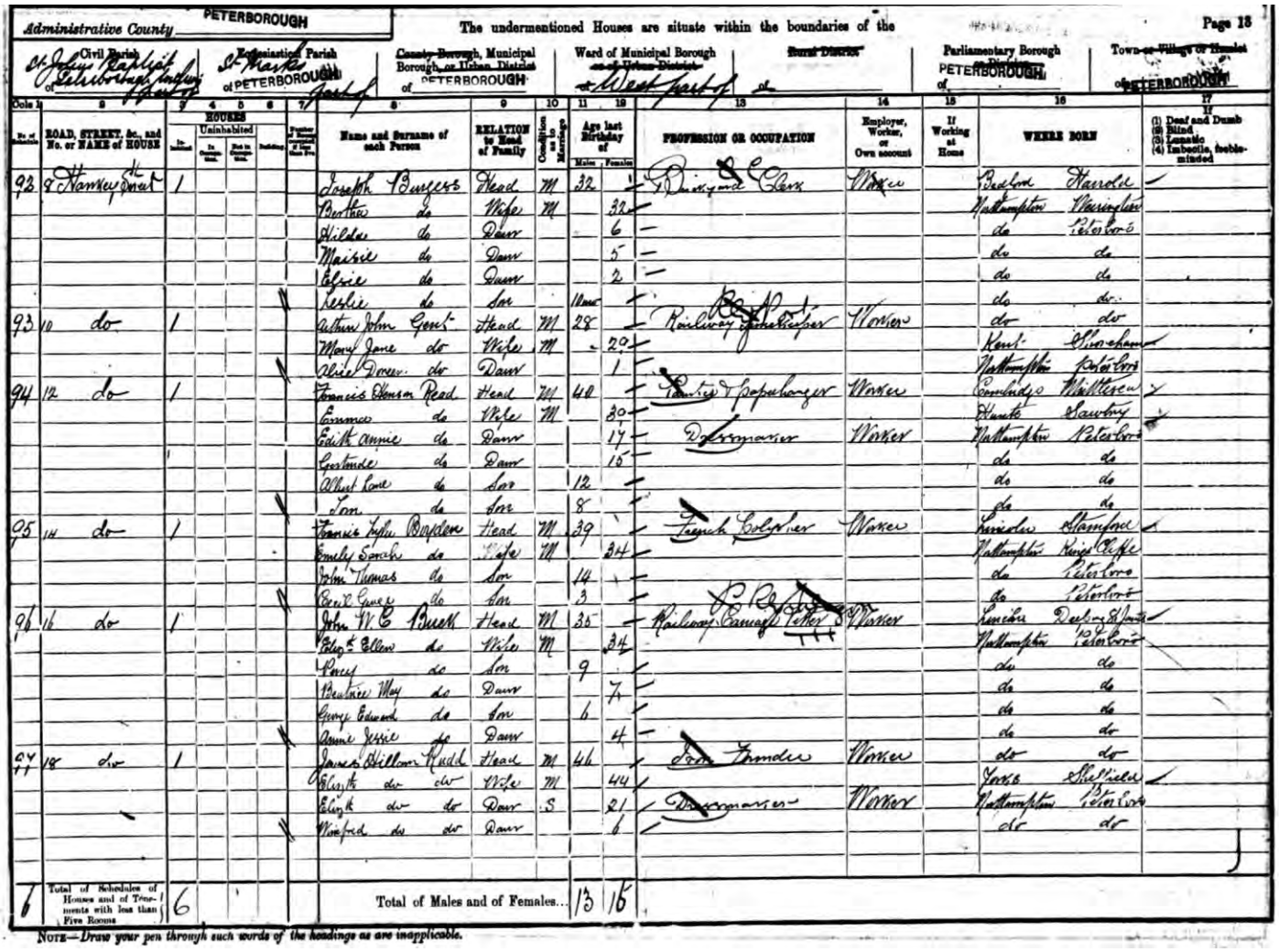
The Dying Comrade: The Story of Percy Buck

Percy Buck was born in 1891 into a fairly typical late Victorian family in the Northamptonshire town of Peterborough. Percy was the first son of nine children to John Buck, a Railway Carriage fitter from Lincolnshire and Elizabeth Ellen Buck of Peterborough.

The family home from around 1890 was in a small 1815 built property at No 16 Hankey Street in Peterborough (pictured). It is here that the National Census of 1901 (below) finds the Buck family residing.

Percy and his siblings would have attended school locally throughout the 1890's and would have lived a modest life like so many other working class families at the time.

The Buck family would likely have all been home after visiting church in Peterborough on Sunday 31st March 1901 when the National Census Enumerator knocked on the door of No. 16 Hankey Street and recorded the following information from John Buck.



