

Wyndham Lewis in the Royal Garrison Artillery, 1916-1917:

Part 1, Home Service

In his 1937 memoir, entitled *Blasting and Bombardiering*, the British modernist artist and writer Wyndham Lewis sought to distil the war experiences of artillery soldiers in the First World War:

A gunner does not fight. He merely shells and is shelled. He discharges a large metal cylinder, aiming it by means of a delicately-adjusted mechanism, to fall at a certain point which he cannot see, in the hope that he may kill somebody he hopes is there.

But, having conceded that as an officer he would occasionally see the enemy from forward observation posts, Lewis went on to explain, more colourfully, that:

A gunner is a very dangerous type of spectator – without intermission throwing murderous missiles into the bullring below [...] and over at the banks of equally active spectators opposite, who are of course doing the same thing.¹

This characterisation of the artillery as semi-detached from the frontline fighting stands in stark contrast to the recent military historiography which stresses their centrality, especially the heavy artillery, to the outcome of the war's battles.² Therefore Lewis' interpretation perhaps tells us more

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¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1937), 131, 135. For the wider context of war memoirs and autobiographical fiction in the interwar period, see: Brian Bond, *Survivors of a Kind: Memoirs of the Western Front* (London: Continuum, 2008); Ian Isherwood, *Remembering the Great War: Writing and Publishing the Experiences of World War I* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 12-61; Vincent Trott, *Publishers, Readers and the Great War: Literature and Memory since 1918* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 13-49.

² Jonathan Bailey, 'The First World War and the Birth of Modern Warfare' in Macgregor Knox & Williamson Murray (eds.), *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 132-53; David

about his personal relationship with the fighting than it does about the dynamics of trench warfare. Perceiving himself as somewhat aloof from the sordid business of the infantry's war, as more observer than participant, these explanations reflect his complex and sometimes ambivalent attitude towards his military service. Additionally, anyone familiar with literary modernism will recognise in Lewis's stance the characteristic detachment and aesthetic autonomy of the movement. Artists, according to modernists like T.S. Eliot or James Joyce – both primary characters in Lewis's memoirs – were to remain emotionally distant, only indirectly invested, remote.³ As Lewis wrote in his memoir: 'When first I met War face to face I brought no moral judgements with me at all'.⁴ This approach led to praise from reviewers like Graham Greene, who would observe that: 'Wyndham Lewis writes about those savage and irrational events with beautiful objectivity, [...] without personal passion, [...] untainted by moral indignation or patriotic fervour, and the effect is odd and stimulating'.⁵ But of course autobiography can never be entirely objective, nor is it often found to be 'untainted' of personal passion or agenda; and under closer examination, Lewis's narrative account is decidedly liberal in recasting some of the events of his war experience. As well as being known for detachment, modernist prose writers are regularly associated with the rise of impressionism and aesthetic subjectivity, and the evidence all points to Lewis playing freely with these literary techniques.

Before the war, Wyndham Lewis was one of the most notable up-and-coming artists in Britain. Born in Nova Scotia in 1882 to an American father, a veteran of the Civil War, and an English mother who raised him, he was educated at Rugby (1897-1899) and later studied at the Slade School of Fine Art (1899-1901), though neither institution saw him complete a course of study due to, in Lewis's phrase, 'neglect of work'.⁶ Lewis regularly fell in with revolutionary artists of the age and normally fell out

Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 184-6; Hew Strachan, 'The War Experienced: Command, Strategy, and Tactics, 1914-18' in John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 43-4. For the development of British artillery within this context, see: Sanders Marble, *British Artillery on the Western Front in the First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

³ For Lewis assuming the 'role of 'observer'', as well as portraying 'coolness' and a 'lack of emotion', see: Christine Hardegen, 'Actors and Spectators in the Theatre of War: Wyndham Lewis's First World War Art and Literature' in David Peters Corbett (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 69-70; Emily Anderson, 'An "unseemly joke": Service-author Stories and Wyndham Lewis's *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937)', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 45:2 (2022), 34-51.

⁴ Lewis, *Blasting*, 90.

⁵ Graham Greene, 'Homage to the Bombardier', *London Mercury*, December 1937, 219, reprinted in Judith Adamson (ed.), *Reflections* (London: Vintage, 2014).

⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. by Toby Foshay (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), 250.

again, eventually attributing to himself the title of 'The Enemy'. This included alliances and bust-ups with Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury coterie and later with F.T. Marinetti and the Futurists. He briefly became a leader of the British *avant-garde* with the publication of the bright-pink, provocative magazine *BLAST* in 1914, gaining him regular publicity in pre-war London for both innovative writing and painting as well as his bohemian appearance and manners.⁷ With the onset of the war, however, the public taste for revolutionary art was significantly quelled, and his career suffered a notable war-related hiatus between the first serial appearance of his novel *Tarr* in 1916 and the publication of his 'Man of the World' volumes starting in 1925, works which began to re-establish his status as one of the most significant authors and painters of his generation.⁸

Understandably, given the subsequent importance of the war to his art and writing, the twenty-one months Lewis spent as a gunner have been pored over by scholars and biographers.⁹ Underpinning their analyses have been four historical sources: his aforementioned memoir, surviving letters written at the time, a service record, and the war diary of the artillery battery in which he served.¹⁰ What follows here is a fresh and more comprehensive exploration that draws upon these and a much wider range of contextual military historical sources to reconstruct Lewis' service with the RGA. They include contemporaneously recorded materials from those in the training system alongside Lewis, the service records of his military peer groups, the documentation created by the headquarters above his battery during the Third Ypres offensive and, most significantly, a previously unknown diary kept by one of the other officers in his battery. The range and depth of these new sources allows the creation of a microhistory, particularly of his artillery battery, which then permits a more comprehensive investigation of events and a thorough interrogation of Lewis's version of them.¹¹ Some of the article's

⁷ Lewis, *Blasting*, 50.

