

Albert Henry Hamer

Private

7201

2nd Battalion King's Shropshire Light Infantry



Albert Henry Hamer was the youngest of three children born to Benjamin and Isabel Hamer. Benjamin, a builder and surveyor, was born in Kerry near Newtown in Montgomeryshire and had moved, with his younger brother Henry, to Kington in about 1870. The two brothers lodged at 36 Bridge Street and set up a building business at Sunset Yard. In the 1871 census both brothers were recorded as being Builders and Surveyors and the company was employing some 30 men in the business. Also in 1871 Benjamin married Isabel Thomas, from Tenby and together they moved to Belmont House in Duke Street, Kington. Here they brought up their three children, Isabel Florence (1870), Alfred George (1872) and Albert Henry Hamer, born in Brecon on the 12th February 1874. Albert, or Bert as he preferred to be known, was educated at Lady Hawkins' School and when old enough went to work in his father's business as an assistant surveyor. By this time, 1891, Benjamin and his family was living at a house called Rock Close on Gravel Hill, Kington. It appears Bert's attentions were not solely on his building work since records provided by surviving relatives show he was quite athletic and sporty. He played

football for Hereford Thistle, a team no longer in existence, and was offered professional terms to play for Aston Villa. But for whatever reason he refused this opportunity and went in search of greater adventure. He joined the Army in early 1900 and served as Private 7604 Hamer in 2nd Battalion the King's Shropshire Light Infantry during the 2nd Boer War. He enlisted into a Volunteer (Service) Company which, by design, served for a limited time in South Africa. Bert's detachment was the second from the King's Shropshire Light Infantry to sail for South Africa and left these shores in March 1901 arriving at Cape Town on the 29th April. Throughout the year or so he served in South Africa Albert's detachment were employed guarding blockhouses, trains and Battalion baggage. His medal record from this conflict would support this indicating that he received the Queens South Africa Medal with 1901 and 1902 South Africa clasps and three further clasps, Cape Colony, Orange Free State and Transvaal. This would indicate he did not take part in any specific actions. On the 4th of June 1902 he arrived back in this country and was discharged from service on the 8th of June 1902, "in consequence of termination of engagement" having served for one year and 120 days. By the time of his release he had achieved the rank of Lance Corporal. Returning to his parents' house, now The Beeches on the corner of Duke Street and Gravel Hill, it is clear he enjoyed his time in South Africa. Passenger Lists for March 1906 and June 1909 record an A H Hamer travelling back to South Africa, so it is possible this was our Bert returning, for what reason we do not know.

Tragedy hit the family in 1910 when Bert's brother Alfred passed away. A report in the 2nd April edition of the Kington Times released the sad news. In his youth Alfred had worked for his father but then attained a position working in Calcutta. He worked in India for two years and then got a job working for the Colonial Office as a Government Surveyor on the Gold Coast of Western Africa, he served there for 13 years. He came home on leave during the summer of 1909 , returning later that year only to be invalided back to England in January 1910 having contracted a tropical disease. He was treated at the London School of Tropical Medicine where he stayed for a few weeks under observation before returning to Kington. He's illness did not improve and in March of 1910 he returned back to the London School of Tropical Medicine. It was here that he died in late March with his body being returned for burial in Kington Cemetery.

Life with the Hamer's carried on despite the sad loss of Alfred. On the 4th July 1911, at the age of 37, Albert married Lillian Ruth Bridges at St Mary's Church in the Parish of Stamford Brook, Hammersmith, London. He was so enamoured with South Africa that he chose this destination to take his new wife for their honeymoon. They sailed from Southampton

bound for South Africa aboard the Kildonan Castle on the 8th of July 1911. They really must have enjoyed themselves because on the 25th February 1912 their son Albert George (David) Hamer was born. And so it was that when they arrived back in the country on 26th November 1912 aboard the Aberdeen Direct Lines, Intaba they were Mr and Mrs Hamer plus one. The happy family returned from their adventure and moved in with Lillian's parents at Ivy Dene, Kington. Regrettably, due to the outbreak of war in August 1914, their newfound happiness was short lived.

