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Rifle Corps

The Volunteers, 1859 – 1920.

Princess Louise's Kensington Regiment

Setting the Scene

Britain declared war on Germany on 4th August 1914. My father was then twenty-five and a Company Sergeant Major with eight years service in the Volunteer Army... This made him not only older than the majority of men, in the 1st Battalion, but a senior non-commissioned officer. Albert Kearey was a proud Londoner living with his parents in Bayswater not far from The Regiments, Headquarters. As a Volunteer he attended drill nights, weekend rifle practice, and the annual summer camp. During the week he worked for Thompson McKay & Co., a haulage company who had a contract with the Great Western Railway Company to deliver their freight. He had worked his way up the ladder of seniority from junior clerk to cartage manager; being particular, that he should know and understand all the customers, and routes - to their businesses. The Kensingtons enlisted their men from the locality. Most had been to local Board Schools, some from Church Schools. Many young men had been members of The Church Lads Brigade, others from The Boys Brigade, and a few from The Scouts. Many knew each other, before they had joined up, for in essence, it was very much like a 'Pals' battalion – all knowing each other and for many, their parents too.

The Regiment prided itself on its smartness and its excellent marksmanship at the butts – winning many medals for its rifle team. The other Battalions making up the 56th Division were also local men from neighbouring drill halls, and they too, were known to each other – it was a London Division. Albert's four brothers were also in Kitcheners

Army, who served on the Western front and at Gallipoli. By 1918 they were all dead, as were many of his friends. The land fit for heroes was waiting for them to come home.

CHAPTER I

Albert enlists

ENLISTMENT:- Militia – Yeomanry – Volunteers – Territorial Forces, Standing Army – Crimea War – Lord Truro – West London Rifles – Childers - South African War, The Kensingtons - 1st & 2nd Boer Wars, The Boy's Brigade – Thompson McKay & Co. – Hauliers – Horse Work - Embarkation – WW1...

This story follows the life of proud Londoners, the Kearey family; in particular, my father, Albert Edward, b1889..., who came fifth in the order of births. The Kearey's' came from northern Tipperary, Ireland, at the turn of the eighteen hundreds, settled in north London where they raised their children... eventually the first generation moved to the northwest of the city – to Paddington - then Bayswater. Albert volunteered - to be a recruit in the local Volunteers – The Kensingtons... winning the DCM. MID and clasp [London Gazette, 11 March, 1920], eventually, over a period of almost thirty years, became their Regimental Sergeant Major... In WWII he was promoted to Major, 17th London Division, organising the protection of north London.

The country in the late nineteenth century was defended by a small standing army, and Militia - a body of troops raised from the citizenry, by voluntary enlistment. In ancient times, it was a force raised by the Lord Lieutenant of a county for the sovereign – to be on hand, in times of invasion, rebellion, or similar emergency. The men were to keep themselves available

and serve for six years; training was to be for twenty-four days annually... whilst providing their own arms and equipment. Initially, the Lord did this by detailing off one-hundred men from his estates, placed under the command of a captain. This recruitment was achieved by compulsion, but later, the body of men were Volunteers. The final acts of the Militia were in the Crimean War followed a little later by the South African War. Thereafter the Militia was superseded - to become a more professional force of trained Volunteers; this came about in May 1859.

After the Crimea War the government realized that the country had insufficient forces available to defend the state. It was decided to have a Volunteer Force made up of three part-time corps: of infantry, gunners and engineers. It did not take long for this force to be considered an important part of the nation's defence.

On April 29th 1859, war broke out between France, under Napoleon III, and the Austrian Empire [the Second Italian War of Independence], and there were fears that Britain might be caught up in a wider European conflict. Lord Truro, one of a number of aristocratic county landowners, raised the 4th Middlesex Volunteer Corps [West London Rifles], based at Islington. He maintained command for twenty years. The 1st Middlesex [Victorias] and the 2nd Middlesex [South] were raised by Lord Ranelagh. All three were to prepare for this possible encounter. Two years later many of these isolated bodies of troops were amalgamated into battalion-sized units. By 1862, the government issued a grant: to provide headquarters, drill-halls, transport, uniforms and equipment. Later, the government, appreciating the worthwhileness of the scheme, removed the financing from those of county precepts to a national commitment. To carry out the reorganization of the commission,

The Volunteer Act of 1863 was announced, whereby each man was to offer their services to her Majesty through the Lieutenant of a County. An annual inspection process, overseen by an officer from the regular army, was put into place, and the standards set by order in council.

In 1872, The Secretary of State for War, by the Regulation of the Forces Act, ordered the jurisdiction removed from the County Lieutenants. The Childers Reforms of 1881, nominated, 'that the rifle volunteer corps should be volunteer battalions of the new 'county' infantry regiments'. Childers set about ensuring that regiments were henceforth made up of two battalions – one based at home the other overseas. The intention was that there would always be a body of troops capable of responding to an emergency. These changes took a further twenty years to be completed, including adopting a standard dress and designated names and badges. The Volunteers now numbered a quarter of a million men. This reserve force incorporated: the Militia – the country regiments, the Yeomanry – the mounted infantry, and the Volunteers – the urban regiments.

In 1859, the 4th [North] Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps was formed at Islington, and the 2nd [South] Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps formed in Fulham. The West London Rifles became the 2nd. Volunteer Battalion of The King's Royal Rifle Corps in 1881; four years later they moved to Kensington changing title to the 4th Middlesex Rifle Volunteer Corps. A further six years saw its title change yet again to 4th Middlesex [West London Rifles] Volunteer Corps.

The stimulus for all these changes was the South African War of 1899-1902. Three-quarters of those that volunteered were declared physically unfit - to fulfil the duties of a soldier. This shocked the Home Office. A call was made to recruitment officers through the Inspector General to find out why so many

men were in such poor health. The conclusions: the plight of the poor - their sub-standard housing, and lack of a healthy diet. Both these were considered equal factors. The legislative reforms made by the Liberal government went some way to correct the deficiencies. However, this correction process took another ten years.

In The South African Wars Britain sustained nearly thirty-four thousand casualties for the cost of two hundred million pounds. It was declared, 'that the war had been a shambles.' It did however point the finger at national shortcomings. Britain signed an alliance with Japan, in 1902, France by 1904, and Russia in 1907.

The formation of The Boys' Brigade, by Sir William Smith, and The Boy Scouts, by Baden Powell, was to improve the physique and mental health of young boys, who might in the future become army volunteers. Both these organizations and others like them gave the young, especially children in inner cities of Glasgow and London, something to work for and benefit by.

Albert Kearey joined the 6th London Company, Boys' Brigade in 1900, at the age of eleven. The first company was set up by Sir William Smith seventeen years before, on 4th October 1883. The organization quickly caught on in Glasgow, and the first company in London started soon after.

The Brigade's uniform aped that of the army - white haversack, brown belt and Pill Box hat [The bands of the pill box hat were pipe-clayed and the buckles of the belt and haversack polished brass]. The lads conventional school uniform, plus lapel badge and everyday black shoes, formed the basic uniform... Dummy rifles were issued to provide the necessary equipment for drill and parade purposes. All the drill commands and actions followed those of the Army Manual, of the 1880s. In effect, The Boys Brigade, taking boys from the age of eleven to seventeen,

was a valued recruiting arm of the country's military establishment. Sir William introduced camping to continue the boys association with each other during the school's summer holiday.

The Edwardian economy, business structure and social attitudes rested in part on the philosophy of Imperialism, and that was about benevolent exploitation and economic advantage. However, what marks the period was the direct intervention by a number of well meaning individuals to improve the social and economic opportunities for all.

Britain's population in 1901 was 42 million and growing fast. Railway goods traffic grew by one thousand per cent and the first of many steam tractors were now used to tow pantechincons. The numbers of carmen, carters and carriers grew in London to over a quarter of a million and the delivery of coal and heavy equipment soared. In 1903, Joseph Chamberlain used the Imperialistic mood in the country to suggest a series of tariff reforms. Over six million frozen rabbits were imported from Australia. This and the import of wheat just two of the items which undermined British goods. The tariffs were meant to protect the country from the dumping of foreign goods and gather taxes to help promote new social measures. This hint of protectionism undermined the idealistic concept of free trade weakening the country's great imperial dream... the concept of Imperialism never really recovered...

At this time a team of private individuals launched the 'Garden City' programme in an attempt to marry town conveniences to country pursuits. Its first experiment was at Letchworth... This social manipulation was a follow on to other Liberal reforms.

Albert Kearey started work at the age of fifteen, as a three month probationary clerk, in 1904... in the Grand Central Railway freight department, attached to Paddington Main Line Station, [The Headquarters of The Grand Central Railway Company] [GCRC]. He served out his probationary period but unfortunately there was no vacancy for a full-time clerk.

Thompson McKay & Company, a large freight haulage company, held the license to deal with all the railway company's freight. They had their warehouse and distribution centre next door to the railway company. The GCRC suggested to Albert that he should transfer to this company - who were advertising for a trainee clerk. He applied immediately and was offered an interview by return of post. At his interview he mentioned his membership in The Boys Brigade. This greatly influenced the selection committee. The Board recognised the dedication and discipline necessary to be a corporal, heading up a section. They complimented him on his excellent school report and the railway company's recommendations, telling him that his application was likely to be accepted, which it was, two days later. The next ten years saw his development from junior clerk to cartage manager.

1904 was the year the *Entente Cordiale* was signed. This was a treaty which gave France a free hand in Morocco allowing Great Britain to take over the 'governorship' of Egypt. Germany saw this as aggressive... any move by Britain was a stab in the back to the Kaiser, who was paranoid about Britain's grand designs – he saw this as an attempt to corral his ambitions of expansion... This was the start of Britain and France becoming allied against Germany and the creation of the British Expeditionary Force by Haldane at the War Office.

The General Election of 1906 brought a Liberal Government, under Campbell-Bannerman, to power. Richard Haldane was appointed Secretary of State for War. The Liberal Party's manifesto centred upon social reform. They intended to

do something about the poor health of the working class and the amount of unemployment – ‘greater equality and equal opportunities for all’, was the cry. The Liberals were determined to push through all their schemes related to social reform even if it created a quarrel between the two Houses of Parliament. Poor Campbell-Bannerman did not live long enough to see the fight for he died two years later. The only bill he did see become law was, ‘that medical inspection was to be introduced into state schools’. This laid the foundation of the modern system of school clinics. His other great works involved his Resolution, ‘that within the limits of a single parliament the final decision of the Commons should prevail’. This broke the power of the House of Lords.

Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary of the minority Liberal Government of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, appointed Richard Haldane to the post of Secretary of State for War. Grey had committed The British Army to go to the assistance of France, if attacked, needed a strong pair of hands to ensure the army was up to the task. After much studied thought Haldane concluded that an Expeditionary Force was needed – settled on six infantry units. These six units required back-up to cater for leave, sickness, casualties and deaths by a home-defence force. Haldane further supported his suggestions by having drawn up two Field Service manuals implemented by the new Director of Staff Duties Douglas Haig. The supply of officers was filled by volunteers from universities and public schools trained by Cadet Corps and university Rifle Corps.

It was realised by Chancellor St. John Broderick, that the army was not capable of fighting a protracted war without the support of additional troops. Volunteers had to be brought in to fight in the war... afterwards reform was necessary to change the system... the Liberal Secretary for War Haldane set about

forming the Territorial Force. These Volunteers were mainly local business people, craftsmen and professional, lower and middle-class men training at weekends and at the summer annual camp numbering two hundred and thirteen rifle corps.

Viscount Haldane engaged Colonel Ellison as a member of his staff. A year later the reorganization of the army was complete. The National Army was to consist of a Field Force and a Territorial Force. The Field Force organized to be ready for mobilization in the event of war. The Territorial Force would be there to train – to support and effect the expansion, a new force of fourteen divisions. was created by Richard Haldane in 1908, [Territorial and Reserve Forces Act 1907] becoming the new reserve volunteer force, made out of the previously civilian-administered Volunteer Force: this made up of the Militia, Yeomanry and Volunteers – the Militia being mainly those officers and men from the counties, the Yeomanry the mounted rifles and the Volunteers, men from the towns and cities. The new volunteers, with an overall strength of just over a quarter of a million men, were part-time soldiers paid the same rate as the regulars whilst engaged on military activities.

General Sir Ian Hamilton, 1853 – 1947, was told by Haldane, on the 27th July 1914, that he was to command the Home Army – previously he had been Inspector General of all forces – Home and Overseas. His immediate duties were to defend the nation and mobilize the Territorial Force - who were at summer camp. This he accomplished rapidly, forming battalions, brigades and whole divisions, ready to replace regulars in overseas garrisons and fill up depleted ranks after the initial fight in late summer, early autumn. Hamilton considered the 1st London Division Territorial Force to be of ‘exceptional value’.

By the end of October the Allied Force was dug in from Switzerland to the North Sea – in deadlock. The Territorial Force

was under no obligation to serve overseas. In reality most of the men did... included amongst them, my father

CHAPTER II

Preparations for War

CALLED TO THE COLOURS: - Leaving the Boy's Brigade - Volunteer - Attestation - Receiving the Uniform - Kensington Adoption - 4th Middlesex - The Territorial's - Regiment of the Line - Grey Brigade - Social Classes - Corporal.

At home, in 1905, the Kearey family consisted of Alfred - the father, who was a self-employed painter and stainer, and Martha - his wife. The eldest child was Alfred who was twenty, and Sidney, the youngest who was five. It was a family of six boys, the four eldest were at work, and two girls [Thomas 1881, the first child, died in his second year, Elsie, the second eldest girl, had died in her third]. Lillian who was sixteen, the eldest of the two remaining girls, stayed at home to help the mother. The family had moved again... this time to Kensal Green, a suburb of Paddington. It was necessity - to find more room to accommodate the eight children...

