

John Alfred Tunley

Private
54887
10th Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers



John Alfred Tunley has proven to be an elusive person to research with very little of his time in Kington known and, as is often the case, very few of his service documents surviving. However, we are able to say that he was born in 1887 in Evenjobb where his father, William Tunley, was Gamekeeper on the Newcastle Court Estate. William had married Elizabeth Hancocks in 1885 with their first child William arriving shortly after. The focus of this biography, John, was born in 1887 followed by five other siblings, Percy (1889), Arthur (1892), Lewis (1894), Mary (1897) and finally Elizabeth (1900). In 1901 the family were living in Rhos Cottage in Evenjobb, almost certainly a property of the Newcastle Court Estate. William and Elizabeth's growing family was bound to split up in time and in early 1906 John married Charlotte Frances Powell and moved out of his family home.

Charlotte had worked as a domestic servant for the Helson family at New House, Upper Hergest and, with the eye of faith, it is quite possible to see John and Charlotte courting each other across the fields between Hergest and Evenjobb. In mid-1906 Charlotte gave birth to Francis Lily. Sadly, birth and death records indicate that baby Francis died shortly after her birth. As is often the case however, sadness is followed by joy and the following year, 1907, John and Charlotte brought Dorothy Frances into the world. This was followed in 1909 by the birth of John Stanley Tunley. The 1911 census tells us that the fledgling family were living at a farm called Fforddfawr on the outskirts of Hay-on-

[illegible]

The 10th Battalion was a service Battalion, raised in Wrexham on the 16th October 1914 in response to Lord Kitchener's call to arms. The new battalion began their

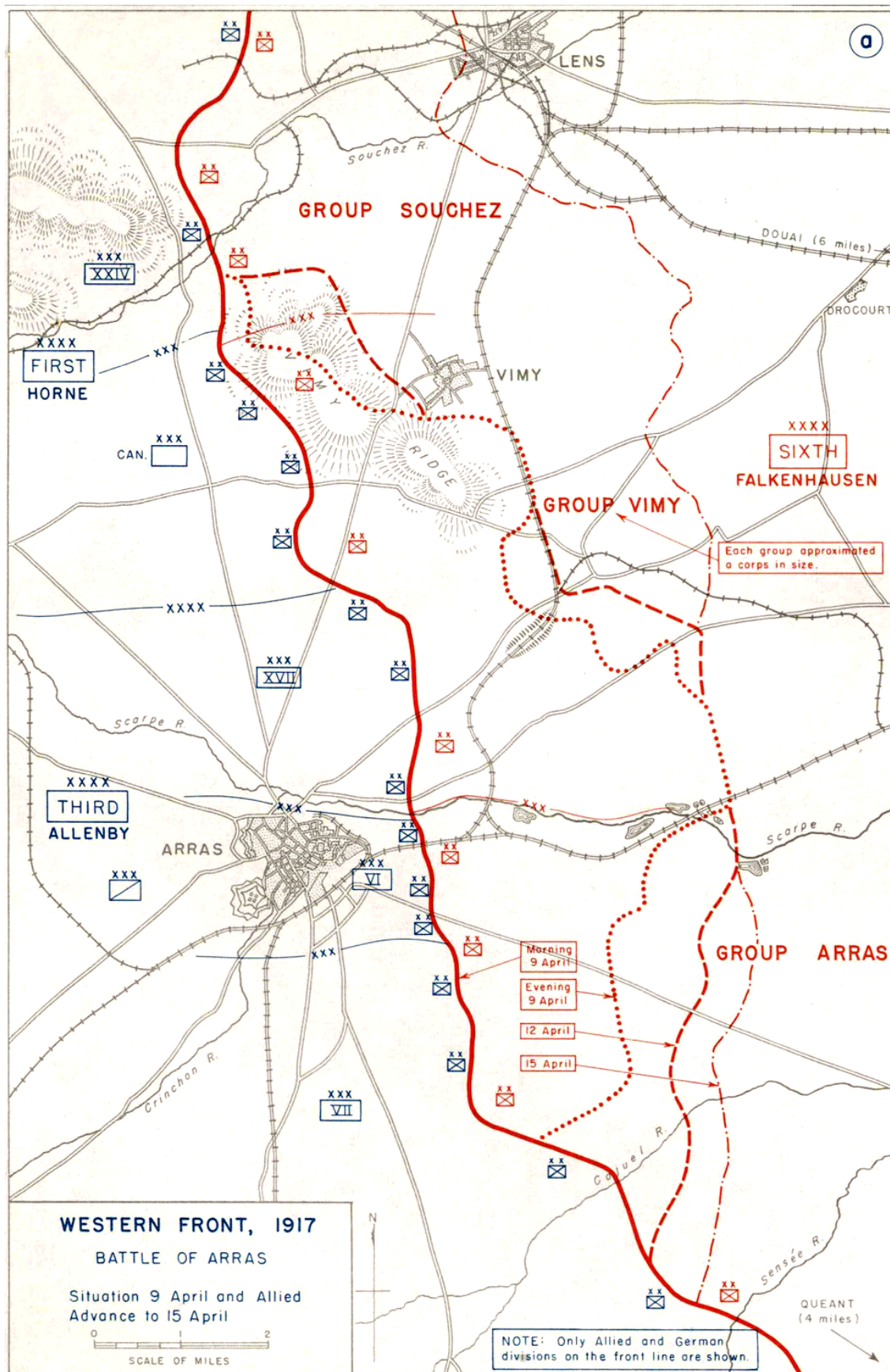
A vintage World War I recruitment poster. It features a close-up, high-contrast illustration of a soldier's face and upper torso. The soldier has a prominent mustache and is wearing a dark military cap with a light-colored band. He is pointing his right index finger directly at the viewer, creating a sense of personal address. The background is a plain, light-colored surface. Below the soldier's face, the text "YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS" is written in a bold, sans-serif font, followed by the word "YOU" in a much larger, stylized, outlined font. In the bottom left corner, there is a small signature that reads "G. M. 1917".

