of youth during the Great War. The chapter titled “When the Vision Dies…” reveals how the responsibilities of an officer played a major role. Edward’s account of his actions at the Battle of the Somme that display how he performed his duty and was rewarded with not only the Military Cross, but also the respect of his men, who dubbed him “the immaculate man of the trenches.” It is shown through Thurlow’s account how decision-making as an officer was a great responsibility and how shell shock victims were stereotyped as man cowards. The behaviors which accompanied shell shock did not follow the mold of how a man should present himself as an officer: brave, stoic, and masculine.

Class and social standing was often an aspect that contributed to a man becoming an officer. Upper-class young men were expected to attend public schools to further their education as young adults. Brittain and Thurlow planned to attend a public school for their education. Before obtaining a commission as an officer during the war, Brittain was planning to attend Oxford University (Brittain [1933] 1999, 99). Due to the outbreak of war, young men such as Brittain were unable to continue their education and enlisted in the British Army. As Second Lieutenant Edward H. Brittain of the 11th Sherwood Foresters and Second Lieutenant Geoffrey Thurlow of the 10th Sherwood Foresters, the pair became close friends, having trained together in the Officer’s Training Corps. The friends became known to their battalion as “Brit and Gryt” (Brittain [1933] 1999, 203). After receiving the Military Cross for his bravery, Brittain was promoted to Captain of his regiment. Young men who came from wealthy or prestigious backgrounds were often sought after and wanted by Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener to lead the British Army to victory. Kitchener became Secretary of State for War in 1914 after his success in 1898 in the Battle of Omdurman in the Sudan. As Anthony Fletcher (2013) points out: “The British Army was led by gentlemen. Social standing had long been the foundation of military leadership. Kitchener believed that education, still largely an upper- and middle-class preserve, really mattered” (20). Both Thurlow and Brittain demonstrated what was expected of an officer of the British Army.

An image of Edward Brittain will be explored as the second piece of primary material supporting this research. This image, a photograph of Edward Brittain after he received the Military Cross for his brave actions during the Battle of the Somme, demonstrates the reward that was presented to officers whose actions demonstrated leadership, masculinity, and courage. Brittain’s actions indeed earned him respect among his men: his nickname, the “immaculate man of the trenches,” is evidence of that. Both the photograph of Brittain as well as his and Thurlow’s accounts from Testament of Youth will show how an officer’s responsibilities impacted their actions and experiences as well as uncover how respect was given to officers through the course of the war.

This essay will follow the important roles that were required of British officers—particularly Reggie Trench, Edward Brittain, Geoffrey Thurlow, and Rowland Fielding—throughout the Great War, as well as their relationships with their fellow soldiers and the responsibilities they held as leaders. The focus of this essay will fall greatly on the analysis of how British officers carried out their roles in regards to their men and their relationships with the soldiers they were responsible for throughout the years of the First World War.

An Officer’s Responsibilities

There were many expectations of officers in the Great War. The British officers, upon finding themselves in the trenches of France, were handed certain responsibilities. Among these responsibilities were maintaining morale and discipline; providing food, dry clothing, warmth, and shelter; and decision-making. The weight of these responsibilities was very great.

Major Reggie Trench’s experiences uncover how an officer on the Western Front carried out his responsibilities. Anthony Fletcher (2013) describes how his grandfather, Trench, provided
for his men, the 2/5th Sherwood Foresters. Trench writes, in letters home to his family, how difficult it was to maintain both good discipline and popularity among his men. Trench, having only seen battle on several occasions, worked to win the loyalty and respect of his men by fulfilling his responsibilities to them. Fletcher argues that leadership on the Western Front was not only defined by action during battle, but was best demonstrated through an officer’s actions in caring for their men. Trench referred to this as “practical soldiering” (142). Trench provided for his men by supplying them with the means to acquire proper hygiene. He worked to allow each soldier an opportunity to bathe properly. Trench also worked to have clean and suitable latrines for his soldiers. In his letters home, Trench described his domestic duties.

As well as providing appropriate means of hygiene, Trench also worked to improve living conditions and housing billets. Another domestic responsibility that Trench aimed to fulfill was giving the men decent meals with fresh meat and vegetables. Trench wanted to offer his men a variety of meals that allowed them to be more efficient, as well as happier. As the battalion history describes Trench: “Captain Trench was dead nuts on field kitchens” (Fletcher 2013, 146). This description is evidence to how passionate Trench was when it came to feeding his men. Officers of the Royal Welch Fusiliers provided a Christmas dinner in 1916 for their company’s enjoyment. Inspired by such treatment, Trench made it his aim for the next year to provide each one of his soldiers with a kipper as a treat for Christmas (143-50). Major Reggie Trench worked incredibly hard to make life in the trenches bearable for his men.

