

Albert Edward Griffiths

Corporal

2nd Battalion, South Wales Borderers



When researching a person, it is sometimes interesting to investigate their family circumstances, which can be most revealing. In this case Albert (Edward) Griffiths' biography opens by studying his parents background, where they came from, how they met and when they married. Edward Griffiths, Albert's father, was born at Newcastle Court, a considerable pile on the outskirts of Evenjobb, and was the son of a jockey and farmer called Stancel Griffiths. As with his father, Edward developed a great love of horses, learning equine skills and when old enough became groom to Mr. John Edwards of Broadheath Farm, Presteigne. In the 1881 census, we find Edward working at Evancoed Seat, the ancestral home of the highly respected Mynors family. Evancoed is a fine country home situated on a hillside just outside Evenjobb and here Edward was employed as coachman to Robert Mynors, sometime magistrate and Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Radnorshire. In this same census, we first come across a Miss Martha Davies of Evenjobb who was employed by the Mynors family as a domestic servant. It appears a below stairs romance blossomed between Edward and Martha and their relationship resulted in an 1882 marriage. By 1891 Edward is described as a 'horse breaker' and the Griffiths family has grown by four. Their first child, Mabel was born in 1885, swiftly followed by Thomas in 1886, Mary Elizabeth in 1887 and Albert Edward Griffiths in early 1889. The 1891 census reveals that the fledgling family were living in Hereford Street, Presteigne. In 1892 Martha had a further child, George, but this growing picture of family bliss was soon to be shattered. Death records for Knighton district show that in 1897, at the age of just 43, Martha sadly died. In the same Knighton quarter a male Griffiths is recorded as dying and it is tragically possible that Martha died in childbirth along with her unnamed baby son.

The next revealing record for the Griffiths family is the 1901 census return. Edward was living at 25 Mill Street in Kington and is still recorded as a widower. He is boarding with Mrs. Ann Lloyd, a laundress who is herself a widow. Clearly, she and

Edward had something in common. Living with the horse breaker, are his two youngest children, Albert and George. Ten years later in 1911 Edward had moved back to Evenjobb and was living with his older sister, Mary Ann Griffiths at her farm, Brook House. He was still a horse breaker and sadly still an unmarried widower. The focus of this biography Albert (Edward) Griffiths, is conspicuous by his absence in this census return, his circumstances obscured by time. The next documents associated with Albert reveal that he had joined the army and become Private 26801 Griffiths of the 3rd Reserve Battalion the South Wales Borderers. Close analysis of his service number indicates that he attested in December 1915 and was probably mobilised in February 1916.

Albert had joined one of the great British regiments whose history is the stuff of legend. Originally formed in 1689 as the 24th Regiment of Foot, it was based in Brecon and recruited from the border counties of Monmouthshire, Herefordshire and Brecknockshire. This fine old regiment was present at many of the great Victorian conflicts of the time, but arguably its most famous, and debatably most notorious action, was during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Both 1/24th and 2/24th battalions took part in the war and were present when the British army crossed the Buffalo River and entered Zululand on 11th January 1879. Shortly after, the debacle that was Isandlwana occurred. The British had pitched camp at Isandlwana and such was the size of the camp, and arrogance of the British army, no defensive shield was established. On 22nd January Lord Chelmsford, commander of the British forces, split his force and led a patrol in search of the Zulu. The bulk of the 24th were left to guard the camp while a single Company detachment of the 2/24th were dispatched to garrison the missionary station at Rorke's Drift.

A Zulu force of 20,000, sensing weakness, attacked the camp at Isandlwana destroying it, few escaped the ferocity of the Zulu onslaught. Following this great Zulu success, a force of some 4,000 to 5,000 Zulu warriors headed for the missionary station at Rorke's Drift.



Alphonse de Neuville, The defense of Rorke's Drift 1879

The Zulu attacked at 4:30pm and probed the speedily fortified garrison from all directions. Bitter hand to hand combat ensued. The battle raged throughout the night, with Zulu warriors throwing themselves on the guns of the 2/24th. Gallant actions by the garrison throughout that night earned no less than eleven Victoria Crosses with seven going to men of the 2/24th Regiment of Foot. As dawn broke a much-depleted garrison were relieved to discover the Zulu army had withdrawn. Those brave actions were immortalized in the 1964 Cy Enfield movie, ZULU. Following the Childers Reforms of 1881 the 24th Regiment of Foot evolved and continued to proudly served its country as the South Wales Borderers. And so, it was into this illustrious regiment that the hero of this piece, Albert Edward Griffiths, enlisted in 1915.