Britain's isolationist stance came to an end when she agreed a treaty with Japan in 1902 and then again with the *entente cordiale* in 1904... It was on the cards that Germany would force an issue with France. That moment came when The Kaiser sent his troops through neutral Belgium to attack France... That momentous event however was not on the minds of these bunch lads about to join the Volunteers...

In 1906, soon after his seventeenth birthday Albert turned up at the **Kensington** Volunteer Rifle Corps Headquarters by appointment, to fill in the necessary forms and take part in the medical. If these were accepted the recruit had to swear allegiance to The Queen. It had been a bit of a wrench leaving the Boy's Brigade, for he had been a keen member – it had been eight dedicated years - taking part in all the drill competitions, and playing the piano for the Sunday bible readings. He left at the same time a number of friends did having discussed joining the Territorial's. It was an auspicious time, not that Albert and his friends realised the significance.

After the attestation the lads were lead to the Quartermasters Stores to receive their uniforms. This to them was the most exciting part as they all fancied walking down High Street, **Kensington**, in their new uniforms. The colour of the cloth was field-grey with shaped cuffs. The buttons tarnished - just waiting for all the hard work to turn them into sparkling brass. The helmet, grey too, looked very similar to a policeman's helmet, plus a spike on the top. All the fittings: spike, badge and chin strap, came separately, also needing much cleaning. The recruits were each handed a kit-bag to carry the boots, socks, shirt and vests, plus the belt, scabbard and bayonet. It was not going to be easy to carry this lot home.

The Kensington Rifles, was now adopted by the Royal Borough of **Kensington**, and granted permission to take the Borough's Coat of Arms, mounted centrally within an eight pointed star, as a cap badge. Colonel A J Hopkins VD was the commanding officer for a further year

The **Kensington** Volunteers moved to a purpose built Headquarters at Adam and Eve Mews, Iverna Gardens, **Kensington** in 1908, now under the command of Lieutenant Colonel A Sutherland-Harris.

The 4th Middlesex [North] Volunteer Rifle Corps [VRC] [**Kensington Rifles**], under the reorganization of the Secretary of War, amalgamated with the 2nd. [South] Middlesex VRC, representing the London Boroughs of **Kensington** and Fulham. This amalgamation joined north and south Middlesex under one Battalion, to be called the London Regiment, Territorial Force Association. The 13th [County of London] Battalion, The London Regiment [**Kensington**] transferred to a Territorial Force, with its Headquarters and A-H Companies, at Iverna Gardens, **Kensington**.

In January 1909 the Army Council declared the Battalion should become a 'line' regiment bearing colours, relieving the battalion of its 'Rifle' designation. Brigaded with the Queen's Westminster's [16th London], Civil Service Rifles [15th London], and the London Scottish [14th London] in the 4th London Infantry Brigade. Lord Truro and Lord Ranelagh decided on a grey uniform with red facings, a shako with a glazed peak. The belts were to be black and the uniform trimmings were of buff laces with silver appointments. To contain an assortment of necessary items a starched white haversack completed the uniform. They became known as the 'Grey Brigade' mobilized for home defence at the start of the war although the uniform had been regularized to khaki some years previously.

The Regiment's Headquarters was positioned close to the home of Princess Louise, daughter of Queen Victoria. King Edward VII was approached by The Regiment to ask if Princess Louise would associate her name with the regiment – he was to give his consent she took an interest in The Regiment organizing the design and production of the regiment's colours. The colours were duly consecrated and presented to the Regiment by King Edward VII at Windsor on the 19th June 1909. Thereafter the Regiment was referred to as the 13th London Regiment. The

Princess Louise, four years later, consented to give her name to the Regiment.

In 1914, the 1st Battalion were billeted in the White city stadium were there waiting to go to France - with The Expeditionary Force. The 2nd Battalion were at Abbots Langley, near Watford – there training at summer camp, for ‘Home Service’; the 3rd Battalion was recruited much later.

CHAPTER III

War declared

TERRITORIAL HEADQUARTERS:- Freemason – Summer Camp – Mobilization – German Aggression – British Expeditionary Force – 4th Middlesex Regiment – Frontiers - Mons – Cateau – Marne - 1st Ypres – Aisne - Nonne Bosschen - Neuve Chapelle – 2nd Ypres – Aubers Wood – Festubert – Artois - Loos – Somme - Gommecourt.

The family moved again this time to 7 Errington Road, Paddington. Albert was twenty-four and a Sergeant in the Territorial's and about to be balloted for membership to The Kensington Battalion, Masonic Lodge. It was November 1913 just nine months before war broke out. By the following January he passed to the degree of Fellow Craft in the Lodge and raised to Master Mason on the 4th March 1914.

Battle of the Frontiers

From the 27th July 1914, Britain began to respond to the gathering crisis in Germany. Two days later, all British troops on leave were recalled and the army was mobilized. Lord Kitchener, the new Secretary of State, appealed for volunteers. An

Expeditionary Force of six divisions [80,000 men] set sail for France... they arrived on the 6th August and moving northeast reached the small town of Mons, in Belgium. The first contact with the enemy was on the 22nd August.

By chance, The **Kensington** Territorial Force had just been assembling for summer camps – had entrained at Addison Road Station on 2nd August for Salisbury Plain. At 10pm that night they receive orders to report to their Drill Hall. Full marks must be given to their commander - that they were able to mobilize quickly, under their commanding officer Lieut.-Colonel F G Lewis, 1910-15. The first days of August were the time of the **'Battle of the Frontiers'** waged against the German Army by the Belgians and the French. The losses were high and as the Germans were also attacking Russia... they were occupied of two fronts.

Battle of Cateau, 23rd August 1914.

On 23 August 1914, the German 1st Army of General Alexander von Kluck arrived at Cateau – a village on the edge of Mons. They were following the Schlieffen Plan to outflank the Allies – to cut them off – from using the channel ports. The BEF was made up of four regular army divisions arranged as I Corps [Douglas Haig] and II Corps [Horace Smith-Dorrien]. Three hours later eight German battalions advanced against two battalions of the 3rd Infantry Division. D and B Companies of the 4th Middlesex Regiment were overwhelmed by the 31st, 85th and 86th German Fusilier Regiments. These three comprised the German 18th Division. – forced the British back towards Paris. By mid-day, the British began a withdrawal. To assist them, they requested reinforcement from the 2nd Battalion Royal Irish.

Battle of Mons, 23/24 of August, 1914.

The 1/13th [County of London] Princess Louise's **Kensington** Battalion, The County of London Regiment was mobilised on the 4th August 1914, two days after boarding the train for summer camp. They were to form part of the then 24th Brigade, 8th Division.

Ninety thousand men descended upon Southampton and Portsmouth to board ships for Boulogne, Rouen and Le Havre, under the command of Sir John French... their destination was Maubeuge. The Army was made up of four infantry and one cavalry division. A division at this time equalled about eighteen thousand men – this sum included support troops. Two or more divisions made up a corps and two or more corps made an army.

The landings were completed by the middle of August. Almost immediately they had gone into the line alongside the French Army, trying to stem the tide of the German advance. The object was to hold the line located by the Mons-Conde Canal in Belgium. The British Expeditionary Force was stationed on the left of the Allied Forces directly in front of the advancing 1st German Army Commanded by Alexander von Kluck. In manpower the German and French armies were equal at a million each. The British totalled eighty thousand The German Schlieffen Plans, which entailed encircling the Allies, had been carefully planned long in advance. The BEF were crucial in keeping the line intact by stopping the German right wing. Whilst the British troops were heavily engaged the French 5th Army was engaged with the German 2nd and 3rd armies at the Battle of Charleroi. The French Army Commander, General Lanrezac instructed Field Marshal Sir John French the BEF Commander to hold the line for twenty-four hours. The BEF dug them in preparation for the onslaught that was bound to happen.

The battle opened at dawn on the 23rd August, with a German bombardment. There were four bridges over the canal... these the Germans had to force. Advancing in close-order, parade ground fashion, the advancing Germans were skittle down and forced to retire in confusion. Another attack was formed only this time in loose formation... this was more successful; using the plantations of fir-trees to shield them. On the right of the Royal Fusiliers were the **Kensingtons** and Gordon Highlanders... Both suffered grievously. Fortunately the reserve battalion, the Royal Irish, gave sufficient steadying power to hold the bridges. Throughout the day the British II Corps held out. It was obvious to all that holding the bridges were not going to last. The Kensingtons had suffered 15 officers and 353 killed or wounded nearly half the total. To the east the Germans had penetrated the parameter turning the right flank.

Sixteen after initially digging in - after becoming used to the place, they were ordered to retire – so as not to be cut off... by the Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre... after the French Army had been defeated at the Battle of Charleroi. This British Army was the original Old Contemptibles and considered Britain's finest troops capable of rapid, accurate firing with their Lee-Enfield rifles, capable of 15 aimed shots a minute. Albert was a champion shot representing the regiment at Bisley. He was capable of double that figure.

At 15.00 hours the British 3rd Divisions was ordered to retire to the south of Mons. Straightening the line the 5th Division also retired establishing a line through the villages. As news was received about the French collapse – pulling back exposing the British right flank, a further withdrawal was scheduled for that night. It was an invidious position to be in. There had not been time to organise a proper holding action. The British Army was now holding a defensive line on the Valenciennes to Maubeuge

Road. All the time the Germans were advancing. This retreat lasted two weeks and covered 250 miles. The battle had been won by the Germans although at a tremendous price [5,000 casualties]. The advance nearly took them to Paris.

The remainder of the German 1st Army had by this time arrived. Although the Germans advanced they lost considerably more men – it was considered a great strategic withdrawal... saving the French line from total collapse. The 4th Royal Fusiliers defended the northern approaches to Mons. The remainder of D and B Companies of the **Kensingtons** retreated to St Symphorien cemetery on the outskirts of Mons. Early that afternoon the British could see they were unable to withstand the pressure. The French army was retreating south together with the Belgian army. The British had their flank exposed and in danger of being cut off, falling back to Etreux on the 27th August. It was claimed the ‘Angels of Mons’ had aided the British army. This was the first major action of the British Expeditionary Force – the retreat from Belgium to the Marne. The BEF was then moved to Flanders to be in easy reach of their supply base at the channel ports... arriving the second week of October.

Battle of the Marne, 5-14 September, 1914.

The fighting in Belgium and France was along traditional lines, which was of armies surging backwards and forwards... in what is known as engaging if forward and retiring movements. At the beginning of September the Allied retreat slowed down as the Germans lost impetuosity becoming further from their supply base. This resulted in the **Battle of the Marne** which halted the German spearhead lasting until the middle of the month. After the battle it was decided to move the BEF north to Flanders convenient to the channel ports. Travelling by train III Corps

reached Abbeville on the 8th October, II Corps a day later and I Corps following on. On the 11th October IV Corps found itself close to Bruges and Ghent. Three days later the last gap in the Allied line was secured. The BEF held the line from Le Bassee to the river Douve... The French holding the southern flank.

1st Battle of Ypres, 15th Oct – 22nd Nov, 1914.

Early on 3rd November 1914, the **Kensington Battalion** marching behind their band to Watford and entrained for Southampton. Embarkation was complete by the following morning. The Battalion sailed for Le Havre which came in sight by midday... There they were marched off to Rest Camp 1. The next day mounting railway trucks they steamed off for St Omer grasping their long Lee-Enfield rifles reaching their destination on the 6th. A period of training followed at Blendecques.

The major battle that first year for the British was the 1st Battle of Ypres fought October 19th. by the BEF under the command of Field Marshal Sir John French. That month the Allies had reached Nieuport on the North Sea coast. The Germans captured Antwerp and forced its defender back. The 8th Division had been redeployed north to join two divisions of reinforcements recently landed in Belgium. They advanced east from St Omer halting the German forces at the Passchendale Ridge. The Division was lined up from La Bassee to Messines, there was little activity but you could hear the battle raging to the north. The French Army Command and General Foch believed a coordinated attack would result in the recapture of the industrial city of Lille, then Belgium finally capturing Brussels. The German general Falkenhayn had other opinions. He ordered the capture of Dunkirk, Calais, and Boulogne. He struck the Belgian defences on the Yser River.

By far it was the worst battle fought – there was an almighty clash of troops. Only a few miles down the road was Ypres. There was constant hand to hand fighting as the battle swayed from one side to the other. The problem for the British was that the position was vulnerable to superior German artillery. The British made a stand which formed a salient around Ypres, the Battle becoming ‘The Massacre of the Innocents at Ypres. The Innocents being eight German units of young volunteers many of them students.

Battle of the Aisne, late November, 1914.

Almost immediately there came the four day **Battle of the Aisne**. The method of waging war changed to one of stagnation as each side settled down and dug Battle Lines. Henceforth the artillery and its insatiable appetite for ammunition and the strung barbed wire developed into the Western Front. The line from Ypres to Nieuport was held by the Belgians; Bethune, Lens, Arras, Bapaume, Verdun, and St Quentin were to become synonymous with great suffering and death.

At the start of November 1914, the **Kensingtons** were attached to the **8th Division as part of the 25th Infantry Brigade**. The Brigade included the 2nd Lincolnshire’s, 2nd Royal Berkshires, 1st Royal Irish Rifles and the 2nd Rifle Brigade. The 8th Division was allocated a four mile stretch alongside the La Bassee Road and La Rue Tilleloy, just in front of the village of Laventie. This was referred to as the La Bassee Front and lay opposite Aubers Ridge north-east of Bethune, in Atois.

Battle of Nonne Bosschen, 11th November, 1915.

The last major attack on the British lines occurred on the 11th November. This battle became famous because it was made by the Prussian Guards and they broke through the British lines. A counter-attack by the 1st Guards Division was forced to take shelter in the woods before driven out by a counter-attack. The fighting secured the close bonding between the British and the French. The two armies fought side by side all around Ypres in a fashion not used in earlier battles. The more the Germans extended their lines the more the Allied troops did too as the front stretched northwards up past Bapaume, Arras and Bethune... onwards to Ypres. During the 14th November 1914 the **Kensingtons** marched to Estaires. This small mill town on the banks of the Lys was to become very familiar to the Battalion. The low-lying land around the river and bridge; the lined cobbled roads shaded by tall poplars on either side echoed to the sound of marching feet.

