

**Discharged and Discontented:
Organising Ex-Service Men in Richmond in 1917-20**

Steven Woodbridge looks at how rival support organisations appealed to
local First World War veterans

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In November, 1917, a year before the Armistice that concluded the First World War, a short letter, signed simply 'Veteran' and headed 'The Future of Our Soldiers', was published in the local *Richmond Herald*. Raising the question of employment and the need for jobs for returning soldiers, the anonymous letter-writer argued: 'There is hardly a home in the Kingdom but must feel the urgency of considering now the future of our soldiers'. The author continued: 'I suggest, sir, that it would be a scandal if our brave men should be left, like flotsam and jetsam, to be driven here and there by the imperious flow of the fluctuating labour market'. Sounding rather aggrieved at how women had become entrenched in a number of 'male' occupations on the Home Front in wartime, the correspondent added: 'This, I submit, means industrial sex war, and can only result in social and civil commotion. Will not our local public men take the matter up?'¹

Although it was a brief letter, in many ways 'Veteran' had voiced the growing discontent among returning soldiers from the Western Front, not only in Richmond but across many parts of the nation. It was not just a matter of jobs, but included growing concerns about housing, pension rights, help for those soldiers who were now disabled, and a range of other issues. There was also the suspicion that the 'land fit for heroes' promises that had been made by Lloyd George's wartime Coalition Government would not be fulfilled.

Such discontent among veterans continued throughout 1918 and, arguably, became a very public phenomenon. Ex-soldiers became increasingly vocal and outspoken, and began to lobby the State through dedicated organisations and

associations.² By May, 1919, the anger was such that an unemployed ex-serviceman's rally in Hyde Park in central London even culminated in some serious disorder in Parliament Square, near the House of Commons, when mounted police officers were forced to charge the demonstrators to break up the gathering crowds and prevent a possible surge of protestors to Downing Street.³

War fatigue combined with a sense of injustice had become a potent combination, and the authorities had become alarmed at how this was being channelled and 'weaponised' (so to speak) in a systematic and organised way by ex-soldiers. In recent years there has been some interesting new research on this still relatively neglected topic. In 2018, for example, *Now The War Is Over*, by Simon Fowler and Daniel Weinbren, explored how Britain sought to adjust to peace in 1919-20 after four long years of war, and included some welcome and detailed information on the challenges faced by former soldiers as they returned to civilian life.⁴ Similarly, in 2019, *Soldiering On: British Tommies After The First World War*, by Adam Powell, offered a broad range of insights on the social adjustment challenges and tough economic realities that faced returning veterans.⁵ In the same year, *BBC History* magazine carried some findings on the rather volatile summer of 1919 in Britain, including the unhappiness of former soldiers and the complex problems such men had felt they faced when they returned back to domestic peacetime life after demobilisation.⁶

Indeed, the summer of 1919 appeared to bring to the fore simmering discontent among ex-service men that had arguably been building for at least a year or so previously in towns and villages across Britain, including in parts of south-west London. Research on the situation in the town of Richmond-on-Thames in 1917-20 illustrates this well.

Reaching out to veterans

The first sign that an organisation for veterans had put down roots in Richmond came as early as June, 1917, when a branch of the 'National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers' was formed. Founded at national

level in April, 1917, the Federation at local level in Richmond held its inauguration meeting one Sunday afternoon at Etherington's Galleries. Mr. T. Richardson, MP, presided over the meeting, which had been made possible by the support of the Richmond Trade and Labour Council.

