

# Henry George Prime MM (1888-1956)

## Royal Welsh Fusiliers

Henry George Prime was born in King's Norton, Worcestershire. It is believed Henry's date of birth was 15<sup>th</sup> October 1888, although discrepancies across various Census and military records have emerged with different dates recorded, generally within a year either side.

Henry's father was Edward Prime (1855 – 1938) and his mother was Anne Evans. Siblings were Florrie, Jessie and James. Edward was a master plumber and had his own business. He used to go out each morning with his cart of tools, repairing gutters and drains.

Henry's childhood was spent in Birmingham. He went to Clifton Road Boys school, receiving an award for regular attendance in 1900 (aged 11 or 12 years).



*Double-sided medal awarded to Henry in 1900, for regular attendance at school*

Henry left school aged 14 and worked for his father for a time. Around 1905, when Henry was 16 or 17, he went to work for the **Birmingham Small Arms company**, manufacturer of guns predominantly for UK and Foreign Government contracts at that time. The following year, the company was awarded a contract to make 100,000 rifles for the War Office.

At aged 17, Henry volunteered for the **Territorial Army** – based at the Thorpe Street depot in Birmingham. His son, Gordon, recalls his father telling him that he used to pass the depot on his way to work and that was where he signed-up.

At some point, the family broke up and Henry lived with his father and brother whilst his mother and sisters lived elsewhere. In 1906, he decided to join the army. The exact date is not known, although he was aged 18 so it must have been sometime after his birthday on 15<sup>th</sup> October.

### **1906: Joining the Army**

Henry was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers. His Service Number was 9425.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was stationed at the cantonment (military garrison) at Chakrata in India at the time, and so Henry was sent to India.

Henry was a keen amateur boxer - something he continued within the army. His family recall stories of him boxing for his regiment. Whilst no named records exist, Regimental records state that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was “highly satisfactory” and “upheld the regimental reputation in rifle-shooting, boxing, football and polo”, winning 32 open competitions in these sports.

The Regimental Boxing Championship of All India was won by the battalion on three occasions during Henry’s posting in India: 1909, 1911 and 1912, as well as the Patiala All India Boxing Cup in 1911 and 1912. The Quetta Boxing Challenge Shield was won the last two years the battalion was in India.



*Christmas 1912, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in India.*

*Henry is front row, second from right (with the dog looking at him)*



*2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in India (date not known). Henry is in the middle row, with cigarette in his mouth*



*Henry Prime pre-WW1*



*Henry's binoculars & case*





Photos from Henry's copy of *The Royal Welch Fusilier handbook* (including the Regimental Goat)



Henry's pips and flashes

### **1914: Outbreak of WW1**

Henry returned to the UK with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1914. On 30<sup>th</sup> July, the battalion was carrying out training at Bovington when it was ordered to return to its peacetime station at Portland in Dorset. On 11<sup>th</sup> August, Henry sailed with his battalion from Southampton to Rouen, France, taking on duties as "Lines of Communication" troops.

**Henry was one of the first group of soldiers to be sent to France after the outbreak of WW1.**



Henry took this framed photo of his sweetheart Bessie, to the Front Line. He would later marry Bessie in 1917.

Name.	Mini 3/ R. W. Fus.	Corps.	Wood	Rank	Sgt	Regt. No.	9425.
	PRIME.	"	"		Serjeant		
	H. G.						
Serial	R. W. Fus / off / 43	Roll.	103	Page.	On Pat. R J/2/02		
VICTORY					1.V. 2320 / W. d / 20.10.20 (6/1/976)		
BRITISH							
STAR	14	9/2/2	119	iv 993/M	20.5.19	WS/4/2454	
	Class 1/1946	Class 1/1976				Class 18589	Pat to Class 1/1996
Theatre of War first served in	(1) France					WS/4/2454	
Date of entry therein	11. 8. 14					encl. in	Class 1/1946
							K. 1380.