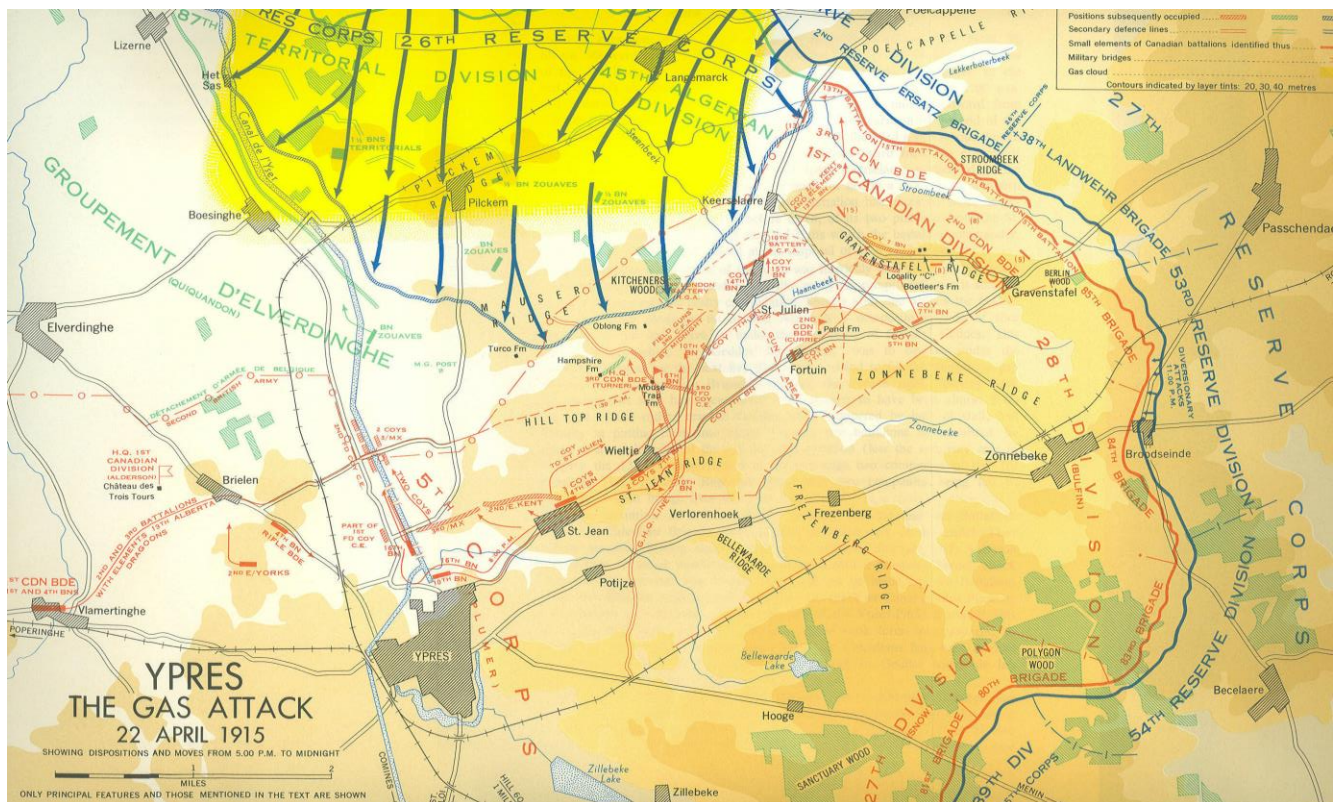
David, Bert's son, recorded a memoir of his early years in Kington and said this of his father. "When the First World War broke out (Bert) decided that it could not be allowed to continue without him. Although he was (at forty) well over the age of call-up age, married, with a child and gammy knee, he still managed to get in." By September 1914 Bert had re-enlisted into the 2nd Battalion, Kings Shropshire Light Infantry as Private 7201 Hamer.

