

## MAYFIELD AND THE GREAT WAR - NO. 46 - JANUARY 2018

In January 1918, as winter weather and mutual exhaustion closed down any large scale actions along the Western Front, the Allies, and their adversaries the Central Powers, pondered their options for bringing the war to a decisive conclusion. The German Army, largely on the defensive in France and Belgium since late 1914, had given up little ground, but in successive major offensives, mounted by the British and French, suffered colossal casualty rates. Add to these the losses on the Russian and Italian fronts and it was clear, German reserves were very limited. Civil unrest in Germany, owing to the ever increasing casualty lists, the food shortages caused by the Royal Navy blockade and social revolution being stirred by events in Russia, seriously influenced the minds, plans and strategies of German Generals and Politicians alike. Furthermore, their Austrian, Balkan and Ottoman partners were feeling the strain and in danger of buckling. The one positive prospect was that peace terms were being settled with Russia, which offered the opportunity for the transfer of large numbers of German men and equipment from the Eastern Front to the Western Front.

In senior military and political circles in Britain these matters would have been recognised and debated, although clouded in early 1918 by the lack of trust between these same parties. Politicians, appalled at the casualties of the Passchendaele offensive and the absence of any clear evidence of important gains, were not keen to support further actions of this nature. The preferred option of British politicians was to set up a supreme 'Military Command' to co-ordinate all future British/French/Italian/American major actions and await the build up of American forces/industrial production whilst providing time for the British industrial war production to reach peak efficiency and output.

1918 would reveal the relative strengths/weaknesses of each combatant and eventually bring the Great War to an end. That 'tipping point' was some months off and the 'man in the street's' understanding of the strategic position and options early in 1918 is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, for the British Government the retention of public support and opinion was of paramount importance, if the war was to be won.

As an example of how this aim was pursued and promoted nationally and locally, the Editorial Leader of the K&SC (11/1/18) praises and challenges its readers: *'By Special Proclamation the King called upon his people to set aside last Sunday (6th January) as a day of prayer and thanksgiving, in order that, in His Majesty's words "we may have the clear sightedness and strength necessary to the victory of our cause". Accordingly, in all places of worship throughout the Kingdom, special services were held, and the nation rededicated itself to the task which it undertook with such firm spirit three and a half years ago. The British people now see with a clearer vision the meaning of the struggle and recognise fully the sacrifice which it demands, and in this knowledge, the nation sought on Sunday a renewal of strength, in order that it may continue steadfast to the end of the great tragedy in which right is slowly vindicating itself. In the course of his sermon the Archbishop of Canterbury urged every one of us to remember that we*

*have a part to play in this vast conflict, and to keep to the forefront of our minds the justice of our cause.'*

The same newspaper (25/1/18) in its leader column continued the plea for steadfastness and resolve, and laced the article with a mixture of criticism and optimism: *'The Prime Minister has given as the watchword for the prosecution of the war "to go on or go under". To this may be added a national rejoinder to the Government to "get on or get out" and we may be said to have at last a perfect working formula for the final cumulative effort in the last phase of the war. We are sure the country will not be found wanting in any appeal that is made to it, and that the real drawback in the past has been the hesitancy of politicians to make the necessary appeal to the full extent to the patriotism of the nation. The 'grumbling grouchers' would be in a still smaller minority, if the nation were already informed by the Government of the full measure of the final effort which has yet to be made, and also of the terrific price to be paid for any failure to make the necessary effort. A great penalty has been paid for past unpreparedness, inefficiency and the fake economy of cheapness but that price would be as nothing to the cost of a German victory in all its ruthlessness.'*

Internationally, the key feature in January was the announcement by USA President Woodrow Wilson of a 14 point peace plan. Points 6-13 related to WWI and largely concerned with the restoration of Belgian sovereignty, restoration of invaded territories and the self determination of various ethnic groups. The other 6 points related to improving relationships between countries on a world wide scale so as to avoid any further conflicts. These latter points would form the foundations for The League of Nations set up in 1919 and eventually the post WWII United Nations.

The local Mayfield men, of "D" company in the 5th (Cinque ports) Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment, spent the early part of January 1918 building telephone cable trenches in Northern Italy, about 30km North West of Venice. Mid-month Lt-Col Langham, who had been in command of the battalion since the start of the war, was taken ill and admitted to hospital; no reasons were given in the war diaries of the battalion. By the end of the month the battalion had moved further east to Treviso, by which time their effective strength was 34 officers and 896 ordinary ranks.

Nationally, under the powers of the Food Hoarding Order 1917, officers of Food Committees were authorised to enter homes to search for hoarded food e.g. accumulation of of tinned meats, condensed milk, tinned salmon. The terms of the FHO provided that no person shall acquire food in excess of the quantity required for ordinary consumption in his establishment. Every person holding a month's supply of any foods, controlled or uncontrolled, is liable for prosecution except in the cases of such articles as home grown produce. Given the threat, particularly in early 1917, of the German submarine blockade and the difficulties in swiftly bringing uncultivated land into food production, rationing and an equitable sharing of food was clearly required.

Nevertheless, given the need to keep public opinion 'on side', such matters required careful implementation.

By early 1918 most people in Britain were finding the pressure of food shortages very great indeed. On Sunday 20th January 1918 a Mr. Robinson commented in his diary: *"This week end has been a difficult one for the housewife. There is a great shortage of meat and many families have had to go without. Even in our own quiet village long queues wait outside the shops for hours to get small quantities of margarine, etc. It is the same all over the country and there is little doubt that we shall all be on compulsory rations very shortly. It is reported from Chesterfield that horse-flesh is being sold for human food and that it is fetching 1/- per lb, at which price it is said to have found ready purchasers. On the other hand, a man was fined yesterday £500, and sentenced to imprisonment for one month as well, for hoarding food. It is true he had laid in a good stock, including 400lbs of food, 144 lbs of sugar, 14 hams, 37 tins of sardines, and a few other things. It strikes one, however, as being a very arbitrary proceeding."*

*Only three days later Mr. Robinson reported yet more developments in his diary regarding "public meals", i.e. meals at hotels, restaurants, clubs etc.:*  
*"Two meatless days are to be observed. In the London area the days will be Tuesday and Friday, and elsewhere in the United Kingdom Wednesday and Friday. No meat may be served with breakfast. Fats are rationed for the first time. No milk may be served or consumed as a beverage, except with tea, coffee, cocoa, or chocolate, or by children under 10 years of age. No more than 1 1/2 ozs of bread, cake, bun, scone or biscuit may be served with afternoon teas. The quantity at present is 2ozs."* (Reproduced from the Imperial War Museum Book of the First World War, p. 226-227)

**ON LEAVE:** The K&SC 18/1/18 P7 reported: *'Private Butler of Coggins Mill has had 14 days leave from the Front.*

*Private Colvin who has been wounded three times is still in hospital at Gloucester, but is progressing favourably.*

*Mr J Bellingham who joined the forces last week has passed as Second Air Mechanic in the RFC.*

*Corporal J Luck has 14 days leave from France.*

*Private H Vickers has been home .*

**POSTED:** *Driver W Weston has arrived safely in Mesopotamia.'*

The K&SC 25/1/18 P7 reported: *' Private T Bellingham is home from France on leave. He joined the army with the first volunteers from the village and has been in France 2 years 8 Months.*

*Other soldiers on leave are Private Sheppard and Private E Carpentere, who joined under the Derby Scheme and have been at the Front for some time.'*

There are no names recorded on the Mayfield or Five Ashes war memorials for January 1918.