⁸ For a brief summation of Lewis's subsequent career, see: Richard Cork, 'Lewis, (Percy) Wyndham (1882-1957)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).

⁹ The milestone biographies are: Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Routledge, 1980); Paul O'Keefe, *Some sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Pimlico, 2000). For his literary and artistic work, see also: Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (London: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ WK Rose (ed.), *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1963); Timothy Materer (ed.), *Pound/Lewis: The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985); National Archives (TNA), soldier & officer record, WO339/81917; TNA, 330 Siege Battery war diary, WO95/545/4. For the letters' tone, see: Ann-Marie Einhaus, 'Lewis and War' in Andrzej Gąsiorek & Nathan Waddell (eds.), *Wyndham Lewis: A Critical Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 51. Subsequent citations of Lewis's letters are taken either from Rose or, for letters to Pound, from Materer.

¹¹ For microhistories, see: Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon & István Szigjártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (Routledge: Abingdon, 2013), 4-5.

findings confirm the consensus and add nuance, but others reinforce earlier suspicions about the factual accuracy of Lewis's memoir account, as well as foregrounding aspects he left unsaid.¹²

To explore Lewis's service with the artillery, this work is divided into two parts. The first article examines closely his 'home service' from enlistment into the Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) in March 1916 to deployment onto the Western Front in May 1917. It covers his attestation, enlistment, and initial training as a gunner, during which time he became a bombardier, a junior non-commissioned officer (NCO). It then looks at Lewis's officer training, commissioning, and his unit's preparation for deployment. The second article unpacks his 'active service' on the Western Front; his battery's dispersal for familiarisation with battlefield conditions, a difficult period together again on the Flanders coast, and, most importantly, their sustained engagement during the Third Ypres offensive, which was the climax of Lewis's frontline soldiering.

Bombardier

Unpicking the process by which Lewis joined the army creates a starting point for understanding his military motivation. In *Blasting and Bombardiering*, he claimed indifference towards the war, but also mocked fellow artists and writers who had avoided military service.¹³ Some works state that Lewis volunteered for the army, but the reality was more nuanced because Britain was beginning to conscript its soldiers.¹⁴ What we see, from December 1915, is Lewis reacting to a legislative process rather than volunteering outright. Additionally, his enthusiasm for serving his country was contingent upon getting a relatively safe job with high status. As Paul O'Keefe has highlighted, the key moment in the timeline was his formal attestation of a willingness to serve under the 'Derby Scheme'.¹⁵ Its significance was also noted retrospectively by Lewis when, in June 1916, during a difficult period in his initial military training he wrote to both his mother and his friend Ezra Pound expressing regret for that attestation and suggesting he had become entrapped.¹⁶

¹² For example, the misrepresentation of his proximity to TE Hulme on the day of his death: O'Keefe, *Genius*, 191; Wyndham Lewis, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: From 'Blast' to Burlington House* (New York: Haskell, 1971), 68-69.

¹³ Lewis, *Blasting*, 182. For the Bloomsburys' 'rejection of wartime values', see: Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 108.

¹⁴ Meyers, *Enemy*, 79; Catherine Wallace, 'Introduction' to reprint of Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting & Bombardiering* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1992), x; Hardegen, 'Actors and Spectators', 39.

¹⁵ O'Keefe, *Genius*, 176.

¹⁶ Lewis to mother, 22 June 1916; Lewis to Pound, 22 June 1916.

Lewis's soldier service record has survived and because of distinctive handwriting and different pens, four initial entries can be identified upon it.¹⁷ On the front Lewis provided the first input of name, address, age, and occupation. The second was the date-stamp (20 March 1916) and signature of the 'attesting officer' in London who assigned him to the RGA. The next stage is crucial. The memoir of Edward Allfree, who followed in Lewis's footsteps three months later, tells us that on arrival at the depot new recruits 'passed through the reception tent and [were] allotted our regimental numbers'.¹⁸ On Lewis's form a third hand, presumably that of an inducting clerk, recorded his arrival (25 March) and a regimental number. Importantly, he also backdated Lewis's military 'engagement' to 12 December 1915. However, that date was crossed out by Lieutenant Toone, an officer at the depot, who re-set it to 20 March 1916.¹⁹ What the minutiae here tells us is that Lewis probably also attested earlier, on 11 December 1915, and the record of a soldier who joined at Dover on the same day as Lewis supports this hypothesis.²⁰ Additionally, the date is significant because it was also the final deadline for attestation under the Derby Scheme.²¹ After much wrangling within government, Lord Derby, the director of recruiting, had announced in October what became an eponymous system which sought to steer a middle way between volunteering and full-blown conscription. Men under forty were encouraged to attest their willingness to be called up for military service and, in associated messaging, it was implied that single men would be summoned before the married ones.