1914 or at any time until the end of 1916. However, we can assume that he was with them by the end of 1916 and I shall now turn to the battalion War Diary to discover what they and John Tunley were doing at the beginning of 1917.

Christmas of 1916 had been spent in billets at Louvencourt, well behind the front lines, about ten miles to the north west of Albert. On the 29th the battalion were marched to the frontline and relieved the 4th Royal Fusiliers at Serre. The new year saw some respite for them when they were relieved by the 2nd Suffolk Regiment and marched to billets at Courcelles-au-Bois. They were then in and out of trenches until the middle of the month. Once relieved they proceeded on a long march to Halloy where they remained in R&R and training until the end of the month. Throughout January the weather is recorded as being very wet but by the end of the month had turned, some might suggest for the better, to very cold and on the 31st January it snowed. The cold was combatted by lots of route marches, recreational activities and training. February saw the battalion billeted in Bethonsart, a small village to the north west of Arras. On the 11th February they were marched to billets just outside Arras where preparations were made to go back into the trenches. In amongst all the training and marching one piece of good news emerges, the weather appears to have moderated. Mid-February saw the battalion in trenches around Arras but on the 19th they were relieved by the 1st Battalion the Gordon Highlanders and returned to their billets in Arras. Bad news, it's raining again. The end of February had them back in the trenches but on the 28th the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers relieved them and they fell back to Hauteville. This particular diary is preoccupied with the state of the weather and on the 2nd of March we learn that it was a fine day and a remarkable day for the battalion by any stretch of the Western Front imagination, there is just one entry, 'BATTALION HOLIDAY'. Quite remarkable that with all the horror surrounding them they still had a modicum of quality down time. This period of relative peace and quiet lasted through to the end of March. They were based at a training area near Berlencourt-le-Cauroy, well behind the frontline and again the weather seems to be the most important factor at this time. Each day a simple entry reads 'WET'. The weather continued to deteriorate into April and on the 2nd and 3rd it snowed heavily. On the 4th they were up and about and marched nine miles to Wanquetin where they once again prepared to re-enter the dreaded trenches around Arras.