Administrative County: PETERBOROUGH

The undermentioned Houses are situate within the boundaries of the

Page 15

Civil Parish of St John Baptist Peterborough Hanley

Ecclesiastical Parish of St Marks

Municipal Borough of PETERBOROUGH

Ward of Municipal Borough: West Ward

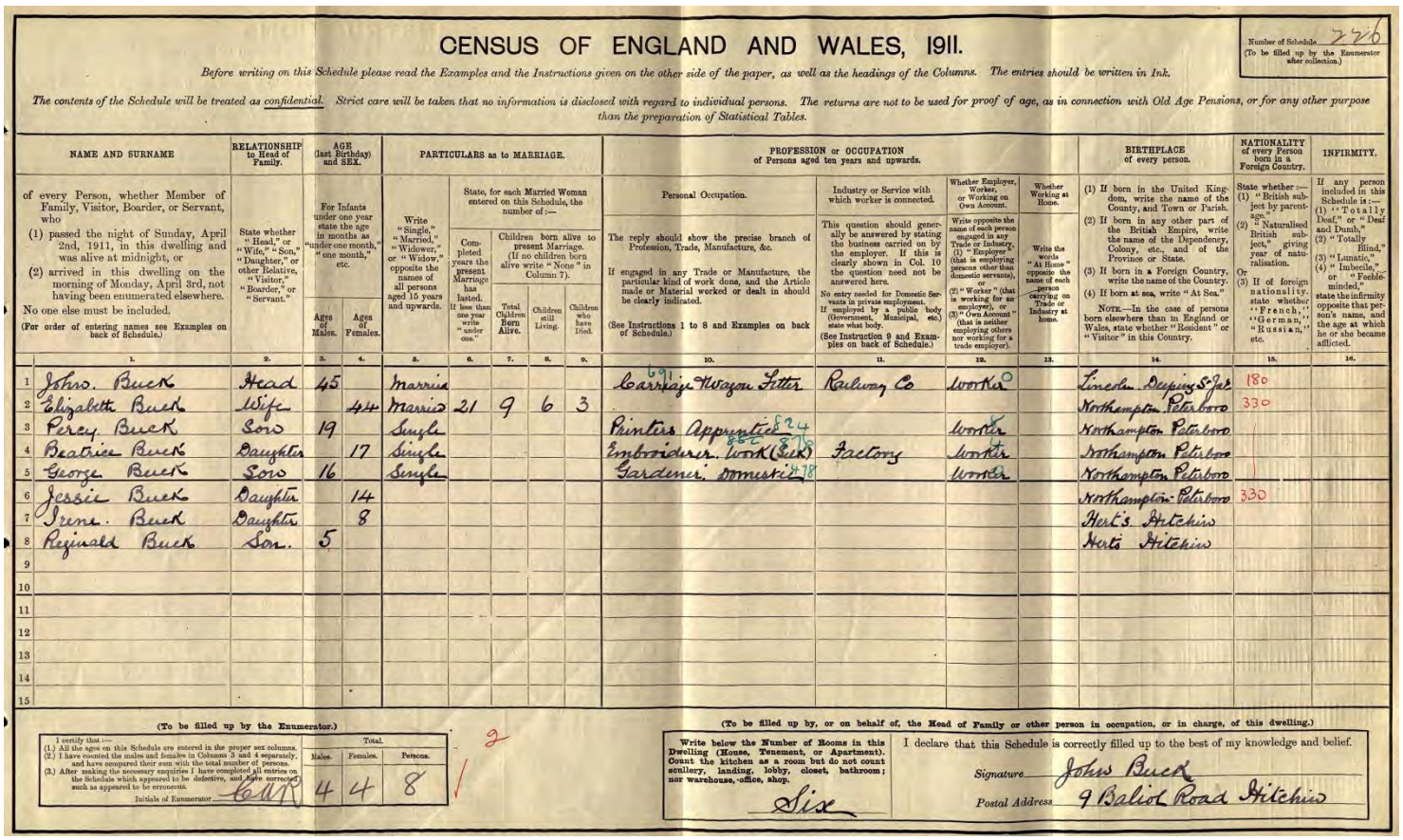
Parliamentary Borough of PETERBOROUGH

Town or Village or Hamlet of PETERBOROUGH

Cols 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
No. of Schedule	ROAD, STREET, &c. and No. or NAME of HOUSE	HOUSES Inhabited: In Occupation	HOUSES Uninhabited: In Course of Erection	HOUSES Uninhabited: Not in Course of Erection	HOUSES Building	Number of Rooms with 5 or more Rooms	Name and Surname of each Person	RELATION to Head of Family	Condition as to Marriage	Age last Birthday of Males	Age last Birthday of Females	PROFESSION OR OCCUPATION	Employer, Worker, or Own account	If Working at Home	WHERE BORN	If (1) Deaf and Dumb (2) Blind (3) Lunatic (4) Imbecile, feeble-minded
92	9 Hankey Street	1					Joseph Burgess	Head	M	32		Painter and Clerk	Worker		Bedford Harrold	
							Bertha do	Wife	M		32				Northampton Wansford	
							Hilda do	Daur			6				do Peterboro	
							Maisie do	Daur			5				do do	
							Lizzie do	Daur			2				do do	
							Leslie do	Son		11mo					do do	
93	10 do	1					Arthur John Gent	Head	M	28		Railway Storekeeper	Worker		do do	
							Mary Jane do	Wife	M		29				Kent Chiselhurst	
							Alice Doreen do	Daur			1				Northampton Peterboro	
94	12 do	1					Francis Henson Read	Head	M	48		Painter & Paperhanger	Worker		Cambridge Milton	
							Emma do	Wife	M		30				Hunts Stanwing	
							Edith Annie do	Daur			17	Dressmaker	Worker		Northampton Peterboro	
							Gertrude do	Daur			15				do do	
							Albert Cecil do	Son		12					do do	
							Tom do	Son		8					do do	
95	14 do	1					Francis Sylvester Bradlow	Head	M	39		French Polisher	Worker		Lincoln Stamford	
							Emily Sarah do	Wife	M		34				Northampton Kings Cliffe	
							John Thomas do	Son		14					do Peterboro	
							Percy Grace do	Son		3					do Peterboro	
96	16 do	1					John W. C. Buck	Head	M	35		Railway Carriage Fitter	Worker		Lincoln Dunston St James	
							Eliz.th Ellen do	Wife	M		34				Northampton Peterboro	
							Percy do	Son		9					do do	
							Beatrice May do	Daur			7				do do	
							George Edward do	Son		6					do do	
							Annie Jessie do	Daur			4				do do	
97	18 do	1					James Gillman Rudd	Head	M	46		Iron Founder	Worker		do do	
							Elizabeth do do	Wife	M		44				Yorks Sheffield	
							Elizabeth do do	Daur	S		21	Dressmaker	Worker		Northampton Peterboro	
							Winifred do do	Daur			6				do do	
6	Total of Schedules of Houses and of Tenements with less than Five Rooms	6					Total of Males and of Females...			13	16					

NOTE—Draw your pen through such words of the headings as are inapplicable.

As we follow the Buck family into the early years of the 20th Century we can look to the National Census of a decade later to inform the History of the years between 1901 and 1911…



CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1911.

Number of Schedule 226 (To be filled up by the Enumerator after collection.)

Before writing on this Schedule please read the Examples and the Instructions given on the other side of the paper, as well as the headings of the Columns. The entries should be written in Ink.

The contents of the Schedule will be treated as confidential. Strict care will be taken that no information is disclosed with regard to individual persons. The returns are not to be used for proof of age, as in connection with Old Age Pensions, or for any other purpose than the preparation of Statistical Tables.

	NAME AND SURNAME of every Person, whether Member of Family, Visitor, Boarder, or Servant, who (1) passed the night of Sunday, April 2nd, 1911, in this dwelling and was alive at midnight, or (2) arrived in this dwelling on the morning of Monday, April 3rd, not having been enumerated elsewhere. No one else must be included. (For order of entering names see Examples on back of Schedule.)	RELATIONSHIP to Head of Family. State whether "Head," or "Wife," "Son," "Daughter," or other Relative, "Visitor," "Boarder," or "Servant."	AGE (last Birthday) and SEX. For Infants under one year state the age in months as "under one month," "one month," etc. Ages of Males.	Ages of Females.	PARTICULARS as to MARRIAGE. Write "Single," "Married," "Widower," or "Widow," opposite the names of all persons aged 15 years and upwards.	State, for each Married Woman entered on this Schedule, the number of:— Completed years the present Marriage has lasted. If less than one year write "under one."	Children born alive to present Marriage. (If no children born alive write "None" in Column 7). Total Children Born Alive.	Children still Living.	Children who have Died.	PROFESSION or OCCUPATION of Persons aged ten years and upwards. Personal Occupation. The reply should show the precise branch of Profession, Trade, Manufacture, &c. If engaged in any Trade or Manufacture, the particular kind of work done, and the Article made or Material worked or dealt in should be clearly indicated. (See Instructions 1 to 8 and Examples on back of Schedule.)	Industry or Service with which worker is connected. This question should generally be answered by stating the business carried on by the employer. If this is clearly shown in Col. 10 the question need not be answered here. No entry needed for Domestic Servants in private employment. If employed by a public body (Government, Municipal, etc.) state what body. (See Instruction 9 and Examples on back of Schedule.)	Whether Employer, Worker, or Working on Own Account. Write opposite the name of each person engaged in any Trade or Industry. (1) "Employer" (that is employing persons other than domestic servants), or (2) "Worker" (that is working for an employer), or (3) "Own Account" (that is neither employing others nor working for a trade employer).	Whether Working at Home. Write the words "At Home" opposite the name of each person carrying on Trade or Industry at home.	BIRTHPLACE of every person. (1) If born in the United Kingdom, write the name of the County, and Town or Parish. (2) If born in any other part of the British Empire, write the name of the Dependency, Colony, etc., and of the Province or State. (3) If born in a Foreign Country, write the name of the Country. (4) If born at sea, write "At Sea." NOTE.—In the case of persons born elsewhere than in England or Wales, state whether "Resident" or "Visitor" in this Country.	NATIONALITY of every Person born in a Foreign Country. State whether:— (1) "British subject by parentage," or (2) "Naturalised British subject," giving year of naturalisation. Or (3) If of foreign nationality, state whether "French," "German," "Russian," etc.	INFIRMITY. If any person included in this Schedule is:— (1) "Totally Deaf," or "Deaf and Dumb," (2) "Totally Blind," (3) "Lunatic," (4) "Imbecile," or "Feeble-minded," state the infirmity opposite that person's name, and the age at which he or she became afflicted.
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.	15.	16.
1	John. Buck	Head	45		Married					Carriage Wagon Fitter 691	Railway Co	Worker		Lincoln. Deping St Jos	180	
2	Elizabeth Buck	Wife		44	Married	21	9	6	3					Northampton Peterboro	330	
3	Percy Buck	Son	19		Single					Printers Apprentice 824		Worker		Northampton Peterboro		
4	Beatrice Buck	Daughter		17	Single					Embroiderer. Work (Buck) 862	Factory	Worker		Northampton Peterboro		
5	George Buck	Son	16		Single					Gardener. Domestic 478		Worker		Northampton Peterboro		
6	Jessie Buck	Daughter		14										Northampton Peterboro	330	
7	Irene. Buck	Daughter		8										Herts. Hitchin		
8	Reginald Buck	Son.	5											Herts Hitchin		
9																
10																
11																
12																
13																
14																
15																

(To be filled up by the Enumerator.)

I certify that:—
(1.) All the ages on this Schedule are entered in the proper sex columns.
(2.) I have counted the males and females in Columns 3 and 4 separately, and have compared their sum with the total number of persons.
(3.) After making the necessary enquiries I have completed all entries on the Schedule which appeared to be defective, and have corrected such as appeared to be erroneous.

Initials of Enumerator EWR

Total. Males.	Females.	Persons.
4	4	8

2

(To be filled up by, or on behalf of, the Head of Family or other person in occupation, or in charge, of this dwelling.)

Write below the Number of Rooms in this Dwelling (House, Tenement, or Apartment). Count the kitchen as a room but do not count scullery, landing, lobby, closet, bathroom; nor warehouse, office, shop.

Six

I declare that this Schedule is correctly filled up to the best of my knowledge and belief.

Signature John Buck

Postal Address 9 Baliol Road Hitchin

This record provides several key pieces of information that help us build a picture of Percy and his family life. We note that head of the house John is still in the same occupation as a Carriage fitter and that wife Elizabeth is a full-time mother. We can also see that the family have made a locational change; from Peterborough to the market town of Hitchin in Hertfordshire. Looking at the place of birth of Percy's sister Irene (born 1903 in Hitchin), we can infer that the family moved to Hitchin sometime between April 1901 and 1903.

Sadly, we can also see that Emma Buck has given birth to nine children in total, and that three have since died, a statistic that was all too common in working class Britain at the time.

According to this record, the family are living in a six-bedroom property at No 9 Baliol Road, Hitchin, Hertfordshire (pictured here). Second child and oldest son Percy is listed as working as a Printer's Apprentice in Hitchin. His sister Beatrice is an Embroiderer in a factory and younger brother George is a Domestic Gardener.

Further record searches reveal that Percy Buck was in fact working at the Paternoster & Hales Printing works located at No 9 Sun Street in Hitchin town centre, the office that Percy would have worked at since leaving school around the age of 12.

Percy Buck's next recorded life incident is that of his marriage to Bertha Stevens, a Hertfordshire native. Their marriage took place on Saturday 9th November 1912 at the historic St Mary's church, Hitchin (pictured).

