Leonard Langford

Corporal

1809

1st Battalion, Welsh Guards

Leonard Langford's story is a truly poignant one which starts with the death of his mother, Elizabeth Langford, nee Cadmore, in 1892. Leonard was just six years old when his father, Charles, was left to care for a considerable family. In 1867 Charles had married his sweetheart in their shared home of Kington and in early 1869 Thomas, the first of their eight children, arrived. The birth records show that the family then grew steadily over the next twenty years with Charles in 1871, Anne 1875, Sarah Jane 1877, Elizabeth 1880, William 1883, the hero of this piece Leonard in 1886 and finally Gertrude in 1888. In 1871 Charles is recorded as a bricklayer and his fledgling family were living at No1 Headbrook. Ten years later the family had grown and moved to 5 Wishlades Row. Wishlades Row is a line of small cottages set back off Duke Street and with seven people living in the small house it must have been very tight. The 1891 census shows that Charles and Ann had moved out or were certainly not present on census night. Twenty-one-year-old Thomas was still at home and working as a postman, one assumes in Kington. None the less, as some moved out new children had arrived, William, Leonard and baby Gertrude, and for certain the house must have still been bulging at the seams. Adjacent is an image of the magnificent memorial scroll produced by Miss Lois Maxwell, a staff member at Kington Boys School, which reveals that Leonard had attended but sadly died in the war, his memory being immortalised in her work. Census records for this period suggest that following the death of Elizabeth in 1892 the

family started to drift apart. In the 1901 census there were just three family members still living together and we see that they had moved to Crooked Well. The family unit now consisted, Charles senior, a stone mason, Leonard fifteen and an errand boy/porter, which might suggest he was working at Kington station, and young Gertrude now turned thirteen. The whereabouts of other family members is unclear.

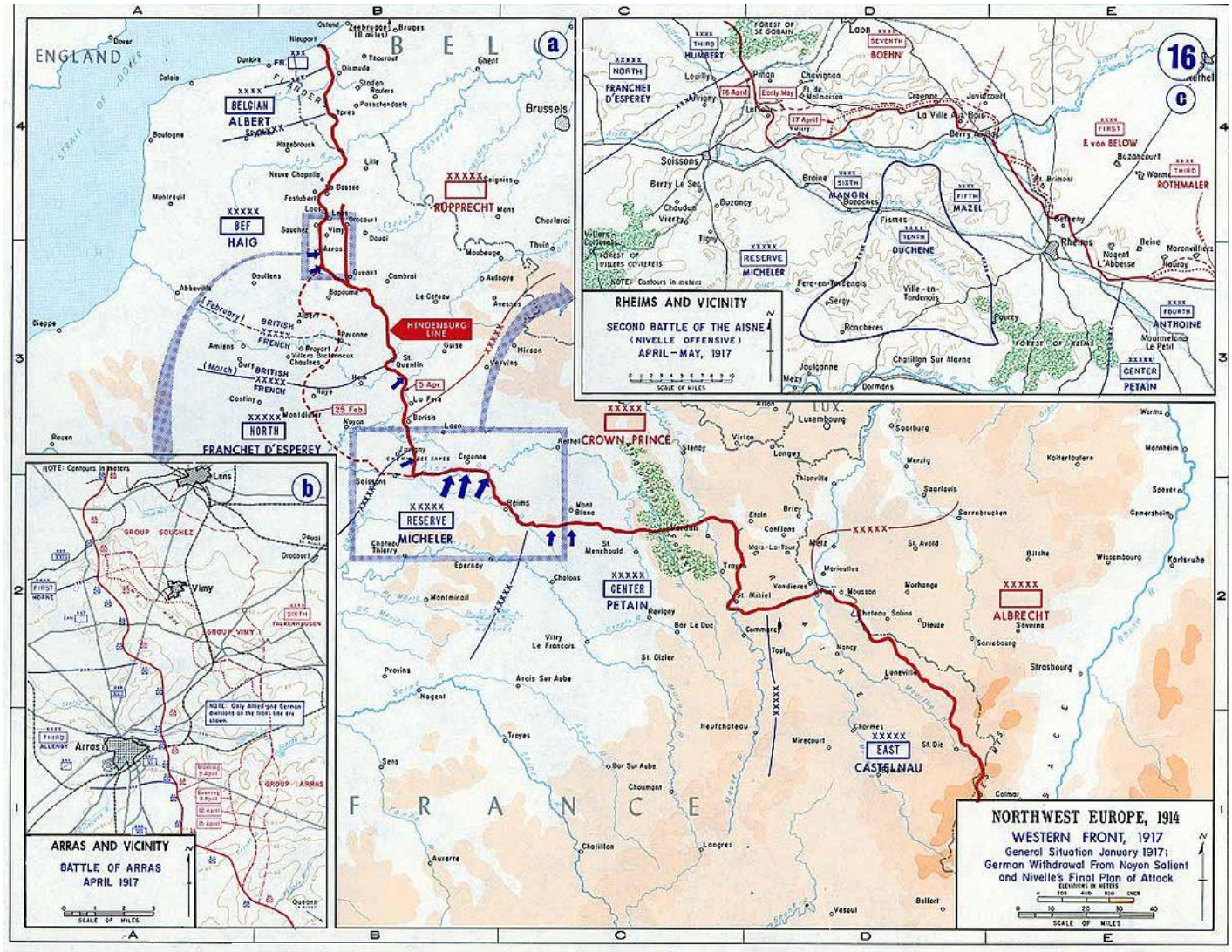
Life in Victorian and Edwardian Britain was often hard and potential tragedy was always just around the corner. The Langford family appears to have attracted its fair share of heartbreak. Firstly, the death of the matriarch of the family in 1892 and then, in the 1st October 1907 edition of the Kington Times, we discover that Charles Langford, mason of Kington, had died of natural causes. An inquest convened at Kington Police station by the Coroner of Herefordshire on 19th September 1907 established what had happened. At his death Charles was 63 and was working at Lower Hergest repairing steps at the Granary. The inquest heard testimony from several witnesses the first being Elizabeth Langford, Charles's daughter. Elizabeth stated that he had left home on the previous Friday and was in good health. Thomas Sargent of Mill Street testified that he had 'met Charley at 6:10 that morning and together they had proceeded to Lower Hergest'. Thomas recalled that 'Charley was just eight yards away when at 7:30 he heard a noise and saw Charley had fallen'. He reported to the inquest that 'Charley never spoke and was dead within five minutes'. The doctor who carried out the post mortem reported that Charles Langford had died of heart disease. This left the jury no option but to return a verdict of 'death by natural causes'.

