

# UNCLE JACK

The Life & Death of a Soldier in The Great War



The Story Of Jack Alfred Willmott, his service with the The Hertfordshire Regiment and his death in the opening phase of the Third Battle of Ypres.

Written by PAUL JOHNSON

## The Author



Paul Johnson is a recognised Military & Aviation Researcher, Historian and Battlefield Guide, specialising in the First and Second World Wars. He is the author of several books, including *Worn Torn Skies of Great Britain – Bedfordshire* (Wing Leader Publications 2012), the *Worn Torn Skies of Great Britain – Buckinghamshire* (Wing Leader Publications 2012), and most recently, *Hertfordshire Soldiers of the Great War* (Pen & Sword 2017). Paul is an accomplished Battlefield Guide and has worked as an Historical Consultant and Contributor for Television and Radio, working with both the BBC and ITV.

Contact Paul Johnson at [Frontlineresearch@hotmail.com](mailto:Frontlineresearch@hotmail.com)

## Introduction



In 1908 the Liberal War Minister, Richard Burdon Haldane, began to reorganise the British Army as part of a series of reforms. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Hertfordshire Regiment (Territorial Force) was formed by the amalgamation of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Volunteer Battalions of the Bedfordshire Regiment with an establishment of 29 Officers and 869 Other Ranks. The battalion was presented with their colours by King George V on the 19th June 1909.

With the outbreak of the First World War, the Territorial Force was expanded and the Hertfordshire Regiment gained an additional three battalions. The original battalion was renumbered 1<sup>st</sup>/1<sup>st</sup>, while three second line Battalions were numbered 2<sup>nd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> /1<sup>st</sup> respectively. The 1<sup>st</sup> /1<sup>st</sup> were the only battalion to serve abroad, the remainder fulfilling recruit training and home-defence.

The 1<sup>st</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion joined the British Expeditionary Force in France on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1914, as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> (Guards) Brigade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. Due to this attachment, it acquired the nickname the "Hertfordshire Guards". In this early period of the war the Battalion served with distinction in the Ypres Sector and in the area around Cuinchy and Festubert. On the 19<sup>th</sup> August 1915, the Battalion moved to the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade within the same division, in time for the Battle of Loos. It spent much of the following winter in the Artois, rotating between service in the trenches and the reserve.

In February 1916, the battalion moved to the 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 39<sup>th</sup> Division. It was whilst the Battalion was in this brigade that Jack Willmott joined the Army and was posted overseas. Subsequently, he saw service with the battalion during the Battle of the Somme, the Battle of the Ancre and, finally, the Third Battle of Ypres. It was on the opening day, the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917, that the 39<sup>th</sup> Division mounted an advance towards Pilckem Ridge. The 1<sup>st</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshires were employed in the third phase of the operation. Advancing over the Steenbeek towards the Langemarck Line, the battalion suffered increasingly heavy casualties from enemy machine-gun fire. On reaching the enemy wire it was found to have been undamaged by the artillery bombardment and the battalion was forced to fall back under heavy fire and strong German counterattacks. Every officer was a casualty, eleven of whom, including the commanding officer were killed, while the other ranks suffered 459 casualties. I hope the following paragraphs will provide the reader with a brief insight into the life of one of these soldiers of Hertfordshire.

**Remember Him.**

## **UNCLE JACK**

### **THE LIFE & DEATH OF PRIVATE JACK ALFRED WILLMOTT**



Jack Willmott was born in Ashwell, Hertfordshire in 1895, the son of George and Jennie Willmott (nee Mehew). His father was a successful Bricklayer and Builder by trade, and his work took him wide and far. The family home was in the High Street, Ashwell, where Jack lived with his parents, five siblings, Reg, Mabel, Winnie, Cyril, Gladys, and a domestic help, Ada Dellar.

By the time Jack was 16, the family had moved from Ashwell and were living at 36 Canterbury Road, West Worthing in Sussex. Here, George Willmott worked as a Bricklayer, and Jack worked as a Grocers Assistant. His elder brother, Reg, was engaged as a House Painter and his elder sister, Mabel, worked as a Clerk to a local accountant. Jack's mother catered for her large family of seven children, which now included new editions in Hugh and Beryl.

In the interim years between 1911 and 1915, the family had again moved on at least two more occasions. Firstly, they resided at the Old Manor House, Wrestlingworth, Bedfordshire, and later moved to Springfield, Stotfold, Bedfordshire, the village where Jennie had been born.

## **ARMY LIFE**

On the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1915 Jack travelled to the county town of Hertford, where he enlisted in the Territorial Army. The attesting officer, Captain John Bolle Tyndale Gough, signed Jack's application and he was given the Regimental Number 5090. Sadly, John Gough, who had signed so many recruitment forms, was to be killed in action with the Regiment on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1918.

Jack initially entered service with "A" Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment, and was packed off to Windsor for a period of basic training. As with so many young soldiers, his path to becoming a fully trained fighting man was not a smooth one. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1915, he was brought before the company commanding officer, Captain Crossman, on a charge of causing a disturbance in his tent the previous day. The witness, Corporal Clements, gave details of the offence and Jack was confined to barracks for seven days. In early October 1915, the Battalion moved to Halton Park in Buckinghamshire, and here, on the 21<sup>st</sup> October, Jack was again brought before Captain Crossman, on this occasion by Lance Corporal Smith, for not complying with an order that day. For his disobedience, Jack was again confined to his barracks, this time for four days. He remained at Halton Park for another five months undergoing exhaustive training. A typical day started with Reveille (a bugle or trumpet call to wake the soldiers and call them to duty) at 5.30 a.m. After tidying up and cleaning their quarters and having a brew, at 6.30 recruits would parade for an hour and a half to work on their fitness. After breakfast at 8.00am, the morning was spent drilling on the parade square, learning, for instance, to march, form fours and about turn. Between 12.15 and 2 p.m. the men took lunch before returning for more drill in the afternoon until 4.15pm. Some men might be detailed off for fatigues or work parties thereafter, but otherwise recruits were off duty, although they would have to spend time cleaning kit and shining boots.

## AT THE FRONT

Jack left the shores of England on the 13<sup>th</sup> March 1916 when he embarked for France at Southampton. Arriving in Le Harve the following morning, both he and his comrades marched to an Infantry Base Depot, where they were to remain for the following two weeks, preparing for their time with the Battalion at the front. On the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1916, he joined his Regiment in the field, as part of a draft of 96 men that were distributed amongst the Companies, and brought the Battalion up to a strength of 1004 Officers & Men. The Battalion, which had recently transferred to the 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade, part of the 39<sup>th</sup> Division, were in billets at Robermetz, near Merville and, on Jack's arrival, had seen cases of both Scarlet Fever and Measles break out, one of which proved fatal.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> April 1916, the Battalion marched to billets at Vielle-Chappelle, about 4 miles from the Cuinchy sector of the Western Front. Two days later, on the 16<sup>th</sup> April, Jack entered the frontline trenches for the first time, when the Battalion relieved the 13<sup>th</sup> Welsh Regiment at Festubert. He spent two days in the frontline trenches, during which time things were relatively quiet. On the 18<sup>th</sup> April, the Battalion were relieved by the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment and marched to Reserve billets at Le Plantin and Rue L'Épinette, where they undertook a well-earned rest and awaited further orders. They moved out of reserve positions on 26<sup>th</sup> April and marched to the village of Le Choqvaux, close to the La Basee Canal, where they moved into more comfortable billets on local farms. The small village was just 3 miles North of the town of Bethune, where the troops could spend a little time relaxing, and enjoying the local pleasures available to them.

