



The Dugout

Newsletter of the Dorset and South Wiltshire Branch of the
Western Front Association (Registered Charity : 1142787)

www.wfa-dorsetswilts.org.uk

Parish Notes

Chairman:

Martin Willoughby
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Meetings - 2011

Saturday, 10 December - AGM
David Seymour - The Battle of The Falkland Islands, 8 December 1914

Meetings - 2012

Saturday, 7 January

Kevin Patience - Dorset VCs
Phil Ventham & Bere Regis Scouts - Bere Regis War Memorial

Saturday, 11 February

Mark Smith - The Will Townend Memorial Lecture

Saturday, 17 March

Gary Sheffield - Three Chaplains on the Western Front

At Pimperne Village Hall, Blandford -
2pm for 2.30pm start.

Field Trips:

Saturday 10 March

- Imperial War Museum

Saturday, 2 June

- Bletchley Park

Battlefield Tours:

Friday, 14 - Monday, 17 September - Tanks on the Somme

Sunday, 23 September - Monday, 1 October - Gallipoli

Further details from the Secretary, Judy Willoughby, the Chairman or the Branch website.

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Newsletter Editor:

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## Chairman's Chat

### Remembering 2011



As you read this Remembrance 2011 is past. It is noticeable that public awareness has significantly increased. "Remembering" is the cornerstone of the Branch and the WFA as a whole. Whilst space does not permit a full examination of the reasons for this re-found awareness I am sure that recent conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan and its consequences have played a notable part and the public at large has a renewed awareness of the contribution and sacrifice of our Armed Forces, past and present, in defending our freedoms and it is right and proper that this is remembered. Since its founding the WFA has played a part in this. Previously unheralded, the WFA has for the last seventeen years organised a Remembrance service at the Cenotaph in Whitehall on Armistice Day. Attendance this year was probably the highest it has ever been. As a branch we are, albeit at a distance, a part of this and I am sure that on both Armistice Day and Remembrance Sunday members attended local services to

'Remember' the sacrifice of those who didn't come back and also those who served.

Whilst the Great War generation has passed into history we can look back with sadness at the cost, yet thankfulness that because of the price paid by the Great War generation and those who served in later conflicts whether it be World War Two, Korea or the myriad 'minor' campaigns that Britain's Armed Forces have been involved in over many decades we are able to live as we do today (for better or worse). To quote George Orwell "We sleep safe in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm". As one of those 'rough men' (safely retired) I was fortunate this year to be able to attend a service on Armistice Day at the home of the Royal Armoured Corps and the Remembrance Day service at the Tank Museum. At the latter, accompanied by family and friends I watched as our eldest grandson Sam laid a wreath on behalf of a branch member who was unable to



attend in remembrance of those who served in 141 Regiment (The Buffs), Royal Armoured Corps on Crocodile Tanks. Later Judy placed a wreath at Wareham War Memorial remembering a member's uncle who served in the 18<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Army Cyclist Corps who died on the 8<sup>th</sup> September 1917. Thus through several generations on one day of the year the memory and the reasons we remember live on. And so it should always remain, otherwise we forget who we are.

Other notable recent events include: Sunday 11 September when several members attended the re-dedication of the memorial to the 7<sup>th</sup> Bn Hampshire Regt at St Peter's Church Bournemouth. This memorial was rescued from oblivion with branch member Roger W Coleman playing a central role in its re-instatement in a fitting location.

October saw the publication of 'A Sergeant Major's Death' (a sequel to an earlier publication 'A Sergeant Major's War') written by Martin Middlebrook and published jointly with The Keep Military Museum, Dorchester. Members duly took up the challenge with half our stock already sold.

We now look forward to 2012 and beyond well positioned to develop the branch and continue to 'educate' the public on the Great War with our exciting schedule of events and activities. The Branch continues to see a rise in numbers attending our meetings and other activities and I thank members for their interest, enthusiasm and support. The Branch executive committee continues with its excellent work and I am grateful for their dedication and support in taking the branch forward and taking on the additional responsibilities of a Trustee.



### **Battlefield Tour 2011**

#### **The Battle of Mons and Northern Phase of the Retreat.**

On Friday the 2 September, at 6 am our coach slid gracefully and silently out of Pimperne. Its destination; the area of Folkestone, its purpose; to board the "Chunnel" train to Calais as it has these past few years. Despite a slight hitch with tunnel times we were not delayed too long and our management sorted things in the usual smooth and calm manner. A stop en route in Bethune was welcome, as was the news that Stands 1 and 2, originally planned for Day one would be adjourned until Day two. Thus we arrived at our hotel, the Ibis, Mons, in good shape and spirits.

Day 2: To Casteau to view two memorials and to hear how, ironically, the final shots of the War took place in such close proximity to where the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards fought the opening engagement. Memorials to these events were viewed, the second dedicated to the 116<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry Regiment which ended up at Casteau on the 11 November 1918. This is a mere fifty metres from that of the 4<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards. We had now completed Stands 1 and 2 from the previous day.



