

73rd year 1944-5

The deaths on active service of four more players with Exeter associations were recorded during the final ten months of the war. The first of these was Gavin H.G. Galbraith of the Royal Engineers who was killed in France in August at just 21 years of age.

During the last two months of 1944 came news of the deaths of two former players whilst serving with the 1st Battalion Devonshire Regiment at Imphal, India. Lieutenant Edwin Harry Coombe, a native of Thorverton, had made his debut for the club in 1938 and was a highly promising forward. Lieutenant William George (Bill) Cann of Cullompton died of typhus. Playing as a wing three-quarter Bill Cann had made his debut in 1928 and played his last first team game for the club in 1934.

The club's final fatality of the war was also the oldest. Peter Lawless, aged 54, was a war correspondent for "The Daily Telegraph" attached to the First United States Army. At the Remagen bridgehead in March 1945 he was severely wounded by shrapnel from an exploding shell. He died on his way to a field hospital. A member of a well-known Exeter family, Peter Lawless made half a dozen appearances for Exeter between 1911 and 1913 and was said to have been instrumental in organising the club's first trip to France in 1912. Standing six feet (1.8m) in height and weighing seventeen stones (108 kg) he was literally an outstanding figure. At the end of the First World War he played for Mother Country, a representative team from the home unions that faced representative teams of servicemen from New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and Canada. Oddly there was a sixth team in the competition - a side representing the Royal Air Force. He was captain of the Richmond club between 1922 and 1924.

During August 1944 it was reported that Exeter would be resuming fixtures for the coming season. Two weeks later this intention was confirmed at a meeting at the Clarence Hotel at which Old Heleans, Old Blundellians and the University College of the South West offered playing support to the club. A combined committee of five was elected to aid Jack Coombes with raising teams and organising matches. It was decided that players would be required to pay one shilling (approximately £1.50) per match to help defray costs.

Colin Paul was to captain the club. Three pitches were available for use but the County Ground was not yet suitable for matches as "both ends are in a sorry state". A practice match at the end of the month was attended by a mix of returning old players and many promising young recruits.

Exeter was the first club in Devon to resume fixtures. At Hele's School ground on the first Saturday in October the season opened with a home fixture against the Royal Naval Engineering College. The Exeter team included six players under the age of 19 and the youthful team proved successful (16-3).

The following Saturday saw Exeter field both a first fifteen and a sevens team. At Hele's School ground an Army XV was comfortably defeated (19-0). At Paignton the Exeter VII was defeated by Blundell's School in a semi-final (6-8).

Unusually for the war time period the club then went on to lose three matches in succession. Away to the Royal Naval Engineering College the home team avenged their early season defeat. The Exeter team was likely to have been a make-shift outfit as it contained four players identified only as "A.N. Other" (5-11). At Tiverton, Blundell's School were again successful in an encounter with Exeter (3-9). At Torquay a Royal Air Force XV accounted for an Exeter team that had been reduced to fourteen men for much of the game due to Harry Moore having to retire through concussion (3-11).

In a reversal of fortune three home games then resulted in three victories. A Royal Navy Barracks XV was first to go down (8-3), followed by Tiverton (29-3). In this latter game Sid Waller was successful

with five penalty goal attempts. Finally in this sequence the earlier defeat by the Royal Air Force (Torquay) XV was avenged (8-0).

December commenced with a cancellation by the Royal Engineers following which a trip to Paignton brought another success (16-0).

An unfit pitch caused another cancellation, this time against the Fleet Air Arm but the encounter was quickly rescheduled for the following week when the visiting team was defeated (9-3). The poor weather had not gone away and frost returned. As a result a visit by Paignton on the final Saturday of the year to be cancelled.

The first visitors in the New Year came in the form of Bridgwater Barbarians, a youthful invitation team. Exeter lost for the first time since November, albeit narrowly (6-9). A second consecutive home defeat was inflicted by Royal Air Force (Chivenor) (3-9). January ended with two blank Saturdays. There is no report of the outcome of a scheduled fixture with University College of the South West or the following week when not even the name of the opposition was recorded.

Inactivity did not prove to be a hindrance as on the first Saturday in February an away game with a Royal Marines XV resulted in the biggest win of the season (51-0). Success continued at home when the Plymouth Combination's unbeaten record was "smashed" (18-0). During the war Plymouth Albion did not function and clubs in the city combined to field a fifteen. Playing host to the Royal Naval Engineering College, Exeter won through the efforts of a heavier pack that dominated the scrums (20-0).

At Braunton Road, Barnstaple, Exeter had twice to come from behind to defeat R.A.F. (Chivenor) with Sid Waller converting a late try to win the game (13-11). The proceeds of £20 (£520) were donated to the North Devon Infirmary.

As yet no record of a match being played on the first Saturday in March has surfaced but the following week found Exeter playing at home against a Royal Air Force XV. Exeter, with six policemen in the team, won the game (6-0). Another journey to Barnstaple for a further encounter with Royal Air Force (Chivenor) came next. Exeter narrowly came out on top (6-4). The beneficiary from this match was The R.A.F. Benevolent Fund.

A trip to Somerset brought no success as Bridgwater Barbarians claimed a double victory over Exeter during the season. In ideal conditions the youth and vigour of the home team overcame the age and experience of the visitors (6-17). The final fifteen-a-side game took place at Tiverton at the end of March. By converting four out of the five tries scored, Sid Waller took his tally of points for this abbreviated season to over one hundred (23-5).

On Easter Monday a seven-a-side competition was held on the County Ground. The chosen Exeter squad had suffered three injuries during the game at Tiverton and then lost two more players injured during the first round of the competition. A team from the Royal Engineers defeated Exeter in the final by thirteen points to six.