

MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 13 - APRIL 2015

The stalemate along the Western Front caused the major combatants to think deeply as to how the war should proceed and in particular to seek a strategy that would provide a war-turning breakthrough. For the British and French military the urge to 'do something' often resulted in accusations of tactics getting in the way of strategy. One of the consequences was a general polarisation of opinion between politicians and senior military figures as to how to progress the war. On the one hand politicians noted the casualties suffered in attempting to overcome the stalemate and felt that operations elsewhere could bring pressure to bear on the Central Powers. On the other hand, senior military men believed that only a knockout blow on the Western Front would defeat Germany.

The Allies were not the only ones divided on how to win the war. In Germany an increasingly alarming thought was that they were 'shackled to a corpse' i.e. the Austria-Hungarian Army, who were often in difficulties on the Eastern Front. Again, from a different perspective, opposing views were held on how to best progress the war. Here the difference of opinion was expressed amongst the senior military men and the Kaiser. Some felt that the war could only be won on the Western Front whilst others thought the stalemate position could work to their advantage. The latter thinking was that the German Army was firmly entrenched in Belgium/France and could even afford to lose some ground without suffering a knockout blow. By transferring resources from the Western Front to the more flexible Eastern Front it was strongly argued that the Russians could be swiftly defeated.

On both sides the arguments to seek the seeds of victory elsewhere than on the Western Front were, for the moment, accepted. The British and French proposed to inflict such a outright defeat on the Ottoman forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, that it would eliminate Turkey from the war. It would open up sea routes to reinforce the Russian efforts, with fresh equipment and supplies and increase pressure on the German and Austria-Hungary armies. Meanwhile, the Germans proposed to force the Russians into seeking an armistice, which would allow the bulk of the eastern armies to be transferred back to the Western Front, where success was confidently predicted.

Consequently, during April 1915 eleven German divisions were moved from the Western Front and detailed preparations made to take the offensive against the Russians. The outcome of these plans will be further explored in later Articles.

Despite the transfer of divisions to fight the Russians the Germans had not forgotten to keep the pressure on the allied armies in France and Belgium. In Nov 1914 the Allies had gained the Ypres salient in the First battle of Ypres. In April 1915 the Second battle of Ypres was fought and established an infamous note in history as the first battle to feature the use of chlorine gas. From late 1914 Germany's scientists had begun developing the poison gas chlorine, and by early April 1915 some 5,700 cylinders were in place on the Ypres front. The German plan was that the gas released from the cylinders should be blown across Allied lines by the wind - but the Germans had a long wait, as for much of April the wind was in the wrong direction. On the afternoon of 22 April, in the Battle of Gravenstafel Ridge, with the wind finally blowing in the right direction from behind German trenches, the gas canisters were opened. A yellow-green cloud drifted across No Man's Land - those in the frontline were mainly unable to escape, either killed by chlorine in the lungs, or by gun-fire if they climbed out of the trenches. Those troops at the rear of the trenches fled in panic, choking and with streaming eyes. Over the next few days one of the Allied forces on the receiving end of this hideous attack were troops of the 1st Canadian Division. The Canadians improvised protection against the gas by using handkerchiefs soaked in water or urine and managed to prevent a German breakthrough of any high significance. It is clear that despite intelligence warnings of a possible gas attack, and even a prior German broadcast accusing the British of using gas shells and bombs, insufficient precautions were taken against such attack and the Allies were put on the back foot. This battle rumbled on through May and further details will follow in future articles. One immediate positive outcome for the Allies was that Germany's reputation suffered internationally, especially with the Americans.