Very few of Albert's military records survive, many having been destroyed in a German bombing raid during World War Two. However, we do know that when fully trained he was transferred into the frontline 2nd Battalion of the South Wales Borderers, the exact date is unknown. At the outbreak of war in August 1914 the 2nd battalion were far from British soil and were in fact operating in Tientsin, a northern coastal city in China. On 23rd September 1914, they landed at Laoshan Bay and undertook operations against the Germans territory of Tsingtao, being present at the Siege of Tsingtao in October 1914. Later that year in December, they embarked in Hong Kong and sailed for Britain arriving in Plymouth on the 12th January 1915. They immediately came under the command of the 87th Brigade attached to the 29th Division and were moved to Rugby. They had little time to settle there and on the 17th March 1915 again embarked, this time at Avonmouth, and sailed for operations on the Gallipoli Peninsula. The battalion were one of the first to land on the opening day of the campaign at Cape Helles on the 25th April. They immediately encountered stiff Turkish resistance and hellish conditions, in truth the writing was on the wall from an early point in the campaign. The operation went badly and resulted in the whole allied force being evacuated. The 2nd battalion left Gallipoli on the 11th January 1916 and were therefore one of the longest serving regiments on the ill-fated campaign. They were moved to Egypt temporarily but their undoubted fighting abilities were soon acknowledged and before long they sailed for Marseilles arriving there on the 15th March 1916. Remember, Albert was mobilized in February 1916, so it is quite probable that he joined the 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers after they arrived in France. Very soon both he and his regiment were in action on the Western Front.

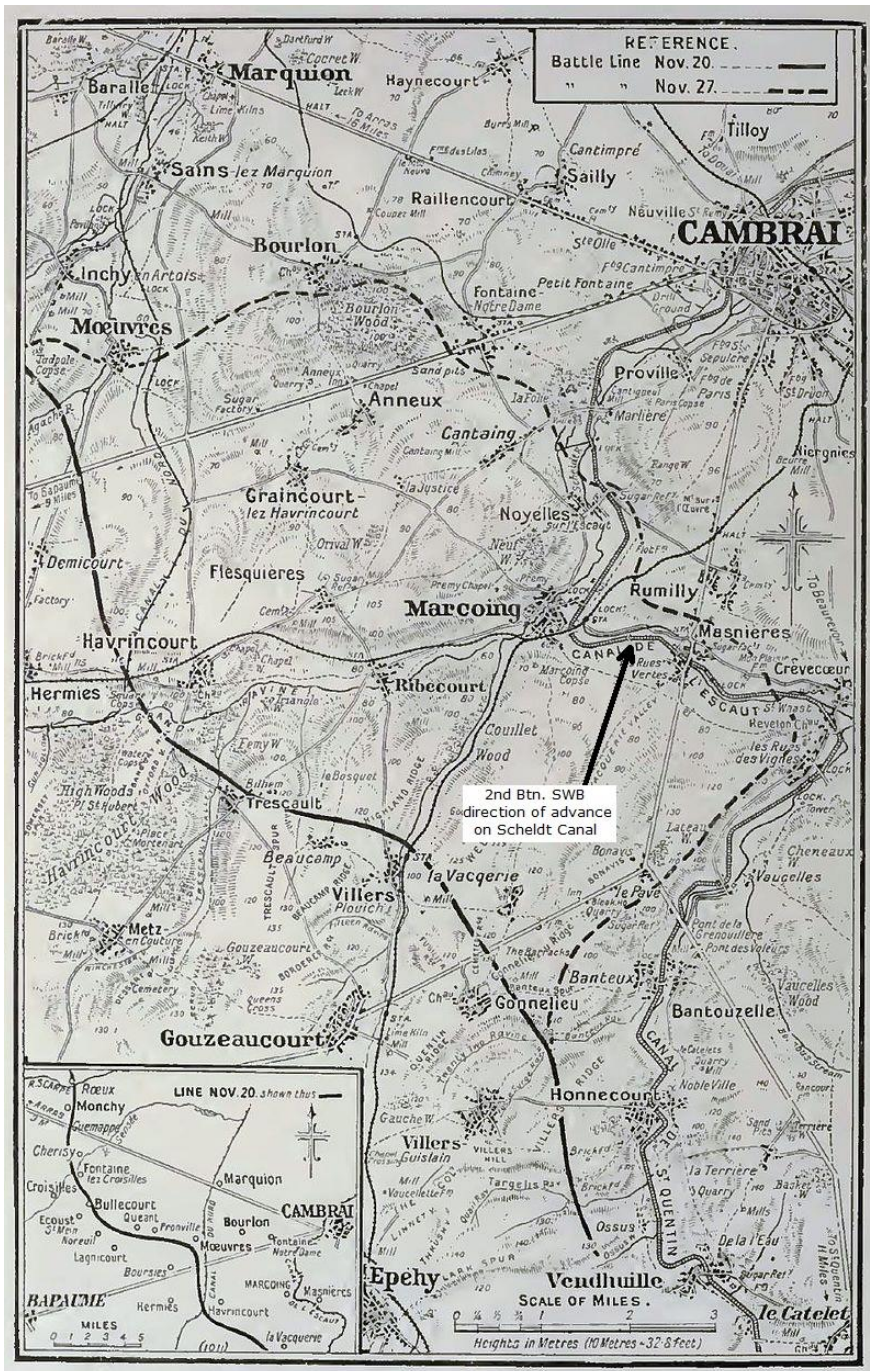
The battalions first big action was on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916. Set the task of attacking Beaumont Hamel the battalion mustered 21 officers and 578 men. They were decimated, losing 11 officers and 235 men killed or missing and a further 4 officers and 149 men wounded in the first few minutes of the advance. In April and May 1917, they fought with honour at Monchy Le Preux with a Victoria Cross being awarded to a Sergeant White for his leadership and self-sacrifice in attacking a machine gun nest. This was followed by action at the Third Battle of Ypres, more commonly known as Passchendaele. The battalion history then moves on to the Battle of Cambrai.

