

My Great-Grandfather's War

Part 1: Arno Bierast of FAR 48

This is the first in a six-part series on my German great-grandfather's war service with **Kgl. Sächs. 4. Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr.48** (FAR 48). After a brief summary, I will be telling the story mainly through the pictures and their captions.

Emil Arno Bierast (known throughout his life as Arno) was born on 9th August 1889 at Zwickau in western Saxony, evidently into a solidly middle class family. His father Friedrich Wilhelm Emil Bierast had moved from the ancestral home town of Rosswein in the east of the kingdom, where he had entered the family trade of *Seiler* (ropemaker). He was one of two brothers, but it is not entirely clear whether Rudolf or Arno was the elder. By 1906 the elder Bierast is listed in the address book for Zwickau as *Werkmeister* (foreman), and had evidently made his fortune. This allowed him to provide Arno with a vocational secondary education. According to a CV prepared in 1934, Arno had attended a '*Höhere Handelslehranstalt*' with training courses at the *Handelshochschule* in Leipzig. He was apprenticed to the firm of C.F. Baessler in Auerbach from August 1904 to the end of 1906, continuing to work for them for a further three months as salesman and stockman. Subsequently he held a series of white-collar positions as bookkeeper and correspondent in Tangermünde and Berlin.

Reaching the age of 21 in 1910, Arno belonged to the approximate half of the annual potential intake who were passed over for peacetime active military service - perhaps simply because he wore glasses. Consequently he was probably on the books of the Royal Saxon Army as an *Ersatz-Reservist*, to be called up for training in the event of war.



In March 1912 Arno embarked on a different adventure, travelling to the German colony of Kamerun (Cameroon) in West Africa to work for the Woermann trading company of Hamburg. Initially based at Longji on the coast, during his second year he was entrusted with the running of a '*Faktorei*' (trading post) in the interior, purchasing rubber and selling European goods. Due to the poor economic situation (Cameroon being primarily a status symbol, and never producing enough to justify the German state's investment) he was allowed to break his contract early and return to Germany in February 1914. Had he not done so, he would undoubtedly have become involved in the 1914-1916 campaign to defend the colony, though lacking any prior military experience he would not have immediately been called upon to fight.

At the beginning of July 1914, Arno took up a new post with a Swedish company in Helsingfors (Helsinki, Finland). There his career was interrupted by the international crisis which became the First World War, and he was forced to return to Germany to avoid Russian internment. Rather than wait to be called up as an *Ersatz-Reservist* and face the prospect of service with the infantry, Arno presented himself at the barracks of FAR 48 in Dresden on 24th August 1914 and was accepted as a *Kriegsfreiwilliger* (war volunteer). While eminently respectable, artillery service was significantly less likely to result in death; this decision may well have saved his life, though it would leave him hard of hearing for the rest of his life.

As an educated man who had held a series of responsible positions, Arno was promoted to *Gefreiter* (lance-corporal) at some point during his six or so weeks of training. Luckily for him he was not picked for the new formations of XXVII. Reservekorps which were being raised at this time, but was instead sent to reinforce FAR 48 in the field, arriving on 12th October.

Until the end of 1916, FAR 48 belonged to 23. Infanterie-Division of XII. Armeekorps. It had fought at Dinant and on the Marne before the corps established itself north of Reims (at the southern end of the Chemin des Dames) in September. By the time Arno arrived most of the corps front was quiet, and would remain so (with some brief interruptions) until FAR 48 was sent to the Somme at the end of September 1916. Although all of Arno's surviving wartime photos are from this front, we know that he served with the regiment until demobilisation.

In part 2 we will take a look at Arno's numerous photos of La Ville-aux-Bois-lès-Pontavert, a fortified village held by the infantry of 23. Infanterie-Division.

Fig 1: Studio portrait of the young Arno Bierast, taken in his home town of Zwickau.



Fig 2: Arno Bierast, his colleague Herr Schiff and native porters of a 'rubber caravan' pictured at Longji in Kamerun (Cameroon) on 2nd July 1912.

Despite his evident desire to leave the continent earlier than originally planned (and contracting a recurring case of Malaria), Arno maintained a lifelong interest in Africa and continued to correspond with friends there after WW1. Besides a collection of African curios, he later acquired an African grey parrot which became a menace in WW2 due to its habit of repeating its owner's passionate denunciations of Hitler (it was eventually re-homed as a result).



*Gumm Karavane
Links Herr Schiff.
Longji, am 2. Juli 1912*

Fig 3: Arno's employment reference from the Swedish firm of Dahlberg in Helsingfors (Helsinki), where he worked in July 1914 as bookkeeper and German-language correspondent. Since Finland was still part of the Russian Empire, the breakdown of international relations forced him to flee back to Germany or risk Russian internment as an enemy alien.

"Sadly Herr Bierast desires to leave our employment after such a short time on account of the outbreak of war, in order to fight for his fatherland."

Abschrift

Osakeyhtiö O. J. Dahlberg Aktiebolag

Helsingfors 28/7 1914.