The British and French initiative discussed earlier was to attack Turkey by forcing the Dardanelles and gaining access to the Black Sea. An earlier attempt to breach the Dardanelles in March (see March article) had been unsuccessful, but in late April a large scale invasion of the Gallipoli Peninsula was undertaken. On the 25th April, on what has since become ANZAC Day, British, Australian, New Zealand and French troops were landed ashore Gallipoli Peninsular. Despite many courageous actions and achieving bridgeheads on a number of beaches further progress was heavily opposed by Ottoman forces well dug in and commanded by German officers. This campaign, which requires it's own lengthy story, was in trouble almost from it's commencement. A number of plans aiming for a resolution of the campaign were actioned over the remainder of 1915 and all met with the same lack of strategic success. By November it was clear the Allies had given up all hope of a decisive outcome and a decision taken to evacuate the Peninsula. In contrast to the 'muddle' of the initial landings the evacuation was planned in meticulous detail and the withdrawal was a resounding success.

However, the campaign had encouraged Italy to reconsider its treaties with Germany/Austria and in April 1915 Italy agreed to join the war on the Allied side, by signing the Treaty of London. Under the terms of this secret treaty Italy had to declare war on the Central Powers within a month.

On the home front much debate had been stirred up following 'difficulties' with the level of war production particularly among armament workers. The Government led a campaign to cut down on heavy drinking and King George V declared that all Royal Households would in future be dry. Newspapers, national and local, joined in the arguments, followed closely by temperance groups and members of the public. Also, a number of editorials/articles/letters lamenting the fact of Britain's unpreparedness for a European war together with much debate and accusations/apportionment of blame. One of the outcomes of these debates was that David Lloyd George was put in charge of munitions production and his proposal for heavy increases in duties on alcohol was adopted by the House of Commons.

Amongst the non political news were reports of the FA Cup being won by Sheffield United F.C., who defeat Chelsea 3-0 in the final at Old Trafford, Manchester. The competition was then postponed until the war is over. Charlie Chaplin's film, *The Tramp*, was released this month.

British poet Rupert Brooke, who had enlisted in the Royal Navy, died of sepsis, from an infected mosquito bite, on a French hospital ship moored off the Greek island of Skyros. He was on his way to the Eastern Mediterranean to participate in the Gallipoli landings. The opening lines to one of his sonnets *The Soldier* "*If I should die, think only this of me; That there's some corner of a foreign field That is forever England*" have resonated with individuals world wide ever since.

The 5th Bn of the Royal Sussex Regiment were in rest billets at the start of month, but by the 7th were back at Neuve Chapelle, with "D" Company in the trenches. Captain Hornblower was subsequently injured whilst assisting a severely wounded man under fire. By the end of the month practically the whole battalion were employed in working parties in the Rue de Bois before moving into Brigade Reserves at Richebourg L'Avoue, and eventually experiencing heavy bombing in the trenches.

Easter fell early in 1915, with April 3rd being Good Friday. The recent announcement by the railway companies that there would be no Easter excursions was met without demur. The railways withdrew cheap ticket facilities as they were unable to cope with their State obligations and large number of additional passengers. This meant a substantial decline in holiday visitors to Sussex, and the loss of income to the region was significant, as large numbers of the Sussex populace depended on the holiday industry for their livelihood. As the *Sussex Agricultural Express* noted, "*While the War lasts holidays for pleasure will be out of the question for most people.*"

Mayfield celebrated Easter Sunday at St Dunstan's with four services during the day, with a record 119 present at the 8am Holy Eucharist. The kindergarten children attended the afternoon service and the church was adorned with seasonable flowers and plants. On Easter Monday the Mayfield Scouts were joined by the 1st and 2nd Heathfield troops for a field day in Vicarage Woods, Mayfield, defending themselves against an attack by the Wadhurst Troop of Boy Scouts. A narrow victory for the defenders ensued! A "War Service Badge" was presented to Patrol Leader Reginald Fenner, of the Mayfield Troop by the Assistant District Commissioner.

The annual spring lamb feast of Mr. Thomas Daws of Ewhurst took place in Mayfield, celebrating the return of 1,864 lambs returned from 43 different farmers around the local district. The farmers were paid about £1,000 for the lambs' keep, and it was noted that acorns had been a great asset to their keep that winter.

Mid month saw the billeting of some 200 men from the Royal Sussex Regiment within Mayfield. They stayed for two or three nights and made their headquarters at the "*Interesting old house in High Street, Middle House*". The soldiers were kindly entertained in the Parish Hall each evening.

