

## Bravery In The Field - William Jeffery Sell MM

On the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917, the opening day of the Third Battle of Ypres, more commonly known as the Battle of Passchendaele, the brave lads of the Hertfordshire Regiment attacked strongly held German positions on the outskirts of the village of St Julien, in Belgium. Amongst their number was a young stretcher bearer, William Geoffrey Sell, a man who had served his regiment faithfully since their arrival on the Western front in November 1914. This is the story of a simple soldier who served his King and country well, was to be awarded a gallantry medal for his bravery, and whose life was taken at an early age.



William was born in Royston, Hertfordshire, in 1895 the eldest son of Jeffrey & Emmaline Sell. His father worked as an engineer's driller for a boiler making company based in Hitchin, and the family later moved to 68, Tilehouse Street, Hitchin. They later moved to 13 Chapmans Yard, also occupying number 14 as well.

After leaving school, William was initially employed on a local farm as a house boy. He later became a labourer for the Willmott building company in Hitchin, where he went on to learn a trade, as a carpenter.

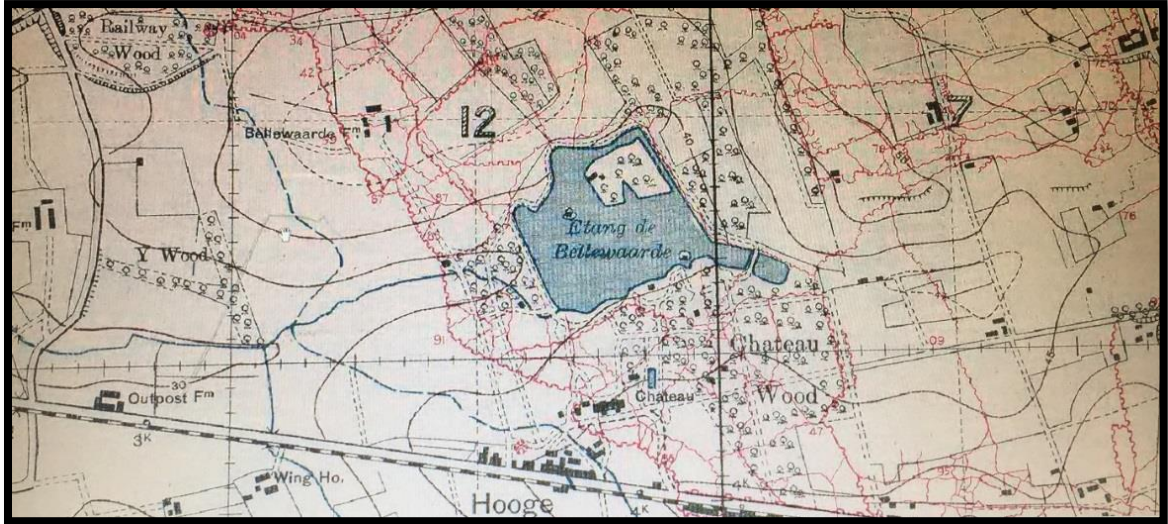
On the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1913, at the age of 18 years and two months, William enlisted in the Hertfordshire Regiment at its headquarters in Hertford, as a Private soldier with the Regimental Number 2197. He was placed in "G" Company. Described as Blue eyed, fair haired and standing at 5' 6 ½" in height he spent the twelve months before the outbreak of the Great War as a part-time soldier. He would have attended the Drill Hall on the Bedford Road at weekends, where he would have been trained in the art of soldiering. He would also have attended an annual camp, in order to ensure that he received his annual bounty payment.

**Above: Private William Jeffery Sell wearing his Stretcher Bearer armband.**

### The Great War

Following the outbreak of war on the 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, William and the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment, were mobilised and made ready for overseas service. This small contingent, of less than 1000 men, were to be one of the first Territorial Army units to be posted overseas.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1914, the Battalion embarked at Southampton aboard the merchant vessel "City of Chester" arriving in Le Havre the following day, where they then marched to Rest Camp No.2. Over the next few days the Battalion travelled by train, bus and foot across France and Belgium until they reached the town of Vlamertinghe. After a long and wet journey, they marched through Ypres to reach their final destination, a location known as Kilo 3, just on the outskirts of the village of Hooge. The Battalion were part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, whose Headquarters were located in Hooge Chateau.