The 8th Division was part of General Sir Henry Rawlinson's IV Corps... he inspected the Kensingtons that Sunday, after the Battalion had reorganized itself - into a four-company structure. He recognised the enormous efforts made and made reference to it. The 8th Division went into the line just south of the Belgian frontier, close to Armentieres

By the end of November the terrible battles died down, both armies were spent forces needing to reform. The Salient came to be attached to the Belgian names of the farms, villages and features – Mouse Trap Farm, Cheddar Villa, Polygon Wood, Sanctuary Wood, Hill 60, and many more At Neuve Chappelle the 1st Battalion lost 160 men even though they had broken the German lines. The losses at Aubers Ridge the losses were even higher reducing the battalion by thirty per cent. There were several awards granted and the gallant action by Captain Kimber rated a DSO. Over to the northeast a village on a ridge provided

cover and observation posts for the German observers. They could see all that was going on. For the next four years this ridge was to become a raging sore, the landscape a pulverised mass of pocked marked soil... this was Passchendaele. The **Battle of Aisne** ended on the 13th November 1914, the last battle of the first year of war. By December, the Germans decided to call off their offensive and to dig in – to resume the battle in the spring.

Back in England in early October parts of the 8th Division was forming up at Hursley Park near Winchester. Amongst them were the **2nd Battalion Kensingtons**. In the last days of December 1914, twenty-two Territorial battalions marched to join that British Force in France and within two further months, another twenty-six followed them. After the terrible casualties the **1st London Division** was split up to provide reinforcements for other Divisions. As a result of these battles – the loss of so many men, not just in the **Kensingtons** but also in other parts of the division. The 1st London was split up to provide reinforcements and substitutions’ for those killed. By March 1915 it ceased to exist as a unit... later that month, thankfully it was reconstituted – the gaps made good by men from the 2nd Battalion... together they were numbered the 56th London Division.

Battle of Champagne, December – March, 1915.

The First Battle of Champagne took place between Rheims and Verdun. The French pressed relentlessly against the German positions. The Germans were better lead maintaining their front against repeated gallant attempts by the French. The whole of that year was a success for the Germans achieving striking victories against the Russians, whilst joining forces with Bulgaria to complete the conquest of Serbia.

Battle of Neuve Chappelle, 10th March 1915.

That Christmas both sides were exhausted, the terrible weather the previous summer and autumn convinced the Generals on both sides that battle should be joined in the spring. The men gathered in the trenches trying to make the best of it trying to keep warm. During this period the territorial units, landing and marching to the front in September and October were initiated into trench warfare. As such they were given an easy time to acclimatize and learn the ropes. The first spring battles were as much to demonstrate to their allies that they were willing to engage the enemy. Neuve Chappelle was on high ground looking down on Lille.

The **Kensington Battalion** were attached to the 25th Brigade, 8th Division - as a regular division, engaging in their first major action at Neuve Chapelle. As with all newly formed groups. This battle was planned as a local offensive mission involving the 7th and 18th Divisions. The Indian Corps, with the IVth Corps being to the north. The goal was Aubers Ridge and the ground beyond. The **Kensingtons** were relieved on March 1st, and for the first time the four companies were united in Billets in La Francas Mill, occupying Lines of Communications, a term used to describe troops who assisted the forward battle lines with ammunition – the job of the Ammunition Column to keep the supply of shells going up to them from the dump in the rear, reserves, pioneer support, communications, constructing support trenches, unloading railway carriages, and making sure the rations got through, and a host of other tasks to relieve the forward troops. Most of this work was done at night with the Battalion horse teams. [The BEF had sixty-thousand horses to supply all arms.] The Battalion joined the now re-formed 1st **London Division [56th] in the 168th Brigade under the command of**

Brigadier General Granville George Loch, CMG, on 8th February 1916. **Brig Gen Loch** commanded the 168th **Brigade** until it was demobilised... being Mentioned in Dispatches, and awarded the DSO.

The 1st Battalion, now reformed, occupied the outskirts – outside the town walls, of St Omer – a small provincial town with cobbled roads and looking very French. The large camp had been erected adjacent to the main road, Wagons and gun limbers lined the walls. Bell tents accommodating eight men with duck board floors were lined up in the field opposite. The ground was much used making the main paths muddy and bare of grass. Ditches circled the fields under thorn hedges. Of the remaining London Rifle regiment were fifty or so men of the 1st **Division Kensingtons**. Also using the facilities were men of the Rangers, who were in the next field.

The **Kensingtons**, together with the rest of the 25th Brigade, moved out and marched from Lestrem on March 9th equipped to move to the front. A meal was prepared at Rouge Croix and water bottles filled after which the battalion took up position in the support trenches. At 7.30 on the 10th the artillery bombardment began preparing the advance half an hour later. The assault troops rose up clambering over the trench sides and surged forwards. Despite the casualties the advance continued with the supporting troops passing through keeping up the momentum. The **Kensingtons** meanwhile, a quarter of an hour later, moved forward from their support trench into the vacated breastworks to prepare for the follow-up – to attack the second objective.

The 25th Brigade not been so fortunate. They were on the left of the Divisional front supported by the 24th Brigade. They had moved off before the advancing troops had totally cleared the way. Although by 1pm the objective had been reached the

German's had recovered and beginning to strengthen their lines. That night neither side was aware what the morning would bring... so far it could be said the three-day event met with initial success. Unfortunately, again the early gains were not exploited. There was a serious lack of coordination and the supply of ammunition was lacking.

The next morning further attempt was made to drive the enemy out of the ruins of the village but the Germans were well concealed and protected by the collapsed houses making the village into a stronghold. The Germans began to put down an artillery bombardment and the attacking **Kensingtons** were cut down. The battle for Neuve Chapelle collapsed and what was gained was consolidated. By the 16th the dead were still lying around and special recovery troops had to be brought in to collect up the bodies. 5,000 were killed or wounded. The Kensingtons lost 6 officers and about 150 men.

The thought that the war would be over by the previous Christmas was quickly forgotten as all the troops started to settle down to make the best of it. The glorious weather was a thing of the past too as the rain started to fall. This turned the onetime hard ground into vast areas of mud. The men were up to their knees in freezing water waiting for the next downpour. The Germans had opened and redirected the ditches so that the water flowed down hill towards the British trenches which soon filled up.

The trenches stretched south from Armentieres to Festubert. The countryside was flat, plain and drab, with the hillier bits of Messines Ridge and the Ypres Salient to the north. To the south ranged mounds of coal tippings around Loos and Lens to the south. Although there were indications of places where battles had been fought the countryside had not been pulverised into a morass to be seen a few months later.

Second Battle of Ypres, Thursday, 22nd April, 1915.

By spring 1915, the fighting began again in earnest. The 1st Army attacked at Neuve Chapelle, a small rather insignificant village scarcely more than a cluster of scruffy cottages and barns. Three weeks later the 2nd Army, to the north, launched an attack on a huge artificial mound that had been built up over any years of soil dug whilst constructing the railway cuttings nearby. This great mound was the southern part of the Ypres Salient, and became known as Hill 60.

Battle of Gravenstafel, 22nd April 1915.

This battle is significant - it staged the first large use of chlorine gas killing 6,000 French and colonial troops in ten minutes. The gas, denser than air, kept to the ground being carried by the wind. It filled the trenches and dugouts forcing the defenders to scramble out to be mown down by machine gun fire. The German's had a victory but did not support it tactically not directing a follow up quickly enough - before the Canadians recovered - to put it a hasty defence.

Battle of St Julien, 24th April 1915.

The village of St Julien lies behind Poelcappelle on the road to St Jean. The German advance behind the gas storm... reached this point; they were set upon by pockets Canadians who halted the advance sufficiently to allow the Allied line to reform. The Germans released another cloud of gas and the Canadians broke, allowing the Germans to take the village. There followed several counterattacks by units of the Northumberland Division

who lost three-quarters of their men, to no avail. The 2nd Royal Dublin Fusiliers continued the fight...

Battle of Frezenberg 8th May 1915.

A German bombardment was directed at the ridge. This succeeded in shattering the 83rd Brigade. Resuming their positions they halted the German advance by a number of desperate struggles. Eventually they gave way pushing the defenders back. The neighbouring Brigade gave sterling support stopping the German advance. The 84th were broken allowing a two mile gap to open up in the line. By a number of night attacks by the 10th Brigade the line just held but the Germans were across the Menim road... In total the Germans had advanced over a mile. Now the BEF had a new commander Lt General Herbert Plumer.

Battle of Aubers Wood and Festubert, 9th May 1915.

There developed behind the lines a heated quarrel over the shortage of ammunition. At the Battle of Aubers Wood in the second week of May there occurred a great calamity for the Army ran out of ammunition for the guns. The attack of the 15th May on the village of Festubert was fated. Both battles were poorly conceived and executed and proved very costly in lives. British and Empire troops were forced back nearly to the gates of the city.

On the 28th May the Battalion went into Divisional reserve. The billets at Laventie were a welcomed sight as the Battalion marched up occupying the trenches at Picantin in fine weather which made a nice change. It was late spring the ground was hard and dry and the sun shone. The Battalion was given the task of

taking the crater made by the Royal Engineers under the German line. The Battalion was taken out of the line to train for the event. The **Kensingtons** moved up to the start line on the evening of the 8th June. At 5.40 the next morning the mines were exploded and C and D Companies advanced. In spite of heavy losses they took over the crater. A and B Companies followed along behind in support. Two hours after the start they had secured third objectives – the crater and trench leading back to the old front line. The line was extended to Delangre Farm. The supply of bombs had now been reduced there was no sign of any back-up troops. The Brigade sent up the London Scottish in support. By the middle of the morning only twenty-four men were standing their ground. Only one officer and two bombers arrived, an hour later the Germans had got to within ten yards and were beginning to bomb the crater. Using the ammunition from a disabled machine gun. The position was now desperate the machine gun ammunition was running out. At 2.45 General Pinney passed word to retire back to the Farm. By that time No Man's Land was swept by German fire. The casualties piled up and were used to crawl round. Once the Farm was reached the German gunners had range onto it and the survivors had to retreat from that. By this time the Germans had surrounded the **Kensingtons** who had to fight their way out. Enormous bravery was shown but the day had been lost. The attempt to take Aubers Ridge failed. By nightfall fifty survivors reached Cellar Farm where they stayed until ordered to Croix Blanche. A roll call found that 13 officers and 423 other ranks were lost, the **Kensington Battalion** was non-existent there being no reinforcements. The Battalion was taken out of the line and put to Lines of Communication duties. The bodies of the men killed on the 9th were never recovered. The period of Lines of Communication lasted from the end of the battle to the beginning of February 1916.

The Battle of Artois

The next attack on the British front was made by the 1st Army at Artois. The French generals were very keen on a massive attack by the British at the same time they in the south would attack at Champagne. The French over-ruled the British generals. Kitchener declared that the British Army should do all that it could to help the French even though it would result in heavy losses. This would also help the Russians who were in need of urgent assistance to draw German reserves away from their front.

Any war has the advantage with the aggressor... He is better armed, prepared, able to dictate circumstances, and has an initial weapons advantage. So it was with the Germans in early 1915..., later that year, they used poison gas and flame throwers. German industrial output was fully geared to achieve maximum output for war production - particularly for munitions, something the British were to emulate only after the government attacked by the newspapers as, 'letting the Army down'. [The lack of artillery shells was leaked to the newspapers by members of the military staff to achieve publicity for their gunner's plight]

The second attack at Aubers Ridge demonstrated the British lack of guns and shells. Eventually this dramatic shortage was made known to those back home that caused a political storm. In May 1915, a new Ministry of Munitions was established. The British Forces increased from 35 0,000 to 800,000 by the end of the year. This increased force, Kitchener's New Army, was engaged in training throughout the land. Now it was understood that the war was not going to be over quickly. The strictly amateurish beginning was now a professional team. The wartime facilities were upgraded to back up that new spirit of

efficiency and professionalism. The new Short Lee Enfield Rifle was the best rifle that could be produced for any army. By this time recruitment had dropped alarmingly. The authorities were forced to accept that conscription was the only answer. By May the first Divisions were ready to be shipped abroad - to support the depleted BEF. The 9th, 14th and 15th Divisions were marched to the Somme front, now part of the British line.

2nd. Battle of Artois, June 1915.

The French 10th Army suffered over 4,000 casualties. It was a failure but only goaded the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre to re-engage with vigour late that July. Again there was little to show for the suffering French army. By the end of 1915 they had endured nearly one and a half million casualties and the British, just under a third. In fact the French would never again reach the same willingness to fight. It became clear that France could not win and if the German army concentrated all its efforts after beating the Russians they would conquer the country. Joffre needed help and for that he turned to the British. Again it became clear that Britain had a similar problem to the French. They lacked comparable weapons and a back-up of sufficient ammunition, especially artillery shells. Kitchener recognised that the fight would have to be extended into the following year. Until both countries could work out a better solution they would have to engage in active defence in France... his eight point plan was accepted by the government.

In September a series of offensives were launched to try and punch a hole in the German lines. In the north, around Loos and Lens the British were ordered to attack whilst the French concentrated in the south, in the region of Artois. The now reorganised and revitalized BEF were to go into action with six-

divisions amounting to 72,000 men, supported by a five-day bombardment with guns adequately supplied by munitions.

Battle of Loos, 21st September, 1915.