Herr Arno Bierast ist bei uns als Buchhalter und deutscher Korrespondent vom 1.7.1914 bis zum 28. 7. 1914 tätig gewesen, und sind wir mit seiner Arbeit und seinem Verhalten in jeder Hinsicht sehr zufrieden gewesen. Herr Bierast will uns leider nach so kurzer Zeit aus Anlaß des Ausbruches des Krieges verlassen, um für sein Vaterland zu kämpfen.

Osakeyhtiö O. J. Dahlberg Aktiebolag

Unterschrift

Fig 4: The *König-Georg-Kaserne*, home of Kgl. Sächs. 4. Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr.48 in the *Albertstadt*, the military district of Dresden-Neustadt (the part of the city on the north bank of the Elbe). The *Albertstadt* was the largest contiguous military area of any city in Imperial Germany.

Unlike the historic Altstadt on the south bank, the *Albertstadt* (like nearly all military installations in the city) survived the WW2 firebombing essentially unscathed and was subsequently used by the Soviet Red Army and the armed forces of the satellite regime it established. The *König-Georg-Kaserne* lay abandoned for ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, but was subsequently renovated. Though some of the original buildings have been lost it is still recognisable today, and houses elements of the Saxon Police.

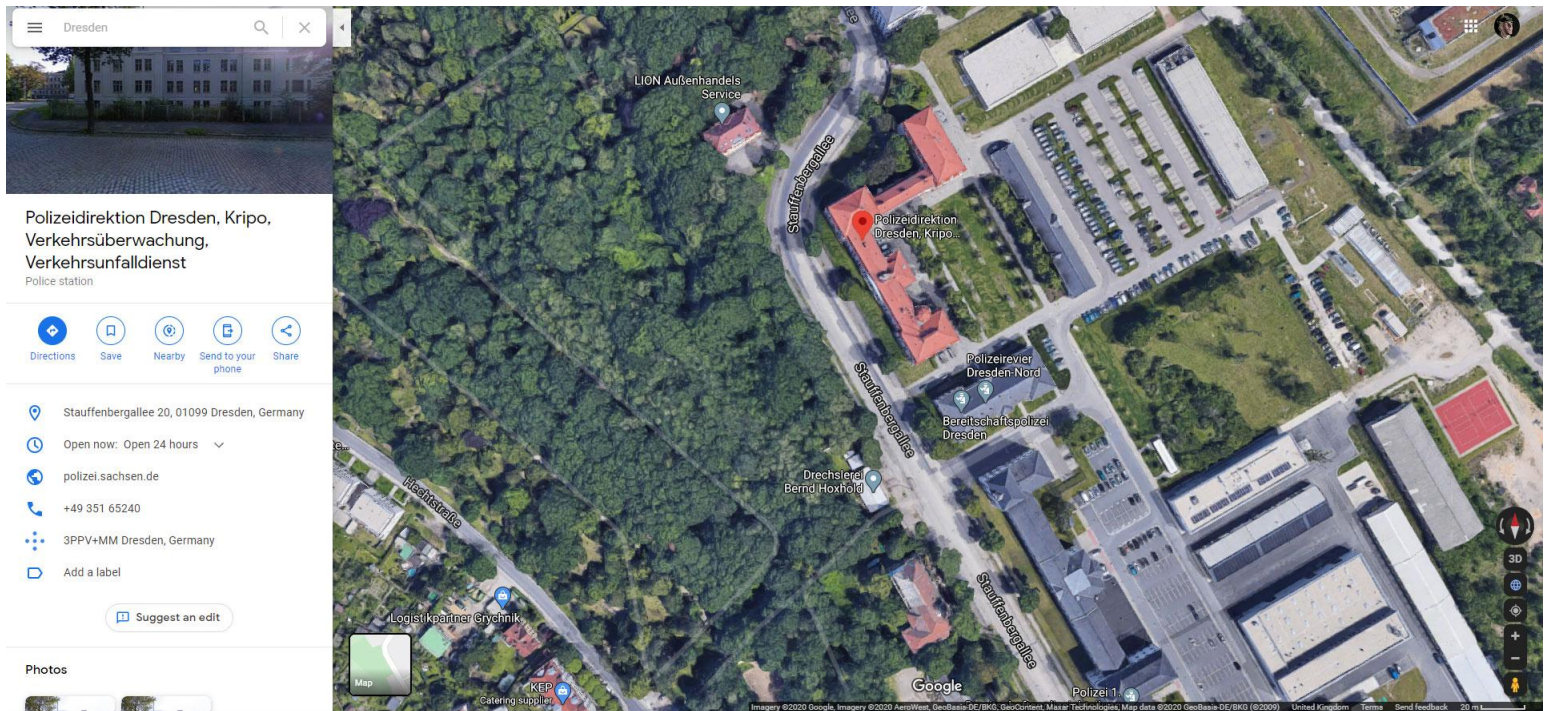


Fig 5: Group photo of the men housed in one of the many bunk rooms (*Stuben*) of the *König-Georg-Kaserne* during WW1.