Opening the meeting, Richardson said it had been called for the purpose of 'organising public opinion and of securing not only individual but corporate interest in our brave sailors and soldiers who had been wounded in fighting their country's battles'. The same meeting was also attended by Councillor J. Morrison, who said that he had been asked on more than one occasion why it had been thought necessary to call the meeting. He pointed to the case of a young man who had returned from the war 'maimed and broken in the nation's battles'. After discharge, the man had gone to his late employer and asked him for a job. The employer had given him a job, but with a low wage. Morrison also pointed to the ongoing struggle to secure better pensions for veterans.⁷

By the early summer of 1918, there were two organisations each competing with one another for the loyalty of ex-servicemen in the town. The Federation now found it had a competitor in the area. In late July, 1918, the local press revealed that a branch of the 'Comrades of the Great War' organisation had opened an office at No.9 Golden Court in George Street in Richmond. Publicity for the new branch informed ex-soldiers in the town that the branch embraced Richmond, Kew, East Sheen, Mortlake and Barnes, and stated: 'Discharged Service Men and Dependents of men who have died on Service should call or write when requiring advice or assistance on Pension or other matters'.⁸

In a further advert for the 'Comrades' branch, placed in the press a week later, additional information was offered on the purpose of the organisation and its key aims. These included a promise to 'Watch and safeguard the interests of all Ex-members of the Forces, and to take such steps as are necessary to protect them now, during and after demobilisation'. The 'Comrades' also intended to 'press the claims of Discharged Soldiers and Sailors to State and Public Employment', and also to 'secure adequate pensions for discharged men, and promote the welfare of

women and children left by those who have fallen'.⁹

Despite these quite radical-sounding ambitions, most historians regard the Comrades of the Great War (CGW) as a relatively conservative organisation, which was founded by former officers at national level to channel and 'calm down' some of the growing discontent of discharged and demobilised service men, as there were worries that angry soldiers might be attracted to Socialist or more 'subversive' revolutionary groups, eager to exploit growing disappointment over the broken promises of the Coalition Government. The CGW's national president and leader was the Conservative MP Colonel Wilfred Ashley (1867-1939), who was also the secretary of the Anti-Socialist Union, a rightwing lobby group. He was keen to steer ex-soldiers away from what he saw as the seductive propaganda of 'radical' ex-service organisations.¹⁰ It was evident he saw the National Federation as falling under this 'radical' label.

Meanwhile, the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilised Sailors and Soldiers itself continued with its own activities in the town. Under the auspices of the National Federation, for example, a public meeting was held at the Victoria Working Men's Club one Friday evening in July, 1918, presided over by Mr. H.E. Pike. An address was delivered to the meeting by Mr. T.H. Garside, and those on the platform included Councillor J. Morrison and Mr. T. Smith, who was secretary of the local branch of the National Federation.

Often viewed by its critics as more forthright and 'political' than the Comrades of the Great War, the Federation appeared keen to highlight how angry and thoroughly disenchanted soldiers had become with the authorities. This came through quite clearly at the meeting held at the Victoria Working Men's Club. In his speech, reflecting on the reasons for the formation of the Federation, Mr. Garside noted that it was stated by many, 'especially in the press', that such a combination of discharged soldiers 'would mean revolution'. They were told, he continued, that discharged men 'should trust the Government'. But from this he 'dissented', for they had, 'on the contrary, every reason to mistrust the Government'.

While Garside denied that the Federation was 'a political organisation', he

nevertheless stated that they were out to 'protect the rights of discharged men', especially over the question of pensions and the award of pensions to ex-soldiers. He explained: 'A man had no right of appeal, and this, in his opinion, was an unequal and iniquitous position in which to place men who had been in uniform. They had every right to be paid money from the coffers of the State, to which they were legally and morally entitled'.¹¹ Garside also went on to strongly emphasise what he called the 'meagre allowances' that the State granted mothers and widows.

Growth and rivalry

Perhaps unsettled by the activities of the Federation in the town, a month later the Comrades of the Great War branch held its first general meeting, at the Greyhound Hotel. The chairman, Captain Warren, in welcoming CGW members, opened with a short review of the inception of the branch two months previously and its subsequent work. He also stated that, at the CGW branch premises at Golden Court, a 'recreation room' and lending library were under construction, 'this being the first step in the social side of the organisation locally', and the 'nucleus' of a Comrades Club in the Richmond Borough.