Int Prime applies for. <sup>Correspondence.</sup> Class 1/1914 class 4-7-20. EF/q. 27/9/20

Address. Incefield  
 Lichfield Rd.  
 Four Oaks  
 W. Bham

(25454-14a) Wt. W 3347-H P 6451 2000m 10/79 H. St Est 5450/1256

**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was to spend the entire war in France and Flanders.**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1914, they became attached to 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, which was an independent command at this time, not attached to any division. (They were also joined by the 1<sup>st</sup> Scottish Rifles, 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex, 2<sup>nd</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders). The battalion was present at the Battle of Mons but not engaged, and then took part in the sixteen-day retreat, earning the Battle Honours: Mons (23/24 Aug), Retreat from Mons (24 Aug – 5

Sept), and Le Cateau (26 Aug). The Marne (6-9 Sept) and the Aisne (12-15 Sept) were added to the list in September when the battalion suffered its first casualties.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> October 1914, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion transferred with 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade to 6<sup>th</sup> Division. On 22<sup>nd</sup> October, the battalion entrenched at La Cordonnerie Farm. They were to remain in these trenches until 14/15 November in appalling weather, under constant artillery and sniper fire, and frequent attacks.

On Christmas Day 1914, Henry's battalion was involved in the **unofficial 'Christmas Truce'** that occurred on some stretches of the front line, in spite of strict orders against fraternisation, and led to the exchange of food and drink in No Man's Land.

### **1915**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were involved in the infamous **Battle of Aubers Ridge** (9-10 May 1915), widely recognised as being an unmitigated disaster on the part of the British. No ground was gained, no tactical advantage was gained, and the British suffered more than ten times the number of casualties as the Germans.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1915, the battalion transferred with 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade to 27<sup>th</sup> Division, then on the 19<sup>th</sup> August to 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. On the 25<sup>th</sup> November 1915, the battalion transferred with 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade to the newly arrived 33<sup>rd</sup> Division.

### **1916**

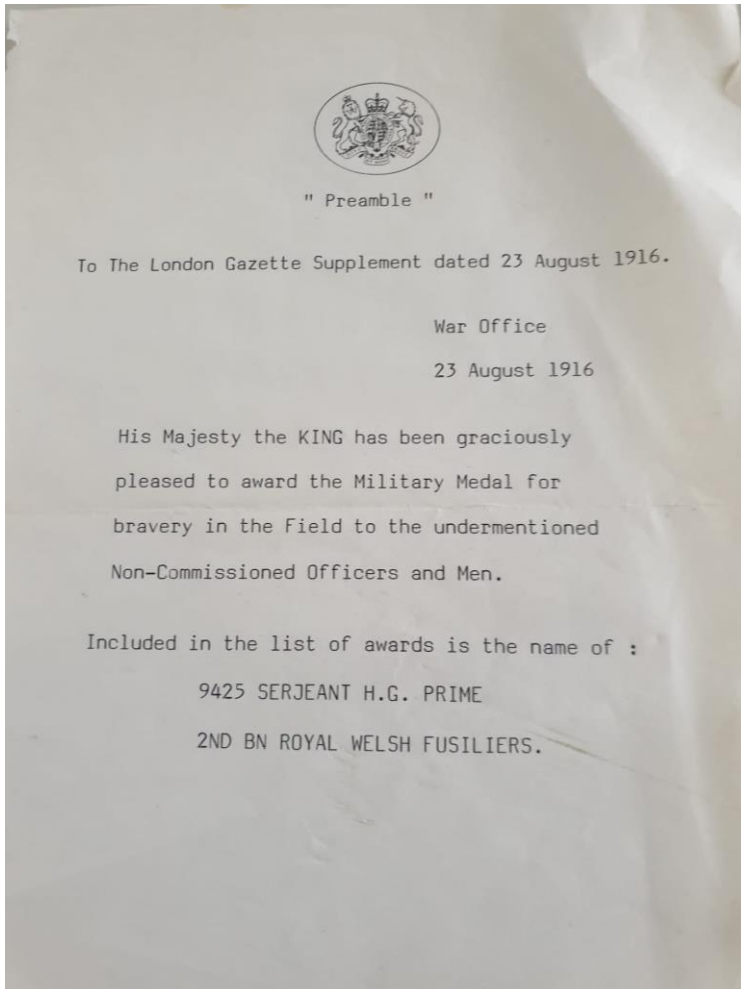
On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion went into line in the **Givenchy** sector. At 2am on the 22<sup>nd</sup> the Germans set-off a huge quantity of explosives under B Company. An intense bombardment followed and then the Germans attacked. This was repulsed by C Company. Over a hundred casualties were sustained in the incident. The crater was named Red Dragon Crator.