Domestic duty in the trenches, as observed by Major Reggie Trench, was only one duty of many for which officers were responsible. Morale and discipline were other responsibilities that officers worked tirelessly to uphold. Maintaining morale and discipline among their soldiers was an important and challenging task. In G.D. Sheffield’s book (2005), we learn how officers managed to balance the two and create an environment for their soldiers that was equally optimistic and controlled (135). Martin Petter (1994) argues that demonstrating masculinity played an important role in maintaining morale. If an officer presented a strong and brave front, they were not only deemed as masculine, but their men found themselves following their officer and remaining optimistic in the trenches (131). Jessica Meyer (2011) states that displaying bravery in the trenches was considered “the very basic test of manhood” (128). Keeping the atmosphere of the trenches anything less than tense and terrifying was indeed a struggle for officers who wanted to provide for their men as well as discipline them.

A third major responsibility that took its toll on officers on the Western Front was that of making decisions. As an officer, one was responsible for making decisions in and out of battle; these decisions impacted an officer’s men, and their lives were often at stake. “When the Vision Dies...,” a chapter within Vera Brittain’s Testament of Youth ([1933], 1999), best describes this weight of decision-making. Brittain describes a conversation with her friend, Geoffreys Thurlow, an officer of the 10th Sherwood Foresters. Within this conversation, Thurlow reveals his experience with decision making in battle. Thurlow describes his experience as one of strain and anxiety. Making decisions that impacted the lives of his soldiers fell heavily on him. Thurlow tells of his experiences in the Battle of Ypres. He shares with Brittain that his fear was not of the danger in the battle, “but of completely losing his nerve.” Thurlow describes how he felt when his men looked to him for guidance: “It's awful the way the men keep their eyes on you! ... I never know whether they're afraid of what's going to happen to me, or whether they're just watching to see what I'll do” (258). Thurlow was faced with the decision, during a bombardment of German fire, to either stay and face certain death or to retreat. After choosing to retreat, Thurlow confided to Brittain how he still struggled to confirm that he had made the correct decision. Thurlow’s encounter in battle demonstrates the pressures young officers dealt with when making the best decisions for their men on the front lines. The heavy sense of responsibility weighed on officers, and Thurlow’s description of his experience to Brittain demonstrates that responsibility (257-9).
Thurlow also suffered heavily from shell shock, also known today as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and this suffering impacted how others judged his character as a man. As he convalesced from an injury he received in battle, Thurlow struggled with nervousness and the anticipation of returning to the front lines. Vera visited Thurlow during his stay in hospital and observed his changed state. As she describes, “he [Thurlow] still shuddered from the deathly cold that comes after shell-shock; his face was grey with a queer, unearthly pallor, from which his haunted eyes glowed like twin points of blue flame in their sunken sockets” (Brittain [1933] 1999, 257). Thurlow was granted two months of sick leave in order to recover from his wounds and shock. Shell-shock was often associated with fear, and one who suffered from it could be deemed a coward. This is where the ideals of masculinity carry a great deal of weight in regards to how an officer behaved during war. Maintaining control and hiding fear during battle were commended as masculine attributes and behaviors. Displaying fear, often as a consequence of shell-shock, was not acceptable behavior for an officer on the front lines (Meyer 2011, 4). Brittain ([1933], 1999) wrote of Thurlow’s condition in a letter to Edward, “I think he is the kind of person who suffers more than anybody at the front … I wonder if you mind its horrors and trials as much as he does. I expect you do, but being calmer in your nerves and more confident of your own powers you can bear it better” (258). Thurlow’s experience with shell shock demonstrates how greatly an officer’s behavior reflected the weight of their responsibilities and how it could deem one effeminate and, even, cowardly.

**An Officer’s Relationships**

It is through the relationships between an officer and his men that an understanding was shared between a leader and his followers. Having strong relationships between an officer and the rank and file of soldiers motivated officers to fulfill their responsibilities and take care of their men. In Richard Holmes’ work (2005), he describes how a relationship of mutual understanding would occasionally grow to friendship. This friendship allowed for respect to form from both sides of the hierarchy (97). Holmes also discusses the strict chain of command in the trenches, and how many officers worked to build relationships with the average “Tommy” in order to better provide for them. The bond between an officer and a soldier created a link between them that allowed for a mutual relationship with reciprocated feelings of respect and trust (171-3).