Dealing with the movement generally, Capt. Warren also revealed to the local Richmond members that there were now 388 CGW branches across the country and, on the question of pensions alone, the central organisation had taken up 119 cases directly with the Ministry of Pensions, and had also formed an 'employment and information bureau'. Interestingly, Warren also referred to 'the unfortunate friction that had existed between associations formed for discharged soldiers and sailors', and said that he was pleased 'to see that a better feeling between these associations was beginning to appear'. He urged all members of the 'Comrades' to 'do their very best to foster this better spirit'.¹²

Yet, despite these calls for cooperation between rival organisations, and the attempts by officers of the 'Comrades' to reassure ex-soldiers that the Government was taking their concerns seriously, careful perusal of further media coverage of both the 'Federation' and the 'Comrades' organisations in Richmond during the

course of 1918-20 indicates that some rank-and-file ex-soldiers, together with some men of officer rank, remained palpably angry and disillusioned with both the State and with private employers, and their perception that they were being treated unfairly certainly continued well into the post-war years of 1919 and 1920.

Furthermore, both organisations remained keen to present themselves as *the* best conduit for the interests and concerns of ex-soldiers in the area, and continued to embrace any opportunity to publicise their activities in pursuit of this agenda. By October, 1918, for example, according to local press coverage, the Richmond branch of the CGW reported that they had made 'very satisfactory' progress locally; although the branch was only three months old, the membership had reached 'close upon 200', and was apparently 'increasing week by week'. This progress had included the establishment of an employment bureau by the branch, designed to place local discharged men in employment.¹³

Similarly, the local National Federation were also keen to report on their own progress. In early November, for example, at a special committee meeting of the branch, it had been 'unanimously resolved' to take over a large, empty mansion located near the river and Richmond Green, to be fitted out as a clubroom for use by discharged men. The Federation's committee issued a public appeal to try and raise the funds to give the club a good start.¹⁴ There was also evidence of further growth for the Federation in the local area, with the formation in the same month of a Barnes and Mortlake branch.¹⁵ Within just under a year, the latter branch had recruited a reported membership of 330.¹⁶

Significantly, it was mainly through the Richmond branch of the Federation that signs of continuing discontent at local district level can be discerned during the course of 1919-20, the first two years of peacetime. One aspect of this unease on the part of local Federation officers concerned a proposed War Memorial for Richmond, and precisely what form such a memorial should take.¹⁷ Was it to be in traditional 'statue' form, or take the form of a building of some kind, which could be of more practical use for discharged service men or the larger local community? Another component of this local unease on the part of Federation members was the

branch's attitude to the town's Mayor and the Corporation that administered local municipal affairs in Richmond, as there was a sense that local dignitaries had been rather slow in supporting the local Federation's plans to help all the children of Richmond who had been rendered fatherless during the war.¹⁸

Changing patterns

Interestingly, in the competition between the Federation and the CGW to appeal to ex-service men locally, it would appear that the Federation was able to maintain more momentum in 1919, while the Comrades branch saw a dip in enthusiasm and activities. Indeed, in October, 1919, the local press reported that there had been a move to fully re-organise the Richmond branch of the CGW, and that the instigators of this were men who were 'strongly' of the opinion that the time had now arrived 'when a really serious effort should be made to place the Richmond Branch in a foremost place among the social institutions of the town'.¹⁹ A new CGW committee was formed, whose members hoped 'to introduce new life and vigour into the association' and would also seek a new home for the branch.²⁰ Although it is difficult to determine how successful this CGW re-launch was, it is perhaps worth noting that in December, 1919, at a meeting of the Comrades held in a pub at Richmond Green, the new Hon. Secretary, Mr. T.P. Winkoskie, claimed that the branch was, to use the words of a local newspaper, 'gradually creeping to the front'.²¹