Already in force in coastal towns, a county-wide order came into force mid-month, suspending street illumination altogether and making the carrying of rear lamps on bicycles obligatory. There was much irritation with this new restriction and many cyclists ceased riding after dark.

The Duke of Norfolk, Lord Lieutenant of the County, estimated that 33,300 Sussex men were serving with the Forces. Previous returns had shown that Sussex men had done "*uncommonly well*" in the matter of recruiting, and his latest estimates confirmed that impression: 3,300 Navy; 14,000 Army; 12,000 Territorials; 4,000 other Reservists/enlisted elsewhere. A further 13,700 men were either in Government employment/medically unfit etc, making a grand total of 47,000 men. There were 50,000 men estimated to be of recruitable age, leaving just a small number, 3,000, unaccounted for. In effect, that meant that the majority of Sussex men of recruitable age were already involved in the war effort.

Rates for local parishes were set at the Mark Cross Petty Sessions. For Mayfield, household/business rates were set at 3s 4d in the £; 1s 6d in the £ for land. The Mayfield rate was the highest in the area. The annual meeting of the Mayfield Parish Council was held where officers were re-elected and the Parish Clerk produced the accounts which showed a balance of £1 5s 6d.

A wedding of note to this series of articles took place at the Parish Church on the 10th April between Private Herbert Jones* of the Royal West Kent Regiment and Lottie Greenslade of Five Ashes.

Fortunately, no men were killed this month although a few local men were called up for service. T Maynard (a reservist) went off, and George Lusted* and Robert Pettitt left for Chichester to offer themselves for service. George Charles Wicker enlisted in the Royal Sussex Regiment.

The local newspapers began publishing letters/ accounts from enlisted men of their front line experiences; a selection from local men follows:

Private William Pettitt, of the 5th Royal Sussex, wrote to his aunt in Mayfield during the month, referring to his experience of the recent heavy fighting. He said, *"I have seen what a battlefield looks like, as in front of our trenches there are heaps of dead Germans lying everywhere...there are graves all over the place, and it is like a graveyard at the back of our trench....The English have gained a lot of ground here, but at what a cost. The village is a mass of bricks and dirt; not one house has escaped. It is shells all over the place; you can't imagine what it is like until you have seen it."*

Sergt Jack Groombridge 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards (also mentioned in the February article) once again writing to his Uncle and Aunt Mr/Mrs E Groombridge *"we are still in the fighting line and have been mixed up in almost every scrap since the war began. So many of my pals have suffered. It is a terrible war, but whatever happens we shall win."* He concludes by saying *"I am sure Mayfield must be quiet now that so many are away"*

Corporal George Hopper 5th Royal Sussex Regiment, from somewhere in France and again to Mr Groombridge writes *"Our last turn in the trenches was a bit hot although we were covered with white frost and our feet nearly frozen. We were in advance trenches about 80 yards from the Prussian Guards. They are crack shots. Our men that were hit were all hit in the head and killed outright. People say the war won't last much longer. I hope it won't, but we cannot shift much. Have you heard that Albert Lawes was injured in the face by accident, a bomb burning in a fire. He is in hospital. We have had a good taste of shells and got used to them. Our fellows dig for the brass caps when the shelling stops."*

Albert Lawes, aged 17, was living at Pennybridge Farm, Mayfield with his parents and siblings at the time of the 1911 census. From the scant military records discovered to date he appears to have enlisted in the Royal Sussex Regiment and had three different service numbers allocated during WWI; rising in seniority from Private to Corporal and then Sergeant. For the moment nothing more is known of what seems to be an interesting career.

Finally, the K & SC reported on the 30 April that *"Private H Wells of Five Ashes, who is serving in the 1st line Transport, Royal Sussex Regiment at the front, is in Boulogne hospital with a badly crushed hand owing to a wheel passing over it."*

** Denotes one of the Mayfield Fallen.*

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