Contextually, the next key date was 5 January when the government began parliamentary proceedings to conscript single men, regardless of whether they had attested a willingness to serve.²² Over the previous week Lewis had indicated to friends an intention to enlist immediately as a soldier once he had resolved some personal affairs.²³ But he then seems to have changed his mind. On 6 January

¹⁷ TNA, soldier record, WO339/81917.

¹⁸ Imperial War Museum (IWM), Edward Allfree, 'War diary' [undated], 18, Documents.6976.

¹⁹ 'Royal Garrison Artillery Depôts', *Army List*, March 1916, 594.

²⁰ 71062 Gunner Percy Wilsher's original 1 December 1915 attestation date was also struck out. After call-up, he had attested for a second time two days after Lewis at the same London recruiting office. Fresh papers were generated on that occasion, suggesting that Lewis's December attestation form once existed but has not survived archivally. In early January, Lewis stated that he had already attested: British Library (BL), Lewis to Gregory, 6 January 1916, RP1797.

²¹ Lewis's medical examination not occurring until 20 March is consistent with them being dispensed with in the surge before the Derby Scheme deadline: 'After Attestation', *Times*, 13 December 1915, 10.

²² 'Single Men First', *Times*, 19 November 1915, 5; 'A Final Call', *Times*, 4 December 1915, 9; 'The Service Bill', *Times*, 6 January 1916, 9; David French, *British Strategy & War Aims, 1914-1916* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 130, 169; RJQ Adams & Philip Poirier, *The Conscription Controversy in Great Britain, 1900-18* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1987), 128, 133, 139-40.

²³ Lewis to Pound, 27 December 1915; Lewis to Baker & Sturge Moore, 4 January 1916.

Lewis wrote to Robert Gregory, another artist in his thirties, to solicit assistance in obtaining a commission.²⁴ At this point Gregory was a second lieutenant about to start his Royal Flying Corps training. So, despite familial connections to the Irish establishment, his powers of patronage would have been quite limited.²⁵ However, the letter is important because it sets out Lewis's motives and self-perception of potential military utility. His opening point was to stress 'very heavy responsibilities' towards his children, which meant he was not inclined to 'take up a post of the utmost danger'. This was a common concern for men of his age, but the Derby Scheme assumed parental responsibility through marriage and Lewis was still single.²⁶ Then, having stressed a command of the French language, Lewis suggested his suitability for military transportation work as an Army Service Corps (ASC) officer. He followed this up immediately through Maurice Bonham-Carter, the prime minister's son-in-law, but was re-directed towards the artillery.²⁷ The next key point was Lewis's formal application for a commission. This document survives but its dating is odd.²⁸ Lewis's signature is recorded as 26 January, the day before the conscription of unmarried men became law.²⁹ However, one of the character references is undated and the other was not added until 5 March, suggesting either prevarication or back-dating to give an impression of volunteering ahead of compulsion. The application requested ASC or 'Garrison Artillery', with 'Howitzer Brigade' appended later. There is some congruence here with an undated letter to Mary Borden Turner in which Lewis re-stated his 'unusual mastery of French' before suggesting employment with the ASC, 'the Howitzer Brigade', or in espionage.³⁰ The latter may seem far-fetched but writers, such as Somerset Maugham and Compton Mackenzie, did find themselves employed on secret intelligence duties.³¹ Regardless of how Lewis envisaged himself best employed militarily, as he had acknowledged to Gregory, it was 'very difficult' to obtain a commission at this point in the war. This was because the army was shifting towards commissioning primarily from the ranks.³² Also, when Lewis's last-minute application landed

²⁴ BL, Lewis to Gregory, 6 January 1916, RP1797; O'Keefe, *Genius*, 176.

²⁵ TNA, MA1(b) minute, 3 January 1916, WO339/42377.

²⁶ For middle-class men's conflicting responsibilities towards their country and their dependents, see: Laura Ugolini, *Civvies: Middle-Class Men on the English Home Front, 1914-18* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 135-41.

²⁷ Cornell University, catalogue entry for Maurice Bonham Carter to Wyndham Lewis, 12 January 1916, Folder 95, Box 89, Lewis Papers; O'Keefe, *Genius*, 177.

²⁸ TNA, Commission application, March 1916, WO339/81917.

²⁹ Adams & Poirier, *Conscription*, 140.

³⁰ Lewis to Borden Turner, [undated].

³¹ Selina Hastings, *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham* (London: John Murray, 2009), 203-8; Keith Jeffery, *MI6: The History of the Secret Intelligence Service, 1909-1949* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 91, 126-9.

³² Keith Simpson, 'The Officers' in Ian Beckett & Keith Simpson (eds.), *A Nation in Arms: A Social Study of the British Army in the First World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 83.

on a desk in the War Office, the assessor would have first noticed that it was on the form for those who had not served in a private school or university OTC.³³ They may have also inferred, from Lewis's clear preference for logistics or long-range artillery, a desire to avoid the front line. Whatever their thought processes, the application was rejected. Lewis was notified to that effect on 13 March, and the following week his age group was conscripted.

