



ARATOON WILLIAM DAVID GAUSSEN

Captain, 2nd Battalion, Highland Light Infantry

Died on Monday, 17th May 1915, Rue du Bois, Lys, age 38

There are many parallels between Charles Gawain Raleigh Hunter (*p.21*) and David Gausson. Both were career soldiers in light infantry. Both were born into upper middle-class families living in large country houses and both had fathers who were Justices of the Peace. There the resemblance ends, as, although Gausson was, like Hunter, the youngest son, he was some 20 years older and therefore had considerably more military experience at the beginning of WW1. But sadly, they were both killed not far from each other in Flanders within a month.

The Gausson family originally came from Dublin, although David, his attorney father, was born in Londonderry. He married in London in 1865; his wife, Elizabeth Sarah Apar, was born in Calcutta, as was their first daughter two years later. Shortly afterwards they must have moved back to the U.K., as their oldest son, Charles, who was to die in 1901 in the Boer War, was born in County Wicklow. James Robert, who will appear later, was born in Abingdon, Berkshire, where the family was living in 1871. Aratoon William David was born in 1875 at Broughton Hall, in Oxfordshire, as were his two twin sisters. His unusual first name comes from his mother's family. Her grandfather, Aratoon Apar, an Armenian, founded a shipping firm in Calcutta, which was apparently also involved in the opium trade.

David Gausson entered Sandhurst in January 1894 and the next year was gazetted as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Highland Light Infantry. Joining the 2nd Battalion, in 1897-8, he served in the Malakand and Buner Field Forces on the North West Frontier, that perennial (and continuing) thorn in Britain's side. In 1900 he was attached to the 1st Battalion during the



Boer War and was awarded the Queens Medal with three clasps and the Kings Medal with two, seeing action at Paardeburg, Wittenbergen and Witpoort. After his promotion to Captain in 1901, three years later, in November 1904, at the delightfully Irish-named Abbeyknockmoy Chapel in Galway (*left*), he married Marguerite Kelly, a County Court Judge's daughter. There do not appear to have been any children of the marriage. From November 1909 to December 1913 he was attached

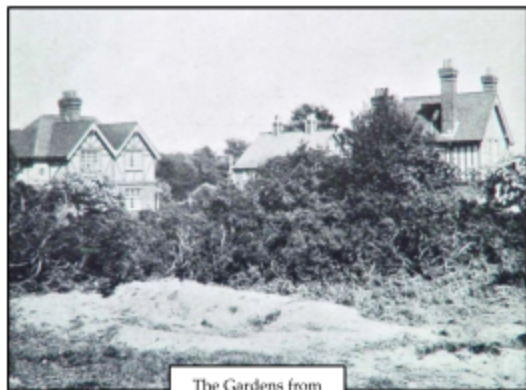
as Brigade-Major to the General Staff of the Irish Command, based at Cork.

With the shadows of a war looming, David returned to his regiment in 1914. At the outbreak of war in August, the 2nd Battalion, Highland Light Infantry were ready at Maida Barracks at Aldershot. Ten days later they were on the troopship 'Lake Michigan', arriving in Boulogne on August 14th. The next day, a train took them to Wassigny, the starting point on the map on the right, joining Kaiser Bill's "Contemptible Little Army" and beginning their baptism of fire, desperately trying to halt a German advance which was vastly superior in numbers and firepower, while themselves short of food, water, artillery and ammunition and stretched almost to breaking point under the hot summer sun.

The 2nd H.L.I.'s first real engagement was on August 25th, at Paturages, near Mons, where they were so heavily shelled that they were forced to withdraw. Then began a series of rearguard actions, taking them closer and closer to Paris before the Germans withdrew to prepared positions on first the Marne and then the Aisne. This map of their movements will give an idea of the fluid state of war in August and September. What became the Battle of the Aisne was a foretaste of the trench warfare that was to follow. The Germans had dug themselves in on top of the steep banks of the north side of the river and had the support of heavy artillery. Because of the difficulty in crossing, the 2nd H.L.I. came piecemeal to an attack on September 14th, gaining some ground, losing it again, digging in and coming under sustained howitzer shelling. There followed days of attack and



counter-attack around the village of Vernueil, until, on September 20th, the very day that John Albert Irelan died, David Gausson was severely wounded and repatriated to England.