**Above: The location known as Kilo 3 opposite Outpost Farm.**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> November, the weather began to change, with freezing rain and light snow making an uncomfortable situation even worse for the troops. As the Germans commenced a major attack, the Battalion moved about 2 miles along the Ypres-Zonnebeke railway, where they entrenched themselves in a wood. Here, they experienced severe shelling from German artillery, and in the evening moved back to their bivouacs at Kilo 3. On the 14<sup>th</sup> November, they marched to a wood named Nonne Bosschen, where they took over trenches from the men of the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, who had managed to stave off a concerted German attack. Of the Battalion's eight companies, three were in the trenches and five were in support. Just two days later, the Battalion were relieved by the 153<sup>rd</sup> Regiment of the French Army and again moved back to their bivouacs at Kilo 3. On the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> November, the Battalion Headquarters, located at Outpost Farm, was forced to move after it was heavily shelled, killing **Private Philip James ROBINSON (Ware)** and wounding three others. That evening two companies remained at Kilo 3 whilst the rest of the Battalion took over trenches from the 1st Royal Dragoons and the 10th Hussars in Shrewsbury Forest, about a mile East of Zillebeke. The following morning **Corporal Arthur Ernest BOARDMAN (Letchworth)** and **Private Frederick James DARLOW (Royston)** were killed, after their positions were shelled by German Artillery.



**Above: Private Frank Pulley.**

It was on the 19th November 1914, that the Battalion were to suffer its greatest loss so far. Seven members of "E" Company were resting in a dug out, which at that stage of the war was not much more than a shallow scrape in the ground, when it was hit by a German shell. All seven men were buried by the intense explosion and none were to survive. Those reported as being killed were;

- **Private William BUTTS (Hitchin)**
- **Private George Haslear CATLIN**
- **Private George Edward ELLIS (Baldock)**
- **Private Walter William FLANDERS (Letchworth)**
- **Private Joseph William JOHNSON (Letchworth)**
- **Private Frank PULLEY (Royston)**
- **Private Henry WEST (Hertford Heath)**

Sadly, all those killed have no known grave and their names are recorded on the Menin Gate memorial in Ypres, Belgium. To this day they remain buried in Shrewsbury Wood.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> November 1914, the Battalion marched some 20 miles on foot to the town of Meteren. It was here that they first joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade and were proudly inspected by the King and the Prince of Wales. Sadly, following their arrival, **Private Walter George WALKER (Hertford)** died from wounds received earlier in the campaign.

### A Christmas Truce?

The Battalion left Meteren on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1914 and marched to the town of Bethune, a distance of some 15 miles. The men of the Battalion spent Christmas 1914 in the trenches at Rue Du Bois with the Battalion, and there were certainly no hints of fraternisation with Germans. In fact, Christmas Day 1914 was to bring tragedy for the Battalion. **Private Percy HUGGINS (Ware)** was shot by a sniper and killed on Christmas morning. Incensed by the enemy's actions on this holy day, **Lance Sergeant Tom GREGORY (Watford)** ran forward and, after taking careful aim, killed the German sniper. Unknown to Tom Gregory, a second German sniper was in position close by and quickly responded to the death of his comrade by ending the Lance Sergeants life with a single shot.



**Photo: Lance Sergeant Tom Gregory**

**Photo: An early photo showing some men of the Hertfordshire Regiment at Rue Du Bois in December 1914.**



### 1915

A major change occurred for the Battalion when, on the 19<sup>th</sup> January 1915, they were re-organised, using the double company format preferred by the Guards Divisions. With this, Regiment was Re-Organised on a four company basis on the 19th January 1915.

This was posted in Part II Orders (No.11) dated 06/02/1915 by GHQ 3rd Echelon, France.

- A & H became No.1 Company – Major F PAGE
- B & F became No.2 Company – Major E M JONES
- C & D became No. 3 Company – Captain P E LONGMORE
- G & E became No.4 Company – Captain A G CLERK.

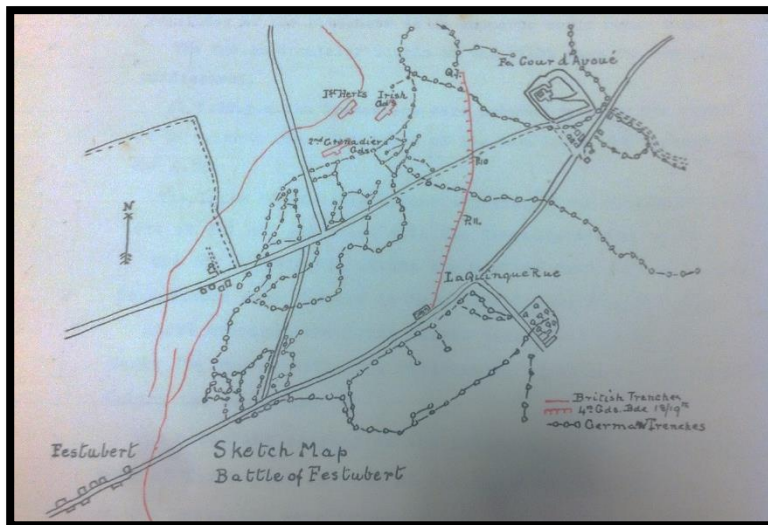
The Battalion spent much of January moving in and out of the line in the Rue Du Bois area. The winter of 1914/15 was wet, cold and miserable, and the troops suffered considerable deprivations and, as a consequence, many men suffered with a variation of medical issues relating to the weather.

