

## CHAPTER IV

### Your country needs you!

CONSCRIPTION:- Another Draft – Lack of Training – On the Somme – Millencourt – Combles – The Royal Flying Corps – Verdun- Arras – Flanders – 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 Kearey died the following year. Walter had already been killed in Gallipoli just after the landing.*

*Martha despaired and vowed never to come out of mourning 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*

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 the Battalion had been withdrawn to re-equip and to train the new intake coming from the call for volunteers.

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. That same afternoon, the King rode by with a large number of staff officers. The Battalion spent the night at the Citadel Camp after the exhausting march from Bray. The Kensingtons were making for Fricourt. Once there proceeded to off-load their packs and take up battle equipment. They were to relieve the 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Fusiliers in trenches close to Falfemont Farm and Leuze Wood and the Warwickshire Regiment. Men from the 7<sup>th</sup> 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 the 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 to be taken out of the line. They had suffered enormous casualties losing half their strength. They had got as far as the corn fields that had concealed the German trench and barbed wire in front of Combles.

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 Kensington's 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 Kensington has moved out to attack the German trench. Unknown to them the Germans had reinforced that part of their line. A bombardment was laid down by the Germans on the British troops, as they surged forward. They fell back, to try again that evening.

The battalion had been fully up to strength regarding men but officers were in short supply. 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!

In the morning the regiment advanced 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 Kensington 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 Kensington's 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. There was a great deal of other fellow lying about dead from the day before. 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 led 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 Kensington's were drawn back from the front to rest, shortly afterwards.

### **Battle of Arras, 9<sup>th</sup> April – 20<sup>th</sup> 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. Plans were afoot to restart the attacks on the front. 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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 Scarp, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1917.**

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 Scarp.

The attack on Messines was launched once again in the early hours of the 7<sup>th</sup> June 1917. It started by an enormous explosion from a series of gigantic mines that exploded underneath the ridge itself... and was even heard in London. Initially the attack was a success achieving all the first objectives. 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.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Battle of Passchendale, 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1917.**

By the time Haig 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. 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 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.

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 Messines and Wytshaete.

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 were fired at 4.00am. 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 Messines was commanded by General Sir Herbert Plumer leading the British 2<sup>nd</sup> Army of nine infantry divisions 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.

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 led by General Sir Herbert Gough. His task was to take the Gheluvelt Plateau, which was preceded by a four-day bombardment. The Germans knowing that this probably heralded an attack moved more troops to 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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 Dickebusch, 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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, 16-17<sup>th</sup> 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 2<sup>nd</sup> British Army took over from the 5<sup>th</sup>. 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.

### **Battle of Menim Road, 20-25<sup>th</sup> 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 we made our way quickly along the road until we reached a pill-box

### **Battle of Polygon Wood, 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1917.**

This took place during the Third battle of Ypres. This started off on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> of September and 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.

### **Battle of Broodsinde, 7<sup>th</sup> October, 1917.**

Much of the south side of the ridge had been captured by the 1<sup>st</sup>. October by the British 2<sup>nd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Armies. The later attack managed to pass through the German defences to the depth of one mile. With the start on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, of the attack on Passchendale itself. After two days of continuous and heavy rain, it was 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, 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1917.**

Whilst the battle for Passchendale was being raged 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 5<sup>th</sup>. 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.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Battle of Passchendale, 31st Oct-10<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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. This land drainage system was used on most low-lying land used for cultivation. 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 5<sup>th</sup> Army were to mount diversionary operation on the left [Pilckem Ridge] and the 1<sup>st</sup>. Anzac on the right [Nonne Boschem]. The start date was 26<sup>th</sup> October 1917.

The bombardment began on 22<sup>nd</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup> Canadian Division kicked off advancing up the northern flank towards Bellevue spur. The 4<sup>th</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup>. And secure a base on the Passchendale crest... A number of strongly held farms were assaulted and captured. By the 10<sup>th</sup> November the Third Battle of Passchendale succeeded costing the Canadians Corps 15,654 casualties in 16 days of hard fighting.

### **Battle of Cambrai, 13<sup>th</sup> November, 1917.**

The Kensingtons took over the front line on the 12<sup>th</sup> November. In support were the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 167<sup>th</sup> and the 169<sup>th</sup> 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 168<sup>th</sup> 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 36<sup>th</sup> Division on the right of the 56<sup>th</sup> advanced from Demicourt the 169<sup>th</sup> 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 22<sup>nd</sup> decided to carry on the attack. Both the Brigades 167<sup>th</sup> and the 169<sup>th</sup> were ordered to attack the Hindenburg Line. The next day the 168<sup>th</sup> 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. The Allies took eleven-thousand prisoners and the Germans nine thousand. 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 5<sup>th</sup> December 1917 the Russian Bolsheviks agreed a truce signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup> 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.

### **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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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, 26<sup>th</sup> 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 5<sup>th</sup> Army and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army to the north. An ominous bulge began to form in the line once again the British Army fell back. The 4<sup>th</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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, 12<sup>th</sup> 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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, 27<sup>th</sup> 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 American 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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.

The Battle for the Hindenburg Line, 18th September, 1918, began with the British 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> 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 26<sup>th</sup> 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 29<sup>th</sup> 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 4<sup>th</sup> 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 Germans 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 30<sup>th</sup> the Turks signed an armistice and on the 7<sup>th</sup> The German Government named their delegates for discussions about an armistice; on the 9<sup>th</sup> November the revolution sized Berlin; and on the 11<sup>th</sup> 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 169<sup>th</sup> Brigade was on the right and the 168<sup>th</sup> 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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 15<sup>th</sup>.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> November the Kensingtons left Rieu de Bury and marched to Villers sire Nicole. They stayed for month, including Christmas. Eventually demobilization came to them allowing groups to slip away. The 1<sup>st</sup> 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 citation it makes it clear that he considered his men first at all times and felt responsible for their wellbeing...

**'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 led 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 led to The Second World War.

The Armistice terms were signed in a railway carriage in the Forest of Compiègne. 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-Germain 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 1<sup>st</sup>.Division, Kensington Battalion, and the role played by my father... I have sought many dates, of battles fought, from Wikipedia. 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, 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. 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...