

RICHARD DE RUPE ROCHE

Cpl. 409, 16th Battalion, London Regiment,

(Queens Westminster Rifles)

Died on Friday, 8th January 1915, Houplines, France, age 34

Qualifying four times for the King's Prize, Richard often came to shoot on Bisley ranges, so it must have been there that he met and fell in love with Ethel, the daughter of George Edmondstone Fulton, the local gunsmith. The pair were married at St. Michaels Church, Pirbright on April 8th 1911.



Bisley Ranges c1910

Richard may not have had an easy childhood, since he was only eight when his father died. Richard Roche senior (*see photo below*) was a Royal Navy officer, nicknamed 'Arctic' from his time as a Lieutenant on H.M.S. Resolute in the search for the ill-fated 1845 North-West Passage expedition of Sir John Franklin. *



Richard was a retired Captain, aged 47, when he married the widowed 42-year-old Maria Jane Leeson in 1879. As Maria Jane Squarey, she had married Henry Beaumont Leeson, an Isle of Wight doctor, ten years before, but he had died in 1872, leaving her quite comfortably off. Richard and Maria's firstborn, Richard de Rupe Roche (the middle name probably coming from his father, who was born in France) was born at Ventnor in 1880 and his brother Maurice, who was handicapped, in 1882, but later that year their mother died and their father was to follow six years on, leaving the two orphaned boys to be brought up in Wandsworth by Helen Jeaffreson, their maternal aunt, and her doctor husband Horace.

Maybe swept along by the tide of jingoism like many of his generation, Richard seized the chance of adventure and excitement by joining the Boer War, enlisting in February 1900 and becoming Trooper no. 4766 in the 50th Company of the 17th Imperial Yeomanry, travelling to Cape Colony, Rhodesia, Orange Free State and Transvaal. Wounded at Rondal in March 1901, he was discharged, but later joined the Queens Westminster Rifles as a Territorial. In the 1911 census he was a lodger at Hugh Street, near Victoria Station as a cab driver, which is strange, as in the Pirbright marriage register less than a month later, he appears as of Model Cottages, Pirbright as an engineer, the same occupation as in the Pirbright baptisms for November 1913, when his daughter Barbara Ethel was christened. At that time the family's address was in Hounslow.

Come the outbreak of the Great War, Richard's military experience was urgently needed and, as a reservist, he was called up early. For the following account of his war service, I am indebted to Messrs. Dix, Noonan and Webb, who auctioned his medals in 2010:- 'Called up in August 1914, he went with his Battalion to France on 1 November 1914, and was Mentioned in Despatches for his bravery at the end of the month: 'On the 30th November, Lieutenant J. B. Baber and Corporal R. de R. Roche captured the first prisoners for the Battalion. They had gone out at night to patrol along a ditch some way in front of the line, when they suddenly found themselves surrounded by three different parties of the enemy who had apparently arranged to meet at a certain spot. Two of the enemy patrols passed by without having their suspicions aroused, but the third consisting of three men was making its way towards the place where Lieutenant Baber and Corporal Roche were crouching. The latter immediately opened fire, and after killing one man rushed the remaining two, who threw down their rifles and surrendered.'



Houplines trenches

The circumstances of Roche's death during the Houplines operations (near Armentieres) are also described in *The War History of the 1st Battalion, Queen's Westminster Rifles 1914-18*, by J. Q. Henriques: '8th January, just as it was beginning to get light, Corporal R. de R. Roche was shot as he was crossing the open to get some water for his gun. He was not missed until daylight, when he was seen lying in the open in rear of the trench and in full view of the enemy, who was not more than a hundred and twenty yards away. It was practically certain death to attempt to reach him; but two very gallant men, Rifleman P. H. A. Tibbs, a stretcher-bearer, and Rifleman Pouchot (both of No. 2 Company), crawled out to him to see if anything could be done. As soon as they were seen, the enemy opened fire on them, but both men went on and succeeded in reaching Corporal Roche, who was found to be dead. Rifleman Tibbs was killed as he was kneeling over his body; but Rifleman Pouchot, who saw that both men were beyond help, managed to get back to our lines untouched. He was awarded the D.C.M. for his bravery on this occasion, and thus won the first decoration gained by the Battalion. Rifleman P. H. A. Tibbs was mentioned in despatches. Corporal Roche was a noted rifle and revolver shot, and a very keen member of the Regiment. At home he had always been ready to give to others the benefit of his experience; he had served in the South African War, and in France had already done some splendid work for which he was mentioned in Despatches. In him the Battalion lost a good soldier and a true comrade.' A less comfortable but probably more accurate account of Roche's final moments appears in *The Daily Graphic*, a witness describing how he was actually found him 'gasping for breath, with a terrible wound in his face', and how Tibbs was shot down as he tried to bandage him with a field dressing; similarly, further mention of the incident is to be found in the diary of Sergeant B. J. Brookes, also of the Queen's Westminster Rifles, who stated that their bodies lay out in the water - for the area was flooded - for a long time, 'the stretcher bearer lying with his arm round the neck of the other man', since the Germans kept a close eye on them in the hope of catching further victims. Roche, whose posthumous 'Mention' by Sir John French appeared in *The London Gazette* on 22 June 1915, was eventually interred in the Houplines Communal Cemetery Extension, where he lies in a grave adjoining that of the heroic Rifleman Tibbs.



Houplines Cemetery



Grave marker

Maybe encouraged by Richard, Ethel's younger brother Frank Fulton also joined the Queens Westminster Rifles, only to be killed two years after him (see his biography). Now a widow with a young baby, Ethel was living near her parents in Maple Road, Brookwood. She was reasonably well provided for, as Richard had left £2365, the equivalent of more than £200,000 today. At some stage she moved to Culver Road in Horsell, the address on the Commonwealth War Graves citation. The next time we find Ethel is on a boat to Canada in 1920 with a young Barbara on a visit to her younger brother Harold, who farmed in Manitoba. They must have stayed nineteen months, not returning until September the following year, giving the address as Bisley Cottage, Brookwood. On the Pirbright Electoral Registers for 1946, she appears just once, at Oaktree Cottage, Cowshot, next to Bisley Camp, which was her father's house before he died in 1943. Both she and her daughter became teachers, noted on

the ship's manifest in 1951 when they both visited Canada again. Ethel Roche died in 1970 at Dorchester and is commemorated on her elder brother Arthur's grave in Pirbright churchyard. Daughter Barbara died twenty years later at Bournemouth. Richard's brother Maurice never married, so this Roche line has now died out.



* Information kindly supplied by Randall Wallace, Edmonton, Canada