We must now turn to the War Diary of the 2nd Battalion to discover what happened to Bert during his second period in the army. The following detail is taken from the transcription of the 2nd Battalion War Diary edited by Major W de B. Wood, entitled 'The History of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914 - 1918'. At the outbreak of war Albert's old battalion were serving in Secundrabad, India. On the 13th October 1914 they sailed from India bound for England. Their ship formed part of a huge convoy of 46 transports escorted by three naval warships. The following morning a further 26 ships joined the convoy. The German cruiser Emden was prowling the Indian Ocean and all due care was needed to avoid her. The convoy sailed through the Suez Canal and safely made it back to Plymouth in the November. They immediately entrained to Winchester where they joined the 80th Infantry Brigade forming part of the 27th Division. Winter in Winchester that year was atrocious and the men were relieved to leave for France on the 20th December 1914. Little did they know what awaited them. They boarded the SS Maidan and disembarked at Le Havre the following day. Initially the battalion were billeted at Blaringhem but on the 5th January 1915 they marched for Strazeele and then on to Meteren on the French Belgian border getting ever closer to the front line. The weather in France at that time was appalling with freezing conditions and thick, cloying mud everywhere. The conditions were particularly difficult for the 2nd Battalion since they had only recently returned from the warmth of India. The Division were to relieve the French in the St Eloi sector of the front, to the South East of Ypres. The battalion had their first taste of shellfire on the 8th January. Throughout the rest of the month they were moved in and out of the trenches, with

typically 48 being spent in the trenches and 48 hours out. The men suffered terribly with frostbite and trench foot and in early February casualties through fighting started to increase. From the records we know that Albert first entered France on the 10th of February and from the war diary we know a large draft of 180 NCO's and men arrived at the 2nd Battalion in the 13th of February. We must assume this is when Albert re-joined his old battalion. Casualties about this time were high and on the 17th February another 164 NCO's and men joined. Throughout February and early March the battalion were moved in and out of the trenches. On March 10th the battalion was temporarily removed from the front line while our heavy artillery bombarded enemy lines close to our front lines. Officers of the battalion reported at this time that they were convinced the Germans were mining underneath its positions. They were disbelieved by the senior command and it was suggested the officers were suffering from 'nerves'. To the South East of St Eloi there was a large mound some 70 feet long and 20 feet high which formed part of the battalion defensive positions. On the 14th the enemy started a heavy bombardment of the battalion positions and then exploded a large mine under the mound. The following infantry attack resulted in the battalion losing the mound, its defensive lines in the area and the southern end of the village of St Eloi. The following day the Brigade counter attacked but the enemy had positioned machine guns atop the mound and they wreaked havoc. Despite repeated attempts to regain the mound they failed and the mound was not to be taken again until June 1917 during the Battle of Messines when our miners reciprocated and undermined the enemy position. On the 24th March the battalion were relieved and retired to Reninghelst until the 5th of April. On 7th April they were back in the line relieving the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on the Ypres Salient. For the next two weeks they spent 48 hours in the trenches and 48 hours out, billeted at Ypres.

On the 22nd of April the 2nd Battle of Ypres started. It began with the Germans releasing huge amounts of gas onto allied positions to the north of Ypres. The front line at this time was about 5 miles from the town. At the outbreak of the battle, three 2nd Battalion companies were located at Zonnerbeke Wood and the other, Z Company was positioned at Polygon Wood to the bottom right of the map below. At 5pm, following an enormous bombardment, a whiteish vapour was seen drifting across the space between the two lines. The Germans had started gassing the