The relationship of an officer and his men often stemmed from respect. In the trenches, men of all class levels became reliant on one another for survival. It is important to note that most officers were of a prestigious class, while their soldiers were often working-class men. On the Western Front, regardless of class, friendships were formed. If an officer earned the respect of his men, the acknowledgement of class differences often faded away. It is within Holmes’ work (2005) that it is revealed that officers who maintained an identity as privileged upper-class men were often less respected than those officers who embraced trench life and lived among their soldiers with a sense of equality (172-4). It is within Holmes’ work that Ernest Parker, a soldier in a Royal Fusiliers battalion, briefly reflects on his officer, Lieutenant F.P. Roe. Parker describes Roe as having “kindly eyes [that] looked into my own as he passed along the ranks” (172). This sense of kindness that an officer emits toward his men, despite their class backgrounds, often was rewarded with loyalty and admiration. The aspect of class may not have been an important aspect in all relationships on the Western Front, but it did play a part in the development of friendship between officers and their batmen.

The relationship between an officer and their servants, also known as “batmen,” is exceptionally fascinating. The first-class officers who came from public schools and privileged lives brought with them to the Western Front a batman to dress and serve them. The term batman derived from such a position on a cricket team. An officer and his batman spent a great deal of time with one another; these circumstances allowed for a friendship to develop. In other words, without this class difference between them and the British officer’s necessity of bringing a servant to the front
lines, such a friendship may never had occurred between an officer and his rank and file soldiers. As seen in Fletcher’s work (2013), Major Reggie Trench developed a very strong friendship with his batman, Albert Lane. Trench described their relationship as having established “a deep mutual loyalty.” What is a true testament to their relationship and deep friendship is described by Lane: “I was always quite happy and felt a certain sense of safety while I was with him” (131). This quote demonstrates how great a friendship between an officer and his batman could become and how a sense of safety with one another developed due to that level of friendship.

Geoffrey Thurlow developed relationships and gained respect from his men through his kind demeanor and humility. As Vera describes him, “Geoffrey was too diffident, Edward told me, to be good at dealing with people, and yet his very self-depreciation caused him to be embarrassingly adored by his batmen and his men” (Brittain [1933] 1999, 202). Thurlow’s shy personality and modesty was a respectable attribute for a man who came from high social standing.

Rowland Fielding, whose account is told within Fletcher’s work, had a batman who expressed eagerness to be next to his officer during battle. As Fielding described, “he would like to be by my side … and this, I think, is not mere talk” (Fletcher 133). This relationship expresses the special bond between an officer and his servant and how that bond grew stronger in anticipation of battle or within battle itself. Affection and loyalty grew among the relationships of officers and their batmen (Fletcher 133-4). Such relationships motivated officers to care more whole-heartedly for their men and led them to provide for their soldiers’ needs.

The relationship between an officer and his family often grew stronger when war separated loved ones. It is through Edward Brittain and his correspondence with his sister, Vera, within Testament of Youth that we see how strong a familial bond could grow during war. Edward was Vera’s only brother, and their relationship was very special. Vera describes her brother, upon visiting him in hospital after being wounded: “The relief of having the great dread faced and creditability over was uppermost in his mind … Only later I realized that the Battle of the Somme had profoundly changed him and added ten years to his age” (Brittain 282-3).

This encounter between Vera and her brother, after his experience in battle, shows how Vera viewed Edward. Vera’s visit with her brother demonstrates how he changed, and how he no longer represented to her all that was pure and innocent, but, instead, was experienced and stoic, for war had taught him to be so. Edward’s change in character demonstrates not only how war impacted an officer physically, but also emotionally. Vera’s ability to register a change in him displays how close they were as siblings and how war only strengthened their relationship. The fear of losing Edward to the Great War brought Vera closer to her brother.

Earning Respect as an Officer

In order to maintain their leadership in the trenches, British officers worked to earn the respect of their men and gain their trust as leaders. Admiration and loyalty were important parts of whether an officer succeeded in holding control over his men or not. Maintaining control and discipline was incredibly important in the success of an officer during the Great War. Masculinity played a key role when it came to an officer deserving his men’s respect. Officers who were not held in high esteem often reflected the privileges of their upbringing and their men resented them for this.