Stand 3. We arrived at the Canal Bridge, Nimy, for a thorough grounding in the desperate events of 1914 when the British Expeditionary Force attempted to hold the Mons-Conde Canal against the might of the advancing, numerically superior, German First Army. With the unheralded withdrawal of the French Fifth Army the British right flank was dangerously exposed. A single company of the 4<sup>th</sup> Bn Royal Fusiliers defended the Nimy Bridge when it was attacked by four German battalions. Also fighting was a machine gun section led by Lt Maurice Dease. Then took place the famous "rapid fire" of the British forces, to such good effect that the enemy were convinced they were facing numerous machine guns. The heroic exploits of Lt Dease was to win him a posthumous Victoria Cross, the citation being:

*"On 23 August 1914 at Mons, Belgium, Nimy Bridge was being defended by a single company of Royal Fusiliers and a machine-gun section with Lieutenant Dease in command. The gun fire was intense and the casualties very heavy, but the lieutenant went on firing in spite of his wounds, until he was hit for the fifth time and was carried away to a place of safety where he died. A private of the same battalion who had been assisting the lieutenant while he was still able to operate the gun, took over and used the gun to such good effect that he covered the retreat of his comrades."*

The private soldier mentioned in Lt Dease's citation was Sidney Frank Godley who himself was awarded



the Victoria Cross for his gallant actions that day. His citation reads:

*"On 23 August 1914 at Mons, Belgium, Private Godley took over a machine gun on Nimy Bridge when the lieutenant in charge of the section had been mortally wounded. Private Godley held the enemy from the bridge single-handed for two hours under very heavy fire and was wounded twice. His gallant action covered the retreat of his comrades but he was eventually taken prisoner. His final act was to destroy the gun and throw the pieces into the canal."*

Another heroic soldier that day was Musketeer Oskar Niemeyer of the German Army who under fire swam the canal to work the mechanism of a bridge over the canal whereby the bridge could be swung to enable German forces to use it. Musketeer Niemeyer accomplished his great deed but perished as a result.

Stand 4 found us at Obourg, just north of Mons, the village to which Private John Parr and another cyclist were sent to locate the enemy. This they did but it resulted in the death of Private Parr; he is held to be the first British fatality of the War.



Stand 5. St. Symphorien Cemetery must be one of the most romantically situated burial plots resulting from the Great War. On the edge of woodland, it affords shaded glades and pleasantly undulating grassy areas. A grey granite obelisk is erected. The burials are thought to include the first and last soldiers killed on the allied side: Private J Parr, the cyclist before mentioned and Private G L Price, Canadian Infantry. Here too lies the aforementioned Lt Maurice Dease VC and that other very brave soldier, Musketeer Oskar Niemeyer. Also honoured here is the grave of Private G E Ellison, 5<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Lancers and the last British soldier to be killed in the Great War.

On this full and busy second day of our tour we continued to Bray to the east of Mons, munching our lunch as we went. Here we viewed the site occupied



by number 4 gun of E Battery, Royal Horse Artillery on the morning of the 22 August 1914. The first two rounds from the British side in the Great War were fired from this spot sadly the small memorial in place is in danger of being completely shrouded by the encroaching foliage. It appears that the two shell cases were retained to find their way into today's E Battery offices. This being Stand 6, we clambered aboard again to make for the next venue.

Stand 7 was at La Bascule where stands the Celtic cross to commemorate the action of the Royal Irish Regiment. It is inscribed *"To the Glory of God and to the Memory of officers and men of the Royal Irish Regiment (18<sup>th</sup> Foot) who fell during the Great War 1914-1918"*. It continues: *"Near this spot the 2nd Battalion commenced operations on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914 and finished on 11<sup>th</sup> November 1918, after being decimated on four occasions."*

On then to Stand 8: Audregnies, where we learned of the desperate action of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Brigade and the 15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. They were supported by L Battery Royal Horse Artillery and 119 Battery Royal Field Artillery. Charged with the "simple" orders: "Stop the German advance!", they faced four German Divisions under Von Kluck which advanced towards the gap between Elouges and Audregnies. The action included a cavalry charge, the troopers from which eventually dismounted and carried on fighting alongside other British troops. This was a rearguard action which allowed other units of the BEF to complete their withdrawal. The German advance had been held up for three hours. Heroism in recovering guns under fire resulted in the awards of two Victoria Crosses firstly to Captain Francis Octavius Grenfell, 9<sup>th</sup> (Queen's Royal) Lancers.

Account of deed; *"On 24 August 1914 at Audregnies, Belgium, Captain Grenfell rode with the regiment in a charge against a large body of unbroken German infantry. The casualties were very heavy and the captain was left as the senior officer. He was rallying part of the regiment behind a railway embankment when he was twice hit and severely wounded. In*

*spite of his injuries, however, when asked for help in saving the guns by the commander of the 119th Battery, Royal Field Artillery, he and some volunteers, under a hail of bullets, helped to manhandle and push the guns out of range of enemy fire."*

And to Major (later Major General) Ernest Wright Alexander, 119th Battery Royal Field Artillery.

Account of deed: "On 24 August at Elouges, Belgium, when the flank guard was attacked by a German corps, Major Alexander handled his battery against overwhelming odds with such conspicuous success that all his guns were saved notwithstanding that they had to be withdrawn by hand by himself and volunteers led by a Captain of the 9th Lancers. This enabled the retirement of the 5th Division to be carried out without serious loss. Subsequently Major Alexander rescued a wounded man under heavy fire."