The build-up for the battle began in late August when pioneer battalions and out of line troops rebuilt, strengthened, and drained the forward, communication and reserve trenches. Other troops ferried forward supplies and ammunition. Detailed preparations took all of August. The 1st Army had the task of being the attacking force. The ground being fought over was sprinkled with shacks, tiny hamlets, and villages... being a district of coal mines, slag heaps, pitheads... all closely linked by tracks and roads. The horizon was generally flat with gentle undulations and dips leading up to the Grenay-Hulluch ridge and Hill 70, to the east of Loos. The ridge and hill was of immense tactical value giving an excellent all round view of the area together with the various mine-shaft winding gear towers at Fosse 8 and Tower Bridge. Nothing could be hidden from the German observers...

On the 21st of September the relative calm was shattered by an artillery bombardment of the German front line. Four days later the **Battle of Loos** was launched over flat, dull, open countryside – The village lay in a depression with long gentle slopes. To the east there is a low hill which was named Hill 70. Loos lies between La Bassee and the mining area around Lens. The battle raged as ten columns in extended lines, all in perfect alignment, moved forward. The German machine gunners traversed their guns backwards and forwards mowing down the lines of men – each line of a thousand men. As the wounded men struggled to rise the Germans held their fire allowing the medical

teams to take the wounded back. As soon as they had done so they started to machine gun the next advancing troops.

With the end of the battle the front quietened down. As the year drew to a close many realised that although millions of men had died the end was still not in sight. The **Kensingtons** needed new replacements to make up their numbers.

After receiving another batch of reinforcements from England the Division was now back up to strength. A training schedule was devised to make the Division ready for front line fighting. The **168th Brigade** of the **56th London Division** included: **4th London [Fusiliers]**, **12th London [Rangers]**, **13th London [Kensingtons]** and **14th London [Scottish]**. The **Artillery**, were Londoners and the Pioneers, the **5th Cheshires**.

The reformed brigade marched off to Loos station there to entrain for Pont Remy. Arriving in pouring rain the brigade again marched off to Citerne. This village is set in undulating countryside with few cottages or hamlets. The weather was squally with occasional heavy falls of snow. Again the brigade was housed in bell tents in a muddy field engaged in strenuous training exercises using the latest tactics and the latest weapons. The automatic Lewis gun with its pan of bullets was going to be an improvement, so too the new grenades. Every day groups were detailed off to become expert in the use of these weapons including their use wearing a new style gas mask. Route and forced marches in full fighting kit made at least once a week. Both these distances over twenty-five miles soon led to men dropping out to be picked up by wagon. At last the division set off away from Citerne to Longpre – a large farm complex.

By the time the battalion got there many men were complaining about blisters. They had short shrift from the sergeant who told them that it was an offence to have blisters and any more complaints than the malingerers would receive

punishment for not taking due care. This soon settles everyone down. Guards were detailed off and the rest collapsed utterly exhausted. There were no blankets or food until the following day. Fortunately the roads were congested by marching Frenchmen and blocked with wheeled artillery all racing to get to Verdun. Their movement delayed us continuing so we had a forced couple of days of rest interspersed with whatever practices the sergeants could devise to keep us occupied.

The rolling low hills and shallow valleys gave Picardy an appearance of Salisbury Plain. It also gave us names to conjure with: High Wood, Thiepval, Trones Wood, Martinpuich, Fricourt, Delville Wood, Ginchy and Combles to mention just a few. If compared to Ypres it had space, unobstructed views and open countryside suitable for unrestricted action. This was the scene on top of chalk lying under much of the region. Ideal stuff to construct deep shelters and communicating trenches. The Germans were experts at making the most of their front line putting all their ingenuity into making substantial living accommodation to back up the forward troops. In fact both sides dug like mad to make extensive trench systems. Once again the object in battle was to take the strain off the French who were suffering many casualties at Verdun.

When at last the road was clear the battalion reformed and marched off the Doullens. The sixteen or so of miles were completed in the morning that allowed us to take two days rest exploring the town doing some washing and having a canvas bath. Off again we marched on to Magnicourt having there an exhibition of a German flamethrower, being told its uses and problems.

The Germans had launched a massive attack on the French Line at Verdun on 21st February, 1916. Although the battle was

still raging and the French had lost almost half a million men it was continuing. To alleviate the strain on the French it was decided that the British should make a strong attack on the Somme. Although the battle has been given the name of the Somme in fact it was the **Battle of Ancre**. The battlefield lay between **Gommecourt** in the north and **Maricourt** in the south. On the north of Ancre lies the village of Beaumont Hamel and Serre.

The Somme is the name for a French administrative department taken from the name of the river, which runs through the region. The part protected by the British Army was the northeast corner overlapping into the next department call the Pas de Calais

This region of France formed part of the old province of Picardy; an old Roman road linked its cathedral city Amiens and two smaller towns of Albert, northeast of Amiens, and further still Bapaume. The region was crossed by two rivers the Somme and the smaller Ancre. The Germans were defending their gains. The Allies intent upon pushing them back. The former, constructed deep secure trenches and dugouts whilst developing small villages into miniature forts. The latter, believed such tactics opposed to aggressive behaviour laid scant regard on such wasted effort - their policy was, mobility and attack. What was typical, the Germans held the high ground... not only could they observe what was going on but knew that any attack had to be made uphill!

Our main concern is the northern end of the front line, in a beautiful village called Hebuterne. There a few cottages lined the road with tall stately trees behind which lay orchards and gardens. As in all villages a fine old church with a tower and several farmhouses. The main employer in the village was the owner of the brick built mill, now used as the battalion headquarters with

all the usual staff – cooks, runners, signallers etc. The village lay between the British 3rd and 4th Armies, opposite the salient village of **Gommecourt**, its chateau and Park, wood, famous tree - the Kaiser Oak, and cross-roads. In parts of the front line, the German trenches were only fifty feet away.

Hebuterne was now a ghost of its former past – it was in ruins. Even though the village and church had suffered terribly the tower still stood proudly silhouetted against the sky. As with all points of interest the Germans had the church entrance well within their range, and even though the entrance had been sandbagged it was a dangerous place to be lingering. The attack on the **Salient of Gommecourt** was to be a diversionary attack made by two encircling flank-divisions; both made up of Territorial's, the 46th North Midland, to the north and the **56th London Division [Territorial Force]** to the south. The first stage of the encirclement was to seize the German trenches to their front... the second stage was for each division to make a turn inwards around the back of Gommecourt and cut the resident German garrison off. In itself this is a simple exercise not complicated by many divergent goals.

The **56th London Division** was probably the most highly trained territorial division in the British Army. Its four component parts had seen a lot of action already losing few men... maintaining a high proportion of their original pre-war volunteers. The men were in the main well educated, working as managers and office workers in London's business sector. Each of the Battalions prided themselves on their core construction representing a particular part of London.

Within the London Division were three Brigades, each comprising of four Battalions. Company Sergeant Albert Kearey was in the **1/13th London Regiment [Kensington's]**, the other three Regiments were: **1/4th London Regiment [Royal**

Fusiliers] 1/12th London Regiment [Rangers], 1/14th London Regiment [London Scottish]... These four Regiments made up the **168th Brigade** commanded by Brigadier General G C Loch, with Captain Neame, VC, as Brigade Major and Major L C Wheatley as Staff Captain. They in turn were a fourth part of the **56th [London] Division**. The 1/5 Cheshire's acted as the Divisions Pioneers.

In overall command was General Haig. The Third Army led by General Allenby, its VII Corps by Lieutenant General Snow, and the **56th London Division [167th and 168th Battalions]** by **Major General Hull**.

After the battle of Loos, the **Kensingtons** settled down for the winter, for it was quite impossible to continue the 'battle of the trenches' in the conditions found in France. The British Commander-in-Chief, Sir John French, was replaced by General Sir Douglas Haig. During the Christmas period the troops were allowed to move about the front behind their barbed wire entanglement. The Germans did exactly the same. Within seven weeks the Germans were to launch their massive attack on the French at Verdun. Once again the attackers gained ground quickly pushing the French almost out of the city. French reserves were ordered up to stem the tide. Marshal Petain appealed to the British to attack to relieve the pressure on them. It was decided to launch a joint attack and the British Commander Haig chose the Somme in late June as a likely area and time to achieve success; it was to be known as 'The Big Push'.

The **56th London Division** was in training. The first months of 1916, allowed the new replacements to become used to their comrades and form a bond with them. In dribs and dabs each Company filled the Hebuterne sector on the left of the

Somme front - at Gommecourt. In all, there were to be 120,000 infantry engaged in the Somme offensive.

Battle for Gommecourt

This attack was to be a diversionary attack – to take away – enemy opposition, to the main Breakthrough Plan – an advance from Albert towards Bapaume... up the main road... to be made by The Reserve Army, of Sir Herbert Gough. [From the centre of the main British attack Gommecourt is some ten miles north].

General Snow stressed that, ‘no movement should be made towards Gommecourt until the German defences had been destroyed by the artillery, for there were no reserves for this part of the battle...’

Before the battle, **Major General Hull** was ordered to construct a completely new trench halfway across ‘No Man’s Land’, which was 800 yards wide. At night three thousand men were sent over to dig an assault trench only three hundred yards away from the German front line... The Germans observed all this activity but did nothing about it - keeping down behind the trench wall - sheltering from a huge barrage meant to achieve a distraction from what was going on. This new advanced trench was dug without any loss of life which was a fine achievement. The following night the trench was deepened and firing steps put in. This action, to prepare ‘No-Man’s-Land’ for an attack - to shorten the distance between the start-line of the battle and the first enemy trench, saved many lives. This very simple expediency, as were others like linking shell holes or pushing out a sap, involving the movement of the attacking troops closer to the enemy front line – to keep advancing troops below ground level for maximum period, not practiced sufficiently.

Battle of the Somme, Saturday 1st July, at 7.30am.

That morning the weather was fine; the **Battle of the Somme commenced**. This was going to be biggest battle so far - conceived to take the strain off the French who were beginning to buckle at Verdun. The artillery had enveloped the German trenches with continuous fire. This provoked return fire.

The attack went in at 4.00am led by the **1st London Scottish** who got into the German front line... the **Kensingtons** followed up, after being very patient withstanding the provoked German fire. The British barrage stopped, whistles blew, and section leaders shouted as long lines of men set off making sure they were in line... they walked through the gaps in their own barbed wire made the night before. As the remaining battalions advanced from the newly dug trench they joined the London Scottish by taking over nearly all the German trenches, which was their objective.

At **Gommecourt, the Kensingtons** had achieved success, making use of the new trench dug before the battle, began a smoke screen to confuse the Germans... the whole front-line system had been taken. On the left, the hard-pressed North Midlanders had not reached the German front line. If they did not achieve their goal, the **Kensingtons** would be in trouble - be left stranded. Five hours later all the German trenches on the right flank of Gommecourt were in British hands. Part of the 169th Brigade, the Queens Westminster Rifles also followed up moving through the London Division to start the linking up movement with the North Midland Division moving down from the north. As this was happening some of the Cheshire Pioneers were constructing strong-points in the German trenches and turning the firing positions to face the German's new front line. As the Westminster's moved up between the **Kensingtons** and

the Queens they were to start a bombing attack on the rear of the Gommecourt Garrison. Unfortunately the Westminster's had received many casualties and there was no one to direct the attack. Leaving his pioneers second lieutenant George Arther lead the attack, though slightly wounded. Forcing their way forward the bombers got to within 400 yards of the German trench almost within reach of where they were to join up with the North Midland Division.

The North Midlanders had fared badly had been forced back towards their own trenches. In the afternoon General Snow ordered the division to continue with the attack that would link up with the London division and the Westminster's who were bombing their way towards them. The order to continue was unrealistic. Six battalions had started off that morning all had been driven back. They were ordered forward again but there were only two companies left. No offices had survived. The attack was called off.

The Germans, a Saxon Regiment, were on the alert they had been warned by the bombardment and their lookouts had raised the alarm. The machine gun started to hammer out their awful chorus. The long lines were easy targets. The Germans had seen the gaps in the wire and had laid down fixed lines of fire to cover them. Men bunched up to get through but the terrible machine gun fire flattened them.

Things on the left were going badly. The night's rain had turned their trench into a morass some of the men were knee deep in mud all night long. It was difficult to get the men out in time. As they appeared in drips and drabs on the top, they were machine gunned down on top of others trying to get out. There were long rows of dead and dying men. In spite of the terrible fire, the men went on forward trying to keep in line at a steady pace. The German wire was supposed to be cut by the artillery

fire but was untouched. Trying to get over the wire, the strands caught in their equipment or wrapped it round their legs.

At last, the facts began to be assembled. It was clear that the British High Command had failed even though in places it had achieved its objectives. On the first day the British Army suffered the biggest losses for any single day in the whole war. Figures can never tell the whole story but in this case the casualties were fifty-seven thousand, of which twenty thousand were killed or died from wounds. A whole generation of men were crippled... That kind of slaughter continued until the battle ended in the awful mud of winter. In all it cost over a million casualties, with three hundred thousand British, French and German dead.

The next morning the **Kensingtons** found they had reached part of their objective. The night had been spent in the German trenches taking it in turn to stand guard, which was an eerie sensation with all the cries for help coming from the wounded and the stretcher parties from both sides collecting up the bodies. It was in the original plan to seize the German trench system on the right hand edge of the salient then link up with the North Midlanders who were coming from the opposite side. It was hoped to cut off the garrison of German defenders in the village.

A company of the Kensingtons and a machine gun section of the London Scottish had crossed over No Man's Land and reinforced the previous day's troops. They were the last to do so. During the rest of the morning the Germans put in three attacks to evict the remains of the Division. Gradually the Londoners became weaker.