All the training and down time was preparing them for another big push, the Battle of Arras, which took place between the 9th April and 16th May. The 10th Battalion the Royal Welsh Fusiliers were to be central to its prosecution. The weather was awful but regardless at 7pm on the 6th April the battalion were moved forward toward Arras. Arriving in Arras at 10pm they were quickly billeted in the cellars of houses on Rue Ronville, not far from the station. Final preparations were made, bombs, grenades, picks and shovels were issued and at 7pm on the 8th April the battalion emerged from their cellars and moved forward into their allocated assembly positions. A massed artillery barrage was unleashed by the allies which was met in kind by the enemy and a huge artillery battle ensued. The morning of the 9th was wet and miserable and the men waiting in their trenches were tense and silent, fully aware they were about to

take part in a huge battle, their goal, to take and hold Vimy Ridge which spread out to the north east of Arras. The map below clearly shows Vimy Ridge and Allenby's 3rd Division, which the 10th Royal Welsh Fusiliers were part of, positioned around Arras.



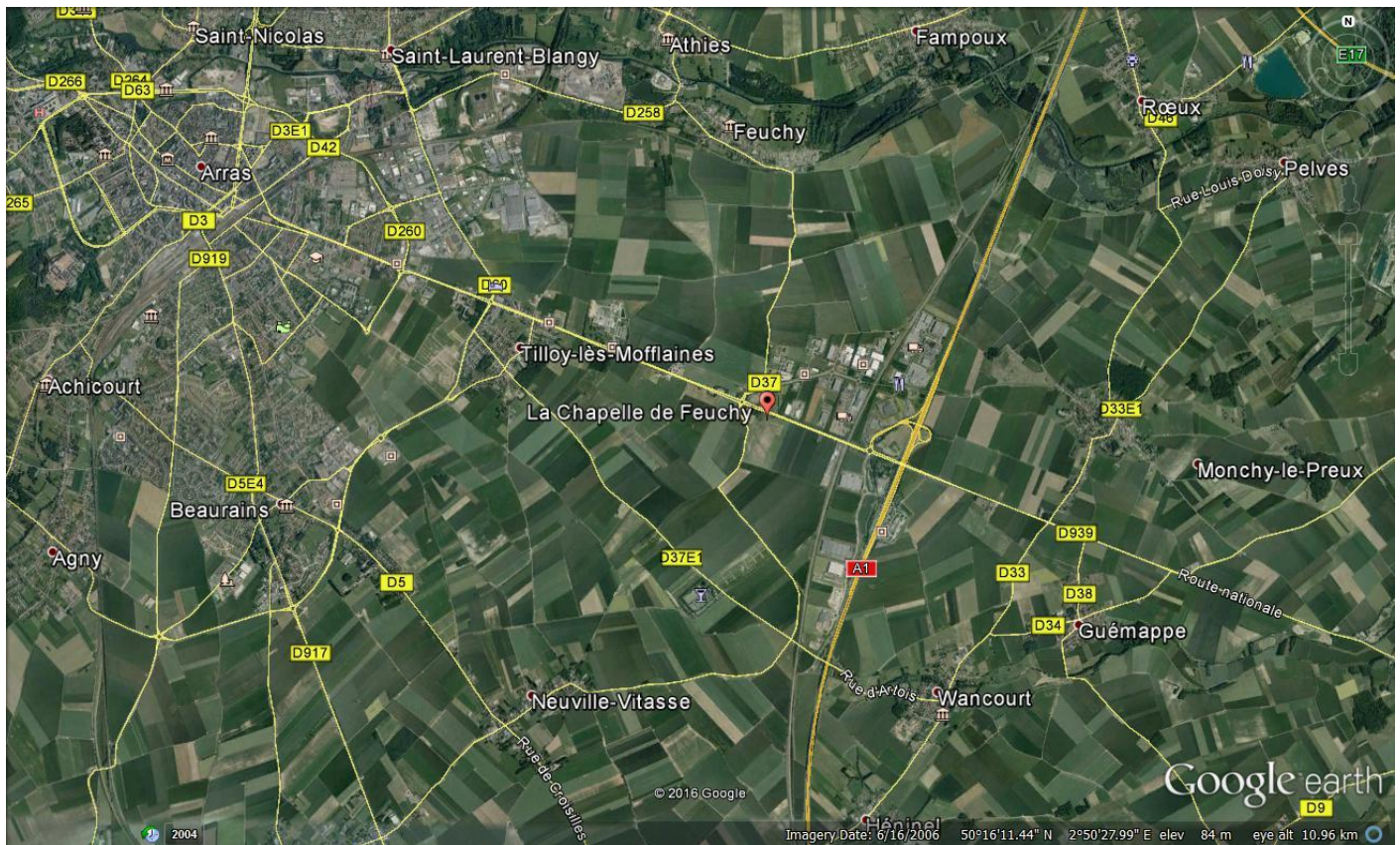
The battalion were in a second attacking wave and as zero hour approached, 5:30am, whistles blew and the men left their trenches and advanced toward the enemy. Passing over their own frontline trenches, recently vacated by the 1st Gordon Highlanders, they advanced into 'no-man's-land' heading towards the enemy trenches. The artillery bombardment continued as they advanced and fortunately its accuracy had destroyed barbed wire and was landing in the enemy trenches. Although badly mauled by enemy machine gunners they kept on advancing eventually coming level with the German first line trenches. These were being swept and cleared by the Highlanders and so the men of the 10th immediately advanced to the enemies second and third line trenches. Here they were halted and took a well-earned breather as the allied artillery concentrated its fire upon the enemies 4th line of defence hidden in an adjacent wood. Once the heavy shells have done their business the 10th advance again into the woods and into the enemies last line of defence. A scene of total devastation was revealed, no enemy soldiers were found alive. They had been killed by the heavy artillery bombardment or had retreated to escape the murderous shell fire. The 10th had reached their objective and set about consolidating their new position sure in the belief that an enemy counter attack would follow.