The first time that Jack was to witness one of his friends being killed, was on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1916, after the Battalion moved into front-line trenches to relieve the 12<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment, in what was known as Subsection B2 at Givenchy. Private Thomas Cummings (4219) was killed that day, believed to have been shot by a sniper. German snipers were very active in the area at the time. On the 5<sup>th</sup> May, Private William Whitmarsh (5003) of Harpenden, who had entered France with Jack, and was amongst the 96 men who joined the Battalion on the 8<sup>th</sup> April, was killed in action. William and Thomas are buried at the Guards Cemetery, Windy Corner, Cuinchy. It must have been a terrible shock for Jack to have seen young men with whom he had spent so much time, suddenly killed.

The Battalion spent most of May 1916 rotating in and out of the front line in the Cuinchy-Festubert area. On the 26<sup>th</sup> May 1916 they were located at C.2 Subsection at Festubert, having relieved the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment the night before. At 6.00am a group of six German soldiers crawled through the long grass which had grown in front of the British positions. They leapt up and surprised the men who were located in the post named Island 30, killing three of them and wounding Private Harold King, who was evacuated to the Field Ambulance at Bethune. He died the following day from his injuries.

Those who died were:

2950 Lance Corporal Reginald Frank CHATFIELD aged 21 of Watford, Hertfordshire – Killed.  
Buried in Grave III. F.32 at Le Touret Military Cemetery, Richebourg-L'avoue, France.

3145 Private Herbert Vincent CAIN aged 32 of Whitwell, Hertfordshire – Killed.  
Buried in Grave III. F.33 at Le Touret Military Cemetery, Richebourg-L'avoue, France.

3401 Private John PAYNE aged 20 of Letchworth, Hertfordshire – Killed.  
Buried in Grave III. F.31 at Le Touret Military Cemetery, Richebourg-L'avoue, France.

5156 Private Harold KING aged 18 of Royston, Hertfordshire – Died of Wounds.  
Buried in Grave V. D. 49 at Bethune Town Cemetery, France.

The Battalion were unexpectedly relieved by the 17<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshire Regiment on the 28<sup>th</sup> May and marched to billets at Ferme du Roi, near Bethune. On the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1916, a draft of 1 Officer and 15 Other Ranks joined the Battalion, the majority being Signallers. The following morning the entire Battalion marched to the village of Gorre, where they took over frontline trenches from the 17<sup>th</sup> Sherwood Foresters. They remained in the Gorre/Festubert region throughout June and July, rotating in and out of the Trenches at regular intervals and resting in the Bethune area when allowed.



**Above: British Trench System near Cuinchy.**

Although the Battalion were in support of a successful Trench Raid that was carried by the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Black Watch on the 17<sup>th</sup> June, it was on the 19<sup>th</sup> July that 3 Officers and 61 Men of the Battalion made their own successful raid on a German trench on the North Bank of the La Bassee Canal. Their task was to enter the German trenches, kill Germans, take prisoners and collect as much material and equipment as they possibly could to help identify the units they faced. Despite a successful outcome, a number of men were killed or died as a result of the raid. These were;

1718 Sergeant H G BREWSTER aged 21 of Hertford – Died of Wounds on 23<sup>rd</sup> July.  
Buried in Grave VIII.A.143 at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery.

2594 Lance Corporal James Walker GITTINGS aged 28 of Abbots Leigh, Bristol – Killed  
Buried in Grave III.J.11 at Le Touret Military Cemetery.

4091 Private Herbert WOOSTER aged 21 of Shenley, Hertfordshire – Killed  
Buried in Grave III.J.12 at Le Touret Military Cemetery.

4627 Private W E FARROW aged 18 of Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire – Killed  
Buried in Grave III.J.13 at Le Touret Military Cemetery.

2304 Private George TURNER aged 18 of Sawbridgeworth – Captured and Died on the 20<sup>th</sup> July  
Buried in Grave VII.G.7 at the Cabaret-Rouge British Cemetery, Souchez

## THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

It was on the 10<sup>th</sup> August 1916 that the Battalion left the Trenches near Festubert for the last time, after being relieved by the 15<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshire Regiment. They marched back to Bethune, where the Brigades of the 39<sup>th</sup> Division were placed into Army Reserve, and made preparations to move South to the Somme sector, where the British Army had been engaged in a major offensive since the 1<sup>st</sup> July.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> August, the Brigade marched to billets at Cauchy-A-Le-Tour, a 9 mile march. The following day they moved to Monchy Breton, a further 7 miles. By the 13<sup>th</sup> August they had reached Ostreville, where they remained for a period of 10 days, undergoing training in preparation for their arrival on the Somme. It was here that another draft of 12 Other Ranks joined the Battalion on the 15<sup>th</sup> July. They marched to billets at Houvin-Houvigneul on the 23<sup>rd</sup> August, and the following day marched a further 9 miles to the village of Grouches-Luchuel, where they were joined by a further draft of 64 Other Ranks. The following day, another 9 mile march took the Battalion to the village of Bus-Le-Artois and, following an overnight rest, they marched the remaining 5 miles to their objective, the village of Englebemer, arriving there on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1916. The journey had been completed entirely on foot and they had covered a distance of nearly 50 miles, with each man marching in full service order, carrying all of his own kit in the high heat of the summer.

On the night of the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1916 the 39<sup>th</sup> Division took over positions near Thiepval from the 6<sup>th</sup> Division. Fighting had been very heavy in this area since the 1<sup>st</sup> July, when the Battle of the Somme opened, and the men of the Hertfordshire Regiment knew that some of their number would soon be lost in the bitter stalemate that typified the Western Front at that time. On the last day of the month a further new draft of 30 Other Ranks arrived to ensure that the Battalion maintained full strength.

The 1<sup>st</sup> September 1916 saw the arrival of 6 Officers and 30 Other Ranks from England. The following day the Battalion moved into positions overlooking the Ancre Valley, known as Fort Prowse and Fort Moulin. No.1 Company were positioned a short distance away in the village of Mesnil, in preparation for an assault on German positions on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September. The 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade were in support of the attack, but it was deemed to be a failure as the Germans made a successful counter attack in the afternoon, forcing the attacking British troops to withdraw.

The German artillery had been particularly aggressive during the operation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> September, and there was considerable damage to the British trenches. Working parties from the Hertfordshire Regiment assisted in the repair work, which involved very hard labour throughout the night. For the troops in the trenches, things were not much better. Due to the high level of gas shells the Germans had been firing, they were required to wear their gas helmets all through the night.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> September, the Hertfordshire's were relieved by the 1<sup>st</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> Cheshire Regiment and moved into billets in Englebelmer, a welcome relief from the drudgery of the trenches, which had been made worse by continued rainfall in the area. During the time they had been in the Somme sector, a total of four drafts had arrived, bringing 86 new faces to the Battalion. Sadly, since their arrival in the sector the Battalion had seen 17 members killed or dying of their wounds, with many more wounded. For Jack Willmott, and many of his comrades, it was a time of great fear, as it was not a question as to whether they would be killed or wounded, but when.

The 19<sup>th</sup> September 1916 saw the Battalion back in the frontline. This time they were holding the sub section of well-known position named Y Ravine, remaining there until the 3<sup>rd</sup> October. During this time, they were engaged in mainly repairing Trenches, Dug-Outs and Tram Lines. On the night of the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> September two Patrols were sent out under Corporal's King and Bilby to investigate the enemy fortifications. They reported the German barbed wire as up to 30 feet deep and heavily staked with very long spikes, and completely impassable.



The Battalion were relieved by the 13<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October, and they, in turn, took over positions from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment in the right sub section of the village of Hamel. The Hertfordshire's remained here until the 7<sup>th</sup> October when they moved into Huts and Billets in the village of Martinsart, after being relieved by the 11<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment.

