

# Howell Wyndham Powell

Private

51949

Royal Fusiliers, 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion (Kensington)

(City of London Regiment)



Howell Wyndham Powell was not a Kington man but was in fact a Welshman. He was born in 1897 in the small Welsh mining village of Ynysybwl, just south of Pontypridd. Howell's father John had married Jane Phillips in 1891 and their first born was Anabel in 1895. Howell followed and was named after Jane's father Howell Phillips. Howell was to have two other siblings, both girls, Evelyn Jane born in 1899 and Elizabeth Doris in 1904. In the 1901 census the family were living at 20b Alma Street in Dowlais, Merthyr Tydfil. John was employed as a Grocer and this enabled the family to have two servants, one being a nurse for the small children. In the 1911 census the family were living above the shop so to speak at West End Stores in Alma Street and the lucrative grocery business still enabled them to hire two servants, one, James Clarke as a Shop Assistant and a second, Annie Jones, as their Domestic Servant. The 1911 census informs us that John and Jane had actually had two further children but both had died prior to the census, held on 2nd April. Howell was then fourteen, still at school and it would appear, no slouch. After leaving school he went into the banking industry and it is while training to be a clerk that we first come across Howell in Kington.

Britain declared war on the German aggressor in August 1914. Shortly after we discover, from an editorial in the Kington Times, that in December 1914, aged just seventeen, Howell Powell volunteered for the army. Clearly he was too young to serve but it demonstrates his sense of duty to his country that he should volunteer at such a young age. Howell was living at 9 Bridge Street quite probably as a lodger of the town



vet, Wilfred Munslow, who owned the property. He worked at the London City and Midland Bank, formerly the Kington and Radnorshire Bank at the top of Bridge Street. By March 1916, such was the demand for manpower, that tribunals had been established to decide whether men should go to war or stay at home, being employed in essential services. The Kington Times reported on all tribunals held in Kington and in the 11<sup>th</sup> March 1916 edition we discover that Howell was required to attend. By now he was nineteen and in the prime of his life, an ideal candidate to serve his country. However, Howell was given a

temporary exemption. He stated that he had studied and paid for examinations at the Institute of Bankers, with his exams due in the April. The tribunal accepted this argument and gave him a one-month exemption until the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1916.

In September 1914 Lord Kitchener made his appeal for a volunteer army. The Mayor of Kensington, Sir William H Davison KBE, DL, MP immediately set about raising a battalion for the Royal Fusiliers. They were to be known as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers (Kensington). The battalion first moved into France in November 1915. Many of the volunteers worked in Kensington business houses (banks) and it is quite probable that Wyndham, once he had passed his exams in 1916, transferred to Midland Bank offices in London, Kensington, and hence when required naturally joined his local regiment, the Royal Fusiliers. Howell initially enlisted into the 32<sup>nd</sup> (City of London) Service Battalion as Private 2725 Powell but at some point was transferred into the Royal Fusiliers, 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion and his service number changed to 51949.

Sadly, Howell's service documents do not survive but we do know that he enlisted in Leominster and first entered France on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1916. By investigating the regimental war diary for the 22<sup>nd</sup> battalion we also know a large influx of 80 'other ranks' joined the battalion in early December and it is probable Howell was one of these. By consulting the war diary and reading Major Christopher Stone's '**A History of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Royal Fusiliers (Kensington)**' we gain an insight into what the battalion and Howell were doing in late 1916 and early 1917.

The battalion had been involved in the July 1916 Somme offensive and later, in November, the Battle of Ancre. Exhausted and depleted by December they had been moved out of the front line and were billeted at Mailly Mailett where they were able to recuperate and regroup. They spend Christmas 1916 in Yvrench, a village near Abbeville, where conditions were as comfortable as could be expected under the circumstances. They were granted leave, were able to bathe and Christmas treats included cigarettes and pipes from the Lord Mayor of Kensington were distributed. Plum puddings and a gift of £5 per Company from a Mrs Barker all helped raise battalion spirits. The men made every effort to enjoy themselves with many of their billets decorated like fairy grottoes. The Christmas banquet must have been a grand affair, since the Divisional police were invited and strangely enough no one got into trouble. On 26<sup>th</sup> December something happened which would have shocked Howell. A Private Skilton was Courts Martialled under the charge of 'When on active service deserted his Majesties service'. Skilton was found guilty and sentenced to death, the sentence being

carried out at 8am on the 26th. Many argued at the time that this type of punishment sent out a message to serving troops that desertion would not be tolerated and I feel sure Private Powell would have been impressed by such an uncompromising message. History reveals that some 306 soldiers were shot for cowardice, desertion and other offences during the 1914-1918 war. All, including Private Skilton, were given a formal pardon by their country in 2006, ninety years after the events which ended their lives.