In Jessica Meyer’s work (2011) the ideal of masculinity in regards to respect is deeply studied. Meyer explores how having endurance was seen to demonstrate masculinity and was rewarded with high regard for an officer. This idea argues that if an officer endured the difficult circumstances of trench life without complaint then their soldiers would respect them greatly for it. Enduring the elements was seen as contributing a large part of the masculine ideal of an officer in the trenches. An officer’s ability to endure was often reflected in that of his men, who saw their officer as a leader and model of proper masculine behavior of a soldier. A stoic endurance of shellfire was greatly admired by soldiers if demonstrated by an officer (61-3).
Another element of how an officer earned respect was through his actions. Second Lieutenant Edward H. Brittain is an example of this. It is through the photograph of Brittain that reveals his bravery (see Image 1). In the photograph, Brittain is turned to the side so the viewer sees his profile. He presents a stoic and expressionless face, and is in uniform, with the Military Cross pinned onto the collar of his jacket. The medal not only symbolizes his bravery within battle, but also depicts, in a small object, what Brittain achieved as an officer. The photograph of Edward Brittain was taken in 1916 following the Battle of the Somme where, on July 1st, Brittain was wounded. In a conversation between Brittain and his sister, Vera, within Testament of Youth, he describes thoroughly how he was wounded while leading his men over the parapet of the trenches and into No Man's Land, only to be welcomed by German rapid fire (Brittain [1933] 1999, 284-6). Edward recounts to Vera that he led the first wave of his company into battle on July 1st. It was Edward who was determined to rally his men after they had witnessed wounded soldiers from previous companies' waves retreat into the British trench. He describes to his sister, “I can’t remember just how I got the men together and made them go over the parapet. I only know I had to go back twice to get them” (284). His men followed his lead for about seventy yards, then Edward was hit in the thigh with a bullet. He describes his injuries, “I fell down and got up, but fell down again; after twice trying to go on I gave it up and crawled into a shell hole … A huge beast of a shell burst quite close to the hole. A splinter from it went through my arm; the pain was so frightful” (284). There were two other men in the hole with him and “one was very badly wounded.” The other was, as Edward describes, “in a blue funk” (285). After trying to persuade the uninjured man to go and find help, Edward himself climbed out of the hole and starting crawling. He explains, “I started dragging myself along between the dead and wounded to our trenches seventy yards away” (285). After twenty minutes of crawling, two stretcher bearers saw him and brought him back to the trench. When he reached the dressing station, Edward sent both men out to find the wounded man in the shell-hole. Edward was congratulated for his “courage and splendid behavior” and recognized for his ability to keep his men’s morale high on a day of a vital “push.”

Edward Brittain was awarded the Military Cross for his fearless actions in battle. The Military Cross was an honor sought by many officers throughout the Great War, awarded to those who committed acts of “really conspicuous courage” (Brittain [1933] 1999, 287). To be awarded such praise was honorable as well as valued and respected by soldiers. The photograph depicts this high praise for an officer who demonstrated bravery in a terrifying atmosphere. That bravery had not only earned Brittain the respect of his men, the 11th Sherwood Foresters, but also the nickname of “the immaculate man of the trenches.” Brittain’s ability to rally and maintain morale during battle is another example of how an officer’s actions earned him respect on the Western Front.

**Conclusion**

Trading a life of privilege and luxury for the trenches on the Western Front was quite a drastic change for many of the British officers in the First World War. Officers had responsibilities and duties to provide and take care of their men, to maintain morale and discipline, and to make significant decisions, often when lives
were at stake. Both Reggie Trench and Geoffrey Thurlow strived
to care for their men. Trench, eager to maintain domestic duties as
well as ones of warfare, worked hard to improve conditions for his
soldiers. Thurlow, afraid of letting his men down, struggled with his
responsibility in battle. Many officers carried with them the weight
of responsibility for caring for their men throughout their entire
experience of war. By performing their duty and demonstrating their
bravery through their behavior and masculinity, officers earned the
respect of their soldiers. The courageous actions of Edward Brittain
reveal how an officer was rewarded, not only with an honorary
medal, but with the respect of his men. With strong relationships
between officer and soldier, and officer and his batman, there came
an even stronger sense of loyalty and even safety. We see through
Reggie Trench’s relationship with his batman, Albert Lane, how
strong a bond could be between ranks in the trenches. It is through
the correlation of duty, friendship, and admiration that we truly see
how a British officer lived on the front lines throughout the Great
War.

Bibliography


Sheffield, G. D. Leadership in the Trenches: Officer-man Relations, Morale

About the Author

Katherine Kelly is a junior majoring in History and minoring in Women’s and Gender Studies. Her research was completed in the fall of 2017, under the mentorship of Dr. Sarah Wiggins. She plans to receive her bachelor's degree in Spring of 2019. Katherine's love of history and research has inspired her to pursue her master's degree in History upon completion of her undergraduate work.