***Above: British Huts in the village of Martinsart, similar to those in which Jack stayed (IWM).***

On the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1916, the 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade were ordered to attack a German strongpoint known as the Schwaben Redoubt, on the outskirts of Thiepval. The Hertfordshire Regiment were held in Reserve to support the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment who were at the forefront of the assault. The attack was successful and the Cambridgeshire's were able to seize and hold the position. A Platoon of the Hertfordshire's were used in a supporting role during the attack, with two Officers winning the Military Cross and three Other Ranks winning the Military Medal.

**Awards to;**

Captain Charles Frederick HACKER (RAMC) - Military Cross  
Second Lieutenant John Phillip KEMBLE - Military Cross  
2855 Lance Corporal Edwin Thomas SAUNDERS – Military Medal  
2587 Lance Corporal Jack WELCH – Military Medal  
2745 Private Randall ILOTT – Military Medal

**A Note on Lance Corporal Jack Welch**

Jack Welch came from Hitchin and had joined the Hertfordshire Regiment on the 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914. He was amongst the first members of the Battalion to arrive in France on the 6<sup>th</sup> November that year and had seen service up and down the Western Front. He was promoted to Lance Corporal on the 5<sup>th</sup> May 1916 in place of Lance Corporal William Arthur Higgins, who had been promoted to Corporal. His bravery on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1916 during the attack on the Schwaben Redoubt saw him awarded the Military Medal, and a few weeks later he took part in the assault on the Hansa Line, during the Battle of the Ancre.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917, with the Battalion suffering devastating losses, Jack Welch was admitted to No.132 Field Ambulance with the classification N.Y.D.N. (Not Yet Diagnosed – Nerves). This was classified by No.62 Casualty Clearing Station later that day as Shell Shock. Despite this, Jack was declared as Fit for Duty just 5 days later and returned to his unit on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 1917. Sadly, just eight weeks after being returned to his unit, on the 26<sup>th</sup> September 1917, he was killed by a shell. His body was never found and his name is recorded on the Tyne Cot Memorial, Belgium.

## THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE

The Battle of the Ancre began on the 13<sup>th</sup> November 1916, and was the final large scale British attack of the Battle of the Somme. The Hertfordshire Regiment, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Page DSO, achieved notable success in the battle advancing 1600 yards and holding their position. The attack was preceded by seven days of heavy shellfire and was launched before dawn to try and take the Germans by surprise. The men travelled lightly, each had been given bombs and around half the men carried spades. Moving an entire Brigade into position in the dark was a very difficult operation and careful reconnaissance had to be carried out ahead of the attack. Second Lieutenant Gilbey had carefully marked out the lines on which the different Companies had to assemble over the previous nights and this work helped the Brigade get into position without too many difficulties. Every man was in his place before 2am, ready for the attack.

The Hertfordshire Regiment attacked from the Schwaben Redoubt which they had been involved in capturing a few weeks earlier. The attack was aided both by the darkness and also a mist which hid the soldiers. It had also been dry for several days leading up to the 13<sup>th</sup> November which allowed the men to move much faster across the battlefield although they still had to carefully avoid shell holes, some of which contained up to a foot of water. Despite the mist and darkness, the battalion kept together and moved quickly towards the Hansa Line, their ultimate objective. The advance was a great success and the battalion was able to seize the whole of the Hansa Line as well as capturing 250 prisoners and nine machine guns. During the battle, seven of the Regiment's officers were wounded and another 150 men were either killed or wounded.



Some of the German stores and equipment captured during the Battle of the Ancre (IWM)



It was at 7.36am on the 19<sup>th</sup> November 1916 that the Battalion, along with a quarter of the 118<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company, left the Somme sector, after boarding Train No.24 at Candas. The journey took them back to Belgium, where the Battalion had first seen service in November 1914.

On the night of the 30<sup>th</sup> November 1916 the 39<sup>th</sup> Division relieved the 5<sup>th</sup> Belgian Division and moved into positions along the Yser Canal, near Boesinghe. They remained in these positions until the 15<sup>th</sup> December when they were relieved by the 11<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex Regiment and moved into billets at "E" Camp near Elverdinghe, for a well-earned rest. The Battalion remained in billets until the 23<sup>rd</sup> December when the 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade took over the Hilltop Section just North of Sint Jean. It was here, in the wet and mud drenched trenches, that Jack Willmott spent his last Christmas. Relief came in the form of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment on the 29<sup>th</sup> December 1916, when the Battalion moved to Dug Outs on the Left bank of the Yser Canal.

Under the Army Council Instruction (ACI) 2414 of 1916, published on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1916, affecting soldiers of the Territorial Infantry, Jack received a new service number, 266667, which was part of a block of numbers allocated to the Hertfordshire Regiment. All documentation and references to his service now used his new number.

## 1917 – THE FINAL YEAR

It was on the 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1917 that the Hertfordshire's returned to the trenches, relieving the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire's in the Hilltop Sector between Ypres and St.Juliaan. The front remained quiet for a few days but at 2.45am on the 7<sup>th</sup> January their positions were subjected to a terrific artillery and trench mortar bombardment, after which two outlying posts were attacked by German troops who were carrying out a Trench Raid. Although they were soon driven off, the raiders managed to capture three Hertfordshire men in one post, one of whom was Private William Frank BASTERFIELD of Hitchin. The Battalion suffered a total of 19 casualties during the attack, mainly from artillery fire, with 1 Officer and 3 Other Ranks being Killed, 1 Other Rank dying of their wounds and 14 Other Ranks Wounded. One of the men who were killed was Private Rowland Newling of Royston, who was just 16 years-old.



Those who died were;

Captain Eric Butler SMALLWOOD MC aged 21 of Stoke Newington.

Lance Corporal Herbert CURRELL MM aged 24 of Codicote

Private Rowland NEWLING aged 16 of Royston. (Pictured)

All three men are buried next to each other in a small plot at Essex Farm Cemetery, Ypres.

Private Albert HONOUR aged 21 of Watford – Died of Wounds Buried at Mendinghem Military Cemetery.

During the raid the bravery of one of the defenders was recognised, when Corporal Henry Beer was awarded the Military Medal. The Battalion were relieved by the Cambridgeshire Regiment and moved into dug outs on the Canal Bank where, later that day, a draft of 57 new arrivals joined them.

Four days after their relief, the Battalion returned to the trenches, this time in the sub-section at Wieltje, where they took over positions occupied by the 10<sup>th</sup> Liverpool Scottish on the 12<sup>th</sup> January. During the relief, the frontline was heavily bombarded by German artillery, causing the death of three men and wounding four others.

Those killed were;

Private Charley TURVEY aged 21 of Chorleywood.

Private Albert Edward LOSEBY aged 28 of Hertford.

Private Cyril Rowland GOUGH aged 22 of Watford.

All three men are buried next to each other in Vlamertinghe Military Cemetery. Ypres.

After being relieved by the Cambridgeshire Regiment on the 18<sup>th</sup> January the Battalion moved back to the Dug Outs on the Yser Canal Bank and, on the 24<sup>th</sup>, they moved into more comfortable billets in "C" Camp on the outskirts of Poperinghe. It was not until the 3<sup>rd</sup> February that the Battalion returned to the Dug-Outs at Canal Bank and, the following day, were back in the frontline at Wieltje. They remained there until the 9<sup>th</sup> February, when they were again relieved by the Cambridgeshire Regiment and returned to the reserve positions on the Canal Bank.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> February 1917, the Battalion were back on the frontline and were ordered to make a night raid on the German trenches. A total of 3 Officers and 64 Other Ranks carried out the raid, which proved unsuccessful, as the German trenches they entered were empty, the enemy appearing to have moved out of their trenches due to the poor condition they were in.