With the loss of both his mother and father, and many of his siblings having gone their separate ways, Leonards ties to Kington were gradually diminishing. In the 1911 census we discover that he had left Kington, moved south, and was living at Bryngarn, Seven Sisters, Glamorganshire. Leonard was a tenant of Mr William Richards and working as a builder's labourer. We can imagine that with the outbreak of war in August 1914 Leonards choices and decisions were fairly clear-cut.

Leonard joined the 1st Battalion, Welsh Guards at Tredegar, and became Private 1809 Langford. Analysis of service numbers issued to new recruits suggest this was probably in mid-July 1915. A Royal Warrant dated 26th February 1915 gave royal assent for a new regiment, the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, to be raised. Considered by many to be the elite of the regular army, Guards regiments had no battalions of the territorial forces raised for Lord Kitchener's New Armies and were generally manned by regular soldiers. However, as regular soldiers were depleted the Welsh Guards started to accept both 'duration only' volunteers and conscripts but, importantly, took great care to maintain their high standards of efficiency and fighting prowess and accordingly were among the infantry most feared by the enemy. Initially located in White city the battalion had been moved to Sandown Park on 28th April 1915. From here they transferred to Wellington Barracks in central London and it was quite probable Leonard joined his regiment here. On the 18th August of that year the battalion landed at Le Havre and came under the command of 3rd Guards Brigade of the Guards Division. The Guards Division packed considerable punch and were rightly feared by the enemy. The Guards Division was uniquely formed in France by subsuming Guards regiments from other infantry Divisions. The Division was made up of three Guards Brigades and numerous other

support functions. The 3rd Guards Brigade consisted the 1st and 4th Battalions Grenadier Guards, 2nd Battalion Scots Guards, 1st Battalion Welsh Guards, the 3rd Guards Machine Gun Company and the 3rd Guards Trench Mortar Battery. This formidable force was immediately blooded at the opening largescale battle of the war, the Battle of Loos, on 26th September 1915.