To add further frisson to the seemingly fervid battle to secure support from local ex-service men in Richmond, in mid-1920 yet another ex-service organisation appeared on the scene: a local branch of the 'National Union of Ex-Service Men' (NUX) was formed and claimed it was making steady progress, 'many new members having been enrolled'. The NUX, which at national level had been founded in early 1919, adopted a more openly pro-Labour Party position and was uneasy about what it felt were the anti-radical and more conservative stances of both the CGW and the Federation. Moreover, NUX was especially keen to highlight the lack of new housing for veterans and, in Richmond, passed a resolution which expressed frustration at what the branch called the 'serious delay' which had arisen 'in the erection of

dwelling houses in the Borough', and requested 'an enquiry into the cause of the delay'.²²

This explicitly pro-Labour support can also be discerned at a meeting held at St. Peter's Mission Hall, North Sheen, in September, 1920, chaired by Colonel J. Bruce-Kingsmill, the prospective Labour candidate for Richmond Parliamentary Borough. The chair opened the meeting by stating that the object of the National Union 'was to look after the interests of ex-service men and to secure for them what was known as back-pay'. One way this would be achieved, Bruce-Kingsmill argued, would be to restore the land back to 'the people' (the idea of creating thousands of small-holdings for ex-soldiers had become a major policy theme by 1919-20). The Labour Party, he claimed was the only party that was prepared to restore the land 'to its rightful owners... the people of this country, and it was for that reason that the Union was affiliated to the Labour Party'.²³

New unity

Thus, by the end of 1920, the 'Front Generation' in Richmond had no less than three separate organisations each competing for their support, to varying degrees of success. Nationally, leaders of the three organisations began to realise that this competitive situation in towns and cities across Britain was not necessarily a good way to campaign for the interests and concerns of ex-soldiers, and by 1921 negotiations opened to have closer cooperation or, preferably, organisational unity. In May, 1921, four veterans organisations, including members of the three discussed here, came together to form the British Legion. As historians of the topic know, the formation of the British Legion (later the Royal British Legion) in 1921 was partly shaped by the desire of founder Earl Douglas Haig to stem the appeal of 'revolutionary ideas' among ex-service men and to bring a new sense of national unity and common cause among the various ex-service organisations. The evidence suggests that, by the early 1920s, Richmond had very much followed this pattern.

Notes

1. *Richmond Herald*, 10th November, 1917, p.2.
2. Useful here is Antony Brown, *Red For Remembrance: British Legion 1921-71* (London: Heinemann, 1971), chapter 1.
3. See *The Times*, 27th May, 1919, p.7 and p.12.
4. Simon Fowler and Daniel Weinbren, *Now The War Is Over: Britain 1919-1920* (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2018).
5. Adam Powell, *Soldiering On: British Tommies After the First World War* (Cheltenham: The History Press, 2019).
6. See Clifford Williamson, 'Britain's Red Summer', *BBC History* magazine, July, 2019, pp.32-36.
7. *Richmond Herald*, 23rd June, 1917, p.4.
8. *Richmond Herald*, 20th July, 1918, p.4.
9. *Richmond Herald*, 27th July, 1918, p.4.
10. See Marcus Barnett and David Broder, 'Comrades at War', 12th November, 2018, at: <https://www.jacobinmag.com> (accessed on 9/1/2021)
11. *Richmond Herald*, 27th July, 1918, p.9.
12. *Richmond Herald*, 24th August, 1918, p.8.
13. *Richmond Herald*, 19th October, 1918, p.3.
14. *Richmond Herald*, 9th November, 1918, p.11.
15. *Richmond Herald*, 23rd November, 1918, p.2.
16. *Richmond Herald*, 11th October, 1919, p.4.
17. *Richmond Herald*, 2nd August, 1919, p.9.
18. *Richmond Herald*, 11th October, 1919, p.9. See also *Richmond Herald*, 18th October, 1919, p.5.
19. *Richmond Herald*, 18th October, 1919, p.4.
20. *Richmond Herald*, 15th November, 1919, p.5.

21. *Richmond Herald*, 13th December, 1919, p.12.

22. *Richmond Herald*, 10th July, 1920, p.11.

23. *Richmond Herald*, 25th September, 1920, p.9.