We found ourselves driving slowly and perhaps precariously down a track by a field of maize to Stand 9 which led to the venue of exploits of the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, Royal Norfolk Regiment and 1<sup>st</sup> Bn, The Cheshire Regiment supported by the 119 Field Battery on the flank. Desperate actions indeed.

Stand 10 was St. Ghislain and a plaque on a pillar to Major Charles Stewart Holland. This officer, born at Wimbledon, London is commemorated by this private memorial. He was killed by rifle fire on 23 August 1914.

This concluded a full and at times very hot, day and we repaired thankfully to our hotel. Within 200 yards of this simple and comfortable hotel are situated some splendid restaurants which served very welcome meals at the end of each day.

Day 3: Off we set in high spirits to continue the withdrawal of the BEF. We made for Solesmes which on the 25 August 1914 was all about retreat and rearguard actions. Thankfully a strong rearguard of the 1<sup>st</sup> Wilts and 2<sup>nd</sup> South Lancs saw off the enemy when they arrived by lorry loads to make contact with the weary men of the BEF. A heavy rainstorm broke at 5 pm and perhaps helped to encourage a German retirement.

For Stand 12 we presented ourselves at Landrecies for more rearguard actions. 4<sup>th</sup> (Guards) Brigade (2nd Division, I Corps) and Headquarters of I Corps moved into the town on the 25 August after a long march under the beating sun. At 5.30 pm refugees reported that Uhlan's were in the Mormal Forest north of the town. Although intelligence reported no sighting, to be safe defensive positions were ordered. This was fortunate because around 7 pm an enemy patrol clashed with 3<sup>rd</sup> Bn Coldstream Guards and was repelled. The Germans brought up a field gun

and reserves and fighting went on all night. Lance Corporal Wyatt was awarded a Victoria Cross for his action in putting out a burning haystack thus allowing the position to be held.

Account of deed: "On 25/26 August 1914 at Landrecies, France, part of Lance Corporal Wyatt's battalion was hotly engaged close to some farm buildings, when the enemy set alight some straw sacks in the farmyard. The lance corporal twice dashed out under very heavy fire from the enemy only 25 yards away and extinguished the burning straw, making it possible to hold the position. Later, although wounded in the head, he continued firing until he could no longer see owing to the blood pouring down his face. The medical officer bound up his wound and ordered him to the rear, but he returned to the firing line and went on fighting."

It was time to head for Le Cateau. Stand 13 placed us at Le Cateau where late on 25 August 1914 the retreating II Corps was being closely pursued by the German First Army, with I Corps some way to the east. It was clear that the disorganised and fatigued units faced disaster if withdrawal continued. Corps Commander Smith-Dorrien ordered II Corps to stand and fight. II Corps' rapid fire was intensive and accurate and field artillery fired air-bursting shrapnel rounds. Field guns fired at point blank range were very effective. The exhausted II Corps disengaged and withdrew to the south. It had been successful. The Germans suffered heavy casualties. To the east I Corps was able to move further away from the German advance parties. The action caused a rift



between Sir John French and Smith-Dorrien (though I doubt whether the lads in the front line lost any exhausted sleep over that, even if they did know!). Le Cateau Military Cemetery contains multi-national graves including 34 Russians prisoners of war.

At Troisville about 5 kms west of Le Cateau the action of 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Dorsetshire Regiment was explained on the actual site of the battalion's deployment - a spot rarely



visited. Troisvilles Communal Cemetery contains the grave of Private W R Oakley of the Dorsetshire Regiment killed on 24 August 1914. Other graves tended by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission are beside him. This was a venue to sit and reflect which some of us did, our lives improved by the addition of a welcome ice cream from the nearby "convenience store".

Etreux beckoned!.....for here took place a feat seldom equalled in the annals of modern warfare when the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Royal Munster Fusiliers, on their first action in France, with three companies, this less than a single battalion halted the advance of the German Army for fourteen hours. This enabled the rest of the BEF to withdraw to a safe 12 miles. The 2nd Munsters were decimated with only 5 officers and 196 other ranks surviving. They were outnumbered by over 6 to 1. The fallen are interred in the Etreux British Military Cemetery, a solemn and noble place. It was here that we held our short act of remembrance.



On, inexorably on!: To St. Quentin and the story that boils down to "How Tom Bridges saved two regiments". British Cavalry officers and their troops entered the town and found troops of two regiments in disarray, some without arms and many asleep. Obviously totally exhausted they slept where they had slumped down. It was said that their respective colonels had surrendered to the German forces. It appeared that a French civilian official was interfering and urging a surrender to save his town from bombardment. The men were counted and found to number 440, representing two regiments: 1<sup>st</sup> Bn Royal Warwickshire Regiment and 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Bridges organised a march out and a makeshift band of tin whistles etc aided the spirit to

move. It was reported that the men had seen their staffs leave by train while they were left without ammunition, food and drink for so long. It is obviously so wrong to form a judgement on behaviour of so long ago, when one is not seized of all the facts and indeed cannot even imagine the demoralised state these men must have been in. We spared a thought for these totally exhausted lads as we smugly enjoyed the comfort of our coach bearing us ever towards The Ibis and to dinner!

Day Four: Mons was doubtless relieved as we headed towards the coast and the tunnel. I think we had all enjoyed our stay in the unpretentious and efficient hotel cleverly sorted out by our "management". Never once on our trip had we been hurried or harried yet timings seemed to be met as if by magic.