The war, which everyone was assured would be over by Christmas, rumbled on into 1916. That year the Welsh Guards were present at The Battle of Flers-Courcelette and the Battle of Morval. In 1917 they participated in the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, The Battle of Pilkem, The Battle of the Menin Road, The Battle of Poelkapelle, The First Battle of Passchendaele and The Battle of Cambrai which opened on 20th November 1917. Cambrai was occupied by the Germans and was considered a relatively quiet sector of the Western Front. During the winter of 1916-1917 this enabled the Germans to build a formidable defensive position from Arras in the north to Laffaux, near Soissons on the River Aisne, in the south. The Germans called this defensive line the Siegfriedstellung, the British knew it as the Hindenburg Line. Cambrai was a vital supply point for the Hindenburg Line, if the allies were to break through this impressive defensive line it was essential they relieved the enemy of its strategic importance.



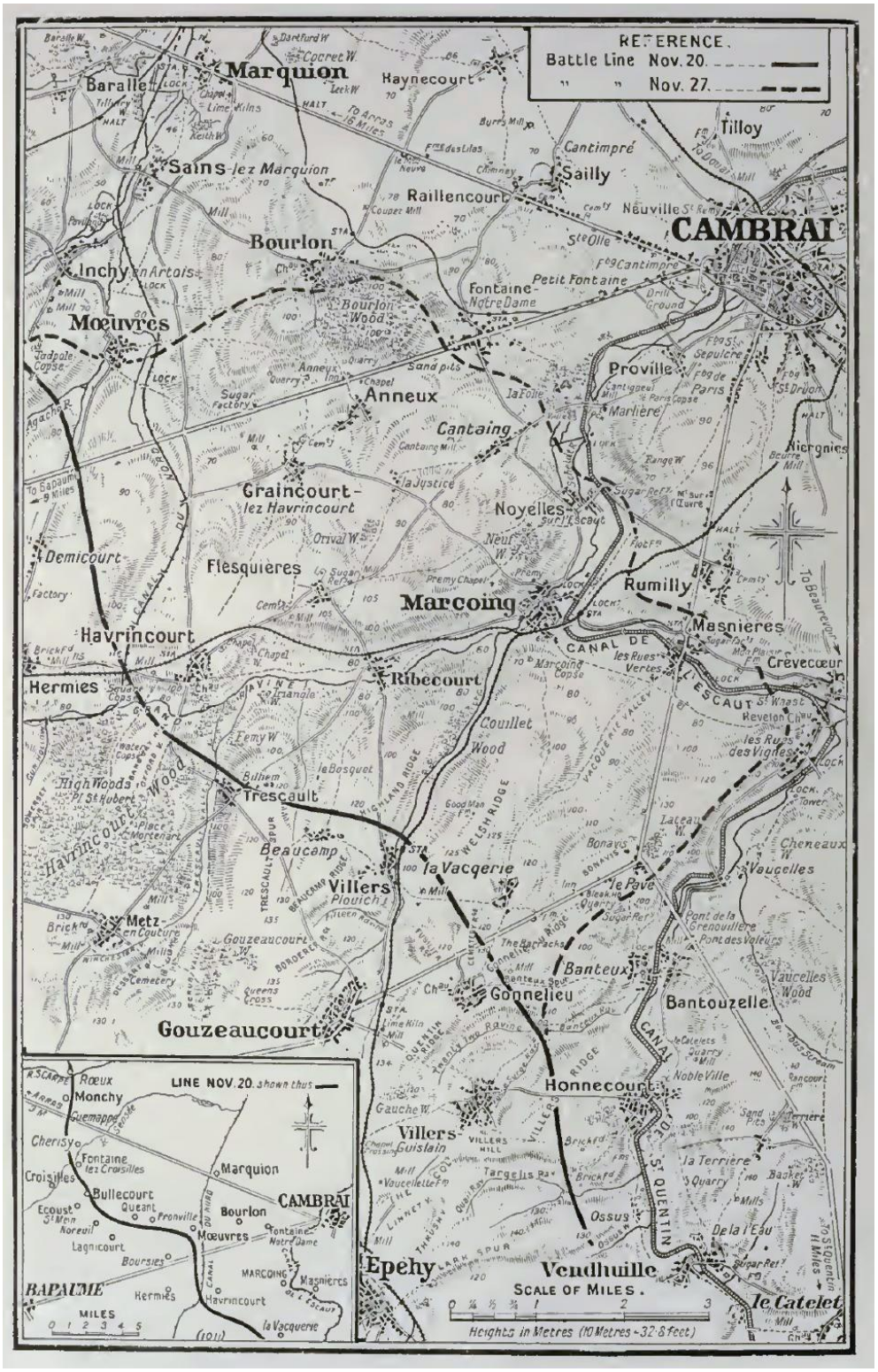
The map above shows the situation on the Western Front in 1917. The Hindenburg Line can be seen in the northern sector of the front. War tends to breed innovation and Allied Command devised a plan to take Cambrai whereby infantry, artillery and tanks would be used in consort. This tactic had been used in the past but with limited success and arguably against less well defended positions. Previously massed artillery was used in advance of an infantry advance but tended to be of less benefit than promised. Its effectiveness was haphazard and warned the enemy of an impending attack. Clearly more effective artillery fire was required. Surprise was the watch word and two new systems of artillery fire were proposed, the first being Sound Ranging. This was a method of accurately pinpointing the location of an enemy artillery battery by collating data derived from the sound of the enemy guns, literally acoustic location. Allied artillery could then be accurately targeted for maximum effect. The second innovation was Silent Registering. Up to this point, for artillery to be accurately laid down, the guns had to be ranged by firing them, thus alerting the enemy to the imminent attack. Silent Registering, also known as predicted fire, was a technique using calculation and detailed surveys, often aerial, of enemy positions. This allowed the artillery to fire accurately from the first round. Large numbers of tanks were also proposed, primarily to break through the formidable barbed wire defences, however their effectiveness was questionable. They were unreliable and all too often became stranded in terrain which had been cratered by earlier shellfire. To resolve this problem a new shell was proposed which utilized the No.106 shell fuse. Up to this point allied artillery was used to destroy enemy positions, break through barbed wire defences and generally terrorise the 'boche'. This was of limited effectiveness and only created a cratered battlefield for men and machines to fight on. The French had designed a new type of fuse, No.106, which detonated upon instant and limited contact, whether barbed wire, bunker or indeed man. This resulted in less destruction of terrain and made tank utilisation more effective. It was hoped that by combining these three innovations a more effective outcome would result. I will now move to the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards official war diary and explain what happened to them during the battle and indeed the fate of Leonard Langford.