Life for 20 year old Percy was seemingly going very well around this time. Both physically active and religious, Percy spent his recreation time at scoutmaster of St John's Troop in Hitchin, as a member of that choir and also as a Sunday-school teacher. Clearly the church played an important part in his daily life.

Interestingly, Percy was also a patriotic man, spending part of his weekends and summer break with his local Territorial Army unit, The Hertfordshire Regiment, where he was an excellent shot and spent time teaching others in the art of musketry.

Sometime around 1913 Percy's time in Hitchin came to an end. With his new wife he moved away from his close-knit family to the county town of St Albans where he moved into No. 59 Upper Culver Road (pictured below) in the city and took up new employment locally in the printing industry. Around a year later the Buck family grew with the arrival of Cyril Bernard Charles Buck on 15th August 1914 just 10 days after the Outbreak of a war that would tear apart so many families throughout Europe.

To War

As a pre-war Territorial soldier and with a young wife and child to support, it is not perhaps surprising that Percy did not sign up immediately to serve abroad in the early months of The Great War but in fact decided to stay at home and continue in his new employment. That is not to say that the war did not play its part in the family's life. Corporal Buck, the Territorial soldier continued to serve with the Hertfordshire Regiment on 'home service' as a musketry instructor in nearby Tring. From here he trained recruits in the 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Hertfordshire Regiment in preparation for war with the units fighting arm; the 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment, known affectionately as the "Herts Guards".

By 1916, the devastating losses incurred on the Western Front in 1914 and 1915 and the need for manpower in the war meant that even Percy could no longer stay at home and so he duly presented himself on 10th January 1916 at St Albans where he enlisted for overseas service and underwent a medical examination. Fortunately documents pertaining to Private Percy Buck's military service survived the rather ironic incident in WW2 when so many WW1 records were lost in a Luftwaffe bombing raid, and so we can chart Percy's military career with some level of clarity.

The following pages provide details of Percy's enlistment with the Hertfordshire Regiment and medical examination.

SERVICE. 30

Card I

the War, with the Colours and in the Army Reserve.

WATFORD. 66 298

ATTESTATION OF

Name Percy Buck Corps Herts

Questions to be put to the Recruit before Enlistment.

1. What is your Name ... ... 1. Percy Buck
2. What is your full Address? ... ... 2. 59 Upper Culver Road St Albans
3. Are you a British Subject? ... ... 3. yes
4. What is your Age? ... ... 4. 24 Years 6 Months
5. What is your Trade or Calling? ... ... 5. Compositor
6. Are you Married? ... ... 6. yes
7. Have you ever served in any branch of His Majesty's Forces, naval or military, if so*, which? 7. yes 1st Herts 4 Y
8. Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated? ... 8. yes
9. Are you willing to be enlisted for General Service? ... 9. yes
10. Did you receive a Notice, and do you understand its meaning, and who gave it to you? 10. yes Name E North Corps Beds
11. Are you willing to serve upon the following conditions provided His Majesty should so long require your services? For the duration of the War, at the end of which you will be discharged with all convenient speed. You will be required to serve for one day with the Colours and the remainder of the period in the Army Reserve, in accordance with the provisions of the Royal Warrant dated 20th Oct., 1915, until such time as you may be called up by order of the Army Council. If employed with Hospitals, depots of Mounted Units, or as a Clerk, etc., you may be retained after the termination of hostilities until your services can be spared, but such retention shall in no case exceed six months. 11. Ye

I, Percy Buck do solemnly declare that the above answers made the above questions are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements made.

Percy Buck SIGNATURE OF RE

E. North. Sergt Signature of Witness.

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY RECRUIT ON ATTESTATION.

I, Percy Buck swear by Almighty G I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs, and Successors, and that I wil duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs, and Successors, in Person, Crown, and Dignity ag enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of the Generals and Offic over me. So help me God.

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE OR ATTESTING OFFICER.

The Recruit above named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entere

and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me at ST.

this 10 day of January 1916

Signature of the Justice

WATFORD

† Certificate of Approving Officer.

of the above-named Recruit is correct, and properly filled

accordingly approve, and appoint him to the

Note: This document shows that Percy has previously served 4 years with the Hertfordshire Regiment as a territorial. The page also bears his signature.

DESCRIPTIVE REPORT ON ENL

(To correspond with Entries on the Medical History Sheet.)
Applicable to all ranks.

Name Percy Buck

Apparent age 24 years 6 months. Height 5 feet 11½ inches

Chest Measurement { Girth when fully expanded 36 inches.
Range of expansion 3 inches.

Distinctive marks
Religion C. O. E.

INFORMATION SUPPLIED BY RECRUIT.

Name and Address of next-of-kin Bertha Buck, 59 Upper Culver Rd St Albans : Herts Relationship

Particulars as to Marriage.

(a) Christian and Surname of Woman to whom married, and whether spinster or widow. (b) Place and date of marriage. (c) Present address. (d) Initials of Officer verifying entry.

(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
Stevens Spinster	Hitchin 9th Nov 1912	59 Upper Culver Rd St Albans	

Particulars as to Children.

Christian Names.	Date and Place of Birth.	
Bernard Charles	15/8/14	St Albans

MILITARY HISTORY SHEET.

Passed classes of Instruction † († includes any authorised course of instruction, e.g., in signaling, chiropody, &c.)	Home 28.3.16 to 23.11.16 Abroad 24.11.16	Corporal
Campaigns ... (Including Actions)		
Wounded ...		
Appearances of Mentions		
	Name of Medal	Clasps

Note: At 5 feet 11 inches Percy was much taller than average (5 feet 6 inches in 1900).

...Regular Army and (b) for ...when they are admitted to Hospital.
...used for Special Reserve recruits and Special ...lists enlisting into the Regular Army.

MEDICAL HISTORY of

Surname Buck Christian Name Percy

TABLE I.—GENERAL TABLE.

Birthplace ... Parish Peterborough County Lincoln Northan

Examined ... ... on 10th day of January 1916 at Mthlas

Declared Age ... ... 24 years 180 days.

Trade or occupation ... Compositor

Height ... ... 5 feet 11½ inches.

Weight ... ... 140 lbs.

Chest Measurement: Girth when fully Expanded 36 inches. Range of Expansion 3 inches.

Physical Development ... good

Vaccination Marks: Arm ... Right / Left; Number ... 4

When Vaccinated ... Infancy

Vision ... ... R.E.—V= 6/24 L.E.—V= 6/36

(a) Marks indicating congenital peculiarities or previous disease ... (a) Nil

(b) Slight defects but not sufficient to cause rejection ... (b) 10 teeth missing Slightly flat foot (left)

Approved by (Signature) Sidney Miggleworth

(Rank) MRCS RCP

Medical Officer.

Enlisted ... ... at St Albans on 10th day of January 19

Joined on Enlistment ...	Corps.	Regtl. No.
	Herts Regt.	6198
Transferred to		

...fective by

Note: Percy's occupation seems to be that of a Compositor (someone who set letters for printing).

Private Percy Buck, now a full-time soldier in service for the 'Duration of War' began his training locally as a regular soldier. As a sign of his character and professionalism, Percy received two successive promotions in less than nine months whilst serving in the 3/1st Hertfordshire Regiment, rising to the rank of Corporal. Around this time he would have probably had some chance to see his wife Bertha and their 18 month old child. However, this was not to last.

After completing his training, Percy was one of many men to be rushed to the Western Front, in part to make up numbers after the devastating Battle of the Somme which had taken place that summer at great cost to all sides involved. Percy was transferred to the 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment where he would join the men of 'No 4 Company' which was the Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston contingent of the 1st Battalion. It is likely that he would have seen many familiar faces when he turned up as part of a replacement draft.

Percy unfortunately had to revert to the rank of Private once leaving the UK to join the British Expeditionary Force. He landed in Bolougne on 25th November 1916 as Private 267098 P Buck, No 4 Coy, 1st Bn Hertfordshire Regiment.

Percy did not actually go straight to the front but was kept at a base unit until the 7th December 1916 when he was finally sent to join his pals in the Herts. Records show that on that day a draft of 52 'Other Ranks' joined the Battalion who were at that time in a 'rest' phase in the area to the North of the Belgian city of Ypres.

Buck's first experience of 'going up the line' would have been a terrifying one, even for a man who had spent four years in the Territorial Army before the war and was well accustomed to a soldiers life. It was on the 12th December that the Herts moved by train to the 'Hill Top Section' of the 'Canal Bank' in the Ypres salient to relieve the 1st Bn

Cambridgeshire Regiment in the trenches. The Cambs were one of the four Battalion's whom, together with the Herts formed the 118th Brigade of the 39th Division; the other two being the 6th Cheshire's and the 4/5th Black Watch.

By following the 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment's 'War Diary' through the early months of 1917 we can get a flavour of the life that Private Buck experienced at this time. The 1st Herts numbered over 700 men at this time and so the diary does not mention him by name, although references to 'No 4 Coy' provide closer detail as to where he was. Of course, although the diary is useful in explaining Percy's movement, it does not even attempt to provide any information on the terrible experiences, incredible fear, adverse weather and threat of death on a daily basis that he must have experienced.

War Diary for December 1916.

1-12-16. ***Lieut. E MACINTOSH*** *joined &* ***2/Lieut F.M. Drury*** *joined the Bn from England.*

4-12-16. The Bn was relieved by the 11th S.W.B. & moved by train to D CAMP. A draft of 8 OR joined the Bn from Base.