On our way we headed for Hautrage and the military cemetery, another multi-national burial site having been started by the Germans in 1914. As with all such cemeteries one could linger all day reading the headstones as this can become an obsession.

An unscheduled stop at Longuenesse Souvenir Cemetery where the eagle eyed among us found the grave of Acting Corporal Cecil Reginald Noble VC of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn, The Rifle Brigade. We further remember this gallant soldier being brought to our notice in a spirited lecture by our own member and ex-Hampshire - Roger Coleman.

I am sure we are all deeply grateful to each one of our accompanying lecturers, who led us through the minefield of information regarding the BEF retreat. Many thanks to: Mike "Idi" Adams, Chris Hands, Graham Kerridge, Colin Parr and Nigel Plumb, in alphabetical order. We are indeed blessed. Our thanks, too, to our "management" who now must be prodded and chivvied to get on with next year's tour.



Photograph : Rod Arnold

**Robert Scott - Puttock**

**Photographs: Graham Kerridge**

**Major Ralph Edward Dawson Kent  
1/4th Bn. Green Howards  
(formerly of 7th Battalion.)**

I was very interested to read the piece by Martin Middlebrook on page 10 of Issue No. 8 of The Dugout, relating to the unauthorised attack which took place on the German front line at Fricourt (Wing Corner) on the 1 July 1916 by a company of the 7<sup>th</sup> Green Howards under the command of Major Kent.

My research in the 1990's revealed that the destruction of the German machine gun post at Wing Corner on that day was allocated to a particular battery RFA, which at the crucial time, was unable to fire owing to shell fuse trouble. By the time the matter was rectified, the battery was prevented from firing on that area, owing to the fear of hitting the British wounded (one of whom was a severely wounded Major Kent) sheltering in No Man's Land after their (and that by others) unsuccessful attack on the German strong point.

So why did Major Kent directly disobey his colonel's orders? One reason put forward at the time of my research was that Major Kent realised, that for the British advance to go forward, it was essential to capture the German post, in particular to cover the 10<sup>th</sup> West Yorks. on the Green Howards' left who were suffering tremendous casualties. In the event, the unauthorised attack failed, but it has been suggested that had it been successful it would have merited an award of the DSO to Major Kent - for a regular officer, a highly desirable decoration. The enemy post was eventually taken by the 1st Bn. Royal Welch Fusiliers coming down the sunken road from the Bois Francais trenches.

Rescued from No Man's Land, Major Kent recovered and was eventually placed in command of the 1/4<sup>th</sup> Green Howards. The battalion was virtually wiped out during fighting in the period 26 to 31 May 1918, Major Kent being killed in action on the 27<sup>th</sup> of that month. The action in which his battalion took part contributed to the Regiment's valued Battle Honour "Aisne 1918". After the war Mrs Kent went to live in Ferndown, Dorset.

My Great War research has been concentrated on the Great War poets, in particular, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon etc. and in this connection, members may wish to visit the web site "Sassoon on the Somme" at [www.1914-18.co.uk](http://www.1914-18.co.uk) following the "Military Tour" and "Virtual Tour", thence on to pages 4, 5, 6, etc. The text and photographs will no doubt bring back memories of visits to this area by members and will display the ground over which the disastrous attack took place.

**Philip Guest**

**Sprechen Sie Deutsch...or Latin?**

May I use the columns of Dugout to seek readers help with the translation of inscriptions on two memorials? Our recent Branch Battlefield Tour focused on the Mons campaign of 1914 including the early part of the retreat as far back as Le Cateau and St. Quentin. At two locations I came across memorials, one with an inscription in German and the other in what appears to be Latin. Unfortunately my schoolboy German is rather rusty and my Latin even worse!

The German inscription appears on a memorial at Hautrage Military Cemetery at St. Ghislain. The cemetery has British and German burials and the memorial stands just to the left of the entrance. As far as I can make out, the inscription reads as follows:



"AUF DIESEM GELANDE MACHTE 23.8.1914  
d. TAPFEPE (or Tapfere) 8 KOMP IR ALYENSLE-  
BEN No. 52  
SIEGREICHEN STURMANGRIFF AUF  
ENGL. MASCH.-GEWEHRE. ES FANDEN den  
HELDENTOD  
Der KOMPAGNIE-FUHRER  
OBERL. VON NEGELEIN  
LTN. BURGATZCKY"

There is a clear reference to 'English machine-guns' and my guess is that the memorial commemorates officers of the German 52<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment killed in an assault on a British position at the Battle of Mons.

David Lomas in "Mons 1914" refers to the German 52<sup>nd</sup> Regiment attacking at Les Herbieres on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914. The area was held by 2<sup>nd</sup> King's Own Scottish Borderers and 1<sup>st</sup> East Surreys. Lomas comments that the 52<sup>nd</sup> "learned the painful lesson



being taught elsewhere” – i.e. British rapid rifle fire stopped mass infantry attacks as effectively as machine guns.