The men of the Hertfordshire remained in the frontline until the 16<sup>th</sup> February, when they again moved back to the Canal Bank. The following day they moved by train to "Y" Camp on the outskirts of Poperinghe, and it was here that Jack Willmott was to unknowingly leave the Battalion.

## **SICK PARADE**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1917, Jack was admitted to the 134<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance suffering with Diarrhoea. This condition was treated very seriously by the Army at the time and all such cases were fast tracked to a Casualty Clearing Station for treatment, as it could be the onset of Dysentery, a highly infectious disease that could devastate a fighting unit if it was allowed to spread.

Jack was sent to No.46 Casualty Clearing Station, where he remained for five days. He was then transferred to No.14 General Hospital at Wimeraux on the 24<sup>th</sup> February, for a further four days of treatment.

Once he had recovered sufficiently enough he was sent to No.1 Convalescence Depot at Boulogne, where he remained until the 17<sup>th</sup> March 1917.

Jack was now ready to return to his unit and was sent to No.17 Infantry Base Depot at Etaples, remaining there until 21<sup>st</sup> April when he was returned to his unit. He arrived back with his Battalion on the 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1917, a full nine weeks after having contracted the condition. By now, the Battalion were back at "C" Camp near Poperinghe and Jack joined them with a draft of 50 new arrivals.

## DAY OF DAYS – ST.JULIAAN – 31<sup>st</sup> JULY 1917

Before the attack on St Julien position, which has been given the name of the Battle of Pilkem, the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts, with other units of the 39<sup>th</sup> division had to undergo a special course of training. On 21<sup>st</sup> June 1917 the Battalion was billeted in the Mouille-Mouille-Seques area, about 7 km out of St.Omer on the Calais Road. In this district a full-scale model of the sections of the line to be attacked had been prepared, Woods being shown by branches of trees, and dummy trenches indicating the German positions. Day in and day out the troops were put through the part to be played by them in the attack, advancing first in artillery formation, then extending at a given point, which represented the crest of a reach at the southern edge of Kitchener Wood, on which was situated the famous Falkenhayn Redoubt, and continuing in extended order to the line of the second objective, we're in due course the barrage would be picked up.

The plan of attack for the 39<sup>th</sup> division was as follows:-

The section to be attacked was divided into three separate objectives, roughly the first, second, and third German defence systems, called in operation orders the blue, black and green lines respectively. There was to be a very thorough artillery preparation for some days previous to the offensive, to be followed by the infantry advancing in leapfrog formation behind an impenetrable barrage. The 116<sup>th</sup>, and 117<sup>th</sup> infantry brigades were to capture the Blue and Black lines, and the 118<sup>th</sup> Brigade, composed of the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Black Watch, the 5<sup>th</sup> Cheshire Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment and the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire Regiment, the Green line.

This latter objective was rightly considered the most difficult as it was not possible to give it the same amount of artillery preparation as the others, on account of a lack of direct observation and the distance it was situated from the guns. In fact, the Brigadier in his address to the Regiment on the day before the offensive was launched, stated this, and added that "Pride of Place" in the centre of the line had been allotted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire Regiment.

Intrepid German machine gunners might remain undercover and in action, in spite of the barrage, and might possibly hold up the advance, on a limited front, until they could be dealt with by tanks or other means, and as anyhow the action would be very local, it was not considered advisable to delay the general advance, especially as the success of an attack of this nature primarily depended upon the close proximity of the infantry to a creeping barrage. To fully appreciate the work performed by the Battalion on 31<sup>st</sup> July, it must be remembered that all ranks had had it impressed on them, day after day for some time, that their part was to consist of merely walking behind the creeping barrage with slung rifles, and that no opposition would be met with, other than an improbable machine gun nest, which if necessary, would be dealt with by tanks. In due course the Battalion reached almost as high state of perfection as was possible to expect, in their training, and on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, with the remainder of the 118<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade was moved by a motor bus to the camps near St.Jean Ter Biazin, preparatory to taking up the assembly positions for the battle. Routes to the line were arranged and one officer for each company went forward on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> to arrange for the assembly positions, which consisted for the most part of shell holes behind Hill Top Farm.

On the night of the 30<sup>th</sup>/31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 the Battalion left the bivouacs near Vlamertinghe, which they had occupied on the previous day, and after a rather trying march across country through desultory shellfire and gas, in the pitch dark, finally reached their assembly position just after midnight, suffering only a few casualties.

**The following are extracts from operation orders issued by Lt Col page, dated 29 July 1917.**

1.(a) the 5<sup>th</sup> Army is to capture the hostile trench system East and North East of Ypres on Z day.

(b) The XVIII Corps will capture the hostile trench system on its present front.

Right division, 39<sup>th</sup>

Left division, 51<sup>st</sup>

Reserve Divisions, 48<sup>th</sup> right, and 11<sup>th</sup> left

(c) The 39<sup>th</sup> division will attack at zero hour on the Z day and will capture the German trenches on the frontage shown on the attached map as far as the Green line, which will be known as Cuthbert trench when consolidated.

(d) The 23<sup>rd</sup> Division (Prussian) is holding the area to be attacked by the 39<sup>th</sup> division. Its probable dispositions are 1 Battalion 448<sup>th</sup> infantry Regiment, and half Battalion 449<sup>th</sup> infantry Regiment in the frontline system, the same in the Kitchener system, and the same in the Langmark Line. The 450<sup>th</sup> Regiment is said to be in the neighbourhood of Poelcappelle.

(e) The objective of the 118<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade is the Green line. The attack on the Green line will be carried out with:-

6<sup>th</sup> Cheshires on the right. 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshires in the centre. 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Black Watch on the Left.  
1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshires in reserve near Border House.

(f) Three machine guns of the 118<sup>th</sup> machine gun company and two stokes mortars are allotted to the Battalion.

## 2. Assembly

The brigade will move into the assembly position on Y/Z night. The 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire's will leave the camp at 8:45 PM and March via Queens Road-Bridge 2-and Overland track, to the assembly positions. Nos.1 and 3 Companies near Irish Farm, Nos.2 and 4 Companies and Battalion Headquarters to La Belle Alliance and Coney Street.

## 3. Advance

(a) At 0+1 hour 40 minutes the 118<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade will advance from the assembly position. Herts and Cheshires from the X line and Black Watch and Cambs from the canal bank.

(b) The 1<sup>st</sup> Herts will arrive just West of the blue line at 0+2 hours 10 minutes. The further advance will be made so that the three attacking battalions are on the East bank of the Steenbeek by 0+6 hours 10 minutes.

The orders for the attack of the 1<sup>st</sup> Herts were, No.1 Company on the right and No.2 Company on the left, each into waves, in the front-line.

In Support, No.3 on the right and No.4 on the left, also into waves.

The company officers were:-

No.1 Company. Lieutenant Hardy commanding, Lieuts. Walthew, Thompson and Scott.

No.2 Company. Captain Lowry commanding, Lieuts. Ritchie, Head and Secretan.

No.3 Company. Lieutenant Gallo commanding, Lieuts. Marchington, Francis and Edwards.

No.4 Company. Captain D'Arcy Fisher commanding, Lieuts. Lake, Macintosh, Gilbey and King.

**The following is a transcribed account of the action of the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 as described by an officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment, Captain Bernard Gripper.**

At 3:45 am on 31 July 1917, just as dawn was breaking, the barrage opened with a burst of flame along the whole line of the divisional front, the most intense barrage that had been put up, to that period of the war. The 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire's were not due to move off for some time so, as no reason for secrecy existed, fires were lighted and the men had breakfast.