The battalion was in action on **The Somme**. For some of this time, Henry was under treatment at a 'Sick Convoy': for 19 days, between 15<sup>th</sup> July and 3<sup>rd</sup> August. He received treatment for 'Boils' and was listed as **"Wounded"** on the casualty list issued by the Home Office on 7th August 1916. His rank was listed as Sergeant.

### **Records show that Henry was awarded the Military Medal in 1916.**

His name appeared amongst a list of 27 men in The London Gazette dated 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1916 (Gazette Page 8363), under the following: *His Majesty has been graciously pleased to award the Military Medal for bravery in the field to the undermentioned Non-Commissioned Officers and Men.*

The following document was also found amongst Henry's possessions by his family:

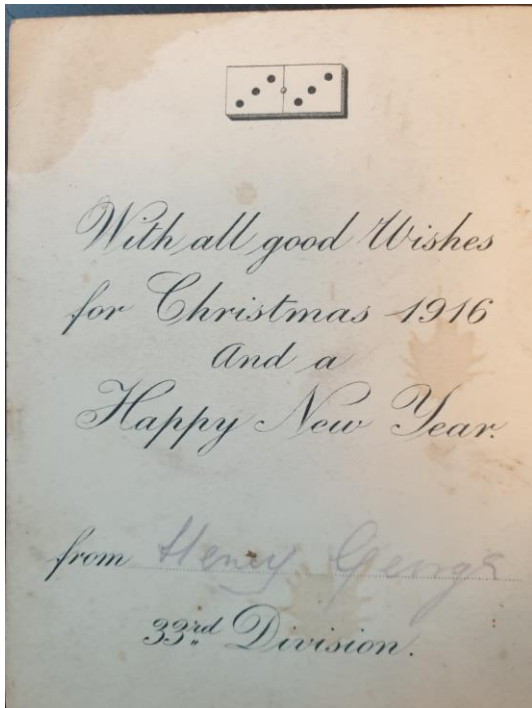


The Military Medal was established in March 1916. According to The Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF) museum in Wales, it is believed that a number of the earlier awards were given retrospectively for earlier actions, although definitive proof of this does not exist. The museum was able to confirm that Henry was awarded the Military Medal. There would have been a recommendation, but the records are believed to have been destroyed when the War Office repository in Arnside Street, London, was struck by bombs in 1940.

Unfortunately, there is no information around the incident which led to the recommendation. Sometimes the War Diary or Division Histories can yield clues, but in this case, they did not. It is possible that the incident took place on the Somme, although it could have taken up to two months for the award to appear in The London Gazette, potentially dating the incident as far back as June 1916 (possibly when Henry was in the Givenchy sector).

Henry spent **Christmas 1916** on the front line and sent Christmas greetings to his family.





Christmas card sent from the front line, 1916

### **1917**

Henry would have been involved in the **Battle of Arras** (launched on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917) on the Hindenburg Line, during the Operations on the Flanders Coast. On 23<sup>rd</sup> April, the second battle of the Scarpe opened. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion attacked Guémappe. By the time it was relieved, it had suffered 133 casualties out of a trench strength of 350.