7-12-16. The Bn was inspected by ***Brig. General J.V. MARDEN*** *commanding 114th Brigade which the Bn had been temporarily attached to since November 29th. A draft of 52 OR joined the Bn from Base.*

8-12-16. The Bn moved to G CAMP.

12-12-16. The Bn moved by train & relieved the 13th Royal Sussex Regt. in the left Reserve Battalion HILL TOP section on the CANAL BANK, coming under the orders of 116th Brigade.

14-12-16. A draft of 120 OR joined the Bn from Base

15-12-16. The Bn was relieved by the 11th Royal Sussex Regt. & re-joined the 118th Brigade, proceeding by train to E CAMP.

16-12-16. The camp was inspected by ***Major General CUTHBERT*** *commanding the 39th Division.*

21-12-16. The G.O.C. in C. intended to inspect the 118th Brigade. Owing to bad weather the parade was cancelled & he started to inspect the camp. Owing to the darkness coming on he was unfortunately only able to inspect one battalion of the 118th Brigade (the 6th Cheshire's).

23-12-16. The Bn moved by train & relieved the 11th Royal Sussex Regt. In the left CANAL BANK.

24-12-16. The Bn relieved the 13th Royal Sussex Regt. in the left front of the HILL TOP section.

28-12-16. ***2/Lieuts. R.L. Hardy [Robert L. HARDY]*** *&* ***E.W. Marchington [Eric William MARCHINGTON, MC]*** *joined &* ***2/Lieut. B.H. Johnston [Basil H. JOHNSTON]*** *re-joined the Bn.*

29-12-16. The Bn was relieved by the 1st Cambs & moved back into the left CANAL BANK dug outs.

War Diary for January 1917

3-1-17. The Bn relieved the 1st Cambs Regt on the left Hill Top sub section.

The following also appeared in the New Year's Honours mentioned in despatches: ***Lieut. Col. F. Page Captain C.F. Hacker 2283 Sgt. G.F. Curtis****.*

The following Officers who are now detached from the Regiment also appeared in the New Year's Honours: Military Cross: ***Captain E.G. WHATELEY*** *(Staff Captain 6th Brigade)* ***Captain A.M. KENNEDY*** *G.S.O. 3rd ANZAC Corps) Mentioned in Despatches:* ***Brig. Gen. Viscount Hampden Capt. P.E. Longmore*** *(D.A.A.G. 2nd Army),* ***Capt. G.M. Brown*** *(Staff Capt. 118th Bgde),* ***Capt. S. Milburn, D.S.O., M.C****.*

6-1-17. The following Officers joined the Bn: ***2nd Lieut. K.J. Ritchie****],* ***Lieut. S. King****],* ***2nd Lieut. R.T.N. Hickley Capt. H.M. Tyler*** *(12th Sussex).*

7-1-17. At 2.45am under cover of an intense barrage the Germans raided on the front held by the Bn. They managed to reach one of our posts and unfortunately 3 men were taken prisoner. From another post which was also attacked the Germans were driven off and for conspicuous gallantry at this post ***2254 Cpl Beer*** *was awarded the Military Medal. Our casualties were :* ***Capt. E.B. Smallwood*** *killed. 3 O.R.'s died of wounds. 1 O.R. killed and 14 O.R.'s wounded. A draft of 57 O.R.'s from base joined the Bn.*

8-1-17. The Bn was relieved by the Cambs Regt. and moved into dugouts on the CANAL BANK.

11-1-17. ***Captain B.C. Molony Lieut. W.L. Grice [William Lucas GRICE]*** *re-joined &* ***2/Lt W. Thompson*** *&* ***2/Lt R.I. Edwards*** *joined the Bn.*

12-1-17. The Bn relieved the 10th Liverpool Scottish in the WIELTZE sub sector. During the relief the Germans heavily bombarded the front line with Minnewerfen. Our casualties during the relief were 3 O.R. killed and 4 O.R. wounded.

14-1-17. ***Captain Tyler*** *left the Bn being posted Oxford & Bucks Light Infantry.* ***Capt. C.F. Hacker*** *left the Bn to do duty with No.10 C.C.S.* ***Lieut. A.C. MURRAY*** *took his place as Medical Officer.*

18-1-17. The Bn was relieved by the 1st Cambs. Regt. & moved to dugouts on the CANAL BANK near YPRES.

24-1-17. The Bn was relieved by the 17th Notts & Derby Regt. & moved to C CAMP. [Comment; ***Lieut. Frederick Reginald HART*** *died of wounds on the 28-1-17.]*

Appendix 1/1 Herts Date 7th January 1917 Unit 1st/1st Herts Regt.

Point of Entry - C.15.c.7.5. between Nos. 4&5 posts. Results - Our casualties Killed 1 Officer, 2 O.R.'s, Wounded 15 O.R.'s, Missing 3 O.R.'s. One Lewis Gun smashed, Front and Support lines seriously damaged. Enemy raiders killed or captured garrison of No.4 Post. Remarks - At about 2.45am two hostile barrages were formed by artillery and trench mortars. (c) Along front line from C.15.c.9.4. to C.15.c.1.8. lifting to approximately an E. and W. line through TURCO FARM. (b) Along Support Trenches from C.15.c.13.7 C.20.a.9.6. S.O.S. Signal was sent up and responded to by our artillery. Bombardment ceased about 3.20am. Our front line in this sector is held by a series of posts all overlooked by the enemy. Enemy attacked on a front from Post 4 to Post 7 inclusive. Posts 5,6 & 7 repulsed attack with Rifle fire. Party of enemy about 40 strong got through wire, which had been cut, between Posts 4&5 unobserved and attacked Post 4 from the rear as well as from the front. The garrison of this post was either killed or captured. Nos. 3 & 5 Posts delivered bombing attacks towards No.4 Post to help Garrison. Directly after capture of No.4 Post the enemy retired rapidly under heavy rifle fire. After the raid all posts were immediately re-garrisoned and a strong working party sent forward to repair wire and trenches.

War Diary for February 1917

3-2-17. The Bn relieved the 17th Notts & Derby Regt on the CANAL BANK near YPRES. 2 Companies remained at C CAMP. ***2 Lieuts E.M. Paul [Eric Macleane PAUL]****,* ***R.H. Secretan E.A. Taylor*** *and* ***F.S. Walthew*** *joined the Bn from England.*

4-2-17. The Bn relieved the 16th Notts & Derby regt. in the WEILTZE sub section.

7-2-17. ***2342 Pte Messenger A.*** *&* ***2626 Pte Terry J.*** *a wounded man of the 4/5th Black Watch from off the wire. For this they were awarded the Military Medal by G.O.C. VIII Corps.*

9-2-17. The Bn was relieved by the 1/1 Cambs and moved back to dugouts on the CANAL BANK near YPRES.

12-2-17. The two companies which had been training at C CAMP re-joined the Bn. It had been intended that these two companies should raid the enemy trenches but owing to the fact that the cutting of the wire could not be observed, the party was cut down to 3 Officers and 64 O.R. At 11.15pm this party, after a successful assembly in "No Man's Land" entered the German trenches. Two Germans from a listening post were captured but the rest of the area which was raided was found to be so knocked about that the enemy had evacuated there. After staying in the trenches for 15 minutes the party withdrew. Our casualties were slight, 5 O.R.'s being wounded. ***2/Lieuts Drury Thompson*** *&* ***Hardy*** *were the three Officers in charge of the party. For their very good work during this raid No.* ***2771 L/Cpl Reeves W.*** *was awarded the Military Medal by the G.O.C. VIII Corps.* ***2/Lieut R.N. Farwell*** *joined the battalion.*

14-2-17. The Bn relieved the 1/1 Cambs in the WEILTZE sub section.

16-2-17. The Bn was relieved by the Liverpool Scottish and moved to CANAL BANK dugouts.

17-2-17. The Bn was relieved by the 5th Loyal N. Lancs Regt. and proceeded by train to POPERINGHE and marched from there to Y Camp.

25-2-17. A draft of 78 O.R.'s joined the Bn from the reinforcement camp.

27-2-17. The battalion marched through POPERINGHE to "ST. LAWRENCE CAMP".

Appendices Date - 12th February 1917, 11.15pm. Unit 1st/1st Hertfordshire Regt., 39th Division.

Officers 3, O.R.'s 60. Point of Entry - C.29.a.55.66. Result - The enemy wire well cut & trenches badly damaged. Two prisoners taken, bith 161st Inf. Regiment. Our casualties 4 O.R.'s slightly wounded. Narrative - The bombardment of the enemy trenches for five days prior to the rid and "drill" barrages were carried out each night to deceive the enemy. No serious opposition was encountered, the few Germans in the area being at once overpowered. Three of the enemy were found where No.1 Sap joins the front line, one was bludgeoned and two others captured. The enemy retaliation was very light.

Report of the raid carried out by the 1st/1st Hertfordshire regiment on the night of 12th/13th February 1917.