The Gardens from
the rear in 1916,
Holly Villa on right

It was probably during his almost five-month long convalescence that he would have established his connection with Pirbright, though there is no direct evidence. We do know that Mrs Hilda Gausson rented Holly Grange, the first house in Pirbright Gardens, from Lady Pirbright for three years from June 1914 and continued

to live there until the early '20s. As Hilda Hennessy, she had married James Robert Gausson, David's older brother, at Lucknow in India in 1894. J. R. G. would rise to the rank of Brigadier General in the cavalry and fortunately survive the war. It is quite possible that Aratoon David's wife, Marguerite, could have been living somewhere near Aldershot, where he was stationed in August, so it would not be surprising if the two sisters-in-law were living together in this big house. Unfortunately there were no electoral registers during the war, but David must have spent some time in the village, or his name could not have appeared on the war memorial.

The War Diary records that he rejoined his regiment on February 8th 1915. After the trials of the First Battle of Ypres they had moved by then to the River Lys, about thirty miles south of Ypres. The 2nd Battalion that he rejoined was a vastly different unit from the one that had sailed for France just six months before. Even in the previous November, such was the attrition rate that barely 30 of the original 900 or so strong had survived and by February, the Regular Army had virtually ceased to exist, their places taken by inexperienced Territorials and keen but hastily trained volunteers. Due to the shortage of manpower and artillery in early 1915, as well as the foul weather, the 2nd Division could do little more than skirmish, often only in company strength,



Ypres 'trench' in foreground

but by May, with some more training and equipment and the incentive of a French initiative, there came a more offensive spirit, even though they were still thin on the ground. The 2nd H.L.I. had spent late April and early May in training billets, but on May 9th were moved up to reserve “trenches” near Loignes. The land here is flat, the fields bordered by wide ditches, as water lies less than 2 feet below the surface, so the only protection was a shallow pit with an earth and sandbag breastwork, no trench being possible (*photo previous page*). The attack by the 1st Division on Sunday, May 9th, which became known as the Battle of Aubers Ridge was, predictably, a miserable failure. The 2nd H.L.I., who were stood to during the day, stumbled about in chaos and pouring rain all night to eventually relieve a tangled mix of Black Watch and Coldstream Guards in reserve just in front of the Rue du Bois (*see map below*). The Battle of Festubert, a renewal of the offensive, starting on May 15th, initially had more success, thanks to a two day bombardment of the German defences. With the other four under-strength battalions, the 5th Infantry Brigade was in reserve during the initial assault at dawn on May 16th, which met with some success, but stalled by machine gun fire from the flanks and artillery in no-man’s land, which also destroyed the bridges over the dykes, making reinforcement difficult. The 52nd Division, which had borne the brunt of the assault and had been heavily shelled all day, was withdrawn and the 2nd Division, with the H.L.I., took its place in the front line. The map shows their exposed position on the early morning of May 17th, with the German front line close by on the left flank. The inset below is a photo of



the Cinder Track today, with the Ferme du Bois to the right of the left hand trees. The 2nd H.L.I. had not a single Field Officer left by this time and Capt. Gausson was now in command.

Cinder Track today. Ferme du Bois in the distance

'Early in the morning of 17 May, the 74th (2nd Bn. H.L.I.) were ordered to advance in conjunction with the 6th Infantry Brigade on the right and capture the fortified farmhouse of Ferme du Bois, some three hundred yards in front. The attack was timed for 10.30 a.m., but shortly after 8 a.m. a large number of Germans left their trenches with their hands up and surrendered to the 6th Infantry Brigade. As a result of this sign of weakness in the enemy's morale, a further order reached Captain Gaussen at 9.15 a.m. that the attack was to be put in at 9.30. Captain Gaussen was at the time with battalion headquarters and two companies in the former British front line trenches, and he was thus given no time to change the hour of attack. He was obliged to take battalion headquarters forward immediately, in order to get the two companies in the captured German trench into the attack on time. The only covered approach was however, the communication trench dug during the previous night; which for most of the way was only waist-deep, finally petering out completely before reaching the German line—the fatigue party having followed the usual British tradition with regard to digging. Captain Gaussen therefore had to lead battalion headquarters across the open, in the face of a withering fire at point blank range from the Germans in the trench immediately on the left. He was instantly killed, and the Adjutant and survivors of battalion headquarters only managed to reach the forward companies by wading up to their waists in a ditch, which fortunately joined up with the captured German support line.'

Captain Aratoon William David Gaussen's body was never recovered.

His name is recorded on the memorial at Le Touret nearby.