Everyone here belongs to the II. Ersatz-Abteilung / Feldartillerie-Regiment Nr.48, which served as the regiment's training and replacement element, as its original one (I. Ersatz-Abteilung) had been mobilised in August 1914 to go into the field with 19. Ersatz-Division. Most of the recruits wear the black trousers and dark green *Waffenrock* with red facings of the Saxon artillery (as well as the Saxon *Pioniere*) in peacetime. The older men in *Feldgrau* may well be returning convalescents who have already been in action.

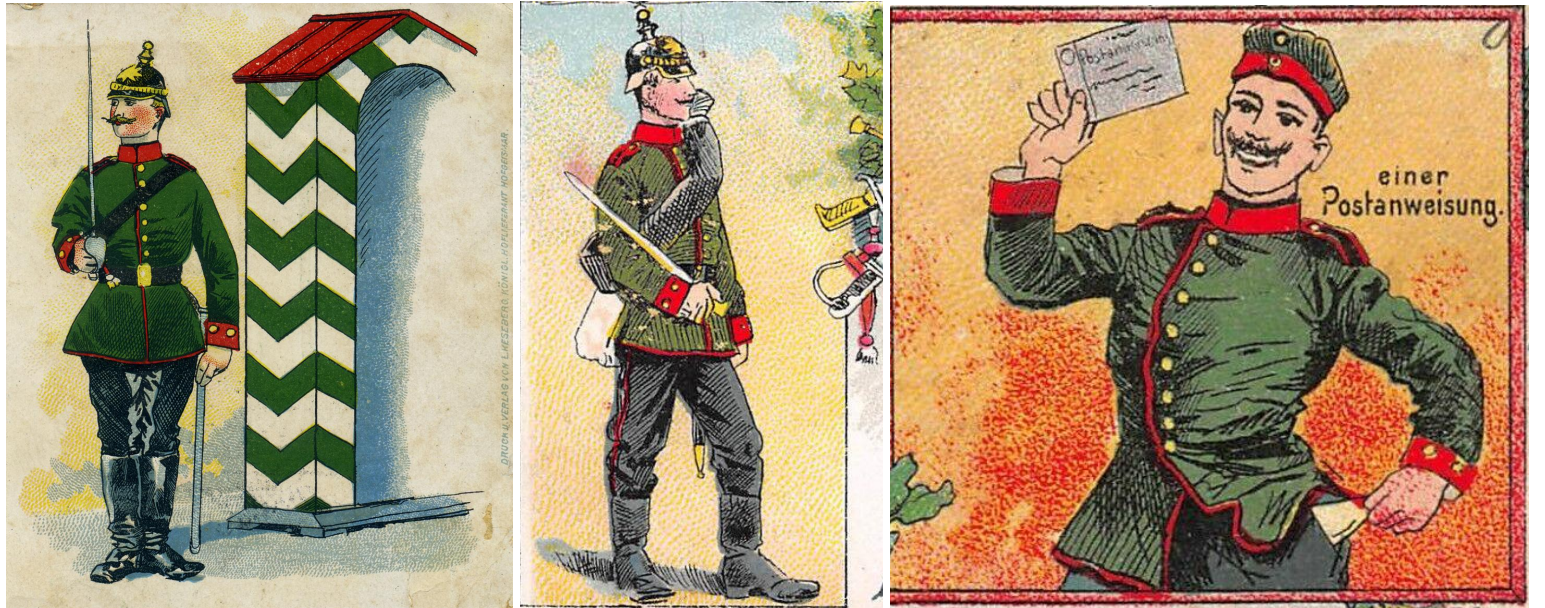


Fig 6: Oath-taking ceremony for a fresh batch of replacements in the stable yard of the *König-Georg-Kaserne* on Sunday 6th June 1915. While the infantry swore their oath on a battalion colour or (failing that) an officer's sword, the artillery traditionally used an artillery piece - reinforcing the belief that the honour of the regiment lay in the guns themselves.



The guns here are both 10.5cm IFH 98/09, the light field howitzers which armed the II. Abteilung (second battalion) of FAR 48 in the field. Initially only one regiment in each active *Feldartillerie-Brigade* possessed a howitzer battalion - the entirety of the sister regiment FAR 12 was armed with the 7.7cm FK96 n./A. field gun, despite being senior to FAR 48.

The Saxon military oath (*Fahneneid*) ran as follows:

"Ich ... schwöre zu Gott dem Allmächtigen und Allwissenden, dass ich seiner Majestät dem Könige Friedrich August von Sachsen während meiner Dienstzeit als Soldat treu dienen, seiner Majestät dem Kaiser und den Kriegsgesetzen Gehorsam leisten und mich stets als ein tapferer und ehrliebender Soldat verhalten will. So wahr mir Gott helfe und sein heiliges Wort, durch Jesum Christum, unsern Erlöser. Amen."

"I, (name) swear by almighty and all-knowing God that I will loyally serve His Majesty King Friedrich August of Saxony during my period of military service, be obedient to His Majesty the Kaiser and the laws of war and conduct myself always as a brave and honourable soldier. So help me God and His holy word, through Jesus Christ our saviour. Amen."

For Jewish soldiers the last line was simply *"so wahr mir Gott helfe"*. Further variations existed for subjects of other German states (or of the Reichsland Elsass-Lothringen) serving with the Royal Saxon Army, as they were not subjects of the Saxon crown.