The weather, which had been fine practically throughout July, had broken on the 28<sup>th</sup> and during the whole of the 31<sup>st</sup> low-lying clouds and drizzle rendered co-operation with the Royal Flying Corps almost impossible. The state of the ground was such, from the rain, that progress of any sort could only be made with great difficulty, and it was this fact, more than anything else, which led to the comparative failure of the operation.

The Germans were well aware of the impending offensive and it transpired subsequently that they were also in possession of most of the details of it. They had accordingly withdrawn most of their guns in the forward area, and had apparently resigned any idea of holding their first system seriously; which was not surprising in view of the pounding it had received from our guns.

Hardly a shred of wire was to be seen, and what remained of the trenches was lightly held by inferior troops. The Blue Line gave little trouble, nor did the black line, although the Falkenhayn Redoubt, on the Southern edge of Kitchener Wood needed the attentions of a tank before it succumbed. The 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire's left their assembly positions about 5am and advanced in artillery formation over the captured ground to the first German line of defence, the blue line, where they took cover on account of the desultory shelling and a certain amount of machine gun fire. The latter was silenced shortly afterwards, by which time the 116<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade had reached the black line.

So far, the attack had gone exactly to plan. While the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire's were on the Black Line, bearings were taken in order to confirm that the Battalion was keeping direction, and to ascertain the position of St. Juliaan, which lay over the crest of the Ridge. The 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire's resumed their advance according to schedule, No.1 and 2 Companies leading in artillery formation, followed by Nos. 3 and 4, being wished "Good Luck" by the 116<sup>th</sup> Brigade as they went through them. On gaining the crest of the first ridge leading platoons came under machine gun fire; the signal to extend was immediately given, and the promptitude with which platoon commanders and NCOs got their men out of artillery formation, saved many casualties.

The "Dead Ground" West of the Steenbeek was reached and the Battalion had to cross the stream by a plank bridge owing to its swollen state. It was here that the Battalion had their first disappointment, as the two tanks detailed to accompany them were both out of action. One stuck irretrievably in a shell hole, and the other fell into the Steenbeek, and although its crew made gallant efforts to get it under way again, they could not do so. The Battalion, after crossing the Steenbeek, having plenty of time to do so, reorganised in the "Dead Ground" on the far side of the stream. The Colonel was full of optimism and the example he set kept everyone cool and collected. The Padre wandered from company to company, although shelling was pretty continuous, cheering the men up giving me cigarettes and showing absolutely no fear, as calm as if such a thing as fear never existed.

The moment for the advance came, and although the intense barrage promised did not exist, as it appeared that only two 18 pounders and two 4.5" Howitzers were in action on this part of the line, the Herts guards swept up the Hill. Reconnaissance patrols from No.1 Company were then extended along the St Julien-Poelcappelle Road, but No.4 Company was shortly afterwards compelled to withdraw a little owing to "shorts" from the two howitzers.

By this time the Battalion were in touch with the Cheshires on the right, but there was no sign of the Black Watch, which had apparently got hung up in Kitcheners Wood. A Battery of 77mm guns had been discovered between the Steenbeek and St. Juliaan, which were duly appropriated.

The unpleasant features on the left of the line at this time were (a) no sign of the Black Watch and (B) persistent machine gun fire from some pillboxes half left. At about 9:35am a message was received from the officer commanding the left company of the Cheshire Regiment, intimating that the Germans were massing for accounts attack on the Springfield-Winnipeg Road, and at the same time a reconnaissance patrol of the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire's reported that the Germans were holding a line of old artillery dugouts about 400 yards East of the Poelcappelle-St.Juliaan Road. This information was sent to Battalion headquarters on the Steenbeek, and Colonel Page ordered the two leading companies to move up and man the latter road, with a view to forestalling any counter attack that might be in contemplation by the enemy. The road was manned and the enemy were in sight of the Battalion for the first time, in force, that day. On the left the counter barrage was very heavy, and the left of the Battalion was entirely in the air, and the ground was a very sticky making the going very heavy.

The casualties on this flank were getting heavy, and still the promised intense barrage was conspicuous by its absence. During this advance Captain Lowry, commanding No.2 Company was killed. About this time two German aeroplanes, flying very low, passed over the Battalion, firing very lights, and machine-gunning the Battalion, and shortly afterwards the Germans launched a counter-attack. This was in some force, commencing with a line in extended order, which advanced up to the line of dugouts previously mentioned, when we joined up with about 100 others who were taking cover there, and who had opened heavy rifle fire to cover the advance.

At this point the counter-attack was stopped by a rifle and Lewis Gun fire, mainly from No.1 Company on the right. The heaviness of the enemy casualties this point and also later in the day, is vouched for by those of the Regiment who were taken prisoner, Lieutenant Walther estimating that he passed upwards of 150 German dead alone, on the ground over which the Battalion and advanced. At 10:10am the intense creeping barrage was due to recommence in order to cover the advance to the third objective, the green line, but this completely failed to materialise on the battalion's front, owing, as it transpired later, to the impossibility of moving the guns up through the mud. Had this barrage been available, there is little doubt that the attack would have been entirely successful. Casualties up to this time, especially on the right, had not been heavy, and the men were in excellent spirits. The attack had to continue, and the men followed their officers without a moment's hesitation, into a veritable hail of rifle and machine gun fire, proceeding from the shelters about 300 yards in front.

In spite of all their special training, for this very attack, in advancing at a walk in comparative safety behind a barrage, the Battalion adopted the only possible course, namely open warfare methods of short sectional and individual rushes, with the greatest promptitude and gallantry. The casualties were at once devastatingly high, Lieutenant Gallo, commanding No.3 Company and Lieutenant Scott of No.1 Company were killed almost at once, and many officers including Lieutenant Hardy, commanding No.1 Company, were wounded, but the Battalion carried on, taking a heavy toll of the enemy, as was discovered when the position, about 400 yards east of the Poelcappelle-St.Juliaan Road, was taken at the point of the bayonet, together with some 70 or more prisoners.

By this time practically the whole of the supporting companies were in the front line. On this position being captured the Germans put down a very heavy barrage underlying about midway between it and St.Juliaan, thus entirely cutting off the Battalion from any reinforcements which might have been supplied by the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment who were in reserve.

Lieutenants Francis, Thompson and Walthew on the right, with Lieutenants Ritchie and Head on the left and Lieutenant Secretan in the centre, went on with the remnants of the Battalion. On the left Lieutenant Ritchie and Head advanced on either side of a cross hedge with about five men each, Lieutenant Head advanced on the left side and was never seen again. Lieutenant Ritchie went on the right side of the hedge and found a row of pillboxes about 200 yards on, carrying his Lewis gun himself, he tried to get around them, but was knocked out, so Private Atkins went on with the three remaining men.

In the centre, Lieutenant Secretan was killed, and the final act of the Battalion in the gallant fight can best be given in Lieutenant Francis' own words, who with Lieutenant Thompson, was taken prisoner on the Green Line. *"Our line was woefully thin by this time, consisting mainly of No. 1 Company, some of my own company No.3, and some of No.4 Company. The remainder of No.3 Company could be seen forming a second line some 300 yards in the rear. It was here I met Lieutenant Thompson of No.1 Company, the only other officer that could be seen. We had a hurried consultation: our left flank was bare, obviously non-existent: our right flank was in touch with the company of the Cheshires, but beyond them in the rear it could be seen that the cemetery was still untaken. Heavy fighting could be heard going on and the Germans showed their presence by the number of rockets being sent up. In front, we had a small creeping barrage, nothing to what we had seen earlier in the morning, we heard afterwards most of the guns had been unable to move owing to the mud. Everywhere around us was the cry, "stretcher bearer wanted".*

We remembered our strict orders, "Never mind your flanks, carry on with your job", and decided to push on, taking advantage of the barrage and not waiting for our second line. The time now was somewhere around 12 noon. It was rather like leading lambs to the slaughter, as we had a pretty fair idea of what the Langmarck Line was going to be like though as yet we couldn't see it, owing to the hedge lining the road in front of us, and also knew that beyond those few men in our second line there was no further help. It cannot, therefore, be wondered at that our men, who had behaved up to now so magnificently, began to lose heart. It was just at this time that a Private of the Cheshires came up to us, saluted as if on parade, and said "Connecting file Cheshires sir". The way this man behaved was wonderful, he stuck to us the whole time and was eventually captured with us, he kept in front with Thompson and myself shouting, "There are Cheshires, come on the Herts". I believe Thompson has his name, as he certainly deserved a medal.