During the horrors of Passchendaele, General Haig, officer commanding forces on the Western Front, realised that such stalemate had to be broken and new tactics developed. He issued orders for a combined cavalry, tank, aircraft and infantry attack to be made at Cambrai. The railhead at Cambrai made it a strategically important location for both adversaries. Haig stated that the objective was a;

'local success by a sudden attack at a point where the enemy did not expect it'

His plan was to swoop around Cambrai, securing the town and then forcing a way through the Hindenburg Line, a heavily fortified defensive line the Germans thought impregnable. The Battle of Cambrai was fought between 20th November and 7th December 1917 and proved to be a significant event in World War One. Cambrai was the first battle in which tanks were used en masse, but up to this point these leviathans of the battlefield had not performed well and hence many military strategists had their reservations about the plan. The attack started at 6:20am with an intense artillery bombardment. 350 tanks advanced upon the Hindenburg Line with infantry in support. A rolling barrage preceded the advance and tanks forced their way through immense barbed wire defences. Infantry poured through the gaps and initial advances went well with some regiments advancing up to 5 miles into enemy held territory. However, by day two barely half the tanks were still operational. Mechanical frailty and accurate enemy artillery fire had nullified the operational effectiveness of the tanks. Those early gains were soon under counter attack with the enemy reinforcing their positions remarkably quickly. Allied forces were stretched very thinly and stiff enemy resistance forced Haig into retiring his army on the 3rd December and a less strained defensive line was formed southwest of Cambrai. By the 7th December honours were considered even and stalemate reinstated but casualties on both sides were colossal.

Close inspection of the battalion war diary reveals the 2nd South Wales Borderers, including Corporal Griffiths, involvement in the Battle of Cambrai and how it affected them. Their advance started at 6:30am on the 20th, under a rolling barrage from the Royal Artillery. As tanks cleared the way in front of them the men advanced through Villiers Plouich, a hamlet north of Gouzeacourt where Divisional headquarters had been established. Here the heat of the enemy counter-barrage was first felt and under intense fire they reached the first German trenches at 7:15, 400meters from their start point. Hostile shelling continued until 7:45 when a lull in the fighting enabled the men to settle and regroup in the enemy trenches. At 10:15 they advanced again and were confronted by rows and rows of barbed wire, and row upon row of broad, deep trenches. Enemy machine gunners were spitting fire from these and had developed an effective tactic against the growling tanks. As the tanks rolled over their trenches the Germans were seen to retire into their dugouts only to re-emerge, set up their machine guns and recommence firing once the tanks had passed overhead. Hence, the hail of bullets the 2nd battalion advanced into was continuous and heavy. However bad it was for the Borderers it was worse for those fighting either side of them. The Kings Own Scottish Borderers on the left and Newfoundland Regiment on the right, failed to make any forward