The last battle involving the battalion in 1917 was at Polygon Wood on 26/27 Sept, as part of the **Third battle of Ypres (Passchendaele)**. Another 190 casualties were recorded, including the Commanding Officer and Adjutant, both of whom were killed.

Henry must have returned to the UK for some time in 1917, as records show he married Bessie Mabel Courtney (b.5<sup>th</sup> June 1893, Cerne Abbas, Dorset) in Dorset on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1917. It is believed that Bessie remained in Dorset to be close to her family, with Henry continuing to serve throughout the war and beyond.

Regimental records show that the battalion remained in Passchendaele for some time and was shelled mercilessly for days on end. The period in the trenches near Passchendaele (25-30 Nov) was described by Captain P Moody as "the worst three days I experienced during the whole of the war".

**Records show that Henry was promoted to Company Sergeant Major (CSM) and commissioned on 27<sup>th</sup> or 28<sup>th</sup> November 1917. Records also show that at some point after this (exact date not known), Henry was attached to the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, in France.**



ROYAL WELSH BUSHINGERS. REGIMENT OR CORPS. 646

ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Victory Medal and the British War Medal granted under Army Orders 301 and 266. of 1919.

(if no remark in duplicate.)

REGIMENT	NAME	Unit previously served with. Regt. No. and rank to name on entry into theatre of war	Theatre of war in which served								Clasp awarded (to be left blank)	Record of disposal of decorations (a) Entitled (b) Dispatched by Post (c) Taken into Stock	REMARKS	
			From	To	From	To	From	To	From	To				
646 (6)	WARD, John.	1st R.W.B. Sgt. 9424. 4th Garr R.W.B. R.W.B. 4th Garr R.W.B.												Infantry Base Depot's
9425	PRIME, Henry. George. M.M.	2nd R.W.B. No. 01 11 9425 Dis to Comm in R.W.B. 27.11.17.												
9427	FITCHARD William. (1/Cpl) Baldwyn.	2nd R.W.B. No. 2427 2nd R.W.B. 2nd R.W.B.												Infantry Base Depot's

I certify that according to the Official Records the individuals named in this ROLL are entitled to the Medal or Medals as detailed above.

Place: 20 MAY 1920  
Date: 1920  
Signature: *John D. ...* Captain,  
for Officer in Charge Infantry Records, Shrewsbury. Signature and rank of Officer certifying.

Noting of Henry's commission on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1917