The second memorial was at the entrance to St. Symphorien Military Cemetery, again a site used for the fallen of both sides. The inscription appears to read:

“AD MILITES SEPEL CDXXXI  
IN FINIBUS OCCISOS  
VICORUM PROXIM. DUODECIM  
HOC AGRI NULLA MERCEDE  
USUI DAT CONCEDITOUE  
JEAN HOUZEAU DE LA HAINE  
23-24 AOUT 1914”

I know that Jean Houzeau de Lahaie was a local resident who donated the land for the cemetery. The inscription may just record this or it could include some sentiments about the fallen. Does the Roman numeral (931?) refer to the number of burials for example?

Is anyone able to provide a translation of either of these inscriptions?

**Rod Arnold**



### **More on Mow Cop**

In Dugout, Issue 8, Alan and Bev Leeson wrote about Pte Noah Stanier of the Cheshire Regiment who was born in Mow Cop on the Staffordshire / Cheshire border. Because of Alan's family connections with the area he and Bev have assisted the village with their fascinating and informative website giving a

short biography on all the men who did not return from the War. I commend it to you.

A Google search on **Mow Cop Interactive** will bring up the website and the click on the poppy.

**Editor**



### **Gas Warfare in WW1 and the Man Who Started It.**

In 1914 Germany was a world leader in industrial chemistry. One of its most brilliant scientists was Fritz Haber and in 1899 he finally solved the enormous difficulties of “fixing” atmospheric nitrogen for the manufacture of fertilizers and explosives. This involved extremely high pressures, and it was another four years before Carl Bosch at BASF succeeded making industrial production possible - hence the name “Haber-Bosch Process”.

This was extremely important for Germany when war broke out in 1914. All imports of nitrates from Chile were immediately cut off, but the Haber-Bosch plants came on stream just in time to fill the gap. It is said that German generals calculated that otherwise they only had enough explosives in store for six months of fighting; so several million more young men were killed because of Haber's laboratory work.

As the war went on, and especially after Ludendorff became the virtual military dictator of Germany, priority was given to explosive production over that of nitrate fertilisers. Agricultural output suffered as a result. Starvation in Germany in 1918 was not due entirely to the Allied blockade.

The war closed many export markets for the German chemical industry, and Fritz Haber suggested that the large stocks of unsold chlorine could be used as a weapon. The Kaiser gave him the honorary rank of Captain in the German army, and he personally supervised the setting out of all the chlorine cylinders opposite the Allied lines at Ypres. The gas cloud which rolled across towards the Allied lines about tea time during the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915 nearly achieved a breakthrough as the unprotected troops caught in it retreated in panic. Fortunately the situation was retrieved by Canadians on the flank and stout resistance of the Belgium Army on the Northern flank of the Salient. The Germans themselves were not prepared for the success of the gas attack and did not make the most of the opportunity presented to them.

Chlorine is heavier than air, so it settled into the trenches and dug-outs. It attacks the lungs and victims literally drown in their own fluid. Wilfred Owen describes it horrifically in his poem "Dulce et Decorum est". Fritz Haber's wife Clara, herself a chemist, shot herself a month later with Haber's service revolver, and many think it was because she had been appalled at what her husband had been doing.

A fundamental flaw in Germany's use of poison gas on the Western Front is that the prevailing wind blows from the Allies side towards the Germans. It was not long before the Allies began their own production of chlorine to use against them. At the Battle of Loos later in 1915, the British released 1,400 tons of it. Unfortunately the wind was light and variable that day and a lot of gas drifted back on to the British troops. Some historians believe that British gas casualties were actually greater than German ones.

Another problem with releasing huge clouds of gas in this manner is that advancing soldiers have to wear gas masks as they attack. All gas masks, and especially early WW1 types, are uncomfortable to wear, breathing is harder so that physical exercise is more tiring, and vision is severely restricted.

A more efficient way of using gas was to deliver it in artillery shells. These contaminated a much smaller area but could be aimed at specific targets, such as cross roads or gun batteries. The German artillery expert Colonel Bruchmueller included gas shells in his orchestrated bombardments during the great German offensives of 1918. He fed them into the programme at carefully worked out irregular intervals so as to catch Allied troops by surprise after they had taken off their gas masks thinking the shelling was over.

After chlorine a more deadly gas was soon developed and used by both sides. This was phosgene. It causes less coughing than chlorine, so people breathe in more before realising it is there (It is supposed to smell like new mown hay). Strangely it may take effect as long as two days after inhalation, so for immediate battlefield results it was often mixed with chlorine. The British used this "white star" mixture on the Somme.

In September 1917 the German chemical industry introduced a new and even more horrible gas – mustard gas or "yprite". This is a brown oily liquid which causes huge blisters to form wherever it gets on the skin. If the vapour is inhaled, it causes dreadful damage to the mucous membranes of throat and lungs. It also causes sore eyes and blindness; soldiers affected by it had sometimes to be strapped to their beds because of the pain, and took four or five weeks to die. Adolf Hitler was in hospital having his

eyes treated because of mustard gas poisoning when the war ended.

A tactical drawback of mustard gas is that it can remain in the soil for months or even years, again making occupation of captured trenches very dangerous.

The man who unleashed this genie from its bottle, Fritz Haber, was actually awarded the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1918 (Norway was, of course, neutral in WW1) despite all the soldiers from both sides who lingered on after the war coughing and wheezing for the rest of their lives, unable to work and in many cases unable even to leave hospital. He is recorded as saying "Death is death by whatever means it comes".