Lewis' first fortnight as a soldier was spent in Dover.³⁴ Letters to his mother show that, in common with other non-working class recruits, uncomfortable accommodation and poor food were the dominant dislocations from his civilian life.³⁵ Both were also commented upon by Allfree, who further noted overcrowding, a paucity of uniforms, and seemingly endless drilling which was painful in new army boots. However, these activities were concluded by mid-afternoon and recruits were then free to go into town.³⁶ In Lewis's case this facilitated some excessive drinking with sailors.³⁷ According to his memoir, similar bouts of alcohol consumption were also a feature of his subsequent posting to Weymouth.³⁸ Looking back upon his non-commissioned service, Lewis placed emphasis upon his status as a bombardier, the artillery's equivalent to lance-corporal.³⁹ The impression conveyed, and later amplified by O'Keefe, is that he 'enjoyed swift promotion'.⁴⁰ Assessing that progress against those he enlisted with is hindered by incomplete records and is a questionable exercise given that they were from a different social class and had not benefitted from a private school education.⁴¹ A

³³ In the first six months of the conflict, 20,000 men with OTC experience had been commissioned: Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 221.

³⁴ No.1 Depot RGA, Fort Burgoyne.

³⁵ Lewis to mother, 25 March, 2 April 1916; Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 191-209; Rachel Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting: Food and the Soldiers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 67-99.

³⁶ IWM, Edward Allfree, 'War diary' [undated], 20-4, Documents.6976.

³⁷ Lewis, *Blasting*, 101.

³⁸ 183 Siege Battery RGA and 30 Company RGA. The latter's postal address appears incorrectly in the published version of Lewis's letters as RGA Westham Training Unit. 'Westham' was the location given by Lewis in his memoir: TNA, soldier record, WO339/81917; Lewis, *Blasting*, 24, 32; Materer (ed.), *Pound/Lewis*, 30-2.

³⁹ War Office, *King's Regulations* (London: HMSO, 1912), 57; Lewis, *Blasting*, 7, 32. Lewis became an acting bombardier on joining 183 Siege Battery in mid-July 1916. Six weeks later he was made an acting full bombardier and a week on, while in the process of applying again for a commission, was formally promoted to corporal: TNA, soldier record, WO339/81917; Pound to Lewis, 7 September 1916.

⁴⁰ O'Keefe, *Genius*, 179.

⁴¹ Because of 1940 fire damage to their papers, only seven men with RGA regimental numbers between 71040 and 71067 can be confirmed as joining at Dover from 22 to 26 March 1916. But within that number range, nine men's occupations are listed: baker, farm labourer, grocer's assistant, labourer, licensed victualler, nursery worker, rounds manager, shop assistant, and shop manager.

fairer comparison is with those who commissioned alongside Lewis at the end of 1916 and, of these, thirty-three officer files have survived.⁴² Taking that sample, fifteen had prior enlisted service at home with the RGA and comparable educational backgrounds.⁴³ Five had reached the rank of bombardier or acting bombardier before starting their officer training. Therefore, given that he was in the third that got promoted, Lewis's progress can be said to be creditable. However, its rapidity is questionable. Reconstructing the timeline from his letters to Ezra Pound, he appears to have twice failed the five-week junior NCO course at Weymouth.⁴⁴ As O'Keefe has highlighted, his performance was judged to be below par by Captain Henry Nind, an instructor in his early forties with a 'broken nose, & teeth' who had recently been commissioned from the ranks.⁴⁵ Lewis's letters were focused on Nind's apparent vetoing of a successful commission application. Lewis appears to have believed, as he had prior to enlistment, that this would happen through string-pulling and so, as best he could, he tried to cultivate relationships with both the commanding officer and adjutant.⁴⁶ Such favours-focused assumptions continued after Lewis's departure from Weymouth, whereby he appears to have delayed his re-submission of a commission application in the absence of a battery commander of sufficient rank.⁴⁷

Lewis's persistent pursuit of a commission, and his explanations for why it was not forthcoming, may have distracted later commentators from concluding that perhaps he was just not a very good gunner at this point. Nind's antipathy explains Lewis not being fast-tracked to second lieutenant, but on its own it seems an insufficient cause of him not quickly becoming a junior NCO. Lewis may have been convinced that his 'more positive [assessment] marks were [...] tampered with', but the course content

⁴² RGA (Special Reserve) second lieutenants commissioned 25 December 1916, *Army List*, March 1917, 656d-e; TNA, WO339/65103, 70237, 72209, 72366, 73601, 73608, 73695, 74001, 77901, 77904, 77905, 77911, 77913, 77914, 77921, 77925, 77927, 77930, 77932, 77937, 77938, 78337, 78343, 78345, 79328, 81918, 82505, 82518, 82519, 82520, 82525, 82530, 82532.

⁴³ ACS Baker, CEO Carter, WB Dixon, AW Gay, GW Gibson, G Goodchild, JL Haddon, MP Harris, WL Horler, WA Lichtenberg, T Morrill, G Rae, CS Righton, NC Swindell, RJ Wallis. One, like Lewis, had attended a Clarendon school, five had a tertiary education, while the others were educated at private, technical, or grammar schools.

⁴⁴ Lewis to Pound, 12 April, 16 May, 22, 25 June 1916. The first course ran from mid-April to mid-May, with the second following on through to late June. The gunnery elements seem to have been delivered at the East Weare batteries on Portland. Lewis's letter of 25 June anticipated a third five-week cycle.