We carried on at the walking pace keeping a good line, and having comparatively few casualties, until we reached the road. After going through the hedge, lining the road, we had our first view of the Green Line, the great big trench on top of a rise, and what was worse two thick lines of uncut wire in front, but it was our objective and the Germans in the trench in front of us could be seen running away. It was at this point that Sgt Hammond came up to me with a broad grin on his face and said something about at last getting at the Bosche, and would he tell the men to get ready to go absolutely all out. Immediately afterwards a Private came up and reported Sgt Hammond badly wounded in the leg, he died immediately I believe. I won't say much about Sgt Hammond, as anyone who was out in France with the Hertfordshire's knew him, but I should like it to be known that he died just as he had always carried on, absolutely fearless and looking as if there was no finer fun on earth than going over the top.

We were now faced with this terrible uncut wire, and the German fire was beginning to be particularly heavy again. Thompson and I managed to scramble through it with a few men the remainder following. The Germans, unfortunately, who were leaving the trench looked round, saw how few we were, and from both flanks and from the front the most murderous machine gun fire was poured onto us. Those who had not yet reached the wire went back a bit, and the few who had got through went on a little way and finally took cover in a shell hole. Our little party was now reduced to about six men, including the two officers and the Cheshires orderly. The Cheshire company on our right had been more successful and reached the trench and entered it. Our hopes were now centred on them.

Our barrage was now knocking the Langmarck Line about in front of us, it seemed deserted now immediately in front though on the flanks it was obviously occupied. It was bitter to sit there and think that with a few more men and more ammunition, as small arms ammunition had mostly been used in St. Juliaan, the trench was ours for the asking. For a little while nothing happened, we lit flares for our aeroplanes, but they quickly went away, and a German one appeared flying low and firing on us. It may be mentioned that although our aeroplanes were obviously doing good work, we were hampered and worried ever since leaving St. Juliaan by low flying German machines.

Germans could be seen well in our rear, both to the right and left of us, though our immediate rear was clear, and soon our men could be seen advancing again. They reached the wire and we tried to re-join them. It was hopeless, the fire was too heavy. Three of the men with us were shot at once, so we sheltered again in a shell hole, and the men who had come up had to fall back. I gather that they were all wiped out as they were practically surrounded on all sides. We were still mystified as to what had happened to the Cheshire company but we quickly knew, as Thompson pointed out some Germans with some English coming out of trench on our right, and to our horror the English were the prisoners and were picking up the wounded and searching the ground. The Germans were now everywhere, the time being about 1:30pm, and we were finally taken about 4pm. It seemed to us we were the only two survivors of that awful day.

Corporal Oliver of No.1. Company I believe, had been badly wounded getting through the wire and died very shortly afterwards. He had shown very fine spirit. I know little of what happened on the left. The Black Watch obviously failed early. No.2 Company got held up at the pillboxes where Lieutenant Head was killed. No.4 Company I do not remember seeing at all. After being captured we crossed the Langmarck Line and were taken to Passchendaele. The Germans had evidently had a bad fright, as every arrangement for a hurried leave was obvious; guns left lying unattended in the fields and everything very much in confusion. There were however many battalions massed at Passchendaele ready to move up, and obviously very reluctant to do so.

What happened with the Battalion headquarters is given from notes by the Reverend E Popham MC, chaplain to the Battalion and Regiment, and Sergeant Major Tite DCM. The padre writes; it was while we were at the Steenbeek that the doctor, Captain Charles, did such magnificent work, going from a shell hole to shell hole dressing wounds. After the Battalion had advanced from the stream a message came asking for reinforcements, and I lost sight of Colonel Page, hearing a few minutes later that he had been killed instantly by a piece of shell.

The Sergeant Major writes; about 12:30pm the adjutant, Captain Milne, was hit and died almost at once. I got together all available men, about 25, mainly signallers and officers servants, and formed a line in shell holes. We then opened fire and the enemy, who were advancing over undulating ground at about 500 yards distance, were compelled to halt. We continued to hold them with the aid of a few stragglers who found their way back, and a Sgt and about 20 other ranks of the 14<sup>th</sup> Hampshire Regiment, but running short of ammunition we had to retire to a partly dug trench on the opposite side of the river. Just before this I stopped a bullet in my left arm which put that limb out of action, and a few minutes later captain Charles, the medical officer, was hit in the thigh. The chaplain at once went to him, but I yelled to him to lie down. I was later reinforced by Sgt Ashwell who turned up with a Lewis gun and one man carrying magazines. This was a great help and I placed him on our left flank where there was a gap of about 1000 yards between us and the black watch. During the whole of the time the chaplain, with total disregard for personal safety, did all possible to aid the wounded, and when he retired, he was the last to leave and brought with him, almost carrying him, a man was wounded in the leg.

About 6pm Lieutenant Walker of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment's arrived with half a company and took over command, ordering me to go back and get my arm seen to. This I did and after walking until nearly midnight, found our transport near Elverdinghe, where I reported to Major Phillips, afterwards receiving treatment at the Corps dressing station nearby.



The padre also writes; we had a few badly wounded men in a pillbox, while I was with them I heard that captain Charles had been hit, and calling to him they found that his thigh had been shattered by a bullet. After making him as comfortable as we could, four splendid stretcher bearers crawled down the hillside with him and eventually got him back, one of the bravest bits of stretcher work ever done by the Herts. I wish I could remember their names. By this time, we were numb with sorrow and also a bit anxious as we did not know where the British army was, but after a time RSM Tite managed to get in touch, and found that a company of the Cambridgeshire Regiment were waiting in our rear, and we felt easier. On arriving at the Camb's trench I found an officer in charge and our boys fighting happily, and as it was not the place for a badly wounded man, I decided to try and take him back, and we managed to get to a dressing station at about 7pm. The next morning, I found brigade headquarters and the Brigadier asked me to take charge of the remainder of the Battalion until Major Phillips could come up, which I did until relieved on the evening of August 1.

The following extracts from Sir W Beach Thomas letter, published in the Daily Mail on 15 August 1917 summarised the fighting in the area covered by the 118<sup>th</sup> infantry brigade.