Fig 7: Arno Bierast (kneeling, with blanket roll) and the other members of his Ersatztransport from FAR 48, accompanied by male relatives or well-wishers at Dresden-Neustadt railway station in October 1914, about to embark on their journey to France. My co-author and dear friend Jürgen Schmieschek has identified the spot where this was taken, near the long-disused railway station which took thousands of Saxon soldiers to the Western Front. In 2016 I was photographed there in my own FAR 48 uniform. :)



Arno was one of eight men recorded as joining the 3. Batterie / Feldartillerie-Regiment 48 on 12th October 1914, and it is tempting to equate those eight with the group we see here. The list doesn't fit exactly as at least one other man here besides Arno appears to have the collar rank discs of a *Gefreiter*.

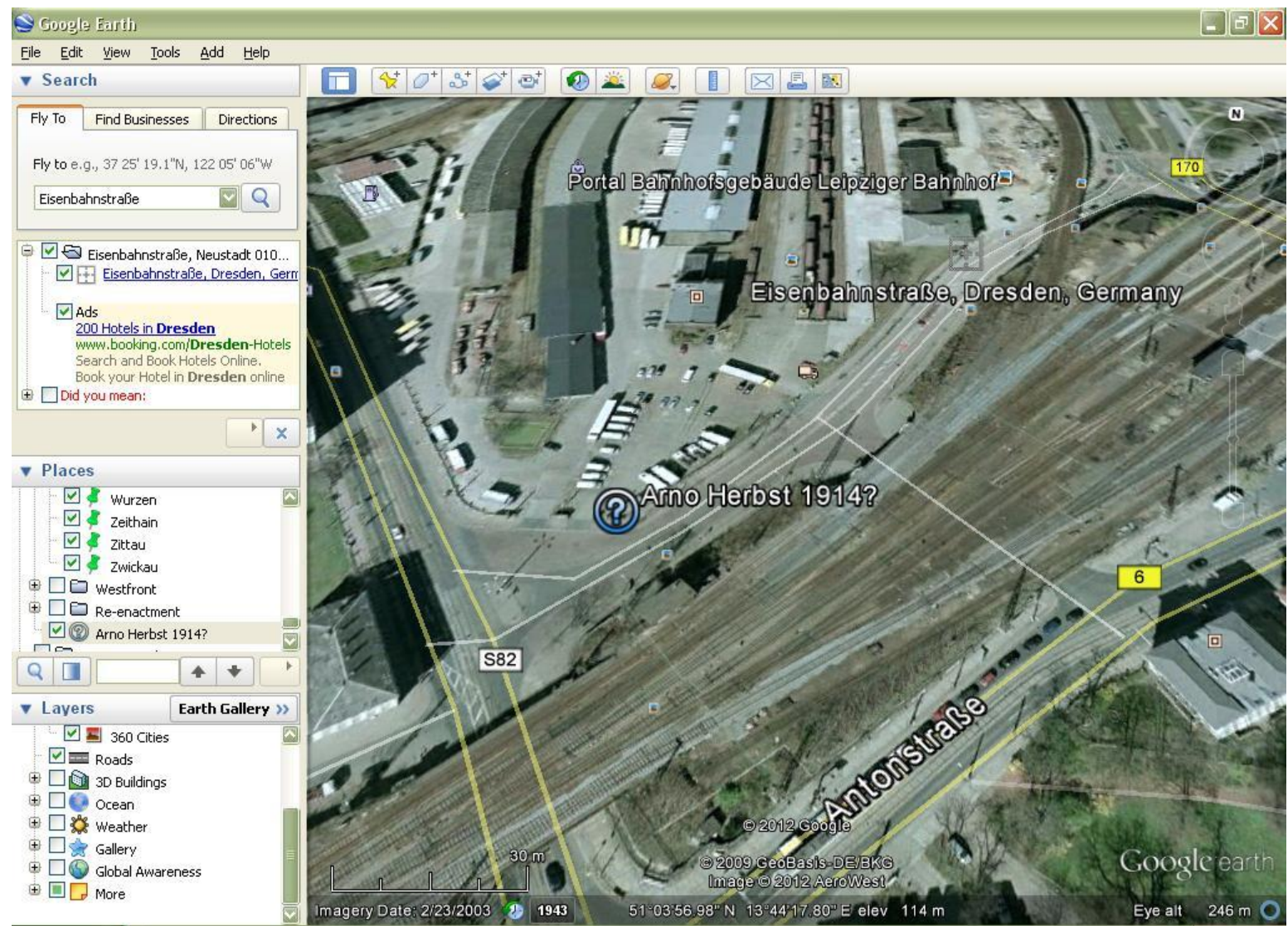
The names listed (see Fig 8) are as follows: Uffz. d. L. II Friedrich Max Kaiser, Uffz. d. R. Georg Lempe, Gefr. Emil Arno Bierast, Kan. Willy Blumenstengel, Kan. Friedrich Wilhelm Karl Adler, Fahr. ??? Edmund Jähne, Fahr. Max Friedrich Müller II and Fahr. ??? August Gustav Karl Pasold.