The raiders left the CANAL BANK and moved via LA BRIQUE and St. JEAN to front British Line and thence to the assembly position in no man's land according to the programme. The whole of this movement was carried out without a hitch and without it being observed by the enemy. At Zero minus 2 the raiders advanced to their objective. The patrol to ARGYLE FARM found it unoccupied. The two parties detailed to deal with Nos. 3&4 saps found these saps obliterated and also unoccupied. The remainder of the raiding party (with the exception of the southern flanking party which took up its position in NO MAN'S LAND) entered the German trenches and worked over the area as pre-arranged. They found the German wire well cut and lying around in a tangled mess. It consisted principally of rusty barbed concertina wire and knife rests. The trenches themselves were badly knocked about by our shell fire. There is no doubt the raid was a surprise to the enemy and the few men in the area were at once overpowered. Three Germans were found where No.1 Sap joins the front trench, one of them was bludgeoned and the other two captured. A number of dead Germans were seen partly buried in the damaged trench. The raiders worked rather beyond the allotted area and it appears that this part of the German line was very lightly held. One NCO reports that he saw a number of Germans in their support line and he thinks they were preparing to counter attack. A raider says he approached the Support Line and found it wired. The raiders withdrew on the signal being given (blue rockets) and waited a short while in NO MAN'S LAND to allow the enemy gunfire to die down. They then returned to the CANAL BANK with the exception of a few who reported in accordance with orders to advanced battalion headquarters, WIELTJE. All the raiders were accounted for by 2am. The two prisoners belonged to the 1st battalion, 161st Regiment. They were brought to WIELTJE by 11.54am and, having been searched, were sent under escort to the 1st/1st Cambridgeshire Regiment at ST. JEAN. The 3 Officers who led the raiders ***2/Lieut F.M. Drury****,* ***2/Lieut R.L. Hardy*** *and* ***2/Lt W. Thompson*** *all returned to WIELTJE before 12 midnight. There were only 4 casualties, all slight. Our artillery barrage was exceedingly good. The enemy reply to it was feeble and fell chiefly on or near our front line, some being sprinkled in NO MAN'S LAND. He did not barrage his own front line. The hostile gunfire consisted of 77mm shells and 2 or 3 inch "Minnies". Small pieces of the enemies trench which remained intact were found to be revetted with brushwood and had plank floors. They were dry. Width of trench about 3'6 to 4'6 at top, depth about 5'6". A small dugout with brushwood roof was found in the front trench and 3 or 4 funk holes, large enough to hold about 4 men each with concrete roofs built into the parados. These funk holes were in front trench south of Sap 1, 100 yards of which were explored. No.1 Sap was partly blown in; it is merely an unrevetted trench. No machine gun was found in it, only a broken box of machine gun ammunition. There was a machine gun emplacement marked E.M.14 at C.29.a.54.60 but no machine gun, There was no trace of Gas Cylinders nor were there arms or equipment lying around. "P" Bombs were used to destroy the woodwork of the trenches. It is reported that a party of about 15 to 20 Germans were out wiring further North and were caught by our barrage. A machine gun was fired from No.5 Sap. The raiders appeared to have carried out the programme exactly as rehearsed and the conduct of both Officers and men was all that could be wished. They belonged to Nos.1 and 4 companies and were trained by* ***Captain B.C. Molony*** *and* ***Lieut. L.R.D'A Fisher****.*

<u>War Diary for March 1917</u>

2-3-17. A draft of 84 OR's joined the Bn. Inspection of the Bn by ***Lieut.-Gen. Sir MORLAND K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O.*** *commanding X Corps*

3-3-17. The Bn moved into Divisional Reserve. Headquarters at KRUISTRAAT.

6-3-17. The Bn relieved 1st/1st Cambs. Regt. on left sub section, OBSERVATORY RIDGE sector.

9-3-17. The Bn was relieved by 14th Hants and marched to Infantry Barracks, YPRES.

12-3-17. The Bn relieved the 1st/1st Cambs Regt in the left sub sector - HOOGE.

15-3-17. The Bn was relieved by the 12th Bn Sherwood Foresters and marched to ST. LAWRENCE CAMP. ***Capt. A.G. Clark, D.S.O., MC****. re-joined the Bn from England.*

21-3-17. The Bn moved into Divisional Reserve. Headquarters at KRUISTRAAT.

24-3-17. The Bn relieved the 1st/1st Cambs Regt in OBSERVATORY RIDGE sector.

25-3-17. On the night 25th/26th March the enemy attempted to raid our trenches after an intense barrage. They were repulsed by Lewis Gun and rifle fire before reaching our trenches.

27-3-17. The Bn was relieved by the 11th Royal Sussex Regt. and marched to Infantry Barracks, YPRES.

War Diary for April 1917.

1-4-17. The Bn relieved the 1st/1st Cambs Regt in the left sub sector - HOOGE.

3-4-17. The Bn was unexpectedly relieved by 16th R.B. and moved by train to ST. LAWRENCE CAMP.

5-4-17. The Bn moved to reserve billets in HOUTERQUE.

6-4-17. Divisional Routine Orders published that ***265298 Pte F. Aldridge*** *had been awarded a Bar to the Military Medal and that* ***265202 Cpl. F.W. Waters*** *and* ***269583 Pte W. CRANE*** *[Comment:* ***269583*** *is* ***Private Arthur FINCH****, so I am unable to verify who this is with any certainty had both been awarded the Military Medal.*

9-4-17. The Bn marched to B CAMP

11-4-17. The Bn moved to tents and a few huts in C CAMP and except for a slight redistribution of huts on the 17th remained her until the 28th, employed on constructing a new railway close by.

28-4-17. The Bn relieved the 14th Hants Regt. in the HILL TOP sub section.

Reinforcements: April 12th - a draft of 27 O.R. joined the battalion April 23rd - a draft of 50 O.R. joined the battalion April 24th - ***2/Lieut. F.G. Lake*** *re-joined the Bn from the R.F.C.*

War Diary for May 1917.

3-5-17. The Bn was relieved by the 1st Cambs Regt and on relief marched to dugouts on the CANAL BANK. On this tour in the trenches two raids were carried out through our lines. On the 29th the Welsh carried out a successful raid and on the 30th another Bn of the Welsh also carried out a successful raid. The enemy's retaliation on our trenches was not very heavy and we were fortunate in having only one casualty.

10-5-17. The Bn relieved the 1st Cambs Regt. in the HILL TOP sub section.

13-5-17. ***2/Lieut. B.H. Johnson*** *was unfortunately hit by a bullet in the left forearm.*

15-5-17. The Bn was relieved by the 17th Sherwood Foresters and on relief half the Bn marched and half went by train to C CAMP and carried on with Railway construction.

18-5-17. ***2/Lieut. H. Symons*** *re-joined the Bn from England.*

23-5-17. The Bn less Nos.1 & 4 Coys relieved the 2/5th Lancashire Fusiliers in the WIELTJE sub sector - Nos.1 & 4 Coys remained at C CAMP.

26-5-17. ***2/Lieut. B.V.A. Tennant*** *joined the Bn. London Gazette published that the undermentioned have been mentioned in Despatches:* ***Lieut. Col. F. Page D.S.O.****],* ***Lieut. Col. G.E. Whitfield, M.C.****,* ***Major T. Barber, Captain A.G. Clark D.S.O., M.C. Captain T.P. Gibbons 2/Lieut. G. McMullen 265292 Sgt. Rand S****.*

27-5-17. The Bn was relieved by the 14th Hants Regt. and re-joined Nos.1 & 4 Coys at C CAMP.

29-5-17. The Bn marched to WORMHOUDT.

War Diary for June 1917.

3-6-17. The Kings Birthday was celebrated by a Parade at WORMHOUDT.

6-6-17. ***Lieut. D Perry*** *joined the Bn.*

11-6-17. The Bn marched to ARNEKE.

12-6-17. The Bn marched to TATTINGHAM.

13-6-17. The Bn marched to BAGENGHAM-LEZ-SERINGHAM.

21-6-17. The Bn marched to SERQUES.

24-6-17. ***Captain V.H. Palmer*** *and* ***2/Lieut. R.H.J. Rowley*** *joined the battalion.*

28-6-17. Lecture by General Sir IVOR MAXSE, commanding 18 Corps (sic?).

29-6-17. The Bn marched to WATTEN and entrained for POPERINGHE and on arrival marched to tents at C CAMP.

30-6-17. The Bn marched to the CANAL BANK and relieved the 17th Sherwood Foresters in the HILL TOP left sub section (Reserve). ***Captain G.E. Whitfield M.C****. joined the Bn.*

The War Diary has taken us up to the start of July 1917, providing details in the small scale actions that the Herts were involved in at that time. It was however, July 1917 that saw the beginning of a build up to the great offensive in the infamous Ypres Salient, the 3rd Battle of Ypres – today known simply as 'Passchendaele'.

The 39th Division, of which the 1st Herts were a part, was taken 'out of the line' in July 1917 and moved to a specially prepared training facility away from the front for practise in going 'over the top'. Replicas of the trench system that the Herts would attack at the end of the month were built and the men spent weeks making mock attacks and identifying areas that they would have to avoid or eliminate at the earliest opportunity.

The section of trench line that the Herts were to attack was to the north of Ypres just outside the small village of St Julien (today called Sint Juliaan). The system itself formed part of the German 3rd line trench system known as the 'Langemarck line'. It was well known to be heavy defended by artillery and machine guns and covered by thousands of yards of barbed wire.