### The Battle of Festubert

On the 17<sup>th</sup> May the Hertfordshire's moved into trenches ¾ mile East of Rue Du L'Épinette to support the Irish Guards in the Battle of Festubert, which commenced the following day. On the 18<sup>th</sup> May 1915, the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade were ordered to attack a location near Ferme Cour d'Avoue, known as Post 14. At 4:30pm the Irish Guards attacked on the left of the brigade front, but were met by heavy rifle and machine-gun fire and men began to fall rapidly. No.1 Company of the Hertfordshire's,, under the command of Major Page, went forward to reinforce the Irish Guards, but little progress could be made. Only 300 yards of ground had been won when orders came to dig in on the position held. Major Page, with about 20 men, managed to advance a further 200 yards, quite close to their objective, but had to come back in line with the remainder of the attackers as no supports could reach them.

It was not until midnight that the Irish Guards were relieved by the men of the Hertfordshire Regiment. The Guards fell back to trenches 800 yards behind a new line. The attacking company, under the command of Major Page, were at first just in the rear of the Irish Guards, and the remainder of the Battalion were behind breast works still more to the rear. All day long the men of Hertfordshire were under heavy shellfire. Soon after the attack was launched a messenger of the Irish Guards reported to Colonel Page-Croft that all his officers were hit and that he could not find his commanding officer. The Colonel immediately sent another company of the Hertfordshire's up the line to support the Irish Guards. Arrangements were made for the relief of the Irish Guards, and directly it was dark two fresh companies of the Hertfordshire's went out and started to dig a new line.

While digging went on, the stretcher bearers and volunteers from the companies not digging, conveyed all the wounded to the rear. At dawn on the 19<sup>th</sup> May the trench along a 350 yard front was down to an average of 4 feet and well traversed. It was a good piece of work, but the men were suffer for it, as the new trench was heavily shelled while the the Hertfordshire's held it that day. As



soon as it was dark the Germans redoubled their barrage and the shellfire was so heavy that the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion, Coldstream Guards, had to wait two hours before they could relieve the Hertfordshire Regiment. The battalion, to quote Col page Croft's words, "was a weary but proud crowd, and they were glad to reach billets at Le Touret at 12:30am on 20<sup>th</sup> May.

Over the two days of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of May 1915 the Battalion had seen 6 officers wounded, 17 other ranks

killed, 7 other ranks dying from their wounds, and a further 86 other ranks being wounded.

**A sketch map showing the location of the Battalion at the outset of the Battle of Festubert.**

## The Summer of 1915

The men of the Battalion entered billets in the town of Bethune on the 20<sup>th</sup> May and later moved to the town of Noeux Les Mines. It was on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1915, that the men of No.2 Company moved to billets at Cambrin Headquarters. They remained here until 20<sup>th</sup> June when they moved to Saily La Bourse, where they took over positions from the Irish Guards. The following day they relieved the men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Grenadier Guards in the trenches about 2 miles North-East of Vermelles, where they remained until 23<sup>rd</sup> June. Throughout the entire period the Battalion spent a great deal of time working alongside the Royal Engineers, deepening and repairing communication trenches and performing minor construction works.

The following men were to die of their wounds in June 1915;

**Private John Henry CANHAM (Hatfield)**

**Private Arthur James GATES (Watford)**

The Battalion remained in its billets at Bethune until 6<sup>th</sup> July when two companies relieved the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Kings Liverpool Regiment at Cuinchy. The two other companies remained in Brigade reserve at Annequin. The men of the Battalion were to spend the month of July moving in and out of the front line, and held positions at Cuinchy, Givenchy and Cambrin. When they weren't in the line, they were in billets at Le Quesnoy and Bethune.

Throughout the month of August, the Battalion continued in their rotation in and out of the front line. On the 19<sup>th</sup> August, described as a sad day for the Battalion, the 4<sup>th</sup> Guards Brigade left the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, to form part of the Guards Division. The men of Hertfordshire now transferred to the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. The troops were kept busy, again digging a new trench which, on this occasion, had been named Wolf's Road.