**1918**

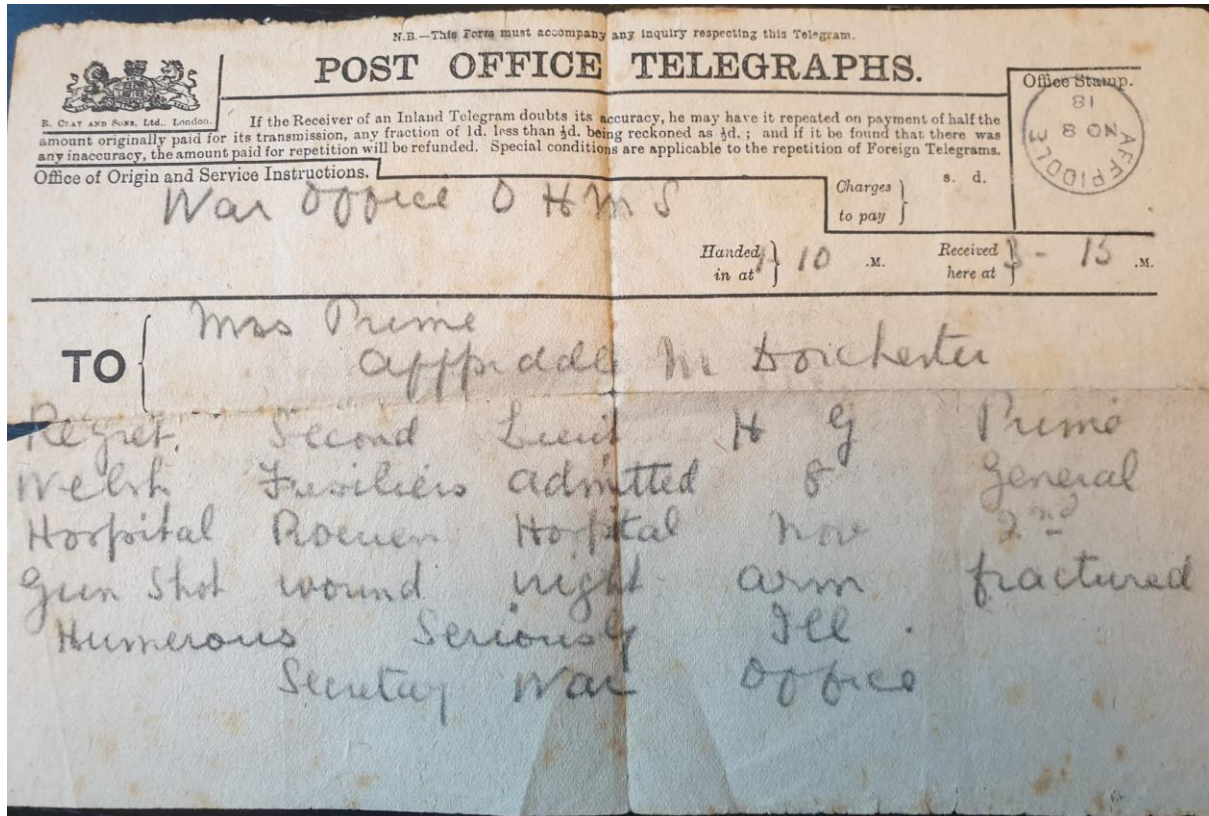
Not knowing the specific date that Henry was attached to the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion means it is possible he remained with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion for some time. Regimental records show both battalions being involved in several of the same battles and manoeuvres that year.

In February 1918, the **2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion** was transferred to 115<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 38<sup>th</sup> (Welsh) Division. Later that year, as the war drew to its conclusion, they were involved in the Battle of the Selle (October 1918) and the Battle of the Sambre (4<sup>th</sup> November 1918), phases of the Final Advance in Picardy. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion captured its objectives but suffered nearly 80 casualties in the process.

The **17<sup>th</sup> Battalion** suffered a steady stream of casualties from raids, working parties, enemy artillery, sniper and machine-gun activity during 1918, although didn't participate in any major battles until later in the year.

Records show that Henry, now the rank of Second Lieutenant, was listed as "**Wounded**" in a report dated 16<sup>th</sup> November 1918. (Recorded in the War Office Daily List of same date: No. 5724). Records also show he was entitled to wear a "Wound Stripe" as authorised under Army Order 204 of the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1916.