In mid-October 1917 the battalion were operating in consort with other Guards Regiments of the 3rd Guards Brigade, north of Ypres, just outside Langemark and Poelcappelle. Positioned in front-line trenches just to the south-west of Houthulst Forest, the weather was appalling with heavy rain and the resultant thick mud the order of the day. On the 14th the battalion were retired to Larrey Camp just outside the village of Elverdinghe. Dirty, exhausted but alive the men of the 1st Welsh Guards set to work cleaning, resting and having their first hot food for many days. They might have thought they would be safe behind the front line but overnight 'Bosche planes flew over and dropped nearly 50 bombs close to our location', wrote the Commanding Officer. Airborne bombing continued throughout the day and into the night. On the 16th the battalion were again moved, this time to Henley Camp where rest and recuperation continued. At 12.15pm on the 17th the whole battalion entrained at Ondank Dump heading for a siding at Beldingham where they detrained and marched to Paddock Wood Camp near Proven, north west of Poperinghe. Here, in relative safety, they regrouped, cleaned up and slept. However, as was ever the case, on the 18th the men were on the

move again marching to Serques, over the border into France. The 21st October was a 'red letter day', a very proud day for the battalion. The men were mustered and paraded in their finery and Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught and Strathearn, the seventh child of Queen Victoria, visited the battalion to inspect, congratulate and present decorations to numerous, proud worthies.

The battalion stayed at Serques until the 9th November whereupon they marched fifteen miles south to the small village of Enguinegatte. The following morning, a further ten-mile route march south led them to Heuchin and on the 11th they moved on to Buneville to the west of Arras. They stayed at Buneville, recuperating and training, until the 17th November on which date they were again moved, always heading toward the frontlines around Arras. Grand Rullecourt, Berles-au-Bois, Achie-le-petit were all passed through and gradually, from all over this part of France, the 3rd Guards Brigade regrouped. The War Diary informs us that on the 23rd November the whole Brigade marched en-mass toward Flesquieres. What a fine sight this must have been as this huge body of men, nigh on 5000, approached the war-torn town of Cambrai.