## The Battle of Loos

Throughout early September 1915 the Battalion continued with its work in building, maintaining and repairing trench works. However, on 25<sup>th</sup> September things changed dramatically for the men of the Hertfordshire's, as they became embroiled in the Battle of Loos. At 6:30am that morning, the men of No.3 & No.4 Companies were in support of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Kings Liverpool Regiment, as they went into the attack. The men of Liverpool failed to reach the German trenches and were held up by heavy machine-gun fire. As a consequence, the Hertfordshire's were ordered not to advance. Throughout that night they helped bring in the casualties the Liverpool's had suffered.

It was on 27<sup>th</sup> September, whilst the Hertfordshire's were waiting in trenches in preparation for an attack, that the first award of a Victoria Cross was to be made to the regiment. A citation for the award reads as follows;

**“Corporal Alfred Burt** was standing in a trench when a large Minenwerfer (Trench Mortar) fell amongst the men. Burt knew only too well the destructive power of these bombs, and could have easily taken cover behind a traverse. Instead, he immediately ran forward put his foot on the fuse, wrenched it out of the bomb, and threw it over the parapet, thus rendering the bomb innocuous. His presence of mind and great pluck save the lives of others in the Traverse”.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> September the Battalion moved back to billets at Bethune. Their casualties throughout September had been; 3 Officers wounded, 4 Other Ranks Killed, 2 Other Ranks dying of their wounds and 35 Other Ranks being wounded.





By the 1<sup>st</sup> October 1915 the Battalion were back in the trenches. This time they had taken over the old German front line trench at Vermelles, on the Hulloch Road. It was whilst they were here that **Corporal Reginald "Jack" EVANS** was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. His citation reads;

*" For conspicuous gallantry and ability at Quinchy on 22nd September, 1915, when he went out in bright moonlight 150 yards to see how far the wire had been cut by artillery fire. He made an exhaustive examination of it, remained out an hour and a half, and returned with a report which was most valuable. He knew that our machine-guns were ordered to open fire at 10 p.m., but in order to complete his reconnaissance thoroughly he did not return till 10.30 p.m. He has frequently volunteered for and carried out useful patrol work of this nature.."*

In February 1916, Reg was badly wounded in the face and underwent pioneering plastic surgery performed by Captain (later Sir) Harold Gillies at Britain's first plastic unit set up in the Cambridge Hospital, Aldershot. Following a remarkable recovery, Reg later joined the Royal Sussex Regiment, serving as a Sergeant, and took part in the British Expeditionary Force's campaign in Russia during 1918-1919.



The Battalion moved in and out of the line throughout October, November and December 1915 but despite the intermittent shelling of their positions, the majority of their time was spent sheltering from the poor weather conditions, as were their enemy. During this time the Battalion saw several drafts of new troops, ensuring that the Regiment remained at strength and that any casualties had been replaced.

## **1916**

The first weeks of January 1916 were to see further drafts of new troops, 126 men arriving in the first week. The Battalion war diary also records further awards of gallantry medals and lists a few individuals who had been mentioned in dispatches. These were;

- **Corporal Alfred BURT – Victoria Cross**
- **Captain Aylmer Gustavus CLERK – Military Cross**
- **Lieutenant Kenneth Morton OLIPHANT – Military Cross**
- **Corporal William George SPINKS – Distinguished Conduct Medal (KIA 26/09/1916)**
- **Private Charles HAGGAR - Distinguished Conduct Medal**
- **Private Robert FARNHAM - Distinguished Conduct Medal**

Men who were Mentioned in Dispatches

- **Regimental Sergeant Major Frank YOUNG**
- **Sergeant Reginald EVANS**
- **Sergeant William Gilbert CALLOW MM (KIA 31/07/1917)**
- **Private Rodney STEVENS**
- **Private George Ashley DUNN**

The winter weather meant that operations were virtually at a standstill, although the daily gesture of intermittent artillery shelling between the opposing forces continued. The Battalion continued to rotate in and out of the Givenchy trench system and saw Lieutenant Colonel Henry PAGE-CROFT, who had led them since 1914, transfer to command the 68<sup>th</sup> Brigade, being replaced by Major Frank PAGE, who led the Battalion until his death at St. Julian on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917.

It was on the 8<sup>th</sup> March 1916 that the Battalion came under the command of the 188<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 39<sup>th</sup> Division. Throughout the month were held under canvas at Sercus, receiving two drafts of reinforcements, totalling 4 Officers and 150 Other Ranks, from the 3<sup>rd</sup>/1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. On the 30<sup>th</sup> March the refreshed and replenished Battalion marched to Pont-Du-Hem.

The Battalion found itself back in the trenches on the 1<sup>st</sup> April 1916, for a four-day stint, during which time **Lieutenant Walter Williamson PARK** was killed and **Second Lieutenant Geoffrey Fontaine LAMBERT** (Pictured) was wounded, dying from his injuries on the 15<sup>th</sup> April.



