

CHAPTER III

War declared

TERRITORIAL HEADQUARTERS:- Freemason – Summer Camp – Mobilization – German Aggression – British Expeditionary Force – 4th Middlesex Regiment – Mons – Retreat – La Basse Front – 1st Ypres Battle – Neuve Chapelle – 2nd Ypres – Gommecourt – Bapaume - 56th London Division.

The Kearey family moved again, this time to 7 Errington Road, Paddington. Albert was twenty-four - a Sergeant in the Territorial Force, about to be balloted for membership to The Kensington Battalion, Masonic Lodge. It was November 1913, just nine months before The First World 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 regular soldiers were recalled from leave. By chance, the Territorial Force 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 Mons, 23/24 of August, 1914.

On Tuesday, 4th August 1914, Britain was at war with Germany. Embarkation started on the 9th August, of the British Expeditionary Force. The 1/13th [County of London] Princess Louise's Kensington Battalion, The County of London Regiment was mobilised on the 4th August 1914, 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. They at once started to occupy the line and get dug-in. Sixteen days later 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 who represented the regiment at Bisley. He was capable of double that figure.

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. 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 4th Middlesex retreated to St Symphorien cemetery on the outskirts of Mons. By 2pm 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 impetus 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 II 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 afternoon of the 4th. 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 defenders 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

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

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 Passchendale. The **Battle of Aisne** ended on the 13th November 1914, the last battle of the first year of war.

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 substitutions⁷ 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 Neuve Chapelle

The Kensington Battalion as 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. Mentioned in Dispatches, and awarded the DSO in 1918.

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...

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 tipplings 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, 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 Aubers Wood and Festubert, 9th May 1915.

In the second week in April, there began the 2nd Battle of Ypres. This time the Germans made use of poison gas. 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.

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 Kensington 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 in '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.

Battle of Loos, 21st September, 1915.

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 is 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 comprised of: the 4th London [Fusiliers], 12th London [Rangers], 13th London [Kensingtons] and 14th London [Scottish]. The Artillery was also from London and the Pioneer battalion from the 5th Cheshire's.

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 mile soon lead 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 then 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 them to take two days rest exploring the town doing some washing and having a canvas bath. Off again they marched onto Magnicourt having there an exhibition of a German flamethrower, being told its uses and problems.

Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916.

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 Third and Fourth 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**.

In February, March and April 1916, the Division was in training. These three months 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.

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 1916, at 7.30,

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 exposed the German trenches with continuous fire. This provoked return fire.

The attack went in at 4.00am by the **1st London Scottish** getting into the German front line... the **Kensingtons** followed up, after being very patient. 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 nearly all the German trenches, which was their objective.

At **Gommecourt, the Kensington's** had achieved success. Making use of the new trench dug before the battle, started 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 Kensington's** would be in trouble and 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 officers 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 Kensington's** 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 Kensington's 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.