

25th Battalion Royal Fusiliers – The Legion of Frontiersmen

The story of the 'Legion of Frontiersmen' is fascinating and many books have been written about it and its founder, Henry Roger Pocock. Because the story is so fascinating, and is all we have of Jo Blackburn's WW1 experience, it's worth giving a short history of the organisation, some idea of its characters, while providing a link with WW1 and Blackburn.

On Boxing Day, 1904, adventurer and author Henry Roger Pocock (known as Roger) sent a letter to all major London newspapers calling for men who had experience of work or action abroad to unite in service to the Country in times of need. One of the ideas behind the Legion was that these men would act as the "eyes and ears" of the Empire – alerting British embassies around the world to issues of concern.

Roger had seen service in the South African war and, later, joined the Canadian North-West Mounted Police.

By the time he was forty, he had seen enough adventure to fill several lives and he drew on these experiences when he wrote the adventure stories that made him a popular author.

He held the long-distance horse-riding record, when, at the turn of the century, he rode unarmed from Fort MacLeod, in Canada, to Mexico, crossing the great American deserts. He even rode into the 'Badlands', the outlaws' stronghold, to interview Butch Cassidy, and his fellow outlaws, for a London newspaper. Cassidy had been so amazed by this unarmed Englishman that he had agreed to an interview.

The 1904 letter soon attracted others of a similar adventurous spirit to Pocock and the Legion was born. And, before long, it was represented throughout the four corners of the earth.

In 1909, however, arguments between the leaders of the Legion led to Pocock, the founder, being expelled and replaced by a Daniel Patrick Driscoll who, on 12th February 1915, with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, formed the 25th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) - the 'Frontiersmen'. Driscoll was, at that time, fifty-five years of age, well above that of an average soldier

Driscoll wanted a mixture of the 'Irregular Scout Guerrillas' of the Boer War and commandos, which put his ideas thirty years ahead of the time.

The age limit was, supposedly, 25-48 years but it was obvious that a few old-timers must have forgotten the year in which they were born as Driscoll succeeded in getting a commission for the famous hunter F. C. Serous, because of his knowledge of the area, in spite of his being sixty-four years of age. Other experienced and well-known African hunters at the time were recruited by him, such as Martin Ryan, George Outram and Jock Richardson – their stories are well worth reading. It was, perhaps, because of this wealth of knowledge and experience that the 25th was the only Battalion of the British Expeditionary Force to embark and enter the field without training.

On 10th April 1915, the 25th Battalion embarked from Plymouth for East Africa, arriving at Mombasa on 4th May 1915. It was formally taken over by the War Office during 1915, in common with other locally raised and "pals" battalions.

The battalion served in the African Theatre of the war from 1915–1918, centred mostly in the area around Lake Tanganyika, British East African and German East African territory. The battalion was largely composed of older men who hailed from diverse backgrounds and varied occupations, some of whom were Boer War veterans. Amongst these occupations were English big-game hunters, a British millionaire, several American cowboys, a Scottish light-house keeper, a naturalist, a circus clown, an Arctic explorer, an opera singer, a famous photographer, and a lion tamer. There were also French Foreign Legionaries and Russians (reportedly prison escapees from Siberia).

The 25th gained the nickname "Old and the Bold", due to its members' ages, their veteran status, and their reputation for endurance and daring against the enemy - even though the majority of volunteers were, actually, young men.

The Stories

Many stories were told of the “Frontiersmen” because of their romantic and adventurous image – some were found to be true and others not so true! Below is just one of the many that’s – well, possibly true!

Pat Cowan was a Frontiersman who preferred German rifles, so had to capture prisoners to keep himself supplied with the proper ammunition. In one pursuit, on foot, he lost his rifle, but continued to chase the armed German soldier into a small, French café where he first disarmed him and, then, bought the man a drink - before marching him into captivity.