⁴⁵ TNA, soldier record, WO339/27968; O'Keefe, *Genius*, 179-80. Census data indicates Nind was from the rural working class and had previously taught gunnery at Woolwich: 1881, 1901 & 1911 Census entries for Henry James Nind (b.1874).

⁴⁶ See also the attempted cultivation of Captain William à Beckett: Lewis to Pound, 25 June 1916.

⁴⁷ Lewis to Pound, 20 August 1916. It was subsequently endorsed by the major commanding his brigade: TNA, commission application, WO339/81917.

should not have been a high hurdle for a man of his intelligence and education.⁴⁸ Although Allfree's experience of the same process was in a different location that summer, it is fair to assume that the subjects and their delivery would have been similar across the RGA. He recalled primarily 'classes, lectures [and] gun drill'.⁴⁹ Another gunner's certificate from a late 1916 course further documents the syllabus:

Gunnery definitions, triangulation, use of directors, lines of fire, gun drill, duties of No.1 & No.4 [manning the gun], slide rules, mechanical appliances, marching & rifle drill, duties of NCOs, laying platforms, map reading, knotting & lashing, road sketching, shells, cartridges, fuzes & tubes.⁵⁰

But more importantly, as Allfree noted, the course also 'entailed spending one's evenings in reading and learning the drill for [various guns] by heart [...] the mechanism [...] and the drill for each'. Given that Lewis was somewhat reluctantly in the army and impatient to be recommended for a commission, he may have been insufficiently motivated to spend his off-duty time rote memorising *Garrison Artillery Training* (1911)? Lewis might have been 'astonished' by his second failure of the course, and the adjutant 'grieved', but for patronage to have worked its magic he would have first needed to demonstrate some basic technical competence.⁵¹

Although the adjutant lined up a third 'special course' for him, in mid-July Lewis was transferred to 183 Siege Battery, which had been established in Weymouth three weeks earlier. He thought this a good outcome because the alternative would have been going directly to France as an individual reinforcement. Furthermore, he was made an acting lance bombardier upon joining the then 'partially formed' battery.⁵² Now in a unit preparing to deploy, Lewis's military context had shifted significantly. He viewed the battery as 'pleasant enough' and was pleased when a sergeant told him he had 'done better on the [drill] field than any corporal present'.⁵³ This would suggest that while he was competent in exercising command, it had been the more rote and technical aspects of gunnery which Nind had

⁴⁸ Lewis to Pound, 22 June 1916.

⁴⁹ IWM, Edward Allfree, 'War diary' [undated], 34, Documents.6976. Allfree was promoted to acting bombardier within a month of leaving the depot, suggesting he passed the NCO course first time: TNA, soldier record, WO339/83733.

⁵⁰ Royal Artillery Museum (RAM), B Siege Depot, Junior NCO Siege Course certificate, 28 December 1916, Frederick Spong papers, <theogilbymuster.com> accessed 21 June 2022.

⁵¹ Lewis to Pound, 25 June 1916.

⁵² TNA, soldier record, WO339/81917; Lewis to Pound, 25 June, 8, 13 July 1916.

⁵³ Lewis to Pound, 16 July 1916.

judged to be below par. Although hoping that this 'fresh start' might lead towards a commission, Lewis also believed that if he continued to pursue it when he got to France, he would be a 'dead man'.⁵⁴ Presumably, and not unreasonably, he anticipated more dangerous duties being assigned to an NCO who aspired to become an officer. During this period Lewis also reflected upon his military motivation. In mid-July he told Pound double-negatively that 'a disinclination to go into the firing line is not very great with me. I contemplate going to France with perfect equanimity'. He also suggested that trying to obtain a commission was not 'an avoidance' of deployment, but instead stemmed from a desire to 'secure myself favourable conditions [... because] as an officer I might be able to count on a few steady hours a week in which I could write or draw'.⁵⁵ However, after hearing about high officer casualties in a deployed battery, Lewis was more uncertain about seeking a commission, wondering if instead he would be 'better off to stick where I am'.⁵⁶ This has echoes of Lewis's pre-enlistment phase, where he sought both relative safety and high status. Exposure to military life seems to have shown him that both were difficult to obtain and could be mutually exclusive.

Cadet

Later in August, 183 Siege Battery proceeded to Lydd to conduct their main pre-deployment training. Because that work included firing live ammunition, the military atmosphere would have been very different to Weymouth. Lewis told Pound that 'first blood is drawn at this so called "live" camp. But it is chiefly signallers that are killed'.⁵⁷ This may seem hyperbolic, but the previous month a targeting mistake by an inexperienced battery had come very close to causing multiple casualties during a shoot.⁵⁸ Militarily, Lewis felt he was 'progressing favourably' and this is reflected in his promotion to substantive bombardier in early September.⁵⁹ In this period he also submitted a second commission application and, while it was being processed, he was transferred to another battery.⁶⁰ This time Lewis requested only the RGA and, wielding their blue pencil, his Rugby School education was highlighted by whoever assessed the application favourably within the War Office. Therefore, on 26 October, Lewis became an officer cadet at 3B Reserve Brigade Royal Field Artillery (RFA) in Exeter and then,

⁵⁴ Lewis to Pound, 8, 13 July 1916.