allied lines. The French took the brunt of this attack and fled their



trenches or died in them. The Germans followed the gas cloud into the French trenches and by 7pm a five mile gap opened up in the allied lines. The Germans pored through this gap but met with stiff resistance from the Canadians. The enemy ploughed on and eventually met a weakened British line. The 2nd Kings Shropshire Light Infantry assisted by Canadian forces dug in at a place called Verlorenhoek and halted the German advance, just three miles from Ypres. Reserves were hurriedly brought in from the rear to reinforce the thin British line. The Battle of Ypres melded into the Battle of St Julien and on the 25th of April X and Z Companies were dispatched to the extreme apex of the salient, near Broedeseinde with orders to retake a communications trench the enemy had taken from the East Surrey Regiment. German resistance was heavy and the attack failed with many from the battalion being killed or wounded. On the 26th W and Y Companies were ordered to take a ridge a mile outside the town of Verlorenhoek. They attacked but again met with heavy resistance. Companies from the 6th and 7th Battalions the Durham Light Infantry were sent to assist the KSLI. These men had only arrived in the front line from England the day before. On the 27th W and Y Companies were ordered to attack the same communications trench X and Z had failed to take a couple of days earlier. This time artillery fire was arranged and at 2.40am both Companies climbed out of their trenches and advanced simultaneously. The attack similarly failed and the Companies were forced to retreat. Later in the month the same trench was attacked by a whole Brigade with a similar result, failure. On

the 28th the Battle of St Julienne came to an end with Allied troops retiring in good order. The battalion were moved back to Bellewaerde where conditions were marginally less stressful. The 2nd Battalion had faced gas, artillery bombardment and overwhelming numbers of machine guns and persistent infantry advances, they had never been more tested. The Germans may have won this battle but the way to Ypres was still barred. Following this period of fighting the battalion had lost, 11 officers and 153 other ranks killed, wounded or missing.

Fighting renewed on 8th May with the Germans repeatedly using gas. On that day the battalion were thrown into the Battle of Frezenberg Ridge. As was customary the Germans started their attack with a heavy bombardment of British lines, their infantry attack followed but failed to break the British lines. The battalion lost a further 3 officers and 35 other ranks killed, wounded or missing. That night the Germans commenced another huge artillery bombardment of the British trenches. The battalion knew a large infantry offensive was coming and prepared. As soon as the bombardment ceased the German infantry advanced. They came in three lines and stretched across the whole front held by the 2nd Battalion. This came as something of a relief to the men of the 2nd Battalion, at last they had something to shoot at and sustained accurate fire halted the advance. To their amazement they saw that some of the advancing Germans were wearing British uniforms and were calling out to our lads. The men ignored this and continued firing eventually forcing the enemy back. This success gave them such satisfaction. To have achieved such a victory after such prolonged heavy artillery bombardment was overwhelming. The battalion were kept in the front line until the 17th of May when they were relieved by the Queen's Bays and 5th Dragoons and sent to Busseboom to rest. Here they were inspected by their Commander-in-Chief, Sir John French who acknowledged the terrible conditions they had been forced to endure and praised them on their fortitude.

Despite intense pressure from the Germans the Allied lines held until on the 25th of May, due to a lack of German manpower and supplies, the offensive was called off. The Germans then started a major bombardment of Ypres turning it into rubble. Losses during the Battle are estimated at 69000 allied troops of which 59000 were British. German casualties came to 35000. The difference in numbers was put down to the use of gas. The allies roundly condemned the Germans for the use of gas which was in flagrant defiance of the Hague Convention. However, the allies went on to develop their own gases and by the end of the war all allied countries had used chemical warfare.

Bert is recorded as being 'killed in action' on the 17th May 1915. Detail from the war diary suggests the battalion were in the process of retiring on that day. The exact circumstances of his death are unknown but he may have been killed during the process of retiring or indeed killed during the preceding battle. His death is recorded on the Ypres Menin Gate Memorial which would suggest his body was never recovered. Perhaps amongst all the horrific fighting his death was only recorded after the events. We will never know for sure. His desperate efforts and sacrifice had held the line and the road to Ypres was still barred from the enemy.

As mentioned above, Bert's death is commemorated at the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, Panels 47 & 49. He was 41 when he died and for his service to his country in World War One was awarded the 1915 star, Victory and British War medals, these to go with his Boer War medals. On the 12th of June 1915 a memorial service was held for Bert at St Mary's Church, Kington and his name was added to the Lady Hawkins' School, Roll of Honour.



To commemorate Bert's passing and his footballing prowess, his family presented the town with a magnificent silver trophy, the Mitchell-Hamer Cup. This was to be played for by school football teams in the local area. The first competition was held in February 1921 with the Kington Boy's victorious. The Mitchell-Hamer Cup is still played for to this day

with a competition held annually. Bert's memory lives on.