Four out of eight here wear the green/white piped shoulder straps of *Einjährig-Freiwillige* (one-year volunteers), and others may well be *Kriegsfreiwillige* (war volunteers) like Arno himself. The accompanying civilian wellwishers suggest the middle class background of the *Einjährig-Freiwillige* in particular, who needed to be able to pay their own way and be qualified for higher education. The 'one year' part of the deal necessarily became 'for the duration' (like the *Kriegsfreiwillige*) in wartime, but the option still offered the prospect of eventually becoming a reserve officer.

Arno and his kneeling comrade wear the marching boots and trousers of dismounted troops, as was the norm for *Kanoniere* (gunners) of the *Feldartillerie* at the beginning of the war. The two *Unteroffiziere* standing at left and right have the riding boots and breeches of mounted troops, and the one on the right is visibly wearing a sabre - likewise the norm for NCOs and *Fahrer* (drivers) in this arm of service. In the other German armies these mounted personnel (like cavalymen) would be wearing a simple claw buckle, but in Saxony the belt buckle of the infantry (with crown and motto 'Providentiae Memor') was normally worn instead as seen here.

The major departure from pre-war regulation is their armament. The personal weapon for both *Kanoniere* and *Fahrer* of the *Feldartillerie* was supposed to be a revolver (the clumsy single-action 'Reichsrevolver') or automatic pistol (the P08 or ideally the recently introduced long-barreled LP08); this would be accompanied by an obsolete long bayonet (for *Kanoniere*) or a Saxon-pattern artillery sabre (for *Fahrer*). In summer 1914 two problems soon became apparent - demand for new pistols rapidly outstripped supply, while the *Feldartillerie* discovered a need for longer-ranged weapons for more effective self-defense. The latter

problem had been foreseen, hence the adoption of the LP08 - but there were not yet enough of these (nor would there ever be) to issue it universally; that summer many *Feldartilleristen* therefore resorted to scavenging rifles or carbines from the battlefield.



Arno's photo clearly shows the acute shortage of pistols (note the *Unteroffizier* on the left wearing an empty revolver holster), which would subsequently be met by the government purchase and issue of all manner of civilian models. It appears that to address both of the ongoing problems with personal weapons in the *Feldartillerie*, Arno and his comrades have been issued initially with obsolescent K88 and G91 carbines (from the stocks of the *Fussartillerie*, cavalry or *Train*) in lieu of pistols. It would become the norm for a *Feldartillerie* regiment to keep a modest stock of rifles or carbines on hand for the defense of forward gun positions, sentry posts etc.

Later photos from FAR 48 show extensive issue of the Mauser C96 among less recognisable types; newly manufactured stocks of the LP08 were also issued.



This is a Karabiner 88 (K88), as issued to the cavalry. The Gewehr 91 (G91) differed only in having a stacking rod added below the muzzle, and was issued to the *Fussartillerie*. Both types can clearly be seen in the photo, with Arno himself armed with a K88.

Fig 8: Record of Arno's arrival with the 3. Batterie / Feldartillerie-Regiment 48 in the field on 12th October 1914, taken from the regimental personnel files held in the Saxon archives at Dresden.

Dir. Nr.	Gr.	Viaufgrad	Name	Vornamen	bei der Feld- eingesetzten	Heimort
32.	2.	Gefreiter	Fröbel	Günther	23. 9. 14.	
33.	2.	"	Gude	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
34.	2.	Leutnant	Horsmann	Walter	10. 10. 14.	
35.	2.	Führer	Schneider	Johann	23. 9. 14.	
36.	2.	"	Reichs	Johann	23. 9. 14.	
37.	2.	Leutnant	Kugelhauer	Karl	10. 10. 14.	
38.	2.	"	Kügel	Walter	10. 10. 14.	
39.	2.	"	Klaus	Walter	5. 10. 14.	
40.	2.	Kanonier	Kerthold	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
41.	2.	"	Klenke	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
42.	2.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
43.	2.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
44.	2.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
45.	2.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
46.	2.	Kanonier	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
47.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
48.	2.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
49.	2.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
50.	2.	Kanonier	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
51.	3.	Kanonier	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
52.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
53.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
54.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
55.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
56.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
57.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
58.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
59.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
60.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
61.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
62.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
63.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
64.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	
65.	3.	"	Krüger	Walter	23. 9. 14.	

Fig 9: Autumn 1914 assessment of volunteers with the I. Abteilung (1., 2. and 3. Batterie plus leichte Munitions-Kolonne) of FAR 48 for suitability for promotion to *Unteroffizier*.

Arno is among those rated as suitable, though in fact - so far as we have been able to determine from the archived personnel files of the regiment - he served for the duration without ever rising higher than *Gefreiter* (I greatly regret to say that I got this wrong in *Fighting the Kaiser's War* due to misinterpretation of a photo from 1916).