He might have argued that gas warfare is actually very cost-effective. It kills your enemy but leaves everything else intact – buildings, transport infrastructure, power plants and so on intact and serviceable for you to use. Nevertheless it was supposedly internationally outlawed in 1925. Nobody used it in WW2, perhaps it was not worth inviting retaliation. Churchill is supposed to have threatened to "drench" a German city with mustard gas if the Germans continued their V-weapon attack on London, but was dissuaded by an appalled Cabinet. By that time, nerve gases had been invented, which have the same effect on humans as DDT on insects.

An aspect of gas warfare which is sometimes overlooked is that apart from your enemy, it also kills all the wildlife, domestic animals and people's pets, but that is their fault for trying to live on the same planet as human beings like Fritz Haber.

**Richard Robson, RAF**



### **A Dardenelles Success!**

The Royal Navy's involvement in the Gallipoli campaign is often thought to have been confined to the abortive attempt to force the Dardanelles prior to the landing of troops on the peninsula, the subsequent support of the land forces and eventually their evacuation. Not so commonly known is that whilst fighting was taking place on land, Royal Navy (RN) submarines passed through the Dardanelles and mounted a very successful offensive in the Sea of Marmara.



Allied submarine operations off Gallipoli began some months before the first naval bombardment in February 1915. Following the escape of the German battle-cruiser Goeben and cruiser Breslau to Turkey prior to the outbreak of war, British and French warships began patrolling off the Dardanelles Straits (the Straits) to deter the German ships from breaking out into the Mediterranean. When Turkey entered the war on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1914 the Allied naval force mounted a close blockade of the entrance to the Straits.

The Allied squadron included six submarines, three from each country. The RN units were B9, B10 and B11, small coastal submarines completed in 1906. They were 142 feet (43 metres) long and had a displacement of 280 tons (surfaced) / 313 tons (submerged). A petrol engine gave them a speed of 13 knots (15mph) surfaced; electric motors produced 8 knots (5 mph) submerged. Armament was two 18" torpedo tubes with a total of four torpedoes carried. B Class submarines had a crew of 16.

The Dardanelles Straits are 27 miles long and lead from the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara. In the centre, between Chanakkale and Kilid Bahr - "the Narrows" - the passage is less than a mile wide. In 1914 the Turkish defences in the Straits comprised land based artillery and forts on both sides and an underwater minefield. Turkish naval units patrolled above the minefield. Apart from these man-made obstacles, a current of 4-5 knots runs down the Straits from the Sea of Marmara making navigation difficult.



A submerged submarine could avoid the forts but it would be vulnerable to the moored mines. Fortunately two in-theatre RN officers, including the senior officer of the three British submarines, had recently devised a system of mine-guards for submarines. In theory these would enable a submarine to push its way safely through moored mines.

The experimental guards were fitted to B11 (Lt. Norman Holbrook) to test their operational effectiveness and on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1914 Holbrook took his boat up the Straits with orders to attack any enemy warship he found.

The minefield just below the Narrows consisted of five rows of mines. Proceeding submerged, B11's guards successfully pushed aside the mines. The boat, however, was only just able to make headway against the current and passing through the minefield took five hours.

Unaware of his exact position, Holbrook brought the boat to periscope depth. They were above Chanakkale and through the periscope Holbrook saw the Turkish battleship Mesudiye at anchor off the Asia Minor shore. The range was closed to 800 yards and a single 18" torpedo was fired. The torpedo struck home and the enemy vessel turned over and sank within ten minutes.

B11 turned to head southeast back to base. Almost immediately she found herself in difficulties.

In B-Class submarines the steering compass was fixed outside the pressure hull to minimise the effect of the boat's magnetism. The compass was read through an arrangement of lenses and prisms. At this critical moment, condensation caused the lenses on B11 to fog-over which meant that Holbrook had to steer "blind". To raise the periscope would attract the attention of patrol craft alerted to the submarine's presence by the sinking of the Mesudiye. Holbrook estimated his position as 10 miles up the Straits from Cape Helles. Guessing a course that would take B11 to the open sea, Holbrook proceeded as deep as he could at full submerged speed.

The boat was bumping along the sea bed, risking holing from rocks, when she grounded on a sand bar. With her conning tower out of the water, B11 became a target for land based artillery and patrol boats. Luck was with B11 - she was not hit. The electric motors were put to full power and with the current well above the danger mark the boat slid into deeper water.

Holbrook took B11 back down to return under the minefield. This time the Straits current was behind the boat. No one on board knew when the boat

passed through the minefield. When Holbrook eventually risked raising the periscope again he could see the open sea and realised that the mines were safely astern. B11 was soon clear of the Straits and an hour later made contact with the destroyers waiting to escort the boat back to base at Mitilini.

The crew of B11 had been underwater for nine hours, a period not thought possible in such a small boat. She had twice passed through a minefield, sunk a battleship and navigated the Dardanelles underwater without a compass. Everyman on board was decorated – Holbrook received the Victoria Cross, his first lieutenant the DSO and the rest receiving the DSC or DSM according to their rank.

B11's success lay not so much in the sinking of the Mesudiye (an old ship of limited fighting value) but in demonstrating that a submarine with greater endurance could not only penetrate the Narrows but also could reach the Sea of Marmara and threaten Turkish sea communications as far as Constantinople.