*"The highest sacrifice in the third battle of Ypres was perhaps paid by the 1<sup>st</sup> Hertfordshire Regiment, who with other territorials as gallant as themselves, took St. Juliaan and pushed forward deep into the enemy's country beyond. I have heard no more splendid or moving tale of gallant men going out to death and glory since the war began, not even that of the Lancashire's told the other day. The achievement of some of the same troops in the final capture of Thiepval, St. Pierre Divion, and the Schwaben Redoubt a year ago went almost unrecorded. It would be a double injustice if this second and yet more heroic venture also were left unrecorded. Losing men all the time, but never checked, these troops pushed on a good 1200 yards to the next line of German trenches. The men reached the approaches to a trench defended by 400 yards of uncut wire, 6 yards deep and running along a contour swept by machine guns from the left, front, and flank. Still they did not stop. Some made their way round, some hacked at the wire and forced a way over it. Somewhere about this time the last of the officers in the Hertfordshire Regiment fell, and the Sgt, himself wounded, took command. Among the men still with them was a padre, a chaplain of many fights, who cheered them on and at the end, being the last man to cross a little stream, carried, and when he could no longer carry, draped, a wounded man to safer quarters a mile or more to the rear. I write especially of Regiment known to me personally better than any Regiment in the army, and one weighs words with special care in writing of friends. The fight was one of the stoutest fights of war, worthy of the Guards at the first battle of Ypres. The men were "Hertfordshire Guards" indeed, and homes should ring with this story of sacrifice and valour".*

It was most probably during the early stages of the attack that Jack Willmott was hit in both legs by machine gun fire, He would have been carried to a Regimental Aid Post, and from there carried by stretcher to the Divisional Collecting Post. Due to the condition of the ground it was extremely difficult for motor ambulance to get the wounded to the Advanced Dressing Station at Dulhallow. In this case Jack would have been carried over two miles on a stretcher by a team of bearers. A long and exhausting journey, that must have seemed never ending for Jack, who was suffering from a great deal of blood loss. It would appear that, despite their best efforts, Jack died just 30 minutes after arriving at the Dressing Station.

The 39<sup>th</sup> Division were supported by the 132<sup>nd</sup>, 133<sup>rd</sup> and 134<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulances of the Royal Army Medical Corps. Their records show that men of the Hertfordshire Regiment carried the wounded for a distance of 2 ½ miles in appalling weather conditions, in order to provide them with basic medical attention. Duhallow Advanced Dressing Station, believed to have been named after a southern Irish hunt, was a medical post 1.6 kilometres north of Ypres.



***A Regimental Aid Post near Ypres in August 1917. Jack Willmott would have initially been treated at a location like this before being moved, by stretcher, to the Advanced Dressing Station at Dulhallow. (IWM)***



***A doctor dresses the wounds of an officer at a RAMC aid post on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917. This is similar to the type of treatment that would have been provided to Jack Willmott. (IWM)***



***This photo was taken on the opening day of the Third Battle of Ypres and shows RAMC Stretcher Bearers attempting to get a wounded man to an Advanced Dressing Station. It took a team of 8 Bearers to carry a single man. The Ypres area had seen the worst rainfall for 30 years and the terrain was indescribable. (IWM)***



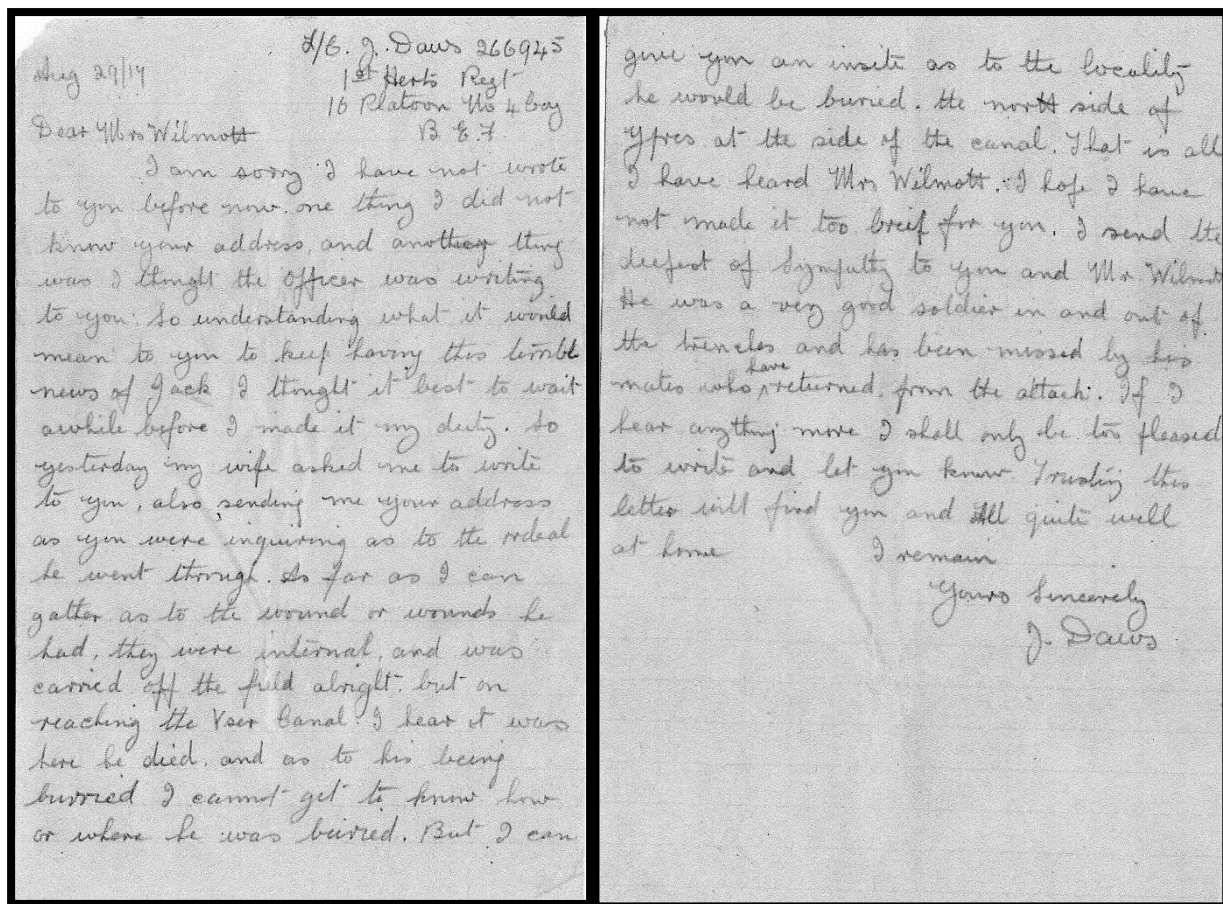
***The Road to Sint-Jean. This photograph was taken on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 and shows the sort of terrain across which Jack Willmott had to be carried in order to get to the Advance Dressing Station at Dulhallow. (IWM)***



***An Advanced Dressing Station on the Yser Canal. This photo was taken on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917 and it is in a similar location that Jack Willmott died. (IWM)***



***The Last Post. A military funeral takes place at a British Cemetery. (IWM)***



On the 29<sup>th</sup> August 1917, Lance Corporal Joseph Daws, who had served in the same platoon, wrote home to Jack's mother to tell her what he could about her son's death.