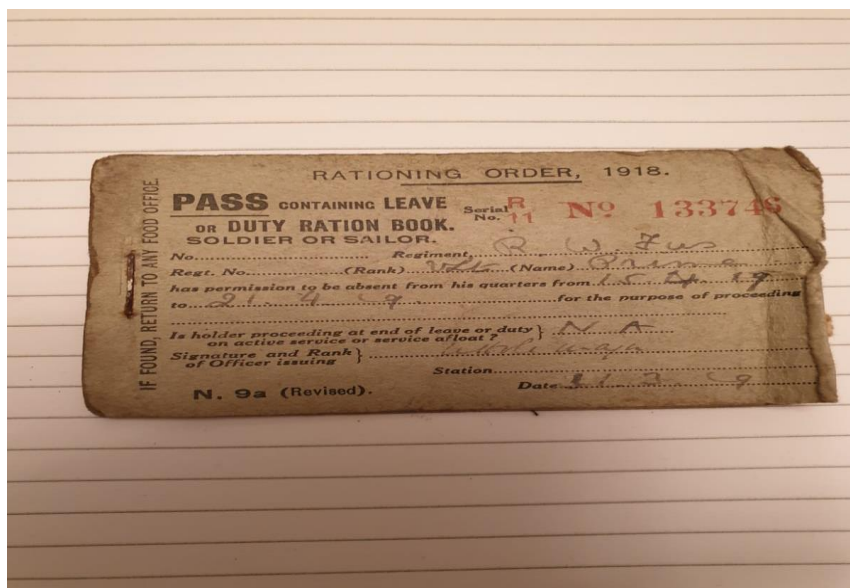
A telegram dated the previous week (8<sup>th</sup> November 1918) from the War Office to Bessie, Henry's wife, stated that Henry had been admitted to hospital in Rouen with a **gun shot wound** to his right arm, suffering a fractured humerus bone and that he was "seriously ill".



Telegram to Henry's wife following his wounding in November 1918

Henry's son Gordon remembers his father talking about this incident and recalls how his father described it to him: "About 10 days before the end of the war, he was shot in the right arm as his battalion was moving through a wooded area in the usual zig zag formation. They believed the area had already been cleared of German soldiers but grenades were thrown towards them and as he emerged from his cover, he was shot".

## Post WW1



*Henry's ration book noting 6 days of leave in April 1919*

**After the war ended, Henry remained in the army until he retired with gratuity on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1919.**

There seems to be somewhat of a mystery surrounding his activities during 1919. It is known he had some leave between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of April that year.

Regimental records show that he was attached to the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion in 1919 and served in France until his retirement. However, Henry's son Gordon, vividly remembers his father talking about his time in Southern Ireland, in particular Limerick, pointing to a photo from the Prime home captioned 'Limerick' and with Henry being marked as 'furthest right with cap on'.





*The location of this photograph remains a mystery. Henry is furthest right with cap on.*

During 1919, the **2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion** was reduced in numbers. On 6<sup>th</sup> June it arrived in Wrexham. Two months later, having been re-formed, it arrived in Limerick. This would fit with the family memories of Henry's post-war recollections, although regimental records show Henry was attached to the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion, who were not in Ireland. It is possible Henry spent a short time with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in Southern Ireland, although it would have to be a very brief time not to appear in any records. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was the only unit of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers that was in Ireland.

For most of 1919, IRA activity in Southern Ireland involved capturing weaponry and freeing republican prisoners. In September of that year, the British Government outlawed republican party Sinn Fein and the breakaway government they had formed (Dail Eireann) and the conflict intensified. The IRA began ambushing British Army patrols, attacking their barracks and forcing isolated barracks to be abandoned. It could perhaps be considered unlikely that British troops would be billeted under canvas during this time (as shown in the photo), rather than in the relative protection of barracks.

The **17<sup>th</sup> Battalion** left France for Newmarket on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1919. The battalion was disbanded on 4<sup>th</sup> June. The only reference in regimental records to the battalion being under canvas (in bivouac) is back in August 1918, near Mametz Wood. On the 25<sup>th</sup> August,



the battalion went into bivouac near Mametz Wood and the following day, in artillery formation, advanced across country and took High Wood, capturing a machine-gun and 5 prisoners. On 29<sup>th</sup> August, a further attack was made by the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion and by the end of the month the battalion was near the village of Morval.