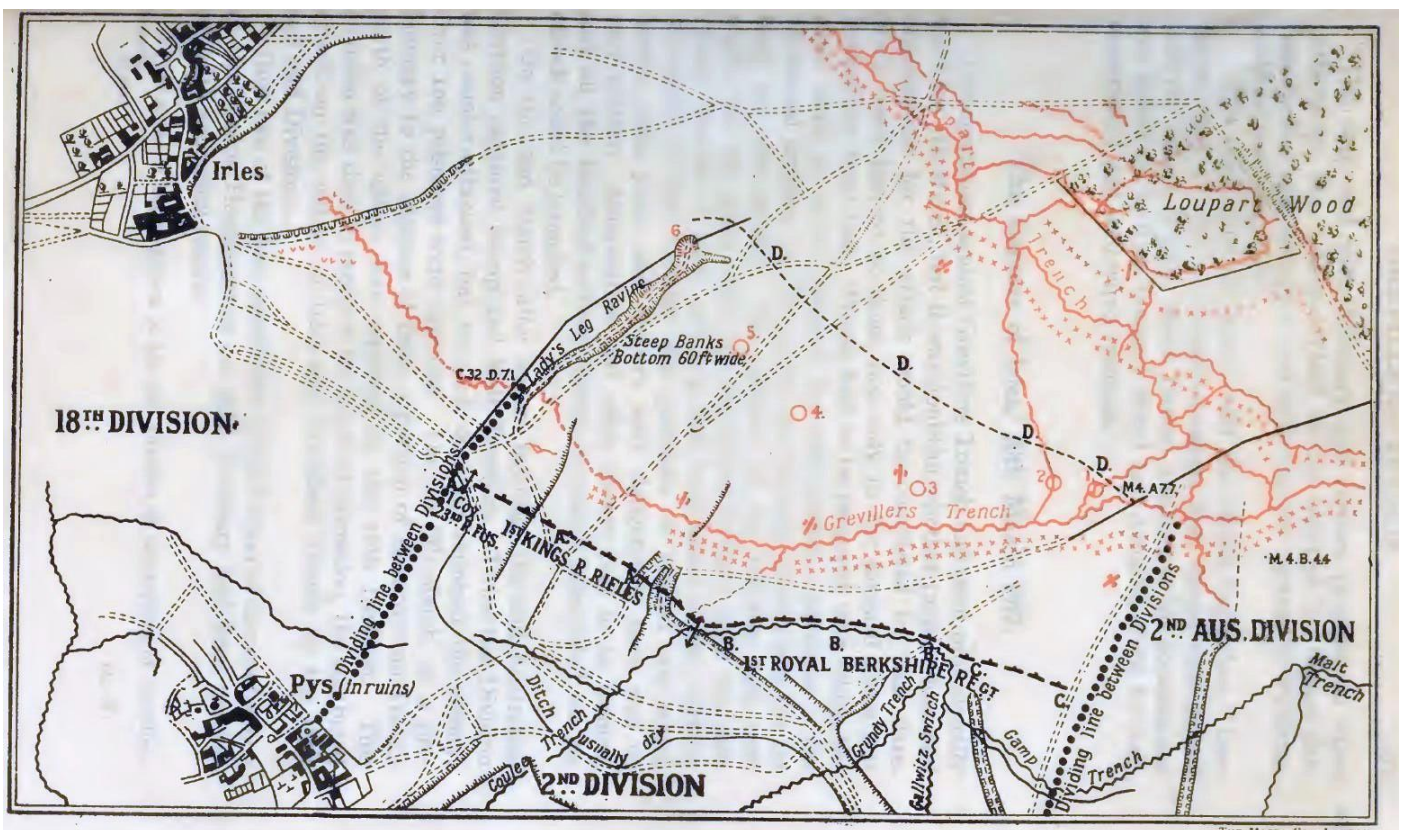
As 1917 opened the battalion were in fine order, all fit and well and at full strength following reinforcement drafts from home and on the 9th of January they started the long march back toward the front. The weather was atrocious and sickness levels rose alarmingly. Up to this point the battalion had been masters at limiting the cases of 'trench foot'. They had even had additional socks, over and above normal army issue, sent over from Kensington. The men knew how to massage and care for their feet and until this time had suffered very few cases of the dreaded ailment. However, standing for days on end in water and mud filled trenches took its toll. The battalion MO was dismayed when many of his men were admitted to hospital to deal with their 'trench foot'.

