

MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 29 - AUGUST 2016

On the Western Front the British and French armies continued the intense fighting along some 18-20 miles of the Somme offensive.

Of particular note was the bitter fighting between the British and Germans along the high ground/ridge to gain/retain the advantage of overlooking the opposing force. As the ridge slopes embraced deep wooded area the fighting was particularly desperate in places such as Delville Wood, Trones Wood, Mametz Wood and High Wood. Over the month since the offensive was launched, British casualties amounted to 160,000 to which was added 40,000 elsewhere along the Western Front. German losses on the Somme were approx the same as the British. The French armies continued to obstruct the German offensive at Verdun and as a result Marshall Falkenhayn (sent to the Eastern Front) was replaced as Chief of the General Staff by Marshall Hindenburg, who in turn took General Ludendorff as his deputy; a change of leadership which would determine the German course of the war over the next two years.

The Italians launched a successful offensive along the Isonzo and in the Balkans, Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary. On the Eastern Front General Brusilov planned to expand his successful offensive, despite Russian casualties of this campaign amounting to approx 550,000.

On the Home Front, sixteen German airships attacked London and South East England. Poor weather and technical problems lead to an unsuccessful operation and one airship was shot down.



News reports and images of Zeppelin raids on London, August 24th 1916

(images from <http://londonfirejournal.blogspot.co.uk/2005/07/zeppelin-raid-1916.html>)

The German High Seas Fleet launched a sortie against the east coast of England (Sunderland) which it hoped would lure the British warships into a submarine ambush. With relatively minor losses to ships on either side of a limited inconclusive confrontation, both Fleets returned to port.

The 5th Bn (Cinque Ports) Royal Sussex Regiment spent the majority of the month of August in the Somme area. Their work seemed to be primarily cleaning, repairing, deepening and digging out trenches; wiring defences where necessary. They seemed to be right at the heart of the action, as they were positioned between Pozieres and Thiepval, presumably as the British gained ground and new trenches were needed to be dug. Much of their work was undertaken under heavy fire - and sometimes their work was cancelled as either attacks were taking place, or the shelling was too heavy to merit them to work.

Local newspapers again carried little reporting of the war itself, preferring to publish photographs and pen pictures of local men who were casualties of the fighting. Sometimes these were accompanied by accounts from wounded men recuperating at home, or lengthy quotes from letters sent to families/friends from individuals at the various war fronts. The K&SC 11/8/16 carries a leader column which may reflect local understanding of the progress of the war. It is a mixture of apparently limited knowledge of the hard facts, particularly in respect of the recent casualties, and the War at Sea eg the looming submarine menace and the Royal Navy blockade of Germany, together with the desire to maintain a positive outlook and no doubt influenced by official propaganda demands:

“Without any desire - and happily, without any fear - of reviving that early optimism which was one of the besetting dangers to this country in the first stages of the war, we think we may rightly note the accumulating evidences of a gradual but far-reaching change in the fortunes of the Allied Armies. The ‘great push’ which was inaugurated in combination upon all fronts, when the heroic Ulster Division on July 1st led the way into the fifth line of the German trenches north of the Somme, has truly begun to assume the aspect of a great converge. In the past six or seven weeks the whole face of the war has altered. We have suffered heavy losses, but thus far they have been lighter than we had dared to hope they could be, and there is good reason to believe that the enemy forces have suffered diminutions - especially upon the Eastern Front - out of all proportions to those of the Allies, as well as a tactical and strategic disorganisation which is no less evident upon the margin on the Picardy Plains than it is in Galicia.’

There are four names recorded on the Mayfield and Five Ashes war memorials for the month of August 1916, although only three of them appear to be correct.

James Watson. Service No. 74262. C Battalion 80 Brigade Royal Field Artillery. James was killed in action on the 7 August 1916. The brief evidence available from his service records reveal that his residence was in Leyland, Lancashire and that he enlisted in Preston in the same county. It is likely that at the time of compiling the war memorial records he was confused with William James Watson service no. 60715, a Mayfield man, who was killed in action on the 8th October 1918.

Harry Maskell. Service No G/607. 7th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. Harry was killed in action on the 1 August 1916 aged 20.

Harry was born in Mayfield to parents William & Alice in 1896 and was baptised at St Dunstons on the 3 May 1896. William was an agricultural labourer and Harry one of eight children; in 1901 the family were living in Fletching St. By 1911 the family had moved to Burnt Oak Cottage, Waldron and at this time Harry was employed as a Baker.