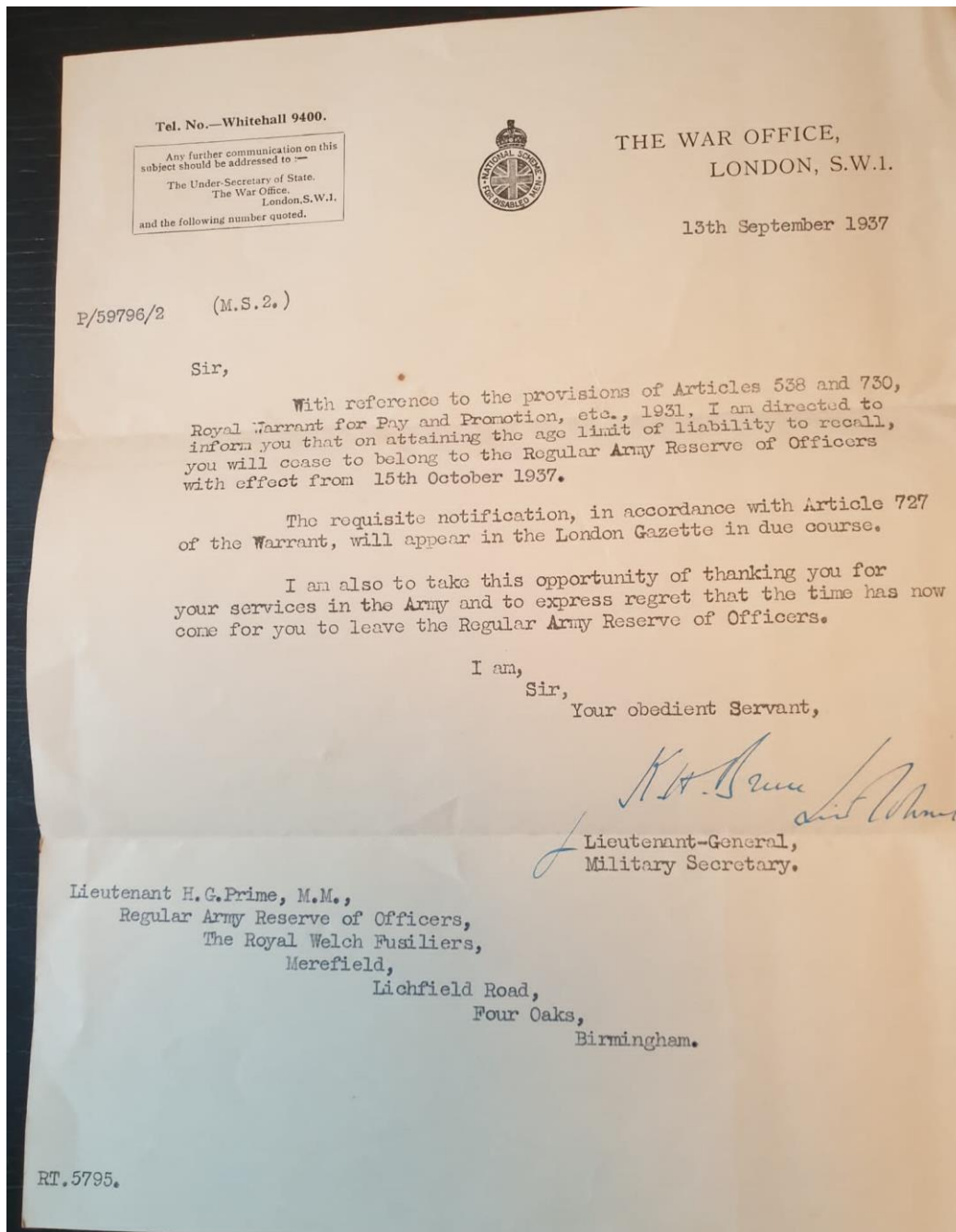
### **Life after the army**

Despite leaving the army in October 1919, Henry's name appeared on military 'Absent Voters' lists for Spring 1920 and Autumn 1920, Dorset (Southern Division). He also appeared on similar lists in 1921 and the Springtime of 1922. All list his polling district as "Affpiddle". This is a village in Dorset, also known as Affpuddle. It is c13 miles from where Bessie's family lived.