As February revealed itself the battalion were to be found south of Ancre and Beaumont Hamel. The diary informs us that on the 17th they were located just outside Miraumont, and preparing to advance. The attack was due to commence at 5.45am but the enemy had got wind of the allied plans and started a heavy barrage of their positions at 5am. At 5.30am enemy machine guns opened up. 'D' Company went over the top at 5.45am and advanced toward the enemy barbed wire. By the time they reached it most of the senior officers were dead or wounded. Sergeant Palmer took over with a team of six men. They cut the wire and advanced into the enemy trench forcing the occupants out. The small detachment held the trench all day, repulsing seven counter-attacks by the Germans intent on taking back their trench. By evening they had run out of munitions and Sergeant Palmer went back to HQ for more. By the time he returned to his men the enemy had virtually won back the trench. Again he organised the men and repulsed the enemy, holding the very important flank guard for the battalion. For his excellent work on that day Sergeant Palmer was awarded the Victoria Cross. The rest of his party were awarded Distinguished Conduct Medals (DCM's) or Military Medals (MM). By noon that day all but three officers of the battalion were dead or wounded and 85 other ranks were dead. The battalion Commanding Officer later wrote 'Unfortunately, we bumped into real Huns, who fought splendidly and cleanly not like the miserable creatures we whistled out of dug-outs at the Ancre battle. They came at us like tigers and never let us alone'. The attack at Miraumont in February 1917 was deemed a failure and the battalion losses were heavy, but the action served to put doubt into the minds of the Germans and shortly after this engagement the enemy started their retreat back to the Hindenburg Line. The 22<sup>nd</sup> (Kensington) Fusiliers trailed them and prodded them when they could all the while incurring more losses of six men killed and seventeen wounded.

The logistics of battle are of vital importance. If an advancing party cannot be resupplied with munitions, water, food etc. it cannot advance as planned. On the 10th March the men of the 22<sup>nd</sup> battalion were involved in supporting an advance by the Berkshire Regiment and 1st Kings Rifles on Grevillers Trench to the east of Miraumont,

seen in the plan below. Basing themselves in a quarry at the opening of Lady's Leg Ravine, which speared into enemy territory, they were able to resupply the advancing troops quickly. Within an hour of the initial advance by the Berkshires the Fusiliers had fully resupplied them with munitions and particularly bombs. Although not directly involved in the fighting they were in the front lines and inevitably still kept taking casualties, with one man killed and three wounded. The following day they continued to suffer casualties with five killed and twelve 'other ranks' wounded, but at 4pm on the 11th they were relieved and retired to Albert. Here they stayed until once again required to go forward on the 30th of March at which time they prepared to take part in the Battle of Arras. The Germans continued their retreat to the Hindenburg Line with the allies in close company, pushing and probing all the way. Behind them was the devastation of the Somme battlefields.

### The 2<sup>nd</sup> Division attack Grevillers Trench, 10<sup>th</sup> March 1917



During this phase of fighting battalion casualties were cleared back to 45 Casualty Clearing Station. Here many died of injuries sustained but some made it all the way back to Etaples where a huge hospital complex had been established. From here casualties were repaired and sent back to their regiments or, for those severely injured, evacuated back to England. Sadly, many died from their wounds in the hospitals. Howell was one such and his records merely state that he 'died'. His record shows that at the time of death he was serving in 'A' Company, but the war diary confirms that 'A' Company and the battalion were not in action at this time. From this we must deduce that Howell was injured during the fighting around Miraumont on 17th February or



prodding the enemy in their retreat during March or indeed he may have been injured by some unknown cause. What we do know for sure is that he died in Etaples Military Hospital on the **25th March 1917** and is buried in the hospital cemetery, grave reference XXII.C.8.

Etaples is a town about 17 miles south of Boulogne. With good access to the English Channel and accessible by railway from both southern and northern battle areas, it was the ideal location to establish a large concentration of reinforcement and training camps for men moving forwards and military hospitals for the care of the injured and from where evacuation was possible. Remote from artillery attack it was not impervious to the



Etaples Military Cemetery. 10,771 WW1 casualties interred within

occasional attack by enemy aircraft. Located at Etaples were eleven general hospitals, one stationary, four Red Cross hospitals and a convalescent depot. This huge concentration of medical facilities allowed up to 22000 wounded or sick to be cared for at any one time. Etaples Military Cemetery is to the north of the town, on the road to Boulogne, and currently holds 10,771 Commonwealth burials from the First World War.

Even though Howell's touch on Kington was light he is forever remembered here. He is also remembered on the Royal Fusiliers Memorial in High Holborn, London, where sadly he is not alone. Almost 22000 of his comrades are also commemorated on this impressive memorial.

For his short but bloody experience in France, Howell Wyndham Powell was awarded the Victory and British War medals. In August 1917 the grand sum of £5 2s 8d was forwarded to Howells father John, as final payment of outstanding wages. Later, in November 1919, a further £3 was forwarded as a war gratuity. John and Jane had lost their only son to war and the country had sacrificed a vibrant and intelligent young man. We must never forget what these men endured and the sacrifices they made for the freedoms we enjoy today.



## The battlefield as it is today courtesy of Google earth



By comparing this modern image with the hand drawn battlefield map above we can clearly see that little has changed in the intervening years. Top left is the village of Irles and bottom left is the village of Pys, which the battlefield map tells us was 'in ruins' one hundred years ago. In the centre can still be seen Lady's Leg Ravine where the 22<sup>nd</sup> battalion exerted most of their efforts on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> March 1917. The reason for such an evocative name for a naturally occurring feature can clearly be seen from above. The trenches have disappeared, ploughed in by industrious farmers, with nothing of the man-made terrain surviving.



Researched and Produced by Mark Wheatland