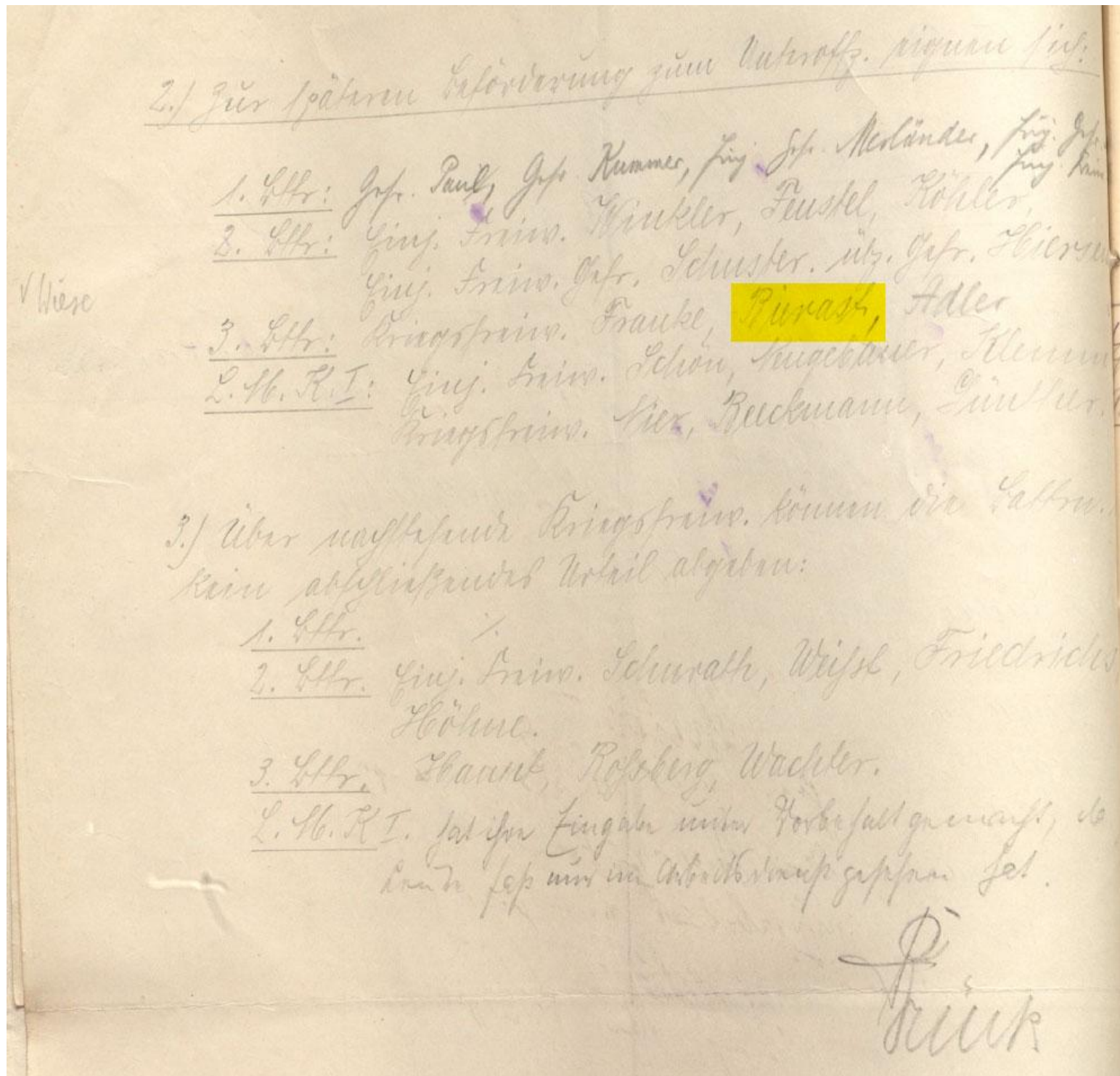
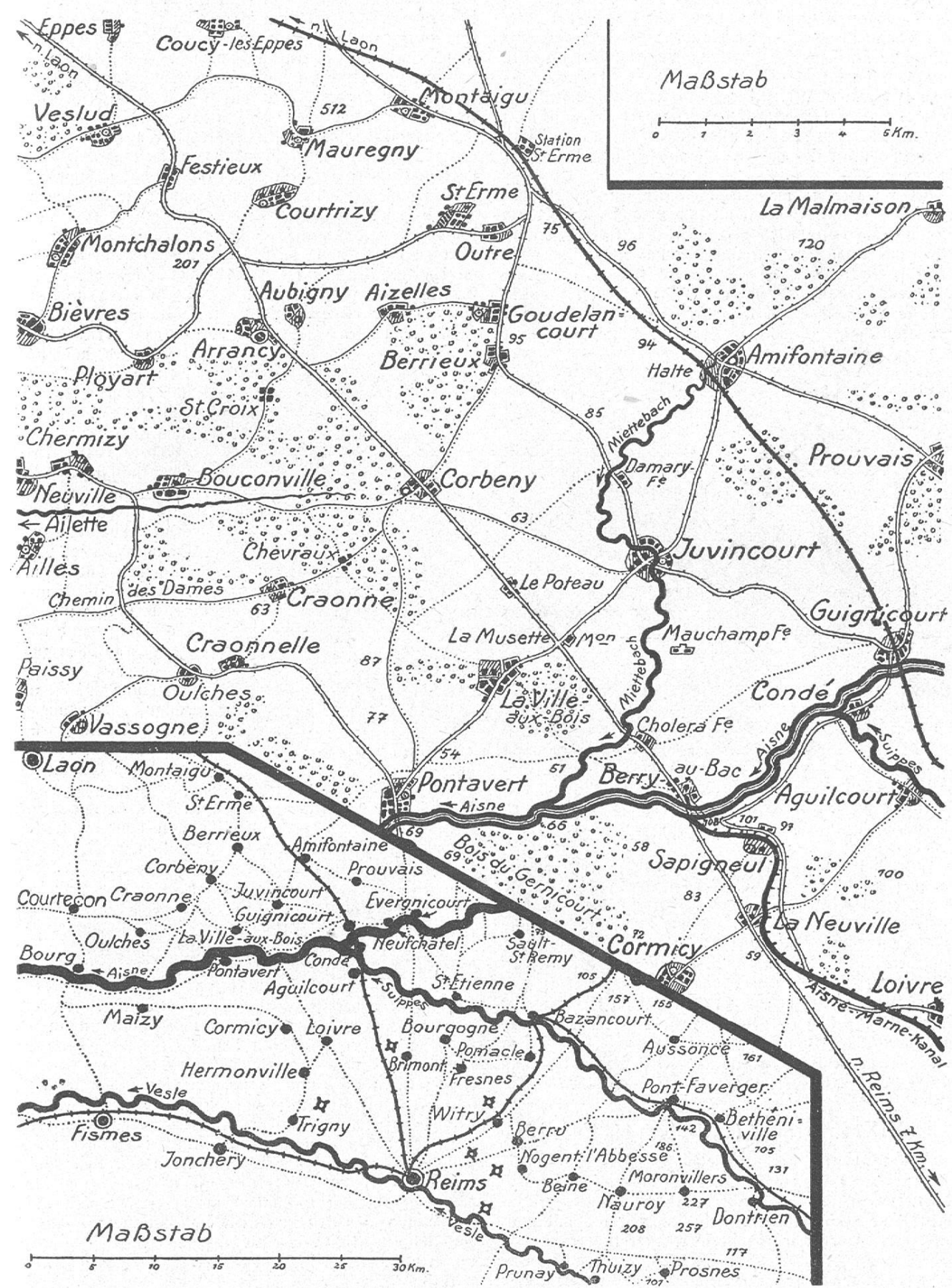