Larger E Class submarines [176 feet long; displacement 660 tons (surfaced) / 810 tons (submerged); speed 16 knots surfaced / 10 knots submerged; armament four 18" torpedo tubes and later also fitted with a 6pdr or 4" gun; crew 30] were sent to the Eastern Mediterranean to carry out the operation.

The attempts to force the Narrows using surface warships ended in failure. However, nine days before the first Allied troops began landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula, E15 sailed from Mudros heading for the Sea of Marmara.

Allied submarines operated in the Sea of Marmara from April 1915 through to January 1916. Turkish sea communications were severely disrupted forcing supplies destined for Turkish troops at Gallipoli to be sent by the slower overland routes. Sabotage parties were landed from the submarines to attack these routes, blowing up railway viaducts. Other land targets were bombarded by boats fitted with guns. British submarines even entered the harbour at Constantinople and sank ships moored there.

Once the decision to evacuate had been taken to evacuate the Gallipoli Peninsula there was no longer any need to attack Turkish communications in the Sea of Marmara. By the time the campaign came to an end the Turkish navy had almost ceased to exist and the merchant fleet had been nearly halved. This had been achieved whilst safeguarding non-combatant crews.

The Marmara operations provided the core of knowledge, skill and experience on which the RN Submarine Service would build for the future.

## Footnotes

1. *The B11's crew was awarded £3,500 prize money in 1916 for sinking Mesudiye. Holbrook received £601.10s.2d (£601.51), his First Lieutenant £481.4s.2d (£481.21), chief petty officers £240.12s.1d (£240.60), and seamen £120.6s.1d (£120.30). This was equivalent to three years' pay for a seaman.*
2. *Later in World War One, B11 was converted to a surface patrol boat. She was scrapped in Italy in 1919.*
3. *Norman Douglas Holbrook was born in Southsea on 9/07/1888 and attended Portsmouth Grammar School. He died at Midhurst, Sussex on 3/07/1976 and is buried in St. James' Old Churchyard, Stedham, West Sussex. Holbrook Road in Portsmouth is named after him.*
4. *Holbrook is probably the only VC winner to have a town and a local government area named after him. In 1915 the Australian town of Germanton in New South Wales was renamed Holbrook in honour of B11's commanding officer. He visited the town several times in later life. After Holbrook's death, his widow donated his group of medals, including the VC, to the Council of the Shire of Holbrook. In 1995 she made a substantial donation to a submariner memorial in the town. She visited Holbrook in 1997 to unveil the memorial – a replica of B11. A bronze statue of Holbrook stands in Germanton Park, Holbrook.*
5. *Under local government reorganisation in 2004, the Shire of Holbrook was absorbed into the Shire of Greater Hume. Holbrook's medal group is now owned by Greater Hume Shire Council but is on loan to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.*

## Acknowledgements

- Royal Navy Submarines, 1901-1982 – M P Cocker
- H.M. Submarines - Lt Cdr P K Kemp
- War in the Mediterranean - P K Kemp
- B11 and Norman Holbrook - Wikipedia
- Submarine B11 - Australian Dept. of Veterans Affairs / New South Wales Board of Studies [www.anzacsites.gov.au]

## Rod Arnold





## Four Officers of Guillemont

At the height of the summer of 1916 the British Fourth Army was locked into a relentless battle of attrition, trying to edge slowly forward, hammering the German defences with artillery and continuous infantry attacks. The Germans were equally determined to hold their defences as long as possible and inflict greater loss on the attackers. It was hot. The battlefield was covered with shell craters, battered makeshift trenches and rotting unburied dead. Villages and farms were heaps of ruins. The condition of the battlefield around Guillemont was amongst the worst of this period. The village had been a German Corps Headquarters at the start of the battle. There were several concrete bunkers there (they are still there). Part of the main German second defence position ran along the western side of the village. The British and French had given names to many parts of that endless trench, but not the section near Guillemont. Division after division had attacked that trench in vain from 30 July onwards. Guillemont would not fall until 3 September.

There is now a beautiful British cemetery on that road into Guillemont. Amongst its graves are those of three junior infantry officers; a fourth was killed on that unnamed trench but his body was never identified. Perhaps it was blown to pieces in the days following his death. After the war his father had a fine stone memorial built on the place where he died. I regard that cemetery as being the heart of the Somme battlefield, not only geographically but also symbolically, because one of the dead was the son of Britain's Prime Minister. The manner of the four officers' deaths was identical - leading their platoons in one of the relentless attacks of that period.

**Second Lieutenant Marsden-Smedley** was taking part in an attack by the 24<sup>th</sup> Division on the German trench north of the village, around the station on the rural railway that served Guillemont and nearby Longueval before the war. It was his first action. He was seen at the trench shooting a German machine-gunner but then a German officer shot and killed Marsden-Smedley.

**Second Lieutenant Forbes** was killed somewhere in the fields south of the cemetery when the 5<sup>th</sup> Division took part in the attack that finally captured Guillemont. He may have been the first burial in the little cemetery alongside the Advanced Dressing Station that was soon established at the roadside.

**Lieutenants Asquith** and **Tennant** were both members of the elite Guards Division that was fighting beyond the village in subsequent attacks. Asquith was wounded in the chest during the famous 15 September 'Big Push' when tanks were first used; he

was being brought back to the Dressing Station but died on the way and was buried in the burial plot there. Tennant's body was brought back to be buried near his close friend.