⁵⁵ Lewis to Pound, 16 July 1916.

⁵⁶ Lewis to mother, 4 August 1916; O'Keefe, *Genius*, 181.

⁵⁷ Lewis to Pound, 20 August 1916.

⁵⁸ DJ Walters & CR Hurlé, *The History of 135th Siege Battery RGA* (London: Hartley Robinson, 1921), 20-1.

⁵⁹ Lewis to Pound, 20 August 1916; TNA, soldier record, WO339/81917.

⁶⁰ Lewis to Hunt, August 1916, Rose (ed.), *Letters*, 84-5; Pound to Lewis, 7 September 1916; TNA, soldier record & commission application, WO339/81917. Lewis served with 196 Siege Battery from mid-September. 183 Siege deployed to France a fortnight later: 92293 Gunner Charles Cook, <davidgibbins.com> accessed 21 June 2022.

from 5 November, at the Royal Artillery Cadet School, Trowbridge. Only one letter referring to this period survives, so Lewis's version of events is documented – albeit briefly – in his memoir.⁶¹ However, by examining materials recorded contemporaneously and subsequently by others in the same training pipeline, a more rounded understanding of his military development can be discerned. Overall, the officer training was generally less dangerous than Lewis portrayed it and his own attainment within it likely misrepresented as well.

Exeter's primary purpose was RFA rather than RGA officer training and its main two-month course also had a consistent focus upon horses, the prime movers of the RFA's artillery pieces which were smaller and thus more mobile than those of the RGA. Men who were cadets there in the autumn of 1916 recorded a process that began with frequent stables work, rifle or gun drill, physical training, and plenty of cleaning and polishing. This was followed by progression to basic gunnery and the use of communication systems before, in the later stages of the course, battery drills, directing fire, and driving teams of horses around the Devon countryside. They also noted bad food, a predominance of teenage cadets who had come straight from private schools, and an off duty focus upon rugby.⁶² Lewis later claimed that Exeter was an 'inferno of horseflesh', where 'I nearly lost my life in the riding school. Several people were killed while I was there, trying to ride. It was a weekly – perhaps a daily – occurrence'.⁶³ In this regard, other cadets noted 'vaulting on and off [horses] at the trot' and 'jumps with and without stirrups and reins', which resulted in many falling from their mounts and some 'broken limbs'.⁶⁴ However, from when cadet training began there in March until Lewis's arrival in October, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) lists two fatalities in the batteries based in Exeter, and only one may have been a cadet killed in a riding accident.⁶⁵ Lewis's dramatic

⁶¹ Evidential absence highlighted in: O'Keefe, *Genius*, 182.

⁶² Winterbourne House & Garden, University of Birmingham, John to Evelyn Nettlefold, 10 October 1916, WBN/L/21/1; IWM, Charles to Phylis Carter, 12 October 1916, Documents.19508; RAM, Cyril Hunt diary (15 September to 16 November 1916), William Slade & Alfred Esmond memoirs.

⁶³ Lewis, *Blasting*, 103. This 'weekly' danger highlighted in: Paul Gough, *A Terrible Beauty: British Artists in the First World War* (Bristol: Sansom, 2010), 216.

⁶⁴ RAM, Cyril Hunt diary, 19, 29 September, 3 October 1916, William Slade memoir; IWM, Charles to Phylis Carter, 12 October 1916, Documents.19508.

⁶⁵ 16th, 17th & 18th Reserve Batteries RFA began training officer cadets at the beginning of March 1916: RAM, 16th & 17th Reserve Battery Digests, 7, 8 April 1916. 377875 Gunner A Buckley (collier, so highly unlikely in 1916 to have been a cadet) died 17 May. 2749312 Gunner William Woodward (manufacturer) died 13 April and is 'cadet' on a memorial plaque in Ryne Intrinseca but cause of death is unknown.

remembrance of equine peril is also undermined by the fact that he was on the one-week 'Special Siege Artillery Class'. They mucked out and groomed horses but did not ride them.⁶⁶

After Exeter, Lewis noted the 'comparative repose of Trowbridge'. A fellow cadet summarised the atmosphere as being one of excellent food, poor accommodation, 'nearly all lectures', and 'much less rush'. However, he also noted a strict regime; a point emphasised earlier by another cadet who recorded many 'extra drill[s]' for violations of 'discipline and smartness'.⁶⁷ In this new environment Lewis later claimed to have demonstrated 'some degree of brilliance' and 'revealed myself as a natural master of calculus'. To support those claims he pointed to an attainment of fifth place in 'the exam'.⁶⁸ Given his earlier difficulties in a training environment at Weymouth, Lewis's putative blossoming as a gunner needs contextualising as it is an important indicator of both his military motivation and competence. Clifford Gothard, who was a month ahead of Lewis at Trowbridge, wrote frequently to his brother about the training. His letters included the exam papers, so it is possible to reconstruct the six weeks of course content.⁶⁹ The first three, assessed by the initial exam, focused on guns, ammunition, and other artillery equipment. Like Lewis's experiences at Weymouth, it seems to have been mostly rote learning of technical specifications, but also included calculations for the correction of fire. Over the following fortnight the teaching of gunnery processes and mathematics became more complex and artillery doctrine for bombardments was also explained to the cadets. Then, after a final exam with both practical and written elements, the course concluded with a few days of exercises in Somerset, which included the digging of gun positions. Thus Lewis had, in passing this course, demonstrated officer-level competence in gunnery.

