

MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 21 - DECEMBER 2015

Military leaders on the Western Front, reflecting on the twelve months of 1915, must have been disheartened that the front line had barely moved in 12 months of determined effort, yet had been costly in terms of lives and national treasure. On the other hand there must have been a certain sense of relief that there had been little further loss of ground or fading determination to continue the pursuit of victory.

For the British and French, military leadership qualities were being questioned and, with the encouragement of politicians, high ranking changes were announced. Field Marshall Sir John French, Commander in Chief of the BEF, was replaced by one of his Army Commanders, General Sir Douglas Haig. Other senior positions were also exchanged. In turn the French Govt appointed General Joffre as Commander in Chief of all French Armies (Generalissimo) thus, in theory, providing him with a command of all French operations and resources. At the end of December Joffre and Haig met to discuss opportunities for large scale attacks in 1916 along the Somme River.

On the Eastern Front, German Army Commanders consoled themselves with the fact that they had pushed the Russian Armies deep into Poland. In Russia, as early as August, the Czar himself had replaced Grand Duke Nicholas as Commander in Chief of the Russian Army.

On the 8th December the evacuation of troops from the ill fated Gallipoli expedition began. Despite grave concerns this was carried out with much success, largely due to the meticulous planning and guile of English born Anzac Commander General William Birdwood and his staff. By the 20th December the British and Anzac troops had left, leaving a small contingent at Cape Helles who were subsequently evacuated by the end of the year. Casualty figures for this campaign vary, but reasonable estimates reveal the British Imperial losses at 34,000 dead and 80,000 wounded. For the often forgotten French participation, figures amount to 10,000 dead and 17,000 wounded.

In December 1915 there were explicit orders issued by Allied Commanders to forestall any repeat of the 1914 Christmas Truce along the Western Front. Nevertheless, this command was not entirely obeyed and there are documented reports of minor, brief local truces being arranged. This front line 'live and let live' attitude occurred not only at Christmas and there are letters from local men, reported in the K & SC, of 'banter', shouted conversations exchanged and placards displayed from closely opposing front line trenches.

"In Flanders Fields" by John McCrae was published in "Punch" magazine on the 8th December 1915, having been rejected by the Spectator magazine. John McCrae was serving as a major and a military doctor with the Canadian Infantry near Ypres, an uncanny connection to Ernest Bateup (see below) who died in December 1915, also serving with the Canadian Infantry:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly*

*Scarce heard amid the guns below.
We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from falling hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

The 5th (Cinque ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment spent the month of December still stationed at Sailly-Au-Bois, in the Pas de Calais region of France. Much of the month was spent carrying out repair works to trenches and putting in drains - on the 14th December Col. Langham wrote that one of the trenches was holding about 4ft of water and falling in at the sides. The Battalion seemed to be under shell fire for many days during the month, and on Christmas Day itself came under shell fire twice. It is recorded that about 200 shells fell on Christmas Day in a single half hour period - no Christmas Truce there for the men of Sussex.

Nationwide one of the big talking points of the month was the completion of the 'Lord Derby' recruitment campaign. Official figures for how successful this had been would not be available until the New Year; there was a surge in attestations over the final weekend as individuals sought to ensure they were included in a 'call up group' which recognised their marital status, their employee/employer work status/obligations and conformed to the 'fairness pledges' given by the Government and Lord Derby himself. By the end of the month, much to the surprise of many, the first groups of attested men (single aged 19-22) were being called up and various levels of appeal and tribunal committees being set in operation. (This recruitment campaign, the forerunner of national conscription deserves an article of it's own given the complexities of it's operation and the emotions it engendered). In Tunbridge Wells and District approx. 2,000 men attested for enlistment as and when the Government thought necessary. Of these, approx. 200 were rejected for medical and other reasons.

A speech in the House of Commons by the Minister of Munitions, Lloyd George, urged the nation to recognise the essential need for labour to produce the materials which guaranteed winning the war. He summed up the position eloquently "The superficial facts of the war are for the moment against us but all the fundamental facts are in our favour" (K&SC 24th December, p.5).

The War Office and Admiralty offered a slightly dotty public warning that chiming of church bells and the striking/chiming of public clocks might, under certain circumstances, afford hostile aircraft useful navigational aid!!!!

Locally, newspaper adverts were used as a reminder that regulations were shortly to be introduced regarding the mandatory notification of measles and german measles. Non compliance would result in fines of up to £100.00. 'Shop early' was the earnest request of all retailers to the general public as Christmas time approached ie with lighting restrictions being placed on all shops/trades, window shopping and close inspection of goods for sale was restricted to daylight hours.

Continuing the lighting theme, the K & SC 10 Dec reported Mayfield Parish Council discussing the question of 'dangers of travelling at night owing to no light'. A proposal was made that the County Council be asked to have the pavement curbing in the High St whitened. Failing which the PC to do so, or allow funds to be raised by voluntary subscription for the work.

The same newspaper contained a letter complaining about a forthcoming rise in council rates, when the writer had anticipated a fall given the savings accrued from the absence of street lighting. Only in Britain!!!!

In the K & SC 24 December, under the Mayfield section is a paragraph headed **Lads at the Front** which reads as follows: Pte Thomas Albert Buss, Royal Sussex, son of Mrs Buss of Miss Cottages, who enlisted in November 1914 has been at the front for four months and writing to his mother states he was '*at the Battle of Loos and miraculously escaped injury*'. Pte Charles Fender of the RHA writes to friends in Mayfield stating he has '*been through several skirmishes without getting hurt*'. Pte Francis J Lade*, son of Mr James Lade, of the Army Ordnance Survey, says he has "*not been in the thick of it yet although big shells fall within 100 yards of the Company 'somewhere in France', and that he is 'still fit*".



Image 1 - Kent & Sussex Courier, 3rd December 1915

The local newspapers often carried photographs of local families with sons serving in the war - in December 1915 the Colvin family from Mayfield were featured. At the time of writing Arthur had already lost his life.



There is one name on the local War Memorial for December 1915.

Private Ernest Bateup, service No. 404260, served with the 3rd Battalion (Central Ontario) Regiment of the Canadian Infantry and died from shell fire whilst on sentry duty on the **29th December 1915**, aged 22.

Ernest was a Mayfield man through and through. He was born on the 30th December 1892 in Mayfield 1892 and lived his whole here. His father, James, was a Mayfield born farm labourer and domestic gardener living in Alexandra Terrace. In 1911 he was recorded as being a single man working as a shop assistant. Between then and 1915 he had obviously travelled to Canada, as he enlisted in Toronto on the 8th April 1915, describing his profession at the time as a mechanic.

He is described as being 5 ft 8 in tall, with grey eyes and light brown hair. His chest measurement was 34 inches and he was in good physical health.

Image 2 - Kent & Sussex Courier, 25th February 1916

According to his Canadian service records he had transferred to the 3rd Battalion (from the 35th) in November 1915 and had only been in France for about two months when he was killed by shell fire.

He was paid at the rate of \$10 per month, so on his death he had earned a total of \$60, but taking account of items he had bought "on credit" with the army, a balancing sum of \$32 was paid to his father.

Ernest's older brother, Herbert Bateup, was sadly killed later in the war in 1917.

Image 1 - Kent & Sussex Courier, 3rd December 1915

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000483/19151203/008/0003>

Image 2 - Kent & Sussex Courier, 25th February 1916

<http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000483/19160225/016/0003>

* Denotes one of the Mayfield fallen.

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