The plan for the attack at St Julien (which was the final objective of the day) was that the Herts would cross the small Steenbeek River and advance across open ground some 600 yards to the enemy trench-line where they would storm the objective and 'dig-in' using the newly captured position as the basis for a defence line. The Herts would be supported by two of the newly arrived 'tanks' and a large scale artillery bombardment designed to 'soften up' the enemy defences as they approached.

Despite all the thorough preparation that the Herts Regiment made, there was one factor which unfortunately they could not control; the weather.

The last week of July 1917 in northern Belgium saw some of the heaviest rain the area had ever experienced, turning the already shell filled landscape into a morass of mud that made the ground virtually impassable. Trenches were filled with water and tales of soldiers drowning in waterlogged shell-holes spread throughout the area. Moving up supplies for the 'big push' was severely hampered by the weather and men

left in the trenches were soaked through and desperately tired even before the advance had begun.

The Herts' war diary tells us of Percy Buck and his comrades' movements throughout July in the lead up to the attack on the morning of the 31st July.

1 to 7-7-17. Bn in Reserve on CANAL BANK in HILL TOP sector, YPRES.

7 to 16-7-17. Bn relieved 1st Cambs Regt. in Front Line system, HILL TOP sector

16-7-17. Bn was relieved by the 6th Border Regt. and marched to C CAMP.

17-7-17. Bn marched to POPERINGHE station and entrained to WATTEN where it detrained and marched to billets at HAULE, arriving 7am 18th inst.

18 to 21-7-17. Bn did splendid training for offensive action.

22-7-17. Bn moved by bus to Z CAMP, arriving about 2am 23rd inst.

23 to 28-7-17. Bn continued special training and equipping.

29-7-17. Bn moved to bivouacs near C CAMP.

30-7-17. Bn moved into assembly positions about X lines, HILL TOP sector.

The 30th July 1917 would have probably been a somewhat surreal day for most in the 1st Herts. In the knowledge that they would 'go over the top' in the next 24 hours, there must have been an incredible amount of tension borne out in many ways. Local newspaper accounts from the time tell of high spirits and singing mixed with nerves and rushed letters home to loved ones. Where Percy's thoughts were on this day as he waited to advance we can only guess, although doubtless thoughts of his wife and three years old son were frequent. He may also have thought of Hertfordshire; Hitchin and St Albans, places he knew fondly, and that were distractions from the situation, if only short ones. Although we can also assume that ever-professional Percy did also have his mind on the job in hand, the attack, and his individual roll in it.

No 4 Coy's specific role was to form the left hand flank of the Herts attack and to maintain the advance and the link with the neighbouring unit, the 4/5th Black Watch. Maintaining contact with neighbouring units was of vital importance and would certainly have been a focus for the men of No 4 Coy.

The Attack

In broad terms, the 31st July 1917 attack which formed the start of the first phase of the 3rd Ypres offensive was a large scale attack made along the front of the Ypres sector involving tens of thousands of men, with the aim of capturing strategically important ground in the region and to form a more advantageous position for the allies from where they could stage further attacks.

The attack itself was planned to take a series of 'objective lines', points plotted on a map designated the blue, black and green lines. The final objective of that day, the green line, was the objective which the Herts were tasked with taking. Being one of the most experienced units in the 39th Division, the Herts were given this task in the knowledge that it would likely prove to be the most difficult objective of the day.

We can again turn to surviving records to describe the first stage of the morning's attack where the 118th Brigade, including the Herts formed the Divisional 'reserve' until they reached the River Steenbeek, at which point they would transfer to the attack role, becoming the leading unit of the advance for the final objective. A copy of Lt Col Page's Operational Orders for the day still survives and can be seen here:

SECRET

Copy No. 11

OPERATION ORDERS No. 44
by
Lieut. Col. F.Page. D.S.O. Comdg. 1st. Bn. Herts. Regt.

Ref. Maps.:- St.Julien 1/10,000. July 29th.1917.
Sheet 28 N.W.
Zonnebeke 21 N.E. 1.

1. Information.(a)The 5th Army is to capture the hostile trench system east and N.E of YPRES on "Z" day.(to be notified later).

(b) The XVIII Corps will capture the hostile trench system on its present front .
Right Division..... 39th.
Left Division..... 51st.
Reserve Divisions.. 48th. (R) & 11th.(L.)

(c) The 39th.Division will attack at zero hour on Z day and will capture the German trenches on the frontage shown on attached map as far as the green line, which will be known as Cuthbert Trench when consolidated.

(d) The 233rd. Division (Prussian) is holding the area to be attacked by the 39th.Division. It's probable xxx dispositions are, 1 Battalion 448th.Inf. Regt. and 2 Battalion 449th Inf. Regt. in front line system; The same in the KITCHENER system and the same in LANGEMARK LINE. 450th. Inf. Regt.is said to be in the neighbourhood of POELCAPELLE .

(e) Appendix A shows the dispositions of Divisions and troops on flanks and dispositions of Units of the 39th Division.

(f) The objective of the 118th Inf.Bde. is the GREEN LINE . The attack on the green line will be carried out with :-
1/8th. Cheshires. on right.. .... objective D.7.b.30.0.0. to D.7.a.5.8.5.3. both inclusive.
1st. Herts.. in centre . objective D.7.a.58.55. to C.6.d.3.1. both exclusive.
4/5th Black Watch. on left.. objective C.6.d.31 to C.5.6.00.15. both inclusive .
1/1 Cambs. will be in Brigade reserve near BORDER HOUSE.C.12 b.0580

The dividing lines between Battalions are shown on attached map.

(g) 3 machine guns of 118th. M.G.Coy. and 2 Stokes Mortars are allotted to the 1st.Herts.Regt.

2. ASSEMBLY. The Brigade will move into the assembly position on Y/Z night .
The 1st. Herts will leave Camp at 8.45 pm.and march via QUEENS ROAD - BRIDGE 2 - and overland track to assembly positions . No. 1 & No.3 Coys. near IRISH FARM ; No. 2 & No.4 Coys. and Battalion Headquarters to LA BELLE ALLIANCE and COXEY STREET .
Order of March :- No.2, No.4, H.Q., No.1, No.3.,.
All movements by platoons at 100 yards interval.
The greatest care will be exercised when marching to the assembly positions. Every man is to know beforehand where he is going and there is to be no delay in getting into the available dugouts. No smoking or talking during the assembly and no movement after the assembly.

3. ADVANCE :- (A) At zero plus 1 hour 40 min. the 118th Inf. Bde will advance from their assembly position . Herts and Cheshires from the X line and Black Watch and Cambs from the Canal Bank.

Appendix B shows movement and barrages .

(b) The Herts. will arrive just west of the BLUE line at zero plus 2 hours 10 min. The further advance will be made so that the three attacking Battalions are on the east bank of the STEENBEEK by zero plus 6 hours10 min.

4. ATTACK :- The Battalion will attack in four waves No.1 Coy.(right) and No.2 Coy. (~~xxxxxxx~~ (left), forming the first 2 waves, the two Coys. being in line, each on a two platoon frontage.
No. 3 & No.4 Coys. will each provide 1 platoon as "moppers up" . These platoons will follow the 1st wave of the leading Coys.

No. 3 and No 4 Coys (less 1 platoon each) each on two platoons frontage will follow and support No.1 & No.2 Coys. respectively .

1 machine gun will move with the rear platoon of No.3 Coy. 2 machine guns will move with the rear platoon of No.4 Coy.

The two Stokes Mortars will follow the attack and take up position near No.3 & No.4 Coys. to fire on selected points in advance of CUTHBERT TRENCH.

5. OBJECTIVES :- Objectives of right Coys. D.7.a.58.53 to D.7.a.10.90.

Objective of left Coys. D.7.a.10.90. to C.6.d.65.35.

6. CONSOLIDATION Coys. will consolidate a line of platoon posts on our side of the crest line ,No.3 & No.4 Coys. forming a support line 100 yards in rear of leading Coys. and covering the gaps in the line of posts.

No.1 & No.2 Coys. will push out Observation Posts over the crest and Lewis Gun Posts in or near the Captured German trench which will be filled in .

No.2 Coy. will form a strong post astride enemy trench about C.6.d.83..

Touch will be established with the CHESHIRES on the right near ARBRE and the BLACK WATCH on the left near VANCOUVER.

Trenches will at first be dug 4" 6" deep by intensive digging . Afterwards joined up and deepened to 6' with fire step 4'6".

7. AEROPLANE :- A contact aeroplane will fly over our lines during the attack and the leading infantry will light flares on the aeroplane dropping a white Very light or sounding a series of"A"'s. on the klaxon horn or daylight signalling lamp. Flares will be lit in the bottom of shell craters or trenches by the foremost troops only.

8. COUNTER ATTACKS.:- The main line of resistance will be the consolidated line of platoon posts(Cuthbert trench) which must be held. The support Coys. will if neccessary assist to repel counter-attacks and regain the Observation Line.

9. MEALS :- Breakfast at assembly position at zero, it is hoped to issue hot tea and rum at the blue line and on Z/A night Every man is to use the contents of his water bottles most sparingly as the supply of water will be difficult.