In front of them lay the village of Tillery behind which was located the enemy's heavy artillery. This had been silenced as they scrambled to retreat and save their guns, all the while under continued attack from the British heavy machinery. The men in the woods were grateful for this respite which gave them time to regroup and take stock. They had done their job and behind them approached the massed battalions of 8 Brigade, which had been set the task of advancing further onto and through Tillery, keeping the enemy on the run. The men of the 10th Royal Welsh Fusiliers became spectators of this advance, their job done, but they would never forget Easter Monday 1917.

By 10am on the 9th April the assault was complete. The British artillery, now on extreme range, ceases fire, limbered up and advanced, taking up new positions close to where the men of the 10th were observing. Soon the heavy crash of harrying bombardment recommenced. For the enemy, now in full retreat, there was no respite. At 12 noon soldiers of 3 Brigade swarmed around the 10th battalion, as they too were thrown into the headlong advance, chasing the enemy as they retreated. At 4pm, to the excitement of the 10th Battalion, cavalry was unleashed on the enemy, chasing them down, all this observed by the gallant men of the 10th who sat in relative comfort in the enemies forth line trenches above the village of Tillery. At 7pm they were relieved and returned back to the enemy second line trenches for the night. Here they licked their wounds and prepare for the next day's exertions.

At 5am on the 10th April, the battalion were ordered to stand too in preparation for confronting the enemy again. However, this order was cancelled and the battalion spent the 10th at one hours' notice to advance. The order did not come until 2:45 am on the 11th. Heavy snow was falling as the men advanced through Tillery and took up positions at Feuchy Chapelle. Here the battalion were informed they would be attacking

the village of Guemappe.