The **Kensingtons** were acknowledge to be part of a London force that was second to none – having the greatest period of training prior to setting off to France, and had been in

the fighting force since the war had begun. The London force were mostly well educated pre-war volunteers from the commercial heart of London and many would have been made into officers in any other division. The advance the previous morning got off to a good start. In the first hour and a half the **168th Brigade**, attacking from the newly dug trench in the middle of No Man's Land, had reached every one of the German trenches in their objective. A fifth of the attacking Londoners were either dead or wounded. By reaching the final trench, they secured for themselves a safe position. The rolling barrage had moved forward as had been planned and the Kensington's and the other three battalions had moved up with it. **The London Rifle Brigade** was on the left of the right-hand division, Gommecourt Park with its wooded acres before the village was to their left. The German second Guards Reserve Division pushed back almost out of the salient but still holding Fricourt in the front line. What was left of the brigade entered the German trench, which was the first objective ready to repel any German foolish enough to try to take it back including part of the London Scottish machine gun section.

After a period of four hours the **London Division** was still in position, although the Westminster's had returned to the First Objective line - along with the rest of the division - this still held to the original plan. This line was to the rear of the German Trench, which was in British hands. As explained, there were no reserves so to make a concerted effort to link up with the North Midlands more men would have to be found. The worst decision was to do nothing for the Germans were beginning to take stock and recover.

At last, information was beginning to get through to Head Quarters. The corps commanders controlling the diversionary attack at **Gommecourt** were determined to carry on with the

encircling movement. Lieut-General Snow ordered the North Midlanders to repeat their attack that afternoon - to link up with the **London Division**..., which by then was being, counter-attacked... gradually being forced back to the captured German trench, behind them. Snow must have known that the diversionary objective had been achieved. Someone was turning this into a separate battle!

Although the **London Division** was being hard pressed it retained coherence, being in the German trench gave the men cover and time to sort themselves out. The Germans, on the other hand, over their initial shock, were getting stronger by the minute. It did not take them long to understand the significance of the British move, not that they understood the battle of **Gommecourt** was a diversionary one, but that these two divisions were trying to encircle them and join up... They intended to prevent that happening. The German guns were ranging in, joining together to bombard the position. Gradually the British troops began to run out of ammunition. Most of the senior officers who had set out in the morning were now either dead or injured. The afternoon wore on and the fighting continued. By 4 pm there were only four officers and seventy men remaining gathered together holding the German front line trench... it was now touch and go whether there was going to be a total rout. Of the seven battalions to start out seventeen hundred men were dead, two hundred were prisoners and over two thousand wounded. Most of these were lying about on the battlefield. The Germans systematically raked these with machine gun fire to kill them off annoyed that now and again one of the wounded would start firing.

By evening, when the light was poor, stragglers started to drag themselves in. They were tired, hungry and distressed having got so far and not in the end succeeding. The Germans were

moving about in No Man's Land not only finding their own wounded but directing their first-aiders and stretcher-bearers to find the English wounded too. This concern for the wounded was reciprocated. There were 4,749 casualties in the London Division alone out of nearly 60,000. It was a seven to one battle, in favour of the Germans. The division remained on the Somme till October.

That August 1916 the **Kensingtons** were relieved by a Yorkshire brigade. They had been on the Somme further south, they were to take their place. Why there was this desire to alter the battalion's position was never made clear. The destination was Abbeville for a rest period, before taking their place at the front... the Battalion had been withdrawn to re-equip and to train the new intake coming from the call for volunteers. The Commanding Officer was relieved to take over a battalion of Cheshires. In his place a Captain from another battalion, was made up to Major to take command. On the 3rd September, at 4 am the **Kensingtons** marched from Millencourt to the railway station at St. Riquier there to board a train to take them to Corbie. By mid-morning the battalion arrived, offloaded, and marched to Daours where, they were told, billets had been reserved for them. As they marched along orders were received that they were going to the wrong place – that they should be heading for Sailly-le-Sec. Halting the battalion, each company was 'about turned' and the whole moved off in reverse order following the road back through Corbie to reach their correct destination at about three in the afternoon... shortly afterwards their kit was delivered from Millencourt by the battalion transport. Even though the battalion had had a number of weeks at Millencourt to train and get to know the new replacements there was still a lot more to impart. These new intakes were not long out of training camps in England.

Now the Kensingtons were up to strength for men, but for officers, there was a shortage [there were only 23 in the battalion]. Again my father was asked to take a commission – to take over command of his company, but again he refused wishing to retain his status and respect by his men. It is difficult from this distance to understand fully his thinking. He believed that his men were being led badly - by inexperienced officers. This should have been his opportunity to do something about it. As it was it was he who was giving the orders to his company for the sub-lieutenants relied upon him. Perhaps it was this that controlled his thinking?

At Sailly-le-Sec the battalion were housed in tents. On the 6th orders were received [*Operation Order No. 60.*] to obey all future commands from the 15th Brigade, the Kensingtons had been lent to the 15th Brigade and ordered into line based on Chimpanzee Trench - between Maricourt and Trones Wood. Late that afternoon, the battalion were gathering up supplies of ammunition, rockets, grenades etc., stockpiled in preparation in Chimpanzee Trench by the 300 existing troops lead by Major Deakin. Clutching their extra loads the battalion made its way into the advanced frontline positions, relieving the 7th Irish Fusiliers who were to form a reserve south of Angle Wood. Contained in the orders were additional instructions to try and extend the position in an easterly direction, digging in as close to the German trench as possible, whilst pushing out patrols into Combles to back-up the French who were also adopting a more aggressive stance. The H.Q. command post was positioned in Chimpanzee Trench where the brigadier was installed. The Advanced H.Q. held the battalion signallers, and artillery spotters. It was the first battle the battalion was to experience using tanks to accompany the advance...

It was clear that H.Q. had no real idea what the Kensingtons were to face – whether their trench was held by the Germans, in what numbers or what the state of play was in Combles? The orders had not been written without any understanding of the true position. The condition of the trenches was bad... it had been raining and the ground was under water. The battalion had to carry their loads in single file pushing their way past the troops who were already there. The guides provided to settle the men into line had only been there the day before and were unused to the exact location of the position.

The day before the 7th Irish Fusiliers had attacked the Germans on the understanding that the position was only lightly held. Unfortunately the ground to the front was strongly guarded by barbed wire entanglements that had been hidden by the abundant growth of standing corn. The Germans had covered the area well with fixed lines covered by machine guns. The Fusiliers had lost 350 men. The survivors had hidden in shell holes. It was these holes that the Kensingtons joined together to make a forward position ready for the advance the following morning.

Now the tanks rolled forward for the first time. How the troop rejoiced in their inclusion thinking that they would grind away the confounded barbed-wire. Spending the night at the Citadel Camp after the exhausting march from Bray. The same afternoon the King rode by with a large number of staff officers. The **Kensingtons** were making for Fricourt after staying the night at Citadel Camp. Once there proceeded to off-load their packs and take up battle equipment. They were to relieve the 7th Royal Irish Fusiliers in trenches close to Falfemont Farm and Leuze Wood and the Warwickshire Regiment. Men from the 7th guided them in single file, officers leading, past a wood on to a rough track past wounded men going the other way. It was

almost pitch dark as they made our way along keeping our free hand on the shoulder of the man in front. Occasionally there would be a blinding flash and thunderous crack as our artillery fired over our heads. Stretcher cases were trying to make their way past slipping and sliding with their charges groaning with pain. The men travelled for about seven miles taking fifteen hours to complete. Eventually slid down a narrow track with steep sides into Angle Wood Valley. On the right was an embankment the top showing the stumps of Wedge Wood?

The **Kensingtons** were on the extreme right of the British Army next to a French battalion. The two valleys running off the hill held an abandoned French machine-gun post with piles of empty cartridge cases. All this time the battalion was filing into position with the remnants of the Royal Irish Fusiliers going back - taken out of the line...? The RIF had got as far as the corn fields that had concealed the German trench and barbed wire, in front of Combles... After suffering enormous casualties - losing half their strength, they now needed rest and their numbers making up.

On the left of the ridge there was a trench full of dead German soldiers. They were Prussian Guards without their outer uniforms just wearing their white vests. The bodies were stacked up on top do each other making it difficult to make a way through them. At last we reached the shell holes that had been linked together taking over from the remaining Irish Fusiliers. Our immediate job was to try and reform the trench system.

Battle of Guillemot, 3-6 September, 1916.

The Officer Commanding the **Kensingtons** was ordered to extend his line from the south corner of Leuze Wood and dig-in as close to the German trench as possible. During the night,

the **Kensingtons** has moved out to attack the German trench. Unknown to them the Germans had reinforced that part of their line – which had been previously lightly held. A bombardment was laid down by the Germans on the British troops, as they surged forward. They fell back, to reform, and try again.

The battalion had been fully up to strength at the start of the battle, they, with the help of a flanking French battalion, were to advance upon Combles as the Germans, it was believed, had left it unoccupied – the General Staff thought the Germans would be in retreat after such a bombardment... this was not the case!

The **Kensington** Commanding Officer split his battalion in two. Half were to take over the shell holes to their front and link them together – to form a trench. The other half battalion were to take over the old German trench and reverse the firesteps – to support the new trench being constructed. When all was quiet patrols were sent out to find out how strong the German position was and to take prisoners if possible. One patrol was to seek out the French battalion to find out what they had in mind – to link up the advance the next day.

The patrols reported back that the German trench was strongly held with barbed wire entanglements firmly in place with no gaps. The French CO sent a detailed plan showing where their positions were and the extent of the numbers holding them. It was clear from the sketch that the French position was not so advanced as previously thought. These plans and descriptions were sent back to the Brigade HQ.

The **Kensingtons** CO held back from making a daylight attack the next day. That afternoon the French flanking battalion attacked to be repulsed ending up back where they had started in the first place. As darkness fell that evening the **Kensingtons** moved out. The Germans became aware of movement to their

front called down a heavy bombardment on the advancing troops. The **Kensingtons** retired to reform and strike out again. But by now the Germans were fully alerted and kept up a steady machine gun fire. Again the **Kensingtons** were repulsed.

In the morning the regiment advanced again towards the trenches in front of Combles, they stumbled, upon uncut barbed wire, which had been hidden by the long grass. Very heavy fire from both machine gun and rifle was directed on them. A third of the regiment fell killed or wounded the rest fell back taking cover where they could. They started to try digging a trench to connect the shell-holes together.

The **Kensingtons** tried to take Combles again that night but by then the Germans had reoccupied their trenches and alerted to this possibility. The Kensington's were again strongly opposed only this time they had the added trial of a German barrage. These shells straddled both the newly dug trench and their original positions...the **Kensingtons** were caught in the middle, where they huddled in shell holes all night.

After being berated by high command, the Commanding Officer decided to try again the next morning... The following day, on the Sunday, a third try was prepared. The morning dawned clear and sunny... again the troops were ordered forward. There was only about half the regiment left and most of the officers had been either killed or wounded. It was a gallant effort but again it failed...!

The Commanding Officer was ordered to report to the Battalion Head Quarters where he was asked why they had failed to occupy the trench and conduct patrols to strengthen their position. He reported that he had not been ordered to do that in the first place and that his original orders had come from another brigade; he went on to report, that his orders came via another brigade and that he did not know who was in charge of the

operation. High Command ordered him to recommence the attack...

After another tremendous bombardment, the artillery fire lifted to range onto the German second line trenches. The day's rations eaten before the shelling had stopped washed down with water. The feeling was that they might as well die with a full stomach rather than have to carry extra weight. It also stopped the men from thinking about the tremendous racket made by the shelling. Many were feeling quite petrified although there was nothing one could do to relieve the tension. Cigarettes were passed round and lit. It was clear that if one talked continuously it made waiting that much easier. The conversation was about nothing in particular just idle chatter. Overhead the Germans had raised balloons to observe the fall of their shot. The Royal Flying Corps were up taking pot shots of the balloons to try to bring them down. Some companies had moved forward into No Mans Land.

My father and his company climbed over the parapet and went towards the German lines. By moving rapidly, they reached the German trenches... there was not anyone about? It was not realised by the Allies how complicated and well constructed the German positions were... the Germans were below ground in deep dugouts Shortly afterwards the German machine guns went into action. They had been hiding in their deep bunkers perfectly safe. As soon as the British shelling had stopped to allow their troops to move forwards up they popped pulling their guns up on ropes. The trenches had been prepared to take the machine guns to give them fixed lines that covered their front. They continuously fired their guns putting down a carpet of fire mowing everyone down. My father found he was the only one standing either everyone else was dead or wounded. He immediately jumped into a shell hole where he found a few

others who had survived. There they stayed whilst the machine guns continued to blast away. Eventually the fire lifted and my father found they were up against the German trench parapet. Organising an advance he lead his few men into the German trenches again only this time they knew they had to eliminate the Germans in their deep bunkers which they did with grenades.

This battle continued long after it was realised it was a hopeless cause. Urged to maintain pressure on the Germans to relieve the French at Verdun these battles continued well into November. The ground resembled the imagine landscape of the moon. It was a shocking wilderness of mud, shell holes, flooded trenches and parts of bodies lying amongst discarded equipment. Four and a half months of turmoil had resulted in an advance of five miles. Both sides had lost nearly half a million men each. The **Kensingtons** were drawn back from the front to rest, shortly afterwards.

CHAPTER IV

Your country needs you!

CONSCRIPTION:- Another Draft – Lack of Training – On the Somme – Guillemot - Millencourt – Arras – Scarp – 1st Passchendale – Pickem Ridge – Langemarck – Menim Road – Polygon Wood – Broodsinde – Poelcappelle – Cambrai – Doullens – Bapaume – Chateau Thierry - Distinguished Conduct Medal – Mentioned in Dispatches – The Treaty of Versailles.

In 1917 Alfred Kearey was posted as missing believed killed as was his youngest brother Sidney, who was only seventeen... Fred died the following year. Walter had already been killed in Gallipoli just after the

landing. Martha despaired and vowed never to come out of morning wearing each of her son's medals in turn each Sunday. She had taken to reading her bible every day to be closer to her boys.

In Britain there was a call for volunteers. It could be seen that the war was not going to end soon – that there were going to be more large battles and many more deaths before the Germans defeated. Quickly men rushed to join the colours. In the first eighteen months, two and a half million men were volunteers. It could be seen that the pick of these men were the finest the nation could produce

Battle of Arras, 9th April – 20th May, 1917.