As mentioned earlier the Battle of Cambrai started on the 20th November and was initially successful. On the 24th the battalion were positioned in dugouts on the infamous Hindenburg Line. The weather was appalling but war goes on regardless and on the 25th November one company of men were sent forwards to the frontline support trenches at La Justice. At 1:30am on the 26th Captain Roderick reported back to battalion HQ that his company, including machine guns, were in position as ordered. The battalion were informed they were to attack the German strongpoint at Fontaine Notre Dame with Captain Roderick's 'C' Company in the vanguard. By 5.50am on the 27th the battalion was in its jumping off position. Zero hour was 6.20am at which time they went over the top and were met by fierce opposition. By midnight on the 27th the battalion found themselves in frontline trenches to the south of Bourlon Wood having relieved the Irish Guards. At 12.15am on the 28th a party were sent out into Bourlon Wood to find a company of Irish Guards who had been reported as 'cut off' and in need of assistance. The Welsh Guards never found those men. The day wore on and was generally quiet save for the intermittent shelling, sniping and machinegun fire from a resistant enemy. That evening the battalion were relieved and marched toward Ribecourt. They were kept on the move until, on the evening of 29th they were bivouacked at Trescault. The Battle of Cambrai is remembered for its initial success for the allies but also for the massed counter attack the Germans made to retake lost ground. This is patently clear in the diary when on the morning of the 30th the men



were rudely awoken and ordered to 'stand to', the enemy had broken through British lines and were advancing in force.

Such was the confusion of the ensuing battle that the battalion were ordered to quickly form up at Dessart Woods outside Metz-en-Couture. No sooner had they established themselves in this position than they received new orders to retrace their steps 1000m back toward a position South East of Trescault. This game of military chess continued into the evening when they were again on the move, now ordered to Gouzeaucourt. Later that evening the Commanding Officer of 1st Battalion Welsh Guards received orders to attack, at first light, Gonnelieu, a small village to the east of Gouzeaucourt. That night the battalion prepared for the imminent confrontation.

On the morning of 1st December 1917, Welsh Guards, with their chums from the 4th Grenadier Guards on their left, were in position and ready to go over the top, zero hour being 6.20am. The attack was to be supported by tanks, which did not materialise. It appears the attack proceeded as planned but came to a halt at an unexpected bank of heavy barbed-wire defences. The advance stalled until 9am when the promised tanks appeared over the horizon and broke through the barbed-wire allowing the Guards to continue their advance. Also in this heroic advance were the Irish Guards whose progress toward Gonnelieu was faltering since they were pinned down by ferocious machine gun fire from village. Progress for the Welsh Guards was better, they captured

their objectives along with 300 prisoners and 26 machine guns. However, success came at a very high cost to the Guardsmen. The diary records that most casualties occurred during the first twenty minutes, the time when the promised tanks were not in theatre. Five officers were killed with four others wounded. The other ranks suffered terribly with 70 dead and some 200 wounded. The following day the battalion, severely depleted, were relieved and retreated behind the front lines to recover. The record shows that **Leonard Langford** died of wounds at No.48 Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) on the **30th November 1917**. The circumstances of his wounding are unknown but it appears he did not take part in the Guards gallant advance on Gonnelieu.

From May 1917 to March 1918 the 48th CCS was located at Ytres about seven miles west of Gonnelieu and buried their dead at Rocquigny-Equancourt Road British Cemetery. Corporal Leonard Langford now lies at rest in this cemetery, grave reference III.C.23, along with seven of his comrades who also died during the Battle of Cambrai. When informed of his death his sister Elizabeth requested the following words be inscribed upon his memorial cross. 'TILL THE DAY BREAKS, IN LOVING MEMORY FROM HIS SISTERS'. The cemetery is located on the Rocquigny/Equancourt road about two miles south of Ytres. Established after the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line in early 1917 it now contains 2016 men who fought in the First World War, 195 of which are German graves.

Leonards name is not only commemorated on Kington War Memorial but also the Tredegar Memorial located in the grounds of Bedwellty House and Park on the outskirts of Tredegar. Consecrated on the 14th December 1924 it records the names of over 300 Tredegar men who did not return.

For his undoubted bravery Leonard was awarded the Victory and British War medals. His name was also read out at Kington Peace Service held at St Mary's church on Sunday 6th July 1919. Each Remembrance Day, the people of Kington gather around their memorial and once again remember the sacrifice given by all those who did not return. After the

war Leonards army account was made up and £13 0s 1d was forwarded to his sole legate Elizabeth Turner in Leominster. His sister received a further £11 10s War Gratuity in December 1919. £24 10s 1d equates to £520 today, a small price to pay for one man's life.

Leonard Langford's Biography was researched and produced by Mark Wheatland