Helpfully, the standing orders of another RGA cadet school, written a couple of months later, codify the consequences of not passing the assessments. Failing the initial exam would see a cadet returned immediately to his unit, while a single re-take was permitted for the final one. Given Lewis's strong

⁶⁶ IWM, Charles to Phylis Carter, 12 October 1916, Documents.19508. Exeter arrival dates for Lewis's commissioning peer group show a batch of thirteen on 29 September which included Carter. His letters (10 to 23 October) indicate they undertook the mainstream RFA course and went to Trowbridge a month later. Lewis and nine others arrived on 27 October and spent only nine days in Exeter, which fits Carter's description of the special siege course in undated letters. In his only letter referring to this period Lewis wrote of 'three "stables" a day' but made no mention of riding: Lewis to Quinn, 24 January 1917. Cadets on the RFA course were also streamed into a 'Siege Class' after scoring highly on an exam: Staffordshire Record Office (SRO), Clifford to Syd Gothard, 13 November 1916, D4054/3/1.

⁶⁷ West Sussex Record Office, Gordon Burder to Emily Druitt, 2 September 1916, Druitt MSS411/D5; IWM, Charles to Phylis Carter, 29 October 1916, Documents.19508.

⁶⁸ Lewis, *Blasting*, 104.

⁶⁹ SRO, Clifford to Syd Gothard, 22 October to 19 November 1916, D4054/3/1.

desire to become an officer, this jeopardy would have provided impetus. However, the impression of excellence conveyed by his memoir needs to be caveated. The same standing orders state that recommendations for commissions were sent to the War Office in an order-of-merit, and the sequence did not 'depend solely on success in the final examination, but also on the general behaviour of the cadet before and after his examination'.⁷⁰ His commissioning peer group of officers were not recorded alphabetically in the *Army List* and there are no other criteria, such as previous unit or cadet training start-date, that would explain the sequencing. Furthermore, only two officers were subsequently promoted beyond lieutenant, one of whom became a major commanding a siege battery. Those men were second and sixth, which implies that the order is hierarchical.⁷¹ Lewis appeared twenty-third of thirty-seven; a fair outcome but not evidence of 'brilliance'. Furthermore, to reinforce a positive impression of his performance, Lewis also claimed that a 'senior wrangler' (an academic award-winner in mathematics) had copied from him in the exam. Within his commissioning group, the only one with analogous credentials is George Rae, erstwhile assistant to the Professor of Mathematics at Aberdeen University.⁷² Rae came fourth in the probable order-of-merit.

Subaltern

In late January 1917, after commissioning at Christmas, procurement of an officer's uniforms, and probably some leave, Lewis returned to Lydd.⁷³ Like other newly commissioned RGA officers, he would have concluded his training there with a fortnight focused on operating a battery. As well as consolidating previous learning, the second lieutenants learnt how to range and observe fire, the use of ropes, blocks and tackle, calibration of guns, and were again assessed by practical and written exams.⁷⁴ Afterwards Lewis proceeded to Whitchurch where, on 7 February, he joined 330 Siege Battery.⁷⁵ Over the next four months the unit moved around England preparing for deployment; to Horsham in mid-February, Aldershot late March, and Lydd then Portsmouth in April.⁷⁶ Their training consisted of gun and battery drills plus route marches until they went to Lydd. There things became

⁷⁰ IWM, *Standing Orders of No.2 RGA Officer Cadet School for Officer Cadets* (London: Straker, 1917), LBY K.62143.

⁷¹ Gothard came top in the final exam and appears fourth within his commissioning group: SRO, Clifford to Syd Gothard, 13 November 1916, D4054/3/1; *Army List*, March 1917, 656.

⁷² 'Death of an outstanding Statistician', *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 12 November 1946, 6.

⁷³ Lewis to Quinn, 24 January 1917; Lewis, *Blasting*, 104.

⁷⁴ IWM, Morris diary, 27 January to 9 February 1917, Documents.14207; National Army Museum, William Harcourt diary, 10-24 February 1917, Acc.2023-08-7.

⁷⁵ RAM, 'Historical Record of 330 S[iege] Batt[er]y', 14 May 1917.

⁷⁶ For a colourful description of the training process in these locations at the same time, see: George Goodchild, *Behind the Barrage* (London: Jarrolds, 1918), 24-58. Goodchild was at Trowbridge with Lewis and then served in 328 Siege Battery: TNA, casualty form, WO339/82520.

more varied, with lectures on co-operation with aircraft observers, dug-out construction, and live firing.⁷⁷

By the end of February, the battery had a full complement of junior officers. However, Lewis seems to have developed, on sociability grounds, an early disdain for his colleagues. Writing to his mother at the beginning of March, he told her that they were ‘all dull dogs: it is a pity I couldn’t get into a battery with a rather more amusing lot’.⁷⁸ This initial disconnect with his closest colleagues is significant because it would evolve into an intense dislike. Their profiles and Lewis’s subsequent characterisations are summarised in **Fig.1**. Taking educational backgrounds as an indicator of social class; Clarkson had gone to Uppingham, a famous private school, Underhill a grammar school then Goldsmiths College, while Harcourt and Ikin had both attended state secondary schools.⁷⁹ Comparing them with Lewis’s commissioning peer group, 330’s officers were fairly typical and the RGA employing fairly well-educated, middle-class technocrats within their officer cadre is unsurprising.⁸⁰