On the 8<sup>th</sup> April 1916, a further reinforcement draft of 96 men joined the Battalion. These were distributed amongst the Companies, and brought the Battalion up to a strength of 1004 Officers & Men. The Battalion were in now billets at Robermetz, near Merville and 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, they entered the frontline trenches, when the Battalion relieved the 13<sup>th</sup> Welsh Regiment at Festubert. Here, they 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 took 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. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1916, 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. German snipers were known to be very active in the area at the time and **Private Thomas CUMMINGS (Watford)** was killed that day, believed to have been shot by a sniper. On the 5<sup>th</sup> May, **Private William WHITMARSH (Harpenden)**, who had been amongst the 96 men who joined the Battalion on the 8<sup>th</sup> April, was also killed in action. William and Thomas are buried at the Guards Cemetery, Windy Corner, Cuinchy. It must have been a terrible shock for Eustace and his comrades to have seen these young men die so suddenly, at the hands of a sniper.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> May **Sergeant George GREGORY** was awarded the Military Medal for his brave act of carrying two wounded men to safety during a heavy German artillery barrage, following the explosion of a mine. Sergeant Gregory was to be awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal later in the war and was amongst one of the most highly decorated soldiers in the Battalion.

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 that morning, 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 a forward post named Island 30, killing three men and wounding Private Harold King, who was evacuated to a Field Ambulance at Bethune, where he died the next day.

Those who died were:

**Lance Corporal Reginald Frank CHATFIELD (Watford) – Killed.**

**Private Herbert Vincent CAIN (Whitwell) – Killed.**

**Private John PAYNE (Letchworth) – Killed.**

**All three are buried in Le Touret Military Cemetery, Richebourg-L'Avoue, France.**

**Private Harold KING (Royston) – Died of Wounds.**

**All are 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.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> June 1916 the Battalion were at Vielle Chappelle, about 2.5 miles North-West of Le Touret. The next day Eustace, and his comrades, marched into the trenches at Femme Du Bois, where they took over the positions that had been previously held by the men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment. The Battalion settled into a routine that they had seen so many times before, one of continual rotation in and out of the trenches in the Givenchy-Cuinchy Sector.

Although the Battalion were in support of a successful Trench Raid that was carried out by the 4<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 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 Hertfordshire Regiment 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;

**Lance Corporal James Walker GITTINGS (Abbotts Leigh, Bristol) – Killed**  
**Private Herbert WOOSTER (Shenley) – Killed**  
**Private Walter Ernest FARROW (Hemel Hempstead) – Killed**  
**All three are buried in the Le Touret Military Cemetery.**

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

**Sergeant Herbert George BREWSTER (Hertford) – Died of Wounds on 23<sup>rd</sup> July.**  
**Buried in Grave VIII.A.143 at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery.**



By the 25<sup>th</sup> July 1916 the Battalion had seen 1 Officer and 12 Other Ranks Killed, and 7 Officers and 38 Other Ranks Wounded. Amongst these were a number of Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO's), including two Company Sergeant Majors.

**Photo: Sergeant Frank Young.**  
**Frank followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Hertfordshire Regiment. Following his service with the Regiment on the Western Front he was recommended for a Commission in the Regiment. It was left to men such as William Sell to fill the void left by men like Frank Young after they departed from the Battalion. As a Second Lieutenant, Frank was to win the Victoria Cross on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 1918 at Havrincourt, losing his life in the process.**



## **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. They made preparations to move South to the Somme sector, where the British Army had been engaged in a major offensive since the 1st 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 next 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, named 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 were 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 Eustace, 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 a 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.

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;

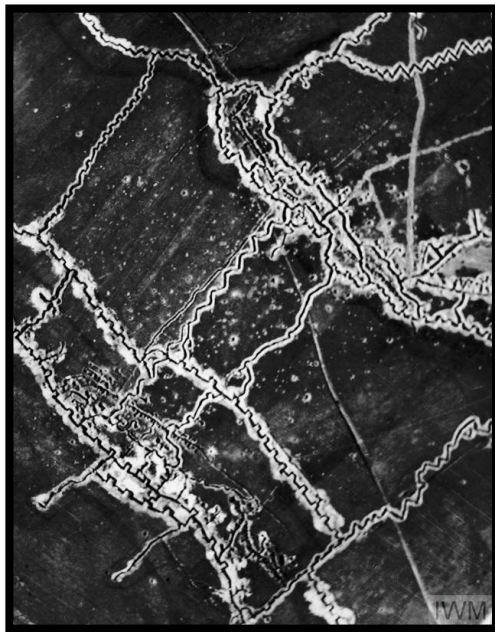
**Captain Charles Frederick HACKER (RAMC) - Military Cross**

**Second Lieutenant John Phillip KEMBLE - Military Cross**

**Lance Corporal Edwin Thomas SAUNDERS – Military Medal**

**Lance Corporal Jack WELCH – Military Medal ( KIA 26/09/1917)**

**Private Randall ILOTT – Military Medal**



**Photo: An aerial view of the German Trench system in the Thiepval area including the Schwaben Redoubt. (IWM)**

#### **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, and would have been well known by Arthur. He had seen service up and down the Western Front and 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. Jack's bravery 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, Jack 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 Frank Page DSO, achieved notable success in the battle, advancing 1600 yards and holding their position. The attack had been 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.