All through that winter of 1916 after the battles on the Somme, the weather had been awful with wind driven sleet and snow... but the Allies kept up the pressure. The local populace could not remember a colder winter, there were weeks of unbroken frost. Uniforms froze solid and could not be taken off before being partly unfrozen. Plans were afoot to restart the attacks on the front as soon as the weather improved...

The Germans strengthened their line by giving up some less tactical parts to permit an easier defensible position. Their army was undoubtedly weaker. In mid-March the Germans pulled back to the Hindenburg Line constructed the previous year by the then Chief of Staff Von Hindenburg and his Quartermaster General Ludendorff. It stretched from the coast to Metz and was an extremely strong series of interlinking strong points and barbed wire entanglements.

The Allies plan devised by General Robert Neville was to launch a massive attack in the south – on the Aisne, whilst the British were to contribute by asserting pressure, with fourteen divisions, in front of Arras. This surprise attack was meant to guarantee victory in forty-eight hours.

On the 4th April, a furious bombardment commenced. Once again the object was: to cut the wire, keep the Germans underground, knock out as many strongholds as possible and give hope and support to the waiting troops. This artillery effort had 2,800 guns firing a variety of calibres.

The attack by the British troops began on the morning of the 9th April that included ten British and four Canadian divisions. The goal was to scale the Vimy Ridge heights.

At the northern end of the line the attack was a brilliant success as the troops backed up by tanks forced the heights on a three mile front. Ten thousand prisoners were captured, stronghold blasted flat and many guns destroyed and captured. However, at the southern end of the ridge the battle see-sawed backwards and forwards for five days... the Germans directing more and more reserves forward. Five days later the British attack was halted to allow the French to advance to the Aisne... The French tried hard to keep the pressure up but the offensive turned into a colossal failure as the Germans started to press forward. The French injected further fresh troops which together made fifty-four divisions attempting to hold the tide. Mutiny took place as Frenchmen refused to take up arms. Nivelle was sacked and Marshal Petain installed as the new Commander-in-Chief. Around Arras General Haig continued to attack into May. They were costly advances. The **Kensingtons** played an important part for over nine weeks having to re-enter the line on a number of occasions.

The **Kensingtons** were directed to take up quarters not far from the station of Rue du Saumon. All the houses adjacent to the station had their cellars linked together. These quarters had been occupied by each army in turn as the battles seesawed backwards and forwards. The men were detailed off sleeping on

all the floors of each of the houses still standing. The battalion was taken out of the line and the majority of men were found room in the Schramm Barracks. The whole place was crowded with troops from Canada and South Africa.

On the 9th April, there was launched, on a front of fourteen miles, the **Battle of Arras**. The most important feature was Vimy Ridge, which stands two or three miles to the north of Arras. The men still had to put up with the atrocious weather conditions. When the battle commenced on Easter Monday there was a strong south-westerly squalls rain and sleet and even snow flurries hampered the build up in the front lines. As usual there were some successes but the bad weather played a part in stopping observation by the Royal Flying Corps – to give the fall of shot. A week later there was launched to the south an offensive by general Nivelle who had prophesied would be a day of glory for France. It turned out to be one of appalling disaster, partly because the Germans had acquired the plans for the French attack. The French were soundly beaten and broken... they were on their knees.

The failure by the French meant that the British had to not only withstand their own pressure received from the Germans but push forward with even greater force to take some of the pressure off the French front. General Haig had to continue the battle longer than he wanted to. It was during that week that the United States entered the war against Germany.

Towards the end of April 1917 Douglas Haig completed his plans for the campaign in Flanders, something he had always wanted but was dissuaded by Nivelle. Over the next three weeks the already tired troop were told to keep up the pressure and go on the attack. During May these attacks failed at Cambrai.

The **Kensington** battalion stayed on the Arras front for over two months, not always at the same sector for they were

occasionally rested... to return to some other position. The battalion took up residence of some villages behind the line. Afterward returned to Beaurains – in reserve. There the men helped construct a new camp using corrugated iron. Once again the weather was awful - raining continuously.

Third Battle of the Scarpe, 3rd May, 7th June, 1917.

On the 3rd May the British Army made a gallant attack at a quarter to four in the morning on the Hindenburg Line along a front of sixteen miles, the most formidable was the section around Bullecourt, ten or so miles to the southeast of Arras. The broke through in many places but their successes were short-lived because the enemy threw in a series of counter-attacks. There took place what was known as the **Third Battle of the Scarpe**.

For two years the British miners had been tunnelling under the ridge constructing twenty-one mines of which two failed to detonate, the other nineteen succeeded. The German knew this was going on but not the scale of exact whereabouts. The massive explosion destroyed part of the German front line and support positions.

The attack on the **Messines Ridge** was commanded by General Sir Herbert Plumer leading the British 2nd Army of nine infantry division from X, IX, and II Anzac Corps. Plumer had his orders extended to cover the first line, the second, the village of Wytshaete, and the reverse slope position... an advance of nearly two miles. He deployed massed artillery pieces whose job it was to saturate the German lines - to be taken, and return fire - to eliminate German artillery positions. The creeping barrage was followed up by tanks and infantry who achieved their aim – the village of Messines in the first phase, an hour after the explosion. The second phase, the village of Wytshaete, fell two hours after

that. This June offensive was a success achieving its objectives with fewer casualties than expected.

was launched once again in the early hours of the 7th June 1917... starting by this enormous explosion - from a series of nineteen gigantic mines at 3.10, that exploded underneath the ridge itself... and was even heard in London. This literally blowing the Germans off the ridge. Initially the attack was a success achieving all the first objectives. The British and Empire Forces immediately occupied the ridge... they quickly reassembled the trenches reversing the firing steps and parapet. Several attempts were made by the Germans to retake the line but to no avail - they were not strong enough.

Unfortunately Douglas Haig was asked to attend a meeting with the Politicians in London. These meeting lasted six weeks and during this time when the weather was at its best the moment was lost, impetus drained away. The storming of the ridge at Messines and the opening of the larger offensive cost the British troops dearly.

1st Battle of Passchendale, 15th July, 1917.

By the time Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the British Expeditionary Force's Commander-in-Chief returned from England, the Germans had found some reserves, even thinning out troops in the front line opposite the French, who were in no position to take advantage. Haig believed the German Army was on its last legs – near to collapse after the battles of The Somme and Arras. The British Grand Plan, its primary motive, was to break out of the salient and open up a route to the Belgian coast and the U-boat harbours - to relieve the strain on the multi-national merchant fleet – stop the sinking of desperately needed supply vessels.

At the end of June there was launched a series of separate attacks made by Britain's Army. The culmination is recorded under a number of titles [*indicated*] **Third Battle of Ypres**. It was the start to total misery. The British command attacked the Imperial German Army... the object: to seize the village of Passchendale. As secondary motives: to deny the Germans the better defended ridge... to take some of the strain off the French at Verdun, who were having morale problems... to deflect the German submarine campaign... to hinder the German bombers offensive on mainland England.

The British War cabinet approved the plan for the summer offensive – to begin in the 20th July 1917. A vast number of artillery piece were assembled whose task was to completely flatten the German trenches, supply dumps and strongholds. Eleven days were calculated in which to accomplish this task.

The picture facing the British was one of a low lying ridge that gave the defending enemy better observation of the plain. This, the British observed from a naturally swampy plain without any redeeming features. The farmland had been criss-crossed with drains and ditches seeking natural escape routes for the water. These watercourses had been blasted away over the previous months that not only upset the natural flow of water but redirected storm water. That summer the weather had been unusually wet.

British and Commonwealth troops attacked making a spectacular advance quickly. That summer was a particularly wet one... during the bombardment the rain started falling... off and on, during the whole period... turning into a heavy drizzle on the day of the attack. The battlefield was a quagmire. Nevertheless the troops mostly achieved their allotted tasks.

The Germans, in their organised manner, had prepared on the ridge deep fortifications, blockhouses, pillboxes and defensive

positions with linking defile trenches protected by staked barbed wire, all covered against enfilading fire. These defended positions formed four lines facing the British and a further line on the reverse slope. Adopting their newly devised plan of lightly defending the forward position, keeping the body of their troop below ground in deep shelters and retaining reserves in counter-attacking positions, they awaited the battle. The manner of defence was replicated at both the villages of Messines and Wytshaete.

To consolidate the newly won positions and to plan the next advance took six weeks. During this delay the Germans improved their defences by installing another strategic defence line to the south, and a further one on the reverse slope. The existing machine-gun emplacements were resisted to take regard of the new, extra, defence line.

The battle started about the middle of July lead by General Sir Herbert Gough. Is task was to take the Gheluvet Plateau, which was proceeded by a four-day bombardment. The Germans knowing that this probably heralded an attack moved more troops the defences. Appreciating the significance of the prolonged barrage they prepared their new offensive weapon mustard gas.

Battle of Pilckem Ridge, July, 1917.

After the bombardment the British attacked forcing their way up the slight ridge gaining over a mile. The British were learning the hard way that it is better to plan carefully to achieve a limited objective then defend it. The artillery also responded to the counter-battery with more precision knowing the Germans would follow up the attack to expel the invaders.

In July 1917 the battalion entrained at Liencourt to be deposited at St Omer, there to march to the villages of Houle and Moule to be got ready for the next battle. It was the most wonderful weather. The countryside had never looked better and the river sparkled. If there was anything which put everyone in good spirits it was the sun allowing everyone to wash and laundry their clothes. But it wasn't for long before we had to take an old grey painted London bus to Abeel and onwards to take part in the 3rd Battle of Ypres. The journey was filled with singing and shouting as we journeyed along the county roads past woods, meadows and fields of hay. We reached the village on the Franco-Belgium border. We all fell-in to be marched to Steenvoode. The villages did not look particularly inviting. Marching along feeling quite jolly arrived at Mic-Mac Camp close to Dickebush, there being several Nissen huts. Now we were in the battle zone where the roads and fields were pocked marked with shell holes filled with water. The village of Ouderdom was only a mile or so away. We continued marching getting nearer and nearer to the sounds of battle at last entering the village were directed to a disused brewery. There was no singing now only a grim deadly look of resignation. Everyone quietened down knowing that shortly we were to go to the front. After staying in the village for a few days we set off again towards Ypres.

On the 15th August 1917 the weather was threatening and the storm clouds complimented our depressed feeling. We continued marching in open formation passing Shrapnel Corner. On the right the walls of the city and on the left the moat which ran parallel to the front.

Battle of Langemarck, 16-18th August 1917.

Over this devastated area the battle raged. It was described as a nightmare casualty station... was inundated – they were shelled by day and bombed at night. The scene in the horse lines was horrible. Lines of horses blown to pieces others stampede around helplessly with torn limbs. Any attempt to move in the thick mud and filled shell hole was impossible any straying meant drowning without being able to move from the cloying mud. The Germans drew breath praying for more rain which was their greatest saviour. At Estree Blanche another attack was made but the weather took another turn for the worst and the attack faltered.

In August the weather broke and the month of August became the wettest known in that part of Flanders. The artillery attack left the ground pock-marked by shell holes that filled up with water. Before troops could advance a path of duck-boards had to be laid following tapes laid by the Pioneers. The next two weeks saw both sides engaged in repeated artillery barrages – each side trying to outdo the other in weight of fired shot and saturation. The battalions took it in turn to keep up the attack throughout the fortnight. On the 16th August the Battle of Langemarck was launched just before dawn. Eight divisions were assigned to create an enormous shove on a wide front.

The day before, expeditionary forces were pushed forward to clear the ground before the main attack... over-running several strongholds including the main fortification of Au Bon Gite, which although surrounded held out. The battle see sawed backwards and forwards, but the attacking troops had secured a vital foothold across the Steenbeek. This was essential to the main attack the following night.

The 60th and 61st Brigades would be able to cross and form up within striking distance of the German trenches the next

morning... to allow the main body of troops, coming up behind, to pass through the hoped for break in the German line.

The 2nd British Army took over from the 5th. Bringing General Plumer into action again. He decided to take the offensive towards the southeast along the southern half of Passchendale Ridge using limited action, then taking a firm stance - to hold on to what was gained.

There were three objectives – a series of lines five hundred yards apart, identified by the colours blue, green and red. The two-hundred attacking troops in the first wave were to hold the first position – defined by the road on the western side of the village, this was the blue line... they were to stay there for twenty minutes before following up. The second wave passed through these men holding the road... setting out to attack and clear the village stopping at the far side to reform and dig in. The third wave then passed on through the two former lines, to secure a third, red line, marked by a series of German trenches. When the third wave attacked the trenches the first would be following up in a supporting role. The green, when their role of keeping the German heads down over would then join in.

Meanwhile, the artillery would fire a creeping barrage in front of the leading troops - to form a curtain of fire and to pulverise the enemy. Signallers were detailed off to lay a line behind the leading troops to allow artillery observers to report back. This barrage would lift every five minutes one-hundred yards... until the German trench were reached, and then a final lift of two hundred yards... to deter any possible counterattack to take back the trench. This final artillery contribution would allow the sized German trench to be fitted with new firing steps and machine gun positions. This was the plan for the capture of Langemarck all the attacking troops took part in necessary training for the battle at the beginning of August.

The planners meant this to herald a breakout which demanded that the various stages to be rigidly kept - so that the overlapping waves would provide the support for the leading troops. This demanded the men should not be weighed down by having to carry their packs which were left behind to be kept in store... there was going to be enough extra ammunition and equipment to be carried as it was!

Before all set piece battles the men played cards, told stories and busied themselves to take their minds off what was to happen. Two days rations were passed out and the water carriers struggled to fill up the water bottles. The officers instructed the sergeants what the plan was so that the men could be told what their particular tasks were to be. Flares were issued to be lit to indicate when they reached the German trench.