Fig 10: The area held by Saxon XII. Armeekorps from autumn 1914 until autumn 1916, when it was finally committed to the Battle of the Somme (to which elements had been sent as reinforcements since July).

The front line was roughly Craonne - La-Ville-aux-Bois - Le Cholera ('Cholera Ferme') and was anchored on the Aisne at Hill 108 southeast of French-held Berry-au-Bac. Arno's battery was deployed between Corbény and Juvincourt, in support of Schützen-Regiment 108 at La-Ville-aux-Bois.



Skizze 19 (wiederholt). Die Aisne-Stellung des XII. Armeekorps.

Fig 11: Arno as a crew member of 4. Geschütz (number 4 gun) of 3. Batterie / Feldartillerie-Regiment 48, deployed in a rough open firing position near the Corbény-Juvincourt road in May 1915. The other members of the crew are named (if I interpret his handwriting correctly) as Hoffmann, Forster, Lemke, Hübler, Dietzdorf and ??? (something ending in -ke?). It is not apparent which was the *Unteroffizier* in command, seen here seated on the gun barrel. As *Gefreiter*, Arno would have been his immediate deputy.

This gun position is laid out 'by the book', with the ammunition caisson to the right of the gun. By the time the Saxon XII. Armeekorps left this front to take part in the Battle of the Somme in 1916, such crude open positions had long been replaced by reinforced concrete gun bunkers.



4. Geschütz
 Firing position Corbény-
 Juvincourt -
 Hoffmann, Forster, Lemke
 Hübler, Dietzdorf
 Pankke. Mai 1915.

Fig 12: Arno, his Unteroffizier and other comrades from his battery having a meal alongside what is most likely the Corbény-Juvincourt road (sadly this one is undated). The overgrown rampart of chalky earth behind them may be part of the same fire position or its associated crew dugout (see Fig 13).



All except the Unteroffizier are wearing the jacket (and in most cases, the trousers) from their white fatigue dress. This was designed to be easy to clean, and commonly worn for dirty jobs behind the lines to save wear on the *Feldgrau* uniform. During 1915 it was recognised that the brilliant white jacket and trousers needed to be camouflaged (for instance against aerial observation), and they started to be dyed in darker shades as a matter of routine.

Fig 13: Arno and another member of his gun crew, "among the turnips[?!] during the cladding of the first enlisted men's dugout". I believe that this most likely shows the construction of a crew dugout for the same battery position near the Corbény-Juvincourt road as seen in the previous two photos.



In der Pöben, beim
Zusammenbau von neuen
Mannschaftsunterständen
Mai 1915.