However, the most obvious – and perhaps most significant – difference between Lewis and the other 330 Siege Battery subalterns was the nine-year average age difference that lay between them. In this regard, Lewis was unlucky, given that his commissioning peer group had erred more towards men in their thirties, with most of that group being older than him.⁸¹ In understanding this and other aspects of the small-group dynamics amongst the battery officers, it is fortunate that one of them, William Harcourt, kept a diary which has recently come to light.⁸² Containing a detailed chronicle of the battery’s activities, his version of events provides both corroboration and challenge for Lewis’s narratives. In the pre-deployment period, as well as conducting their military duties, Harcourt tells us that he, Underhill, and Ikin spent a fair amount of their off-duty time together. Their activities included

⁷⁷ Harcourt diary, 25 February to 28 April 1917.

⁷⁸ Lewis to mother, [2 March 1917]. The letter can be dated by its Horsham address and reference to the visit of Field Marshal French: Harcourt diary, 1 March 1917.

⁷⁹ TNA, Army Form B2076, 10 August 1914, WO339/24935; Commission application, 24 September 1916, WO339/79599; Record of service, WO339/72883; Commission application, August 1916, WO339/72889.

⁸⁰ Breakdown by employment type: agriculture (2), architecture/survey (3), arts (2, including Lewis), clerical (1), commerce (7), education (8), finance (1), legal (5), student (5).

⁸¹ Seventeen in their thirties (twelve older than Lewis, thirty-four), thirteen in twenties, a forty-year-old, and one teenager.

⁸² Pictures of the diaries, but not their content: <lwf.it.ox.ac.uk> accessed 30 December 2021. Contrary to Lewis’s description, William Harcourt was not Jewish; he was from a Protestant Birmingham family that had migrated to Cape Town. ‘Brummagem Jew’ seems to have been a pejorative colloquialism: Pauline Greenhill, ‘Folk and Academic Racism: Concepts from Morris and Folklore’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 115:456 (2002), 230. Anti-Semitism is also evident in a description of a colleague, presumably Harcourt, having a ‘a thick Hebraic neck’: Lewis to Pound, 12 October 1917.

walks, outdoor reading, theatre and cinema visits, shopping, and roller-skating. Lewis is conspicuous by his absence, except for a dinner of four officers at a hotel near Lydd.⁸³ That said, one of Lewis's letters shows that Clarkson was introduced to Pound, which implies some social interaction.⁸⁴ But with direct train lines to London from Horsham, Aldershot, and Portsmouth, it seems likely that Lewis took every opportunity to spend time away, putting his affairs in order, rather than strapping on roller skates with his younger colleagues.⁸⁵ This is understandable given his personal circumstances, but it was perhaps a missed opportunity for building the bonds of comradeship that soldiers rely upon for mutual support in difficult situations.⁸⁶

Surveying Lewis's account of home service, his experiences of joining the war seem rooted in a narrative effort to promote his own willingness to serve and a natural aptitude for soldiering. The latter is accentuated by successful competition with other officer cadets. However, an accumulation of contextual evidence casts doubt on Lewis's version of events. His initial progress through the training system seems to have been quite ordinary and was perhaps retarded by a reluctance to be in uniform at all. That said, during his officer cadet period the jeopardy of being returned to the ranks seems to have energised Lewis into demonstrating competence as a gunner. How he then fared on 'active service' in Flanders will be dealt with in a companion article.

⁸³ Harcourt diary, 26 February, 3, 4, 9-10, 12, 18 March, 12, 22 April, 12, 16, 18 May 1917.

⁸⁴ 'That hysterical little thing I introduced you to': Lewis to Pound, [19-20] August 1917.

⁸⁵ For aspects of Lewis's artistic and literary housekeeping in this period, see: Lewis to Quinn, Pound, Sturge Moore, 24 January, 22, 23 May 1917; O'Keefe, *Genius*, 182.

⁸⁶ For military motivation, 'primary group' theory in war, and its critiques, see: Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26-7, 50-1; Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 241-6, 257-9, 261-2; Ilya Berkovich, *Motivation in War: The Experience of Common Soldiers in Old-Regime Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9-14, 24-30.

Fig.1 – 330 Siege Battery Subalterns.

name	age	profession	Lewis's characterisation
Wilfred Clarkson	27	trainee solicitor	'hysterical and stunted little north-country lawyer'
William Harcourt	26	surveyor	'Brummagem Jew, crossed with a cape Dutchwoman'
Cedric Underhill	26	schoolmaster	'a sharp-featured, horse-toothed, narrow-browed, vain, crotchety young board-school master'
William Ikin	23	bank clerk	'Bank clerk from Lewisham'

Sources: TNA, attestation, 15 September 1914, WO339/24935; Attestation, 14 August 1915, WO339/72883; Protection Certificate, 17 October 1919, WO339/79599; Commission application, August 1916, WO339/72889; Lewis to Pound, 19 June, 11 October 1917, 78-9, 107-8.