

PRESS RELEASE

Our other 'unknown' soldier?

London (Wednesday 9 November 2011)

Just over one hundred years ago, in October 1909, Spurs offloaded one of their surplus reserves to Northampton Town. The first team in the four seasons the 23 year old had been at the north London giants – they regularly played in front of the biggest crowds in the country – had been an all too infrequent imposter. The South East Counties League was his weekly shift. For many Saturday afternoon walkers up and down Tottenham High Road he had not fulfilled his undoubted potential, despite a few seasons back being described as the 'catch of the season' and making his home debut to 32,000 against FA Cup holders Manchester United. Brought down for a second half penalty the conversion earned the Lilywhites a 2-2 draw.

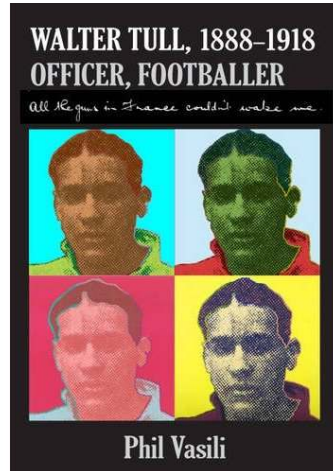
His new manager at the County Ground, ex-Spur Herbert Chapman, as a teenage fledgling had played alongside the world's first Black professional footballer, Arthur Wharton. Always ready to try the new and imagine the seemingly impossible Chapman went on to win the first division twice and the FA Cup as manager of Huddersfield Town, repeating the sequence with Arsenal who, to that date had not won a national competition. He could see something in the Spurs midfielder that had bypassed one or two of the powerful visionaries at White Hart Lane.

After a hesitant beginning the left footer had four good and popular seasons before becoming the first Cobbler to sign-up for the 17th (Service) Battalion Middlesex Regiment (1st Football) in December 1914. The army,



while encouraging all fit young men to throw aside their leather belts and bell bottoms and redress in khaki, hadn't really wanted him. They didn't think he'd fit in, an eastend orphan with a chip on his shoulder and all that. And there was a lot of 'that'.

Perhaps the unusual footballer saw the double bubble on offer: until the end of the season players could claim both their army pay and play and be paid by their club. That was the recruitment deal. Whatever the reason - patriotism, money, propaganda, moral imperative, social duty – it caused a stir. A high ranking civil servant on the very day he signed his Attestation



forms circulated a memo warning that we *must discourage...[such] volunteers*. While nothing could be done to physically stop our young volunteer from showing his Northampton teammates the way, the sentiment in the spiteful memo did come round eventually to take an enormous chunk out of his backside.

After a year's training the men of the Footballers' Battalion were sent to France in November 1915. Before Christmas they were on the front line. By his birthday 28th birthday, April 28th 1916, our man was hospitalised back to Blighty with shell shock a shaking, debilitated hollow of a man.

Fast forward one year and we find our working-class footballing orphan hobnobbing with other officer cadets training for a commission in Scotland. (While up there it is reported he signed for Rangers). If the game had taught him anything, it was to get up more times than you're knocked over. Which he did until his fatal knock-out blow in March 1918 at the Second Battle of the Somme.

So, why am I writing about this (anonymous) supposedly second-rate footballer who became a second lieutenant and, like many of his contemporaries, had his life taken fighting in the war to end all wars? One reason is he was recommended for a Military Cross and never received it. Again, not unheard of. Indeed, it was a violation of military law to notify kith and kin of recommendations precisely because should the loved one not have his breast pinned with a medallion there would be many irate letters flooding regimental h.q.. He wasn't the only working-class orphan to become an officer in the First World War, either.

Perhaps it is me and my obsessive concern, as his biographer, with this injustice at the denial of his medal. Yet

I'm not the only one. A parliamentary Early Day Motion asking he be recognised posthumously had the signatures of over fifty cross-party MPs at the recess of Parliament in July, 2008. The official line from the MoD and ministers is that it is now too late and would set an unwanted, unwarranted precedent, opening the floodgates to other advocates of disappointed nominees. Yet a military *Instructions* booklet on the award of honours, issued in 1918, stated *all orders, decorations and medals may be granted to officers or other ranks who are killed in action or who die of wounds, provided the officer initiating the original recommendation signed it before their death*.

Putting aside his citation by the commander of the 41st Division, Major General Sidney Lawford for *gallantry and coolness under fire* and ensuring the safety of men under his command while on raids in enemy territory, his lack of special recognition after spending periods between 1915-1918 on the front line and surviving is highly unusual given the average mortality rate on the western front was calculated in months rather than years. I don't have the statistics but I would bet a penny to a pound there weren't many soldiers who survived this length of time, were promoted four times, including a commission and yet received no more than the statutory medals.

Since his death a sculptured memorial has been dedicated to him at Northampton Town FC, who have also named the road leading into Sixfields Stadium eponymously as well as playing an annual commemorative match in his honour. A council building in the town has now adopted his name. BBC 4 aired in 2008, ninety years after his death, a drama and documentary side by side on Remembrance Sunday. A biography was published a

year later. A film, play and musical about him are all in the final stages of development. Yet the MoD remain stubbornly resistant to changing their minds.

Identified him? He is our other 'unknown' soldier, the one with brown skin, Walter Tull. Perhaps that's why he didn't get his Military Cross: officers, according to the Manual of Military Law (1918), had to be of 'pure European descent'.

Ps. my insertion of [*such*] in the quote above by Colonial Office civil servant Gilbert Grindle replaced the word *coloured* in his original document.

©Phil Vasili, November 2011.

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