**Photo: These men of the 39<sup>th</sup> Division (possibly Hertfordshire's) can be seen washing in the River Ancre at St. Pierre Divion (IWM)**

### **Back To The Salient**

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 left its billets on the 23<sup>rd</sup> December, and took over the Hilltop Section, just North of Sint Jean. It was here, in the wet and mud drenched trenches, that Eustace was to spend his 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.

### **1917**

A German Trench Raid took place on the 7<sup>th</sup> January 1917, which resulted in the loss of four men from the Battalion. The raid saw three Hertfordshire men taken prisoner, one of whom was Private William Frank BASTERFIELD of Hitchin. In total, the Battalion suffered 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.



Those who died were;

**Captain Eric Butler SMALLWOOD MC (Stoke Newington)  
Lance Corporal Herbert CURRELL MM (Codicote)  
Private William STOTEN (Royston)**

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

**Private Albert HONOUR (Watford) – Died of Wounds  
Buried at Mendinghem Military Cemetery.**

**Left: 17-Year old Private William STOTEN of Royston killed on the 7<sup>th</sup> January 1917.**

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, on the 12<sup>th</sup> January, 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. 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 (Chorleywood)**

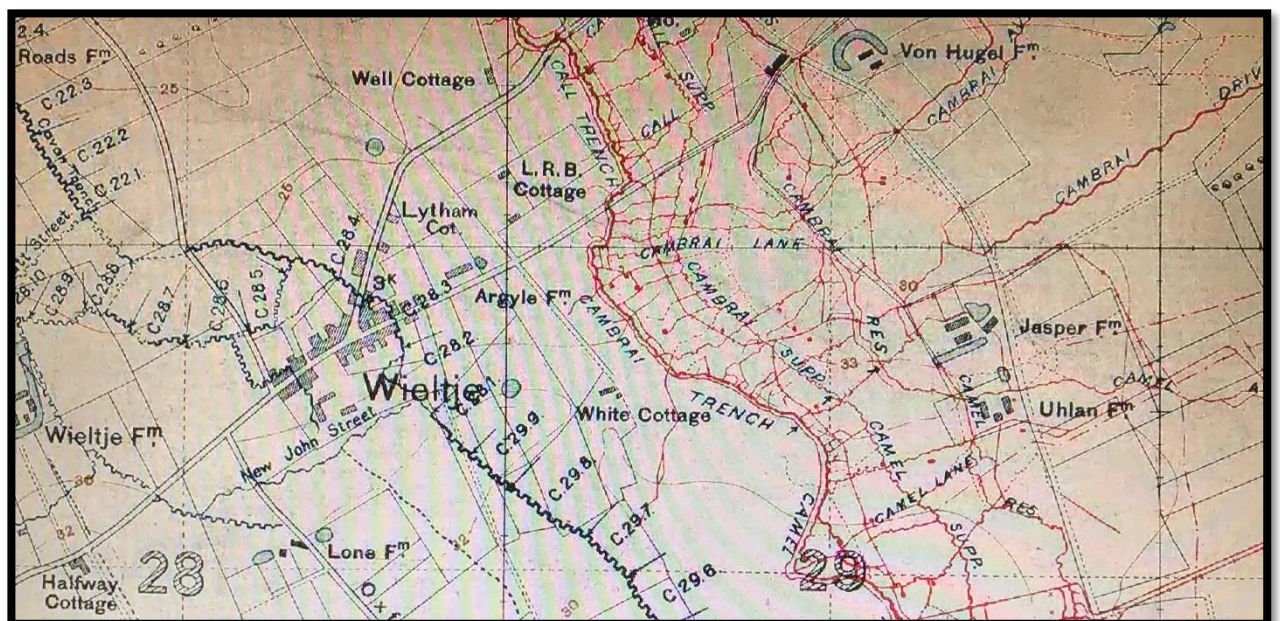
**Private Albert Edward LOSEBY (Hertford)**