Why should I pick out these four junior officers for special attention? Dozens of platoon commanders were killed in that area; many are now buried in that cemetery which grew from the 124 wartime burials in Plot I to the great post-war concentration cemetery that now contains 2,255 graves, more than two-thirds of them unidentified.

The real reason is that these four are more than usually representative of that generation of intelligent, well-educated, able young men who died in the First World War. Only one of the four, Asquith, had really reached maturity; Marsden-Smedley and probably Tennant had been schoolboys a year before their deaths.

Marsden-Smedley, the only one without an identified grave - though he may well be in one of the 'unknown' graves in the cemetery, had no links with the others. His father was a wealthy knitted clothing manufacturer. The young man had performed superbly at Harrow School, one of the finest in the country and the traditional rival to Eton. Now his contribution to Britain's commercial future was lost.

Forbes, often known as Stanhope Forbes, was the son of one of the artists who had established the 'Newlyn school of art'. Young Forbes was studying architecture; his death would be a loss to that profession.

Asquith and Tennant were closely linked. Asquith was the Prime Minister's son; Tennant was the son of a Baron. They were also related by marriage. Both were acknowledged war poets; both were friends of the famous, but now dead, Rupert Brooke. Both would obviously have made contributions to post-war literature. Asquith, the oldest of the Guillemont four, was already a noted scholar and orator; his future would probably have been in politics.

There was yet another link between Asquith and Tennant; they were both members of a loose network of families in the upper level of British society known as 'The Souls'. These families were wealthy and influential, but they were noted for their intellectual outlook and public spiritedness. The families had no military background but their sons volunteered for the Army *en masse* in 1914. Only of the sons of those 'Souls' families survived the war.

Britain was much impoverished by the loss of my 'Four Officers of Guillemont' and of a host of other potential leaders like them.

**Martin Middlebrook**

## Book Review



### **Mons - The Retreat to Victory by John Terraine**

**Pen & Military 2010, £12.99, 224pp,  
Paperback, ISBN 978 184884 170 3**

*John Terraine's* contribution to the sensible interpretation of the Great War is well known. He is rightly regarded as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's outstanding historians. *Mons – the Retreat to Victory* – is amongst his best works. Originally published in 1960, it has stood the test of time well and is now widely regarded as the classic account of the British Army's first battle on the continent for nearly 100 years. Terraine tells the story from the departure of the BEF from Southampton, the fighting around Mons and the subsequent retirement forced upon them by the withdrawal of their French neighbours. The actions of individual battalions are well covered as is the gallantry that produced five VCs on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1914. He deals well with the German attempt to turn the BEF's left flank the next day which led to the gallant but disastrous British cavalry charge near Audregnies, two more VCs and the isolation of the Cheshires. The 26<sup>th</sup> August was perhaps the most alarming day of the Retreat. It saw General Smith Dorrien, commanding II Corps, take his brave decision to fight his successful delaying action at Le Cateau against an enemy at least twice his strength. The accounts are enlivened by personal anecdotes that admirably recapture the atmosphere of those desperate days. He covers the extraordinary events in St Quentin where two exhausted British battalions nearly surrendered but were rescued at the last minute by a cavalry officer with a toy drum and a tin whistle.

We learn of the muddle and confusion that bedeviled the retreat, not helped by the temperament of some of the British and French commanders involved, but the thread that runs through the story is the indomitable courage, patience and good humour of the British soldier. As Smith Dorrien said, "They made a brave show, they could not understand why we were retiring, for they considered they had given as good as they got every time they had met the Germans and were anxious to go at them again." Terraine captures this mood exactly. We see it in the action of the Munsters at Etreux who fought six German battalions for 12 hours until they were surrounded. We see it again in the 5<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade's brilliant rearguard

action near Cërizy as they covered the infantry retreat. We see it again at Nëry where members of L Battery, RHA defended their gun to the last, earning three VCs.

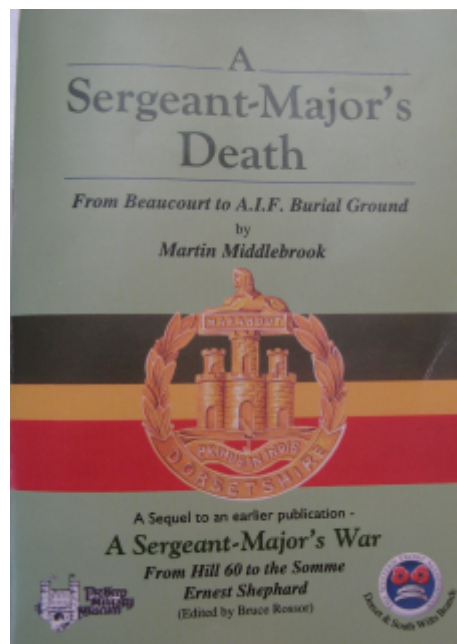
The strain was beginning to tell on the Germans too and the account concludes with the counterstroke that became the Miracle of the Marne. This fine book is a worthy testament to what the author describes as 'one of the finest sustained endeavours in the Army's story'. It is highly recommended.

**Christopher Newbould**



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