10. - S. O. S. :- If a counter-attack is made during the operations, a protective barrage will if still on increase

The following map shows the Division's objectives on the 31st July 1917, attacking from left to right up to the 'green line'.

By all accounts the attack on the day started well, with 116th and 117th Brigades achieving their objectives without too much opposition. The preliminary bombardment of the enemy's 1st and 2nd line trenches had been successful and those German who were encountered had put up little resistance. Although the going had been tough due to the muddy and waterlogged ground, the 39th Division reached the Steenbeek with comparatively few casualties.

The attack of that morning had started at 3.50 am, with the Herts arriving at the Steenbeek sometime after 7am. Again the weather had turned against them as it had stated to rain heavily.

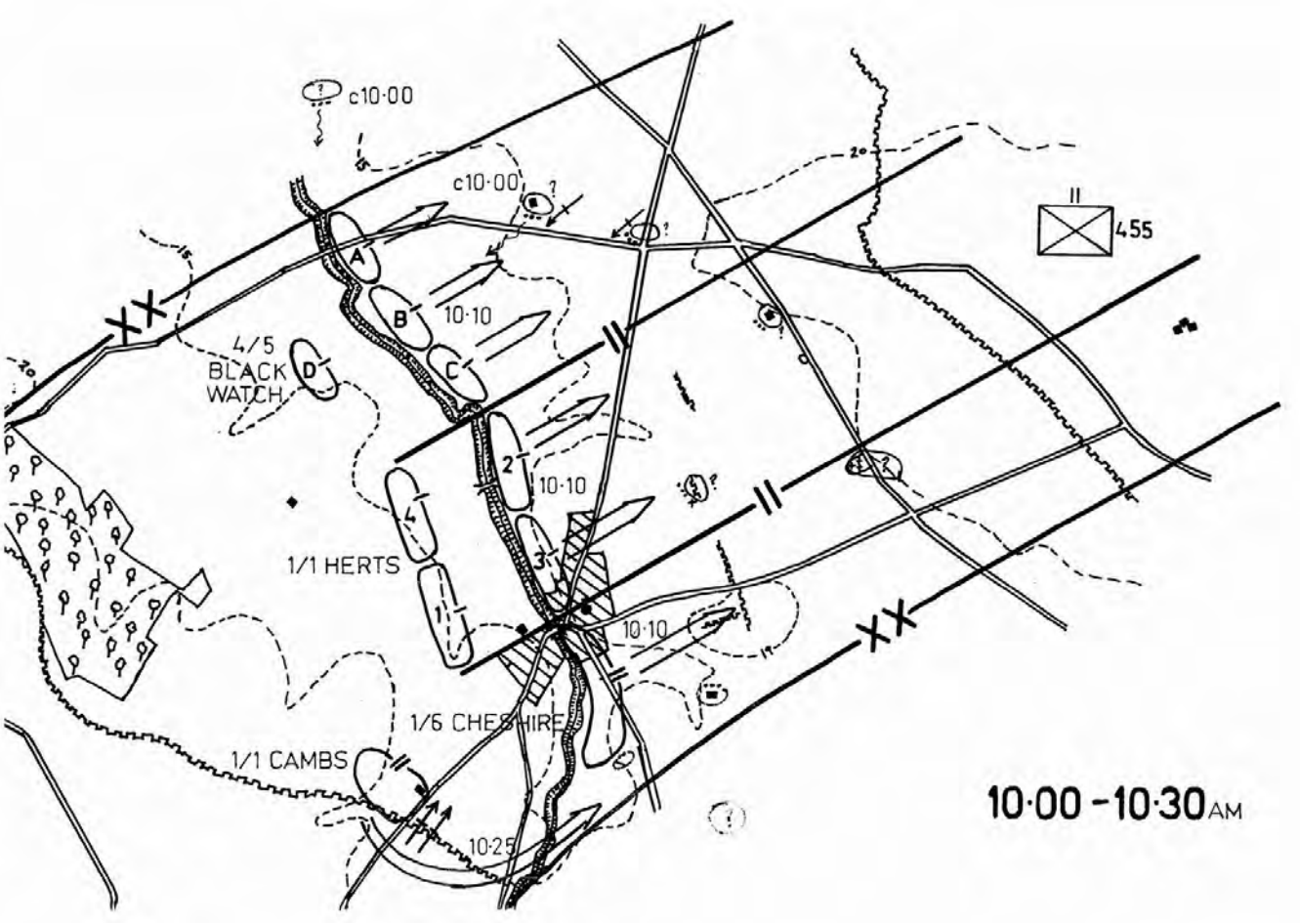
It was now the turn of the Herts Regiment and Private Percy Buck to lead the advance. It was not known at the time, but events were already turning against them. The Germans had actually been well aware of the impending attack and so had virtually abandoned their First and Second trench lines in favour of heavily defending the third, which was out of range of most British artillery, this was the line that was about to be attacked. This would perhaps not have been such a terrible thing if the artillery barrage had been able to 'soften up' this target. Disastrously, as the Herts waited for the artillery to move within range and bombard their objective, it was realised that the ground was too waterlogged and churned up by shellfire for the guns to move. And so, the Green line was left almost completely intact, with fresh troops and machine guns waiting for the coming advance.

At 10am the order to advance was given, and the Herts Regiment left their trenches to a chorus of “good luck boys” from the soldiers of 116th and 117th Brigades. As the Brigade crossed the Steenbeek it suffered its first two casualties, the two tanks which were designated to take out enemy strongpoints and provide support for the advance. One was immediately stuck trying to cross the Steenbeek which had swollen due to the heavy rains, and the other made it some 50 yards before falling into a large shell hole where it bogged down and had to be abandoned.

The area of the advance can be seen in the photograph below, looking from the Steenbeek River toward the ‘Green line’. The windmill in the background was just behind the German line on 31st July 1917 and was known as the ‘totemuhle’ or ‘death mill’.

Percy Buck and the soldiers of No 4 Company were initially on the left flank of the advance, following behind number two company as they advanced toward the enemy line.

The following map showing movements between 10-10.30am details the initial advance:



The war diary describes this phase of the attack:

About 3.50am the Bn moved forward in 4 lines behind the 116th & 117th Inf. Bdes. east of the river STEENBEEK. Up till this time the casualties had been very slight indeed but as the Bn advanced from the STEENBEEK toward the LANGEMARCK line (the Bn objective) casualties grew heavier from sniper and machine gun fire. However the Bn continued advancing. About half way to the objective some of No.3 Coy came upon a German strong point which they gallantly charged, capturing or killing most of the garrison and sending the remainder back as prisoners.

Unfortunately, this was as good as things would get from the Hertfordshire Regiment. Shortly after capturing a German advanced trench, a hail of Machine Gun and Artillery fire was opened up on the Herts. They pushed on, taking severe casualties all the time until they reached the area directly in front of the enemy trench system. By this time, about 10.50 am, the last Officer (of 20 that started that morning) became a casualty, leaving the Regimental Sergeant-Major (who was wounded) in command of the Battalion.

Particularly vicious fire was directed on the Herts from several machine gun emplacements on the left flank of the attack from the strongpoints of 'Masion d'Hibou' and 'Triangle Farm'. These took a heavy toll on Number 2 and 4 Companies, who by now had formed one small company with the men that they had left.

Within 100 or so yards of the enemy trench, losing men all the time, the Hertfords encountered an impenetrable barrier; barbed wire. A contemporary account of the time states: "*The whole Battalion was left in the open with uncut wire in front of them. The few men who got through were killed. The rest just 'took it'.".*

Stuck in front of the enemy positions, losing men all the time, and trapped by barbed wire, the surviving men of the 'Herts Guards' took any cover they could find to avoid total annihilation. It was very soon noticed by the German defenders that the Herts were in bad shape and so a counter-attack was launched from the left flank of the Battalion aimed at the survivors of No 2 and 4 Company. We know that Private Percy Buck was with these men, and had reached as far as the 'Springfield Farm pillbox' where 2 & 4 Company were sheltering. We also know that as pressure mounted on the Herts Regiment they were eventually forced to conduct a fighting withdrawal back toward the Steenbeek, leaving dead, wounded and separated men behind.

The 1st Herts war diary describes the final phase of the Herts attack with characteristic understatement:

On reaching the enemy wire this was found to be practically undamaged (except in one place) & very thick. ***2/Lieut Marchington*** *& a handful of men of No.3 Coy got through the only gap and got into the enemy trench & killed a lot of Germans. The remainder of the Bn, being unable to get through the wire and suffering severe casualties from enfilade MG fire & the Germans making a strong counter attack from our left flank about this time, had to fall back having suffered exceptionally heavy casualties. The remnants of the battalion subsequently dug themselves in in line with the 1st Cambs Regt. on the west side of the STEENBEEK.*

Around 12.30 the remnants of the Hertfordshire Regiment made it back across the Steenbeek, harassed all the time. They crossed back to the point where they had started from some two hours earlier. Of the 620 officers and men who started the attack, not a single officer and only 130 'Other Ranks' returned. Percy Buck was not among them.

This scene of total devastation took place in what is today an unremarkable farmer's field (pictured here looking from the German line back towards the advance). The area in the foreground is where No 2 and 4 Company took their highest casualties.