**Private Cyril Rowland GOUGH (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, with the aim of taking prisoners and reconnoitring the German positions. The raiding party, made up mainly from men of No.1 & No.4 Companies, consisted of 3 Officers, Second Lieutenants Follett Mcneil DRURY, Robert Leslie HARDY and W.THOMPSON, and 64 Other Ranks. They left their positions on the Canal Bank and moved swiftly to a jump off point in no man's land to await zero hour. The Raiders then advance to their objectives, with the first patrol finding Argyle Farm unoccupied. The party's detailed to deal with No.3 and No.4 Sap, found them to be totally obliterated and unoccupied. The remainder of the raiding party entered the German trenches in an effort to achieve their objective. There is no doubt the raid was a surprise to the enemy, and the few men in the area were very quickly overpowered. Three Germans were found in the front trench, one of whom was bludgeoned, and the others were taken prisoner. The firing of blue rockets was the order to withdraw, and the Raiders made their way back to no man's land. They then returned to the canal bank, where it was established that all raiders had been accounted for by 2.00am on the 13<sup>th</sup> February. They had only suffered four slight casualties, and their endeavours were regarded as very successful.



**Map: A Trench Map shows the location of the Trench Raid on the 12<sup>th</sup> February 1917.**

The men of the Hertfordshire Regiment 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. On the 4<sup>th</sup> March 1917, under the Army Council Instruction (ACI) 2414 of 1916, published on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1916, affecting soldiers of the Territorial Infantry, Eustace received a new service number, 266338, 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.

In general, March 1917 was a fairly quiet month for the Battalion. They had been inspected by Lieutenant- General Sir Thomas Morland on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, and marched to Kruistraat the following day. They remained here for a few days until moving into the trenches on the 6<sup>th</sup> March, where they took over positions from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment in the Observatory Ridge Sector. Following the usual routine, the Battalion moved in and out of the frontline throughout March taking over positions from the Cambridgeshire's in the Hooge sector. Five members of the Battalion were to lose their lives during this month, with many others being wounded. Those killed were;

**Lance Corporal Stephen John SMITH (Hertford) - 14/03/1917**  
**Private Sidney William MAYS (Leigh on Sea) - 14/03/1917**  
**Private Albert William FISHPOOL (Cheshunt) – 26/03/1917**  
**Private Henry Charles REID (St.Albans) – 26/03/1917**  
**Private Frederick George Keith NUNN - 30/03/1917**

In early April 1917, the Battalion left the subsection at Hooge and moved into billets at Houtkerque. Here, on the 6<sup>th</sup> April three awards were made;

**Private Frederick ALDRIDGE (Hertford) – Bar to his Military Medal**  
**Private Frederick William WATERS (St.Albans) – Military Medal (Missing 31/07/1917)**  
**Private Henry Thomas CRANE (Hertford) - Military Medal**

The Battalion spent most of early April away from the front line, in a location known as "B" Camp. By the middle of the month, they had moved to "C" Camp near Poperinghe, where they were employed in the construction of a new railway line. During this period, they were reinforced by two drafts totalling 77 men, who would help to bring the Battalion up to full strength. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1917, the Battalion left its billets and moved into positions along the canal bank at Ypres. They remained here, in reserve, until the 10<sup>th</sup> May when they relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> Cambridgeshire Regiment in the HILL TOP sub section. During this period the unit war diary mentions that an Officer, 2/Lieutenant Basil H. JOHNSON, was hit by a bullet in the left forearm. It does not, however, mention how **Private Leslie Arthur TUCKER (Watford)**, was killed in action on the 11<sup>th</sup> May.

It was on the 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1917 that the Battalion, less Nos.1 & 4 Companies, relieved the 2/5<sup>th</sup> Lancashire Fusiliers in the WIELTJE sub sector. Nos.1 & 4 Companies remained at "C" CAMP. Whilst the Battalion was in this location several of its members had their names published in the London Gazette as being mentioned in dispatches. These were;

- **Lieutenant Colonel Frank PAGE DSO & Bar**
- **Lieutenant Colonel Geoffrey Ernest WHITFIELD MC**
- **Quartermaster and Honorary Major Thomas BARBER, OBE, TD**
- **Captain Aylmer Gustavus CLERK DSO, MC**
- **Captain Thomas Pilling GIBBONS, MC**
- **Second Lieutenant Gordon McMULLEN**
- **Sergeant Sidney RAND**

By the end of May the Battalion had moved to Wormhoudt and it was here, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> June, that William and the men of the Battalion attended the King's birthday parade. In this location, they were safe from the rigours and horrors of trench life, but as Spring turned to Summer they entered a period of intensive training in preparation for one of the biggest assaults the enemy were to experience, since the Somme offensive. The Battalion were billeted in the Moule-Moule-Seques area, about 7 km outside 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 were 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, where in due course the barrage would be picked up.

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

The attack on the St Julien position, which has been given the name of the Battle of Pilkem, took many months of intense planning which saw the Hertfordshire's, along with other units of the 39<sup>th</sup> Division, undergo a special course of training. Once this was completed they were ready to take part in the assault which, unbeknown to them, was to bring complete devastation across the home county.