The night of the attack was cold and it was raining hard. The troops formed a single file all along the Yser Canal keeping as quiet as possible. At 22.30 hrs. they moved off crossing the water keeping a hundred yards between each of the four companies. An hour later, after making their way over planks laid over the worst stretches, the way indicated by white tape, the men were allowed to rest. Starting again their march continued still making use of the carefully prepared track by the pioneers the previous night. Crossing over the road and keeping the railway line on their left then over the stream the first wave arrived at the assembly line on the far side of the Steenbeek. The German front line was very close – only about eighty yards away, the leading troops could hear the Germans talking. It was clear that the Germans had no idea of what was about to happen.

At 4.30 the artillery started to pulverise the German position... then ceased firing to allow the attack to go in. The ground had been stirred up by the bombardment making it even more pock marked. The forward line of troops was knee deep in

mud. The attack was going well the Germans did not have a chance to retaliate. As the waves passed through each other the artillery lifted their fire. At 5.00 the battalion was in position.

The attacking troops found that the opposition was lighter than expected. The bombardment was having the desired effect. The Germans were in confusion. The barbed wire had been cut and flattened. As the first to reach the trench jumped in there was hand to hand fighting. The bombers were out moving along the trench throwing their bombs down into the dugouts. Men were detached to search out documents, maps and orders trying to identify the Germans who had been manning the trench. Anything of interest was collected and sent back to headquarters.

The supporting troops using their Lewis guns caused many casualties allowing many prisoners to be taken. The red line had been reached and the attacking force was digging in, reversing the firing steps and mounting the machines guns to cover their front.

The forward battlefield was now empty. No attack in the past had occurred without the Germans reacting by trying to retake lost ground. There was no reason to suppose that this was not going to happen here. Enemy aircraft were flying overhead no doubt surveying the ground reporting on the condition and numbers of opposing forces. At 17.00 hrs. there was movement ahead and the British observers were blowing their whistles. Orders were given to stand up and receive the enemy. The Germans were about a battalion in strength. The order was given to open fire including the now mounted and positioned Lewis guns. A green rocket was fired to alert the artillery to lay down a barrage. This had the desired effect for the Germans gave up and disappeared. There was a second attack two and a half hours later but this failed to dislodge the British. Patrols were sent out throughout the night but it remained calm.

The following morning, the 17th August, the orderly teams were collecting and issuing the battalion's breakfast, topping up water bottles and issuing ammunition. The Germans were firing a morning hate barrage directing their fire at the farm and Langemarck... this continued practically all day. That evening a minor attack was made to secure a short section of trench the Germans had retaken. This was soon accomplished forcing the Germans to leave in rather a hurry... ending the operation as the 20th Division moved into reserve.

The battle was over by eleven, and by that time the reversing of the firesteps completed... There was now time to allow the men to take it in turns to rest, clean up and have a smoke. The place was an utter shambles. All the craters were half filled with water. The bodies of the dead and wounded littered the ground. The wounded were crying out and the stretcher parties were moving about collecting up the worst cases. It took sometimes six men to move one wounded soldier because the sticky mud was at knee height and the shell holes had to be straddled as the water squelched out at each step. A section of German 4.2-inch howitzers and one 77-mm field gun had been captured and a number of pillboxes and strongholds put out of action. This part of the battle had been a success with relatively few casualties... however; the battle in the south was a disaster with 15,000 casualties and very little gain.

The afternoon went by and the Germans never tried to retake the trench... which was a relief, as the men were pretty done in. Those who had slight wounds made their way back to the casualty station. Each battalion had their own stretcher bearers who were busy. They had receive sufficient first aid to attempt to stop wounds bleeding and to prepare the wounded for the journey back to the rear... three-quarters of a mile away, over the other side of the Steenbeek, and then a further three-quarters

of a mile to Gallwitz Farm which was the Forward Advanced Dressing Station. On the morning of the 18th August the survivors were then taken by either horse-drawn ambulance or placed on trolleys using the light railway lines to be patched up at the FADS then shipped to England.

The battalion marched to the proven camp to recuperate. New drafts were sent towards the end of the month to make up for the injured and dead. As soon as the new draftees were placed training undertaken - to instruct the new men about trench warfare. On the 9th September the battalion returned to the front to act initially as salvage collectors – to scavenge for weapons left on the field of battle.

Battle of Menim Road, 20-25th August, 1917.

Once again there was a tremendous bombardment meant to soften up the opposition, flatten the strong-hold and break-up the wire. The Allies attacked and managed to hold on despite counterattacks. At last their seemed to be a solution to prepared positions. This required guns to be ranged accurately using all calibres and shells to creep forward closely followed up by the infantry to gain achievable goals then taking stock to reform and start again.

Ypres was the key position that affected the whole sector. The city had exacted a terrible toll on both sides. As the Kensington battalion marched along the road past the city walls we reached the Menim Gate, turning right continued over a wooden bridge past the Zillebeke Lake. Ahead there was a trench system topped by a mound making the whole area a fortified bastion. Batteries of guns were firing over our heads as we carried on towards the Westhoek Ridge. It was then that the Battalion Major was killed together with the Adjutant, as the RSM lay

wounded. Captain Shaw took over coming from Brigade to take over from Captain Venables.

The Germans were putting up a heavy barrage as the remainder of us doubled along the Menim Road past the dressing station of Half-Way House. Lines of German prisoners were passing as the Kensingtons made their way quickly along the road until they reached the pill-box.

Battle of Polygon Wood, 26th September, 1917.

This took place during the Third battle of Ypres, starting off on the morning of the 26th of September. It was planned as a jumping off point for a direct assault on the Ridge that had as its focal point the village of Passchendale. The troops were marched into line making their way from the road to the torn and shell holed track that lead to the communicating trench. At onetime this had been well dug with duckboards and dugouts, firing points and steps well placed with looped sandbags facing the enemy... now it was a shambles with bits of equipment and bodies sticking out from the slimy mud with two foot of water contaminated with an evil smelling scum. When all was quiet at night the rats came out stealing the rations and foraging amongst the litter. The men asleep covered their faces with a blanket even though they could feel the rats running over them. The rats had no fear hardly taking any notice of the happenings around them. Stray dogs roamed the battle fields looking for scraps of food shivering and shaking as the guns boomed out.

It did not take long for the men to become battle hardened. If they didn't smoke before they did now... it was a nerve calming habit promoting a sense of togetherness, as they all lit up. All men suffered from fatigue and exhaustion, many having the

shakes. No-one took any notice or made a remark but most engaged in mindless conversation, although no-one listened.

This occurred the closer the time came to go over the top. Instructions would be continually repeated. The butterflies in the stomach made you breathless, the loose bowel, hands that would not keep still and the eyebrow that twitched..., they rocked backwards and forwards on the squelching duckboards... waiting their turn... Again the artillery put down a barrage prior to the order to advance... you could feel the ground shake and tremble. The noise of the whistles and bangs... the whine and rushing sound. Everyman had to stand firm. Occasionally a man was hit by shrapnel or an unlucky bomb burst. The cry for 'stretcher bearer' rings out as the word was passed along the line. Somebody had bought it. When would it be my turn?

Battle of Broodsinde, 7th October, 1917.

Much of the south side of the ridge had been captured by the first of October. It had been a tremendous slog by the British 2nd and 5th Armies. The later attack managed to pass through the German defences to the depth of one mile. Just over a week later the two armies pushed forwards again - on Passchendale itself, after two days of continuous heavy rain. It had been a grim business. It was almost impossible to comprehend how troops could continue in such conditions. There appeared to be no change to the strategy and tactics. The troops had to just carry on with the **Battle of Flanders** capturing Passchendale three days later.

Battle of Poelcappelle, 10th October, 1917.

Whilst the battle for Passchendale was being waged another was in progress. Poelcappelle was proving to be a harder nut to crack for it was a complete failure with very little to show for the 13,000 casualties. The British 5th. Army once again was being asked to create a diversion by attacking Houthulst Forest, Malmaison and northeast of Poelcappelle. At first only slight gains were made. Later on the right flank succeeded in capturing the rest of Poelcappelle.

3rd Battle of Passchendale, 31st Oct-10th Nov, 1917.

This was, and is still called, ‘The greatest martyrdom of the World War. The four divisions of Canadian Corps were transferred to the Ypres Salient relieving the Anzac Corps on the 18th October.

Ypres lies at the western end of a low-lying plain circled by woods and hills. It lies behind the front line by some two miles and some five miles beyond- further east, is the actual village of Passchendale. In-between the town of Ypres and village of Passchendale flows the river Yser... dotted about, numerous canals and streams, all part of the field drainage system - all not much above sea-level guarded by the Pommern Redoubt. From the river the ground rises... to the village of Gravenstafel and there, further up the valley, perched on the heights... the village of Passchendale, a gentle climb up to the ridge.

It is important to picture: all military attacks were preceded at that time by an artillery barrage... this was either a total stonk that could last for days or a creeping barrage began just before the battle to saturate the ground in advance of the attacking troops. The Ypres plain was like a basin - the river running through the centre had created water meadows on either side making much of the grassland marshy. Past generations of farmers built a series of canals, channels, ditches and water-courses to drain away the

surface water - to make the land productive. Naturally: any breaking or damage of that drainage system would recreate the marsh. The weather was unexpectedly wet – it rained continually...

Three separate attacks were planned, each given a day to achieve. The British 5th Army were to mount diversionary operation on the left [Pilckem Ridge] and the 1st. Anzac on the right [Nonne Boschem]. The start date was 26th October 1917.

The bombardment began on 22nd July employing 3,000 guns, well in advance of the start date. This shellfire: transformed the area into a pock-marked swamp two miles wide, full of quicksand's capable of drawing man and horse beneath its surface.

The 3rd Canadian Division kicked off advancing up the northern flank towards Bellevue spur. The 4th Canadian Division made for Decline Copse. Altogether the Canadians achieved all their objectives but were eventually forced back by repeated German counterattacks.

The second stage, four days later, was to mop up what had not been cleared on the 26th. And secure a base on the Passchendale crest... A number of strongly held farms were assaulted and captured. By the 10th November the Third Battle of Passchendale succeeded costing the Canadians Corps 15,654 casualties in 16 days of hard fighting.

Battle of Cambrai, 13th November, 1917.

The **Kensingtons** took over the front line on the 12th November. In support were the 3rd London's bringing up full battle equipment. This was the first battle to be ordered that was not preceded by an artillery bombardment. Headquarters had come to the conclusion that a pre-bombardment only alerted the enemy to an impending attack – allowing the German troops to

retire from the front line - to return after the artillery had moved forward. On the eve of the battle the 167th and the 169th Brigades were holding the front. Their task was to create a diversion making it look as if they were the attacking party using many different ploys to seek that effect. The 168th Brigade was in reserve. When the battle began it became obvious that the ruse had been a success. The troops following the tanks penetrating the Hindenburg Line on a wide front.

The 36th Division on the right of the 56th advanced from Demicourt the 169th linked up with them later that morning. By the end of the day there was a large bulge in the line, eight miles wide by four deep. The advance was stopped by the Germans short of the Bourlon Wood which covered a ridge. Douglas Haig on the 22nd decided to carry on the attack. Both the Brigades 167th and the 169th were ordered to attack the Hindenburg Line. The next day the 168th were thrown into the fray, Tadpole Copse now the objective. The **Kensingtons**, with Lieut-Colonel Shaw in command marched the Brigade to Le Bucquiere, along the Cambrai Road. The following night they took up residence vacated by the Rangers and the Fusiliers about the Louval Wood.

The London Scottish was occupying the Hindenburg Line pushing their way towards Tadpole Copse. C Company of the Kensingtons started to dig a trench from the original front line to the crater. A Company took over defending the right flank. When the trench had been dug C Company went to the rear to carry up battle stores. In the morning the rest of the Battalion moved in to relieve the Fusiliers. The Battalion was now in a confusion of trenches, dug-outs and strongholds totally unknown to them. They could hear the Germans but not see them. In the morning the Germans put in a determined attack shelling the line. It was clear that the Germans would attack again.

For the first time tanks were used. The attack started in the early morning with a large number of tanks [381] opening the way ahead for the infantry. Great advances were made including a breaching part of the Hindenburg Line defences. The heavy tank assault broke through the enemy lines into clear ground ahead opening up a marvellous chance to forge ahead. But no reserves were available to take over the territory gained. Before anything could be arranged the Germans had once again sealed the breach and they counter-attacked. In the end the battle was called off and the Germans retook all the ground they had lost. The battle ended with withering blizzard the snow drove everybody below ground. Although the battle had only lasted two weeks the figures of the casualties again leave the mind dazed at the stupidity of it all. Forty-five thousand on each side. We took eleven-thousand prisoners and the Germans took nine thousand of ours. There was to be no more major assaults for the rest of that winter. The Third Battle of Passchendale depleted the number of troops available to exploit the gains made at the Battle of Cambrai which showed the capabilities of massed tank action. At the end of November, beginning of December, The **Kensingtons** were relieved by the Gordon Highlanders and Black Watch to take up a rear reserve camp at Roclincourt. A few weeks later we were off again to Bailleul south of Vimy Ridge after a couple of days taken out of the line to celebrate Christmas 1917 back in Roclincourt Camp.

On the 5th December 1917 the Russian Bolsheviks agreed a truce signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on the 3rd March 1918. The terms were high. Russia had given up Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and the Ukraine. This allowed the Germans to move many of their troops to the western front freeing up stocks of ammunition. By the 15th February 1918, the

Germans had two armies stationed to attack between Ypres and La Bassee, and five more between Arras and Reims.

The **Kensingtons** having handed over to the Scots marched to the transport lines near Fremicourt. After a week of route marches and wagon rides adjacent to Vimy Ridge... finally marched to up the ridge to the long communication trench leading down to the trenches in front of the village of Oppy. Once again the Kensingtons had their numbers made up as they prepared for the new years battles.