'Absent Voters' lists were created to record the details of soldiers who served overseas at times of elections. Sometimes there were anomalies – for example in this case, where Henry had left the army in October 1919. It is not known why his name continued to appear on these lists until 1922 – perhaps it has something to do with Henry becoming a reservist.

### **Regular Army Reserve of Officers**

Henry became a volunteer reservist with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers and continued his service until 15<sup>th</sup> October 1937, when the "age limit of liability to recall" required him to retire. He received a letter from The War Office confirming this and thanking him for his service.



Letter to Henry from The War Office dated 13<sup>th</sup> September 1937

### Family life

Henry & Bessie married during the war, in Alfpuddle a village on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1917. The following extract from a newspaper dated 28<sup>th</sup> September 1917 detailed the event:

*Marriage of Miss Bessie Courtney – The wedding was solemnised, by license, at St. Laurence Church on Saturday, September 15<sup>th</sup>, of Company Sergeant Major H. G. Prime, of the - Batt. Royal Welch Fusiliers, and Miss Bessie Courtney, youngest daughter of the late Mr. Ben Courtney, of Ansty. The bride, who was given away by her step-father, Frank Loader, was attired in a white silk dress, with wreath of orange blossom and veil, lent by her sister, and carried a bouquet of roses and lilies. She was attended by Mrs. Burt, her only sister, who was*

*wearing an apricot peau de soie dress and black velvet hat. Corporal W. G. Burt, of the – Dorset Regiment, acted as “best man”. Many handsome and useful presents were received.*

Henry & Bessie had two children. A daughter Ivy Phyllis Prime during the war (b. 1918/19; d. 2010) and later, a son, Gordon Henry George (b.7<sup>th</sup> February 1924). Census records from 1921 show the family living in the West Midlands, although the date of the move from Dorset is not known. Gordon was born in Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands.

After leaving the army, Henry’s intention was to join the Railway Police Force, with a pal of his. However, his pal was not tall enough and so Henry decided he wasn’t going to join without him. Instead, Henry invested much of his army gratuity into a business venture with a partner. (It is not known if this was the same person he was intending to join the Police Force with). It was a haulage business, based in Aston, Birmingham. But the business did not succeed and Henry lost a great deal of money.

Census records from 1921 show Henry’s place of work was as The Albany Manufacturing Company, Abbey Works, Sutton Road, Erdington. (Erdington is a suburb and ward of Birmingham that is historically part of Warwickshire. It is 5 miles northeast of central Birmingham and borders Sutton Coldfield).

### **Local Defence Volunteer**

Henry became a local defence volunteer (later called the Home Guard). In 1940, his son Gordon, then aged 16, lied about his age to volunteer and they served together for a time.



*Henry after the war*



*Henry with wife Bessie, son Gordon and daughter Ivy*



Henry (L) with work friends after the war    Relaxing at home

Henry later went to work at **Queens Proprietaries Limited**, in Sparkbrook, Birmingham. Now dissolved, the company were makers of various products including bath salts and gravy salts. He stayed for many years, retiring when he was in his 60s.

**Henry died on 19<sup>th</sup> August 1956 in Solihull, Warwickshire, aged 67 years.**

His address at the time was 49 Irving Road, Solihull, Warwickshire.

Bessie remained in that house until her death on 1<sup>st</sup> May 1981 aged 87 years.

In September 1991, Henry's son Gordon, himself a WW2 D-Day veteran, now living in Pembrokeshire, donated two of his father's uniform tunics to the Royal Welsh Fusiliers (RWF) museum. They are currently held at Wrexham Museum where the RWF Museum Trust keeps its reserve collections. In common with most museums, they are unable to continuously display many items, particularly uniforms and similar materials due to the damage that would be sustained through exposure to light over a long period. It is for this reason that display items are rotated in and out of storage over the years.

***Framed display of Henry's military medals, proudly treasured by his family***