The modern day map above clearly shows the battalions advance from Arras on the left through Tilloy-les-Mofflaines onto Chapelle de Feuchy with their new objective the village of Guemappe on the bottom right. However, as preparations were made to advance the enemy became aware of their plans and turned their artillery fire upon the men of the 10th. The enemy artillery and machine gun fire was intense, but had to be endured. The Germans were fully aware of what was coming and fought like demons. Unlike on the 9th the British artillery response was wholly inadequate and the 10th were required to attack over open ground with limited artillery support. They formed up in their assembly position in a sunken road at 6:30am. In the quiet before the storm they took the opportunity to take a hearty breakfast, of biscuits. As the clock approached 6:55am the order was given to 'stand to'. Their advance started at 7am on the 11th April 1917, over open ground, under intense enemy fire. This time there was no concentrated British artillery bombardment playing in front of them hence they were forced to walked straight into heavy enemy resistance. With no artillery support the enemy were able to strafe the advancing troops with machine gun fire and hidden snipers were able to fire at will. In spite of these horrors the men of the 10th continue to advance, but by 7:30 they could go no further, any opportunity to continue their advance, lost. The battalion became bogged down and the men of the 10th were forced to seek shelter in mud filled shell holes. At midnight on the 11th the whole Brigade was relieved. The men of the 10th Royal Welsh Fusiliers had been on the offensive for nearly three days and nights continuously. They had endured unimaginable hardships and

horrors, freezing conditions and mud filled trenches and bomb craters had been their only protection. The battalion suffered heavy losses during those three days with 13 officers killed or wounded and 202 other ranks killed, wounded or missing. Private John Alfred Tunley was killed in action on the **11th April 1917** at the Battle of Arras.

Such a detailed account of the battalion's movements and actions at the Battle of Arras has been made possible, not just by access to the official war diary, but also the personal diary of Private George Culpitt who served alongside John Tunley in the 10th Battalion, Royal Welsh Fusiliers. For those interested in reading more, a full transcript of Private Culpitt's comprehensive and compelling diary is available at www.culpitt-war-diary.org.uk.

Private John Tunley is buried at Feuchy Chapel British Cemetery, plot I.E.34, not too far from where he fell. The cemetery is located outside the village of Wancourt and lies in the valley of the Cojeul River. Wancourt was captured by the British on the 12th April 1917 following heavy fighting, its location can be seen in the map above. The cemetery was started by the VI Corps Burial Officer in May 1917 and at the Armistice on 11th November 1918 contained 249 graves. It was later enlarged when 834 graves, mainly of April and May 1917 burials, were brought in from the battlefields of Fampoux, Roeux, Monchy and Wancourt, and from a few smaller burial grounds in the area. It appears that John was originally buried in FEUCHY CHAPEL QUARRY CEMETERY, about 200 meters north of his final resting place. Feuchy Chapel Quarry Cemetery originally contained the graves of 17 soldiers from the United Kingdom who fell in April 1917. There is a separate smaller memorial to these 17 men and John's grave is adjacent to this memorial. There are now 1,103 Commonwealth burials and commemorations of the First World War in Feuchy Chapel British Cemetery.

Back home in Huntington news of his death seems confused. An entry in the 23rd June edition of the Hereford Times recorded that;

'Official news has been received by Mrs Tunley, Hillgate, Huntington near Kington, that her husband Private JA Tunley, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, was killed in action on the 8th or 11th April. He was previously reported as missing'.



John's passing left a large family of dependents mourning his death. In the Army Register of Soldiers Effects we discover that he was owed £2 8s 7d which was passed to his widow on the 22nd September 1917. Later a small War Gratuity was granted and a further £3 was

passed to Charlotte. But in spite of the undoubted grief John's death caused life back in Kington carried on. Records show that Dorothy Frances, his oldest daughter, married in 1923, aged just 16, to Henry Inseal in Kington. John Stanley Tunley married Doris Colburn in 1956 and lived to the ripe old age of 80 before passing away in Leominster in 1990. William Victor, John's youngest son, married Edith Waygood in 1944 followed by a second marriage to Rose White in 1958. William passed away in Worcester in 1980 at the relatively young age of 65. As for John's wife Charlotte it appears she never remarried and passed away in Leominster in 1975 at the grand old age of 96.

John Alfred Tunley was just one of 80 Kington and Huntington men whose lives were cut short by World War One. For his sacrifice he was posthumously awarded the Victory and British War medals and at the start of this biography can be seen his Memorial Plaque which was issued to his grieving family shortly after the war. May he long rest in peace.



Researched and developed by Mark Wheatland