After the October Revolution and the overthrow of the Monarchy Russia negotiated a cease fire. The Germans could now concentrate on the west – deal with a single opponent - the Allies. As soon as the peace treaty was signed they started to transport men and arms westwards in an attempt to create a victory before America could contribute. As soon as Haig heard of this he immediately realised his preparations should include a stockpile of ammunition. The Germans were about to field 191 Divisions against the Allies 164. There was a discrepancy of manpower which dictated that the Allies should stand firm and defend. The German offensive began on the 21st March [my father's birthday] and was directed at Britain's 5th Army who had been recuperating after the Battle of Cambrai and Passchendale...

Battle of Lys, 21st March, 1918.

The following year, 1918, it became a well known secret that the Germans were being strongly reinforced – that they were preparing for an offensive that would be against the 5th Army. The RFC squadrons were bombing the German lines and airfields at Busigny, Bertry and Escaufourt. The build-up by the Germans was very much larger than previous occasions. Their

object was to smash through British lines before the Americans built up sufficient forces to make a difference. The German Offensive in Picardy became better known as The March retreat.

On the 19th after a long spell of hot dry weather it started to rain with a heavy mist. All sights and sounds were dampened down and the enemy after some artillery fire became quiet. Both sides were oppressed by the enveloping fog. Suddenly there was an enormous crash as an artillery bombardment started. It was the most intensive bombardment staged since the beginning of the war. The St. Quentin sector was in the middle of it. The onslaught was massive. Gas was used and the order was given to put on gas-masks. The fog kept the gas close to the ground as it crept closer. Behind the gas the Germans started to penetrate the weak positions, feeling their way around strong points. Their reserves taking their place as the main body moved forward. Ahead of the main force surged the storm-troopers equipped with automatic rifles and machine guns and light mortars. They made many openings in the British lines. The front had never been held by so few men and so few guns. Behind the British front line troops there were few reserves. The 5th Army had to cover forty-two miles with twelve infantry divisions and three cavalry divisions. The Germans had forty-three divisions and by sheer weight of numbers began to push the British Forces back. There was a break through at St. Quentin. The last of the British reserves were used up. A general order to retire was made.

On the 21 March an Operation called Michael, and the less important attack at Lys, began on the 9th April regained all the ground lost [6 miles] to the Allies the previous year... This was achieved by the Germans in three days. Many of the Brigades were decimated within a few hours. The German advance was finally halted before Amiens.

Battle of Doullens, 26th March, 1918.

During the second night it was realised that the Germans were massing again for another attack... The airfield at Flez had to be evacuated and right in the valley of the Somme columns of German troops could be seen advancing everywhere. They were advancing in hordes. The RFC delayed the advance but not sufficiently to stem the tide. Three days after launching the attack the Germans stood a good chance of driving a wedge in-between the 5th Army and the 3rd Army to the north. An ominous bulge began to form in the line once again the British Army fell back. The 4th Division faced seven German divisions in the 'Mars' offensive; the German advance was halted. It looked as if the Germans were making for the important railway centre at Amiens. On the 26th March the Germans were eventually held at Doullens. It was decided by the general Staff that the British troops should come under General Foch to coordinate the defence of the line. The following day the British held the line the Germans began to falter once again, there was consternation. General Gough was relieved of his command.

The magnificent fighting withdrawal left the Germans with extended lines to the extent it had to stop and regroup. As soon as the Germans halted without capturing Amiens or broken through at Arras they tried to break through to Paris, then to the north towards the coast gaining some ground but the British line still remained complete and unbroken... each side losing nearly three hundred and fifty thousand men. Although it was a very testing attack for both Armies for the Germans it was a very bitter pill, it convinced many that the war was not going to be won their resources had drained away.

Battle of Bapaume, 12th April, 1918.

The **Kensingtons** entrained to be taken along the line to Watten, Houle and finally Bapaume. This was an old battle area, and looked it being desolate. The Germans had retired to high ground. We found our way to Le Transloy and the sugar factory. Thankfully the weather was fine and warm.

On the 12th April 1918, the Germans became so threatening that Douglas Haig issued an order of the day – recognising the seriousness of the German attack – that all troops should stand firm. The lull between the **Battle of Amiens** and the continuation of the fighting at the Somme became known as the Battle of Bapaume. For a week during the end of August and the beginning of September the battle raged across the Somme. The front to the north and south had been pushed forward; there was a general advance of all the Allies along the whole front. The Germans were in full retreat – it was a total collapse of their lines. The weather helped being warm and dry making the ground suitable for tank movement. Douglas Haig issued to all commanders instructions that contained in them an indication of intent, that risks should be incurred as a duty – which it was no longer to advance in regular lines but to take what ground was won or offered. At the end of the month the Australians made a ferocious attack on Mont St. Quentin and Peronne the last commanding positions left to the Germans. Mont St. Quentin is a rounded hill two miles to the north of Peronne. Their fortifications were of the strongest kind and the German troops were told to defend it to the last man. They put up tremendous resistance but were in the end overcome by the Australians who took the fortifications forcing the Germans to fall back on the Hindenburg Line. Away to the southeast the Americans were engaged in the hard fighting for Argonne.

Battle of Chateau Thierry, 27th May, 1918

The battle opened up with the usual bombardment followed by massed infantry attacks. Within five days the Germans had reached Chateau Thierry on the river Marne. Some of the new America arrivals were attached to the British line. By June the Germans had pushed through the British line to the river, and beyond. It was a situation that called for desperate measures. All day long the 2nd Battalion Devon's continued until darkness fell. In the morning the mist seem to be clearing. Out of the murk the Devon's saw the Germans advancing in lines bringing with them their guns and transport. When they got within range they were all mown down. This heroic stand partly took place in a wood the original trench had been blown up. Taking up position in another they turned to face the Germans who were so tightly packed together they could not be missed. The Devon's made a last stand until finally out of ammunition charged the enemy. This triumphant last ditch attempt to stop the Germans disrupted their offensive and sapped their will.

Battle Hindenburg Line, 18th September, 1918.

The battle began with the British 1st, 3rd and 4th Armies moving forwards to reach the fortifications capturing 116,000 prisoners. An attack on both flanks of the German forces was made by all the Allies in a piecemeal fashion to deceive the Germans.

The German positions between Cambrai and St. Quentin were penetrated and the Allies surged on. The Hindenburg Line was formidable having deep canal-trenches filled with water and wire making it difficult to get the men and tanks across. The thick impenetrable wire, massive concrete fortifications and earth

banks were constructed in depth. The British artillery blasted away with a passion that was staggering. On the evening of the 26th of September all the front was in action. The troops were stilled to let the artillery bombard the front. For a time the Hindenburg Line held but finally the attack by the British, American and Australian troops succeeded – during the 29th September following a rain storm and dense fog during the night forward troops penetrated the defences. By the end of the next day the Germans were in full retreat.

The night before Hindenburg agreed with Ludendorff that to save Germany from a catastrophe there must be an immediate armistice. The leaders prevaricated and the fighting went on... The moral of the German Army was in tatters the men were refusing to fight. During the last weeks of the war in October the Germans were in confusion. They had reached a line that ran along the western edge of the large Forest of Mormal and to the south of it the Sambre Canal. The line was back to where it had been at the beginning of the war four years before. On the 4th of November the Fourth Army launched its attack against the enemy positions along the Sambre canal. In the morning the German resistance broke down completely and all along the front the German Army fell back in an open and general retreat. The whole of the Allied troops moved forward eastwards by the British and north-eastwards by the Americans and French. The plight of the Germans became an impossible one. The German gambol had failed and Ludendorff resigned. By this time the division had suffered 34,809 casualties. The German Navy Mutiny at Kiel sparked off a revolution. On the 30th the Turks signed an armistice and on the 7th The German Government named their delegates for discussions about an armistice; on the 9th November the revolution seized Berlin; and on the 11th the armistice was signed.

By the middle of October there were one million American troops in France creating two Armies. Their casualties, when the battle was over, were just over a quarter of the total... after being a full-scale force.

On the 6th November the **Kensingtons** fought their last battle. They had been on the move for three days. The Germans intended to resist their passage and a heavy barrage of gas shells landed. The 169th Brigade was on the right and the 168th on the left. They, together with the London Scottish, advanced towards the River Grande Honnelle. A, joined with B, and C Companies were to keep in touch with the flank Brigades. After a tremendous artillery bombardment the advance was seriously in jeopardy. D Company was sent off in support to link with C. Together they were sent to the northern outskirts of the village where they found the enemy in possession. After clearing a number of Germans, taking many prisoners, the situation became clearer. At last the village was securely held as Battalion Headquarters was set up in the cellars of the church.

The London Division received the Cease Fire order for 11am on the 11th November 1918. The order was given to the **Kensingtons** in Rieu de Bury. By this time all the roads and villages about were completely devastated... this gave a great deal of work to tidy up - to allow passage through. The **Kensingtons** provided a body of troops to march with others in the First Army through the town of Mons on November 15th.

On the 27th November the **Kensingtons** left Rieu de Bury and marched to Villers sire Nicole. They stayed for more than a month, including Christmas. Eventually demobilization came to them allowing groups to slip away. The 1st Battalion had spent more than four and a half years in France and been through fourteen battles.

The war had a profound effect on my father whose life afterwards was never the same again. He relived his time in French throughout the rest of his life, as I am sure many did. During the war, he lost four of his brothers and many of his friends. My father never trusted his Staff Officers and certainly not the Generals. He thought them inefficient and uncaring. His experiences played an important part in shaping his military service in the next war and clouded many judgements after.

In Albert's DCM citation it makes it clear that he considered his men first, at all times, and felt responsible for their wellbeing. My father relayed those feelings and sentiments to me - personally, time and time again...

The Citation Reads:

'He showed the greatest energy and efficiency. Determined and cool in action. He has set an inspiring example to all the junior non-commissioned officers and men of his company. He was present at the First Battle of Ypres and Cambrai in 1917, the enemy offensive at Vimy Ridge in 1918, Arras the same year and later at Maubeuge'.

In 1918, there was a unity of command between the English and French Armies under the French Commander in Chief, Marshal Foch. The British and French had relied upon, to a major degree, a continuous sustained firepower from the artillery. This depleted the German Army, a fact not recognised until later by the High Command. Had they followed up immediately victory would have come sooner? As it was the eventual counter attacks made by tanks later on lead to ultimate

victory breaking the morale of the German Army. Ludendorff and The Kaiser both realised that the war could not go on. The Treaty of Versailles settled the fate of Germany and directed the course of events over the next twenty years, which lead to The Second World War.

The Armistice terms were signed in a railway carriage in the Forest of Compiegne. The terms forced Germany to give up all Allied territory, to withdraw her troops to the German side of the Rhine, to surrender all prisoners , and to hand over her fleet, aeroplanes, and guns.

In June 1919 the Treaty of Versailles settles the fate of Germany. The 'war-guilt clause' declared Germany responsible, demanding a sum of money to be paid annually to her conquerors, the Rhineland to be occupied by the Allied troops, her coal field to be given to the French. France to regain Alsace-Lorraine, Poland gained territory, and did Czechoslovakia, and Germany was to give up her colonies which were divided up amongst the Allies and reduce her army to 100,000.

The treaty of Saint-Germaine brought an end to the Austro-Hungarian Empire – it was split up into racial elements. Two new states were made Czechoslovakia, formed from the old Bohemia with Moravia and the Slovak area of Hungary, and Yugoslavia, an enlarged Serbia.

Poland was restored along with the republics of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

When the troops were demobilized the cry was, 'Back to Normal'. Lloyd George had promised, 'Britain would become, a land fit for heroes'. A General Election in 1919 retained the Coalition Party, of mainly Conservatives, in power; led by Lloyd George... they remained in power until 1922.

Unemployment was the most persistent problem. The returning troops were allowed to return to their old jobs. This naturally forced out those who had replaced them - those who were used to new production standards and methods brought about by mass production techniques. It also turned out most of the women who filled the jobs of conscripted men. The men returning were four years older, some had been promoted to senior ranks – given authority and responsibility. They found it difficult to cope with dissatisfied workers clinging to the shirt tails of Trade Union officials. Soon many began to feel disillusioned believing that they had sacrificed much for a few to become rich. Industry began to feel the pinch as customers cut back. Factories lost their contracts for armaments finding it hard to turn to peacetime products. Overseas customers had been neglected the retooled factories had to compete with the then existing manufacturers. All this led to firms laying off workers. Unemployment soared and an economic crisis loomed ever larger. The dole queues lengthened...!

Acknowledgements

It has been difficult to achieve a chronological order: correct bodies of troops, key non-commissioned personnel - names and rank concerned with outstanding events, and the Kensington Battalion's precise movements. Please excuse any misrepresentations. I have used the date of each battle during the war on the western front to build some order out of chaos, for future scholars.

In my research to write this account of The Volunteer Force, 1907 – 1918, the part played by the 1st.Division, Kensington Battalion, and the role played by my father, I have used many dates, of battles fought; from Wikipedia [These do not always confirm other accounts]. I have tried to link them up with the writings and tales told by my father. For a personal account of life in the trenches I have dipped into Johnny Get Your Gun by John F Tucker; the Years of Combat by Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, The First Day on the Somme by Martin Middlebrook, The Somme by A H Farrar-Hockley and World War One by Philip Warner. An almost complete history of the regiment is told within the pages of ‘The Kensingtons’ published by the Regimental Old Comrades Association, although too few names mentioned of senior non-commissioned officers. Richard Van Emden has written a series of books about the war and times including many personal accounts. To obtain a political view of the times I have consulted As It Happened by C R Attlee, PC, OM, CH., and A Portrait of Britain, 1851-1951, by Lindsay & Washington. For the economics of the period I have turned to The People and the British Economy, 1830-1914, by Roderick Floud. As for history, Hope and Glory, Britain 1900-2000, by Peter Clarke, served me well. I thank the Family and Children’s Services, The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, for their kind assistance and interest.