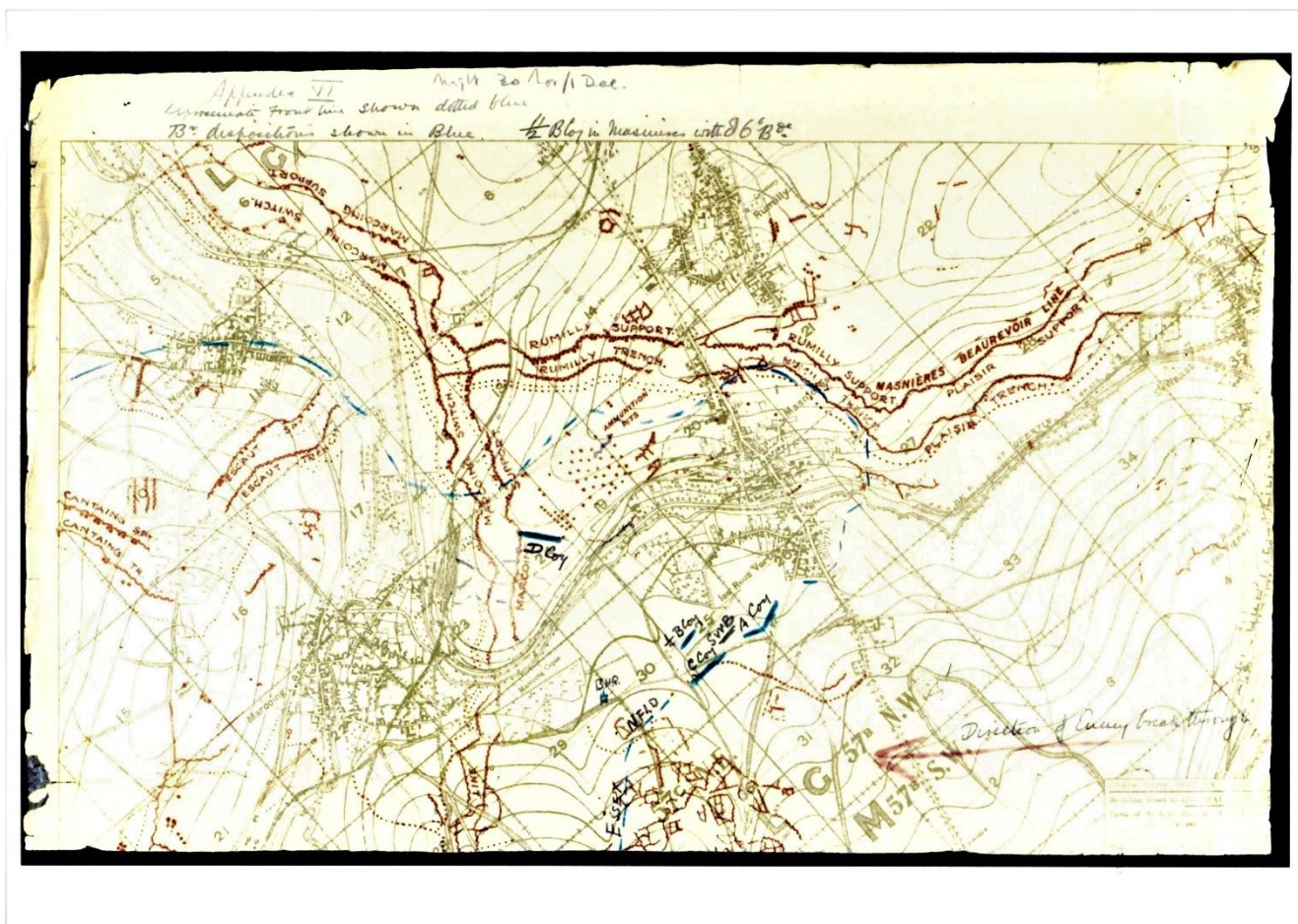
progress. This inability to move forwards left the Borderers in an advanced position and potentially exposed to enfilade fire from the enemy. The Borderers were forced to retreat for fear of being isolated and cut off. They regrouped and for a second time advanced. By 1:30pm they had made it across the Scheldt Canal, all the while under heavy machine gun fire directly in their front and from the village of Masnieres on their right. At 2pm the 1st Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers passed through the Borderers but due to the heavy resistance made little progress beyond the canal. C Company South Wales Borderers were in an advanced position having taken several enemy ammunition pits and machine guns. On their right the Newfoundland Regiment