"Dear Mrs Willmott,

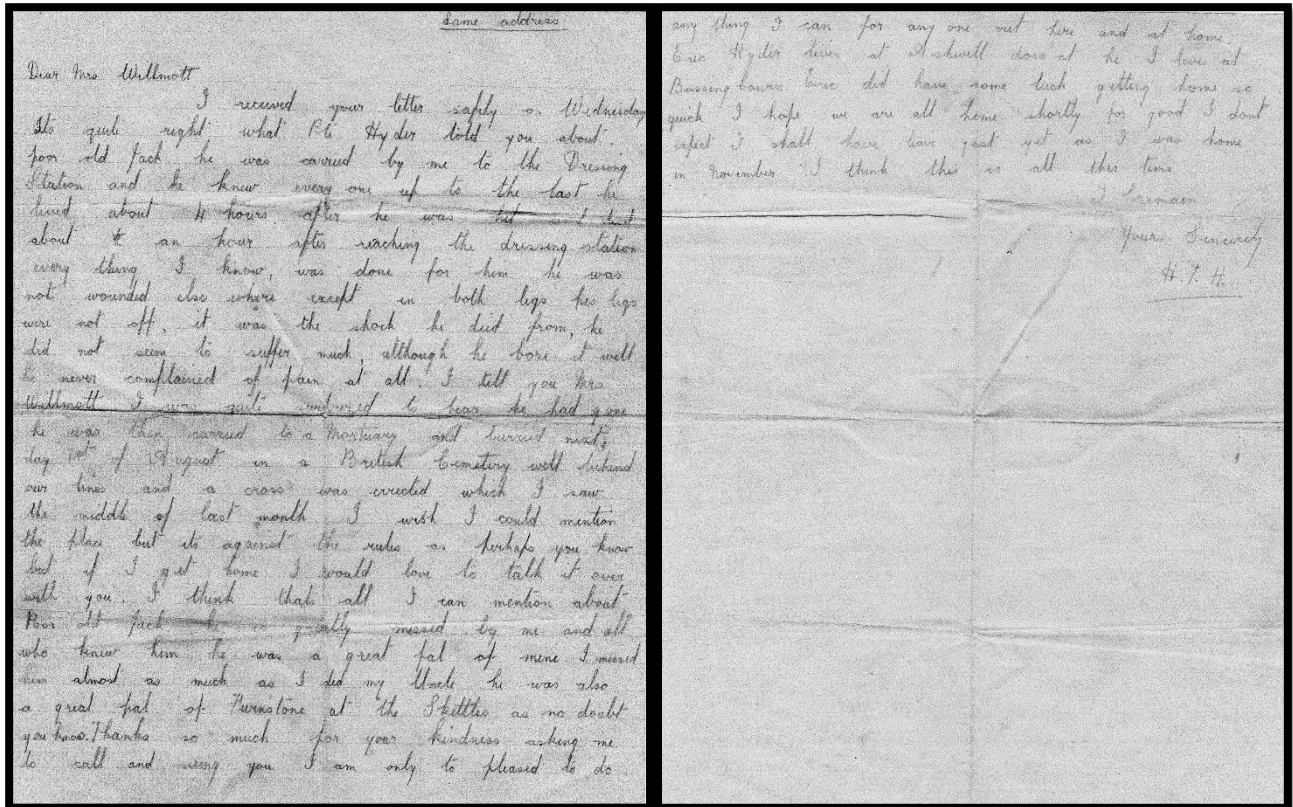
I am sorry I have not wrote to you before now. One thing I did not know your address, and the other thing was I thought the officer was writing to you. So understanding what it would mean to you to keep having this terrible news of Jack I thought it best to wait a while before I made it my duty. So yesterday my wife asked me to write to you, sending me your address as you were enquiring as to the ordeal he went through. As far as I can gather as to the wound or wounds he had, they were internal, and was carried off the field alright, but on reaching the Yser Canal I hear it was here he died. And as to him being buried I cannot get to know how we're he was buried. But I can give you an insight as to the locality he would be buried. The North side of Ypres at the side of the canal. That is all I have heard Mrs Willmott. I hope I have not made it too brief for you. I sent the deepest of sympathy to you and Mr Willmott. He was a very good soldier in and out of the trenches and has been missed by his mates who have returned from the attack. If I hear anything more I shall be only too pleased to write and let you know. Trusting this letter will find you and all quite well at home.

I remain

yours sincerely

J. Daws"

Sadly, Lance Corporal Joseph Daws did not survive the war. He was killed in action on the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1917 and is buried at Belgian Battery Corner Cemetery on the outskirts of Ypres.



A further, undated, letter was received by Mrs Willmott, explaining how Jack had died. The writer is believed to have been a Sergeant in Jack's Company.

"Dear Mrs Willmott,

I received your letter safely on Wednesday it is quite right what Private Hyder told you about poor old Jack he was carried by me to the dressing station and he knew everyone up to the last. He lived about four hours after he was hit and died about half an hour after reaching the dressing station. Everything I know, was done for him was not wounded elsewhere except in both legs his legs were not off, it was the shock he died from, he did not seem to suffer much, although he bore it well he never complained of pain at all. I tell you Mrs Willmott I was quite surprised to hear he had gone he was then carried to a mortuary and buried next day first of August in the British cemetery well behind our lines and cross was erected which I saw the middle of last month. I wish I could mention the place but it's against the rules as perhaps you know but if I get home I would love to talk it over with you. I think that's all I can mention about poor old Jack he is greatly missed by me and all who knew him he was a great pal of mine I missed him about as much as I did my uncle he was also a great pal of ----- at the skittles is no doubt you know. Thanks so much for your kindness asking me to call and seeing you I am only too pleased to do anything I can for anyone out here and at home. Eric Hyder lives at Ashwell doesn't he. I live at Bassingbourn. Eric did have some luck getting home so quick. I hope we are all home shortly for good I don't expect I shall have just yet as I was home in November. I think this is all this time.

I remain

yours sincerely

H. R. H."



*Above: Dulhallow A.D.S. Cemetery taken in the 1920's and a photograph of Jack Willmott's original wooden grave marker.*

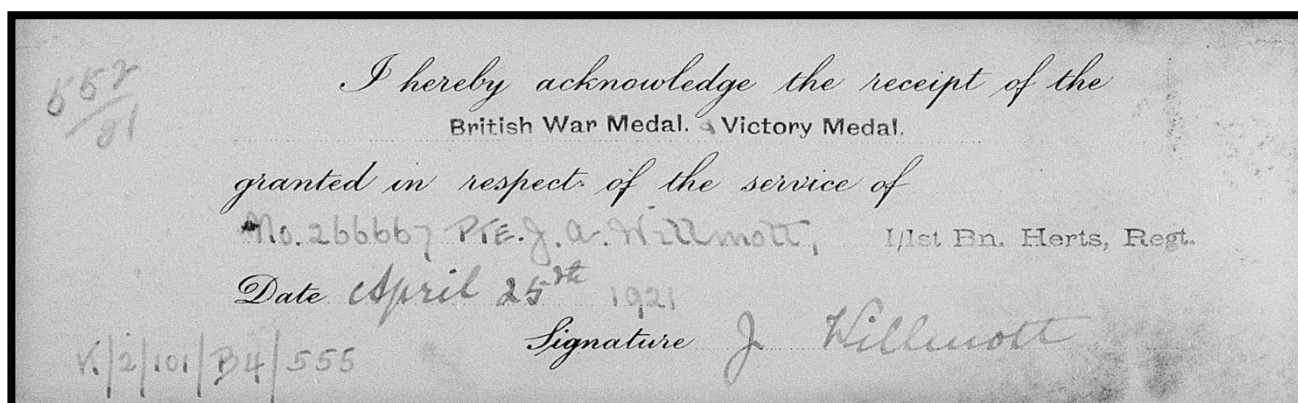
*Below: Jacks grave at Dulhallow Cemetery as it is today under the care of the CWGC.*





**Above: Letchworth Garden City war memorial in Hertfordshire. Jack's name is recorded on a panel here, as a consequence of his connection to the town.**

**Below: A receipt signed by Jack's mother for the issue of his great war campaign medals.**



On 28th October 1919 Jack's mother received notification from the war office that she was to be awarded Jack's war gratuity of Nine Pounds and Ten Shillings (£9.50). A somewhat paltry sum for the loss of a child.

It was on the 25<sup>th</sup> April 1921 that Jennie Willmott signed the receipt for two small campaign medals that had been awarded to her son, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. Finally, in a ceremony on the 11<sup>th</sup> December 1921 the Letchworth Garden City War Memorial was unveiled by Viscount Hampden. The memorial, designed by Onslow Whiting, was erected in memory of 145 men who had died in the Great War and includes Jack Willmott's name.

**Never Forget Him**