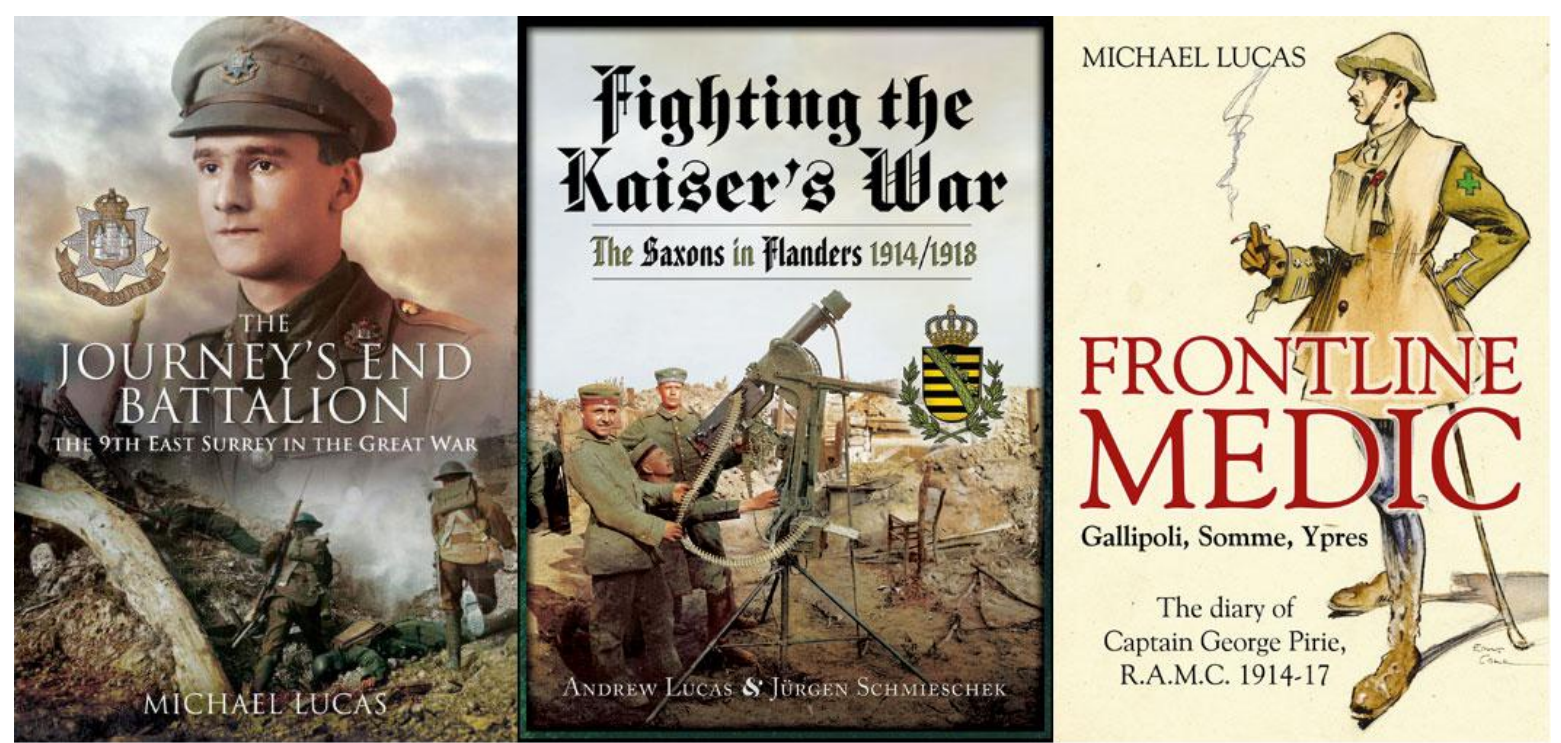
Fig 14: Arno, his *Unteroffizier* (perhaps not the same man as before, as this one is clean-shaven and has unabbreviated NCO rank braid on his collar) and comrades with a captured Belgian fortress gun (Canon de 5.7 cm Maxim Nordenfelt M 1888). Most regrettably this one too is undated.

This weapon was designed by the British firm of Nordenfelt for the close defence of fortresses, and purchased in large quantities before the war by both the Belgian and Russian governments. Captured Belgian guns were reissued by the Germans in 1915 as a 'trench gun' to help defend the infantry positions. Because this piece had been designed for operation in confined spaces, it was later chosen as the main armament both for the German-built A7V tank and for captured British Mk IV Male tanks refitted by the Germans.

The published history of FAR 12 indicates that they received two of these guns on 27th March 1915, and one was given to each of its two *Abteilungen*; the crews were formed by the *Abteilungen* themselves from their existing personnel, and given a course of training on the new weapon. I presume that FAR 48 received its own 5.7cm guns around the same time.



If this has fired your interest, don't forget to visit our website www.royalsaxonarmy.co.uk to check out more articles and buy our books! 😊 My friend Jürgen Schmieschek and I (Andrew Lucas) have produced two volumes in English and one in German on the Royal Saxon Army in Flanders, while my father (Michael Lucas) has produced three on WW1 British subjects.



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