had their hands full with enemy snipers firing at them from the village of Masnieres. As darkness shrouded the battlefield the men dug in and prepared for the inevitable counter attack. It never materialised, and at 11pm orders were received to consolidate their positions and prepare for a further attack at dawn on the village of Masnieres and the Rumilly Trenches beyond. During the night, this attack was postponed until 11am, the battalion being assured nine tanks would be there to assist them.

As morning on the 21st proceeded no tanks appeared and attempts to contact them failed. Seven alternative tanks were found in Marquing, resting following fighting all through the previous day. They were cajoled into assisting and agreed to help the advance. At 12 noon, the tanks rolled and the advance started. But the village of Masnieres was still not occupied by friendly troops, the attack proceeded regardless. Once again, under extreme conditions, progress was made. C Company

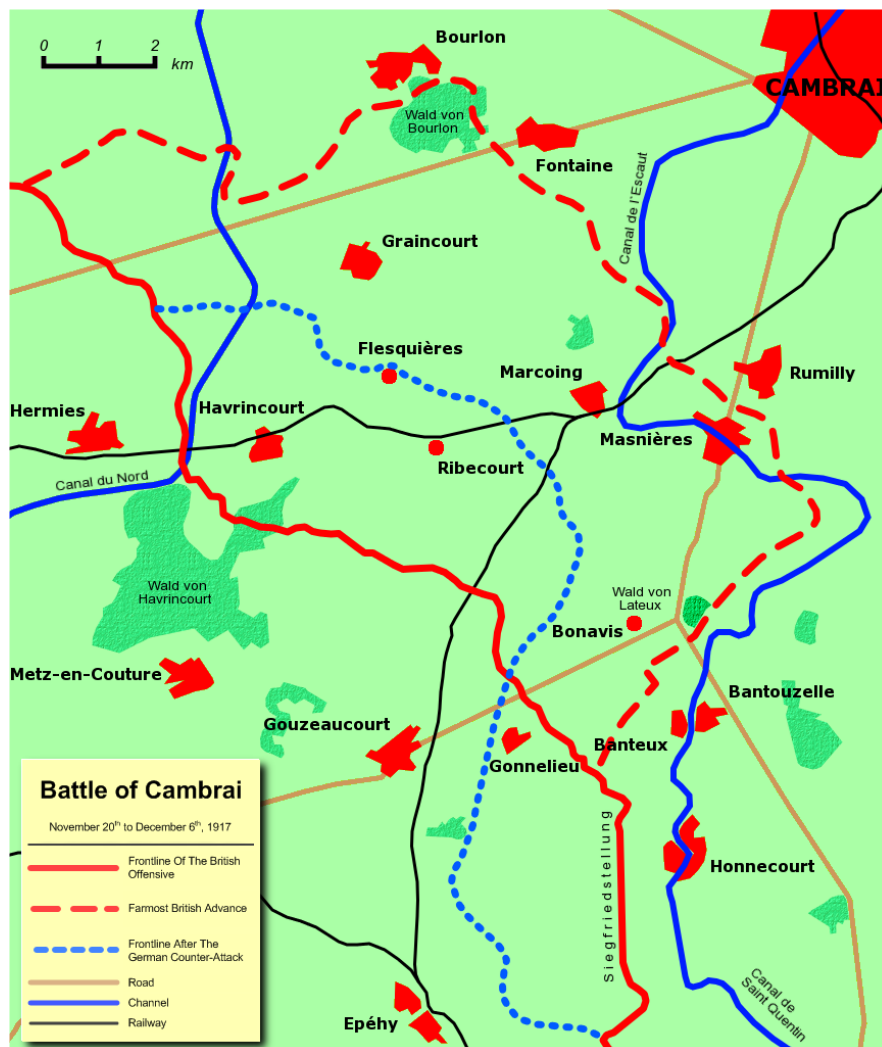
were on the left and the remaining companies, all mixed up, held the rest of the line to the Cambrai Road on the right. Ultimately this brave assault was halted and the battalion were ordered back to their original positions in Marcoing. However, the fog of war is a mysterious and confusing thing and when command realised just how advanced the Borderers position was they countermanded their original order and told the men to dig in. Sniping from Masnieres was still a thorn in the right-hand side of the battalion and after dark a special party was sent to houses on the outskirts of the town to flushed out the remaining enemy troops. This accomplished the party established a forward post in the houses. That night was quiet and no counter attack developed.