The devastation of the days attack for the Hertfordshire Regiment was summed up succinctly by a conversation on the evening of 31st July 1917 between the Brigadier-General commanding 118th Brigade and Quartermaster Sergeant Gordon Fisher of the 1st Herts who had just arrived in St Julien with rations for 620 men:

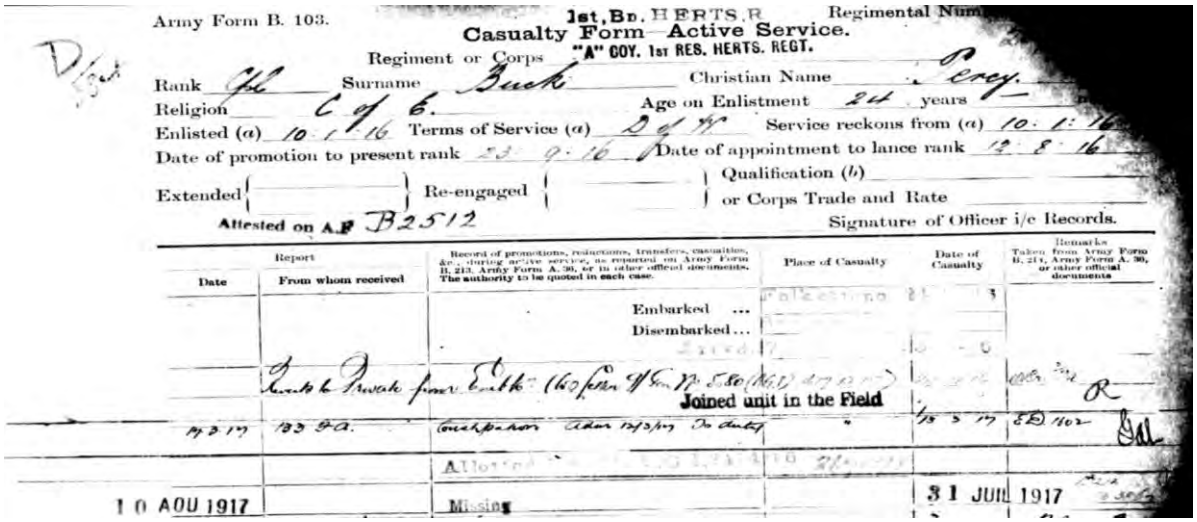
"I said to the general "excuse me Sir, I can't seem to find the Hertfordshire Regiment" he looked at me for a while and then said "I'm sorry quarters, there is no Hertfordshire Regiment".

Aftermath

Once the dust had settled for the Hertfordshire Regiment, the survivors were slowly reinforced and re-equipped. They spent the next few months in the line, again suffering very heavy casualties in September 1917 during the latter stages of Passchendaele.

Throughout the first two weeks of August, news of the attack at St Julien slowly filtered home through personal letters, wounded soldiers returning home, telegrams informing families of the fate of their loved ones and newspaper articles.

One of the many anxious mothers to receive a dreaded letter was Mrs Bertha Buck who was staying at that time with her husband's parents at 9 Baliol Road, Hitchin. It is very difficult today to imagine the anxiety of knowing that her husband aged just 26 was missing in Action. Percy's service record indicates that he was officially reported 'MIA' on 10th August 1917. The likely reason for this delay in informing Percy's family is that the days after the attack saw stragglers and wounded men make it back from no-mans-land, usually during the night.


Army Form B. 103. 1st Bn. HERTS. R Regimental Num
Casualty Form—Active Service.
Regiment or Corps "A" COY. 1st RES. HERTS. REGT.
Rank Pte Surname Buck Christian Name Percy
Religion C of E. Age on Enlistment 24 years
Enlisted (a) 10 1 16 Terms of Service (a) Dur War Service reckons from (a) 10 1 16
Date of promotion to present rank 23 9 16 Date of appointment to lance rank 12 8 16
Extended Re-engaged Qualification (b) or Corps Trade and Rate
Attested on A.F B2512 Signature of Officer i/c Records.

Report: Date	Report: From whom received	Record of promotions, reductions, transfers, casualties, &c., during active service, as reported on Army Form B. 213, Army Form A. 30, or in other official documents. The authority to be quoted in each case.	Place of Casualty	Date of Casualty	Remarks Taken from Army Form B. 213, Army Form A. 30, or other official documents
		Embarked ... Disembarked ...			
		Joined unit in the Field			
10 AOU 1917		Missing		31 JUL 1917	

The following months for Percy's wife and whole family must have been a terrifying waiting game - hoping that news would come that Percy had been taken prisoner and was safe. The waiting was finally over on 11th November 1917 when an unexpected letter arrived from far away Switzerland. This incredibly moving series of events was published in the North Herts express in late November 1917 with the following article:

"THE DYING COMRADE."

GERMAN SOLDIER WRITES TO HITCHIN PARENTS.

A remarkable incident is associated with a sorrowful Hitchin war casualty. Private Percy Buck (26), Herts. Regiment, whose wife resides at the home of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. Buck, 9, Baliol-road, Hitchin, has been "missing" since the St. Julien attack on July 31. He was found lying wounded, with the photograph of himself, wife and child in his hand, on which he had written his name and address, with the request that the finder would forward it. The finder was a German soldier, who has sent the photograph to Hitchin, *via* the Switzerland Red Cross, and with it a letter which, on being translated by the authorities in Switzerland, stated that he found the photograph in the hands of "the dying comrade." Private Buck, before going to France in November, 1916, was acting-sergeant musketry instructor at Tring. He served his apprenticeship with Messrs. Paternoster & Hales, Hitchin. He was the first Scoutmaster of St. John's troop, a member of that choir, and a Sunday school teacher.

A week later the same paper published the following article:

THE HERTFORDSHIRE EXPR

War

.ED.

VEEK'S

contains
st week's

quite a
in figur-
ave laid
had to
dallists

is as

age,

worth,

ford,

"THE DYING COMRADE."

This photograph is of Private Percy Buck (26), Herts. Regiment, whose wife resides at the home of his parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. Buck, 9, Baliol-road, Hitchin. As mentioned in the *Express* war news last week, he had been "missing" since the St. Julien attack on July 31. He was found lying wounded, with the photograph of himself, wife and child in his hand, on which he had written his name and address with the request that the finder would forward it. The finder was a German soldier, who has sent the photograph to Hitchin, via the Switzerland Red Cross, and with it a letter, in which he spoke of Private Buck as "the dying comrade."

AN ICKLEFORD GUNNER.

KNE

Low
one
posi
He

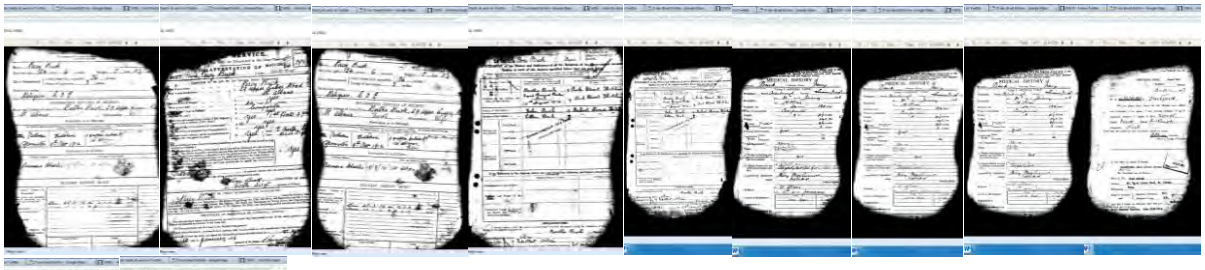
The articles found here tell a truly remarkable story, one which this writer cannot and should not try to explain; rather it should be left to the reader to draw their own conclusions and inferences.

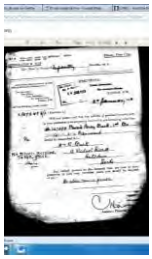
It perhaps should be mentioned that the German soldier who was likely firing at the Herts Regiment that morning as they advanced was probably from the 448th Infantry Regiment of the 353rd (Prussian Division) of the Imperial German Army. Whoever this man was, he found Percy Buck, mortally wounded in no-man's-land and took it upon himself to take the photograph and write a letter back to Percy's family in Hitchin to save them the grief of uncertainty. Did this soldier speak to Percy in his last moments? Did he speak any English? Perhaps he stayed with him for a while, we will never know. All we can say with any certainty is that this 'enemy' chose, for a moment at least, that humanity should triumph in the unspeakable carnage of war.

Epilogue

Private Percy Buck's body was never recovered from the battlefield of St Julien. Just one man in a war that claimed over 8.5 million lives, Percy's story is both representative and unique of the conflict that we know today as 'The Great War'.

Private Percy Buck is remembered today as one of the 54,896 names inscribed on the walls of the Menin Gate Memorial to the missing in Ypres City centre and also his local memorial in Hitchin town centre, Hertfordshire, in the grounds of the church that he was married at in 1912.





Territorial Force Association, Hertfordshire.
PARTICULARS OF MARRIED SOLDIERS. No. 7[illegible]

Unit [illegible]
Number [illegible]
Date of Marriage 9.11.12
Name, Address, etc. [illegible]
Place at which Wife is now [illegible]
Name of Wife [illegible]
Christian Names [illegible]
Date of Birth [illegible]