The plan of attack for the 39<sup>th</sup> Division was laid down in the Unit War Diary. The section to be attacked was divided into three separate objectives, roughly the first, second, and third German defence systems, named in Operation Orders as 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, were to assault, capture and consolidate 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.

The action was expected to be very local, 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 they 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 Lieutenant Colonel Frank Page, issued on the 29<sup>th</sup> July 1917.**

1. (a) the 5th 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 39th 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 23rd Division (Prussian) is holding the area to be attacked by the 39th division. Its probable dispositions are 1 Battalion 448th infantry Regiment, and half Battalion 449th infantry Regiment in the frontline system, the same in the Kitchener system, and the same in the Langemark Line. The 450th Regiment is said to be in the neighbourhood of Poelcappelle.

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

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

(f) Three machine guns of the 118th 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 118th 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 1st 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 1st 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 with Lieutenants Walthew, Thompson and Scott.

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

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

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

### ***The following is a transcribed account of the action of the 31st 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 1st 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 28th and during the whole of the 31st 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 1st 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 116th infantry brigade had reached the black line.

So far, the attack had gone exactly to plan. While the 1st 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 1st 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 116th 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 them 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 Kitchener's 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 an attack on the Springfield-Winnipeg Road, and at the same time a reconnaissance patrol of the 1st 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 1st 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 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 14th 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 1st 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 Cambs trench I found an officer in charge and our boys fighting happily, and as it was not the place for 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 the 1<sup>st</sup> August 1917.

**The action at St.Julien saw 28 gallantry awards bestowed on members of the Hertfordshire Regiment and those attached to the unit. Amongst these were 265330 Private William Sell, who was wounded in the hand and face by shellfire. He was evacuated from the battlefield and never returned.**



**The Memorial to the men of the Hertfordshire Regiment who fought at St.Julien on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1917. The memorial was designed and instigated by the Herts at War Project.**

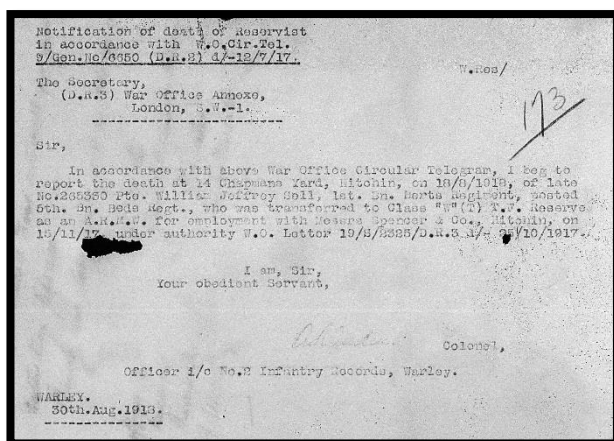
## A New Life



After being wounded at St.Julien, William was first evacuated to No.132 field ambulance for initial treatment. He was quickly sent on to No.64 casualty clearing station at Mendighem, after which he found himself at No.54 General Hospital at Wimereux. His wounds were sufficiently bad enough for him to be evacuated by hospital ship back to the UK.

**Left: A Casualty Clearing Station on the Western Front similar to where William Sell was treated.**

Once he had recovered sufficiently enough from his injuries it was established he was no longer fit for war service. William was then attached to the 5<sup>th</sup> Bedfordshire Regiment and on the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1917 was officially transferred to the War Reserve. He then took up a civilian occupation as an Army Reserve Munitions Worker at Spencer & Co in Hitchin.



**Left: Document reporting the death of William Sell on the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1918.**

William married Catherine Jane Baker early in 1918, and she soon fell pregnant. Sadly, William died a few months later, on the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1918 at the age of 22, the cause presently being unknown, and is buried in grave W. 171 at Hitchin Communal Cemetery, Hertfordshire. He never saw his son, William Arthur Frederick Sell, who was born an orphan a few weeks later on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1918.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1919, the Ministry of pensions wrote to William's widow and advised her that, as his death was regarded his own fault, a pension was not payable, leaving her penniless and with a young child. In the spring of 1919 Catherine married a bricklayer, Edward Thomas Cotton, and a year later their daughter, Catherine, was born. The couple moved to 115 Salisbury Road, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire. Catherine Jane passed away in 1985 at the age of 88.

William Arthur Frederick Sell married Wilhelmina J Keech in 1942 and the couple lived at 79 Knella Road, Welwyn Garden City. William passed away in 1978, aged 60, and Wilhelmina passed away in 2003 aged 84.



Research provided by Paul Johnson on behalf of the Herts at War Project.