Unfortunately his army service records have not survived (his medal record is recorded under Herbert Maskell) and what is known of his military life is largely taken from local newspapers. He enlisted with the RSR at Eastbourne in September 1914 and was posted to the 7th Battalion RSR.

In the K&SC 18/8/16 the following was reported under the heading of Hartfield, Harry Maskell:

‘Harry Maskell, son of Mr Wm Maskell of Bolebrook Cottages was killed in action on August 1st. He joined the 9th (sic) Royal Sussex soon after the war was declared. He was wounded on September 25th last (1915) returned to France on July 25 and was killed on August 1st. He was only 20 years of age. Previous to going to the army he was employed by Mr Eaton, Hoopers Farm, Mayfield.. Mr Wm Maskell has also received word from his eldest son Fred saying that he is in the General Hospital, Denmark. suffering from shell shock. Another son Corporal Ernest Maskell was wounded last year. He was mentioned in one of Lord French’s dispatches for display of great coolness when under shell fire.’

What is known from the War Diaries of the 7th Battalion RSR is that on the 31 July 1916 they were in trenches West of Pozieres. An attack was ordered on a German strongpoint to begin at 21.30 hrs. In conjunction with units of the Middlesex Regiment a strong bombing party were to capture and consolidate 50 yards of enemy trench. This appears to have required two separate attempts to achieve and for some time the attacking units were held up by machine gun fire along a straight section of enemy trench. Casualties: 7 OR killed. 19 wounded.

Harry Maskell’s body was never found/recovered and his name is recorded amongst those on Thiepval Memorial.

Ralph Grant. Private 9 Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment. Service No. G/4109. Ralph died of wounds on the 23 August 1916 aged 19.

He was born in West Hoathley/East Grinstead, depending on which Census is read, and in 1901 was living at 35 Birch Grove, West Hoathly with parents James (a Domestic Coachman/Groom) & Annie. By 1911 the family (James was one of 7 children) had moved to the Mayfield area and were living at Twitts Cottage, Five Ashes. At this time James was working as a garden boy at Quarry Lodge, Five Ashes.

Unfortunately his army service records have not survived but it is recorded that he served in France from 29 March 1915 and consequently his known enlistment at Eastbourne must have been in the autumn of 1914. The War Diaries of the 9th Battalion RSR reveal that over the period 18/19th August, together with the 7th Northamptonshire Regiment, they attacked the German front line and what is referred to as the Quarries, and also the fortified village of Guillemont. Heavy fighting, sometimes hand to hand, occurred over this period and by the 20th August the casualties of the 9th Battalion were Officers: 3 killed. 4 wounded. OR 23 killed. 133 wounded. 23 missing. It is not clear where Ralph Grant was involved in this action but subsequently on the 23rd he died of his wounds sustained on this part of the front.

His body is buried in Abbeville Communal Cemetery. France.

William Turk. Rifleman 9th Battalion Kings Royal Rifle Corps. Service No. R/14870. William was killed in action 24th August 1916 aged 22.

William was born in Jarvis Brook to parents Alfred & Louisa and the family of 10 children were living at Cottage, Clackmans, Rotherfield in 1901. Alfred was a carpenter and by the 1911 census the family had moved to Boulds Lane, Inkberrow, Worcestershire where Alfred was an Estate carpenter & joiner foreman and William was an apprentice carpenter. William enlisted in the KRRC at Worcester in August 1915. His service records survive and record that he was 5' 6 3/4" in height and weighed approx 130 lbs.

The 9th Battalion KRRC were involved in the bitter fighting in the Somme offensive at Delville Wood. On the 24 August they were part of the 42 Brigade of the 14th Light Division which attacked German positions in Delville Wood, in strength, which saw gains in territory and establishment of defensive posts in the shattered trenches. William was classified as missing and not officially recognised as killed until March 1917. At this date a letter was sent to William Turk's father (Alfred) stating that no further information regarding his missing son had been established and asked for confirmation that they had no news from other sources of his likely whereabouts. Alfred responded with a letter he had received from one of William's comrades which stated that William had been killed. This satisfied the army and in May 1917 the family received William's sole remaining personal effect: one disc which was probably one of his identity badges/dogtag.

The CWGC carry an address for William's parents of Gold's Farm, Mayfield although all correspondence with the family is addressed to the Worcestershire family home.

William's body was never found and he is remembered amongst those on the Thiepval Memorial.

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