On the 22nd the South Wales Borderers were well established in Masnieres but had taken a beating the previous day. At dawn on the 22nd just three junior officers, HQ staff and adjutants were capable of fighting. The four companies were very depleted and stretched thinly. A reinforcement Captain from Brigade HQ was sent forward to take charge of the battalion. Thankfully the night of the 22nd was quiet. The following day they held their positions but snipers in houses on the Cambrai road made life difficult. They did however establish contact with the 1st Essex Regiment on their right flank and a coherent frontline was established. Patrols were sent out to harry the enemy, who were determined not to leave. At 7pm on the 23rd the battalion were relieved by the 1st Kings Own Scottish Borderers and retired to the Marcoing Bridgehead Defences. Here they had their first hot meal in days but were soon redeployed onto the bridgehead defences adjacent to the Scheldt Canal. On the morning of the 30th November the Germans made a massed



counter assault, the included map above reveals the battalions precarious position on that day. The blue dotted line shows their front line and note the bulge, or salient, in it. Also, note the ominous note on the bottom right of the map, 'Direction of enemy breakthrough'. The bulge meant they were susceptible to attack from the sides and it was this which forced the battalion to eventually retreat on the 3rd December. For the 2nd South Wales Borderers the Battle of Cambrai was over and they were retired to Sorel, well behind the new lines.

Cambrai was considered a failure for the allies but many lessons were learnt by both protagonists. For the allies, it was realised that a new combined style of offensive could breach the supposedly 'impregnable' Hindenburg Line and tanks had their uses if they could be made more reliable. The German ability to reinforce their frontlines with a new 'stormtrooper' tactic worked well for them. But for them such speedy advances caused serious problems with logistics and soon their advancing troops were isolated. Broadly speaking the Battle of Cambrai ended in stalemate but losses on both sides were horrendous. British casualties amounted to 44,000 killed, wounded or lost in action, this figure including some 6,000 taken prisoner. German casualties were similar with 10,000 captured. The 2nd Battalion South Wales Borderers started the assault on the 20th November with 18 officers and 596 other ranks. Relieved on the 3rd December, at roll call that day just 3 officers and a mere 73 other ranks responded to their names being called.



The map above shows the British initial positions on 20th November and their revised positions on 7th December after the German counter attack.

Corporal Albert Edward Griffiths was killed in action on the **21st November 1917**. He had survived the initial advance but succumbed the following day, his body was never recovered. Albert's name is remembered upon the Cambrai Memorial at Louverval, panel 5, along with 7,000 of his British and South African comrades who also lost their lives at Cambrai and whose bodies



were never found. Louverval is a small village located on the Bapaume/Cambrai road. The Memorial stands on a terrace in Louverval Military Cemetery which is found to the south of Louverval village.

In the 1st February 1919 edition of the Kington Times we discover that Albert was awarded the Military Medal (MM) for bravery. The editorial reads;

Mr. Edward Griffiths. of Brook House, Evenjobb, has recently attended at the Barracks, Brecon, to receive the Military Medal awarded to his late son, Corporal Albert Edward Griffiths, South Wales Borderers, who has been missing since 21st November, 1917 and since presumed dead. The deed for which the late Corporal Griffiths was awarded the medal took place in March 1917, when he entered a German dug-out on the Western front and took prisoners an officer and a number of German soldiers.

Whilst I feel sure Edward would have been proud to receive his son's award, in no way did it make up for the loss of his son. At a Peace Service held at St. Mary's Church, Kington on the 6th July 1919, Albert's name was commemorated along with 60 other Kington men who gave the ultimate sacrifice during World War One. Edward continued to live in the area and remained a widower. He died in the third quarter of 1930 with his death being registered in Kington. The name of Albert (Edward) Griffiths and his sacrifice will forever be remembered upon Kington War Memorial. Long may he rest in peace, wherever he lies.



Researched and produced by Mark Wheatland