The Kington Times reported in its 2nd November 1929 edition that a memorial service was held at Kington Church when a handsome 'brass pulpit desk' was dedicated to the memory of Albert Henry Hamer. The piece read, "Bert Hamer, as he was popularly known, was one of the foremost athletes of Kington. His name is revered by all and this memorial is a fitting tribute to one who will ever be remembered in athletic circles throughout the county. The dedication of the pulpit desk was performed by the Right Rev Bishop Tayfor Smith, KCB, CVO, DD. His lordship referred to Mr. Hamer's sacrifice of his life for his country in a

just and righteous cause.” The brass pulpit desk is still located on the pulpit in St. Mary’s Church today.



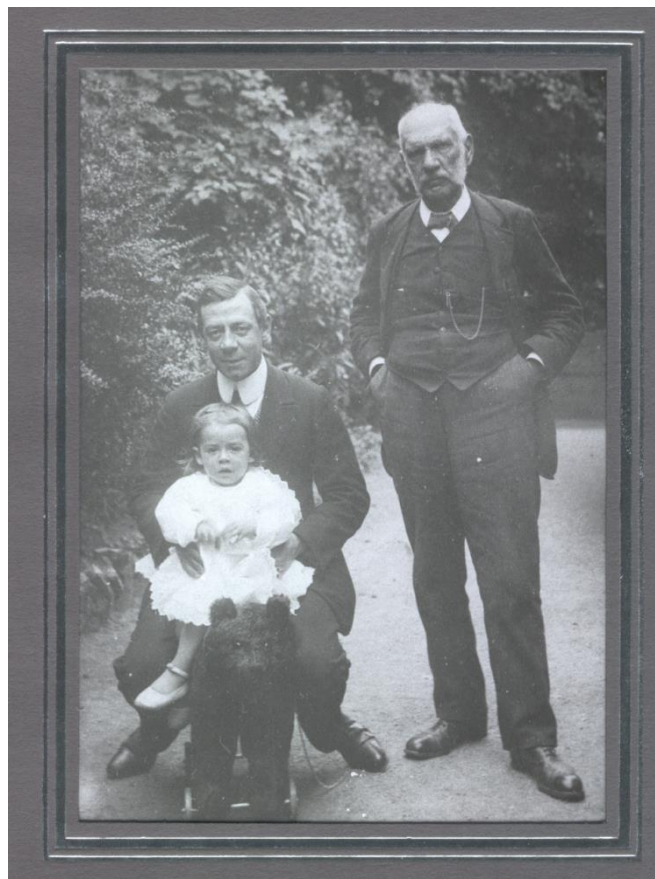
Engraved on the rest is the following commemoration:

To the Glory of God and in memory of
ALBERT HENRY HAMER
Of Kington (2nd King’s Shropshire L.I.)
Killed in Action near Ypres 17th May 1915
Aged 41 years

Back home in Kington the highs and lows of family life continued. Benjamin had lost two of his sons in tragic circumstances and this must have played heavily on his mind. The family building business started to decline and sadly Benjamin died just two years later in 1917, at the age of 78. Bert’s sister, Isabel Florence, became an actress of some repute, but gave up the stage when she married Benjamin Mitchell, a solicitor who had his practice in Calcutta, India. The Kington Times reports that Isabel passed away, at home in Ballygurge Park, Calcutta, in June 1931. Bert’s mum Isabel, continued to live in Kington and died on the 1st of June 1932 leaving all her estate (£294 11s 2d) to an Alfred Ernest Mitchell. Could this have been her Grandson in India?

Following Bert’s death in 1915 his widow Lillian, now a single parent bringing up her only son, worked as a postmistress in Kington and managed to support her son David through his education at Lucton, Ardingly and then King’s College London. She lived into her nineties

finally passing away in 1972 in Weston-Super-Mare. And finally to David (Albert George Hamer), Bert's only child. Clearly his mother, in difficult circumstances, gave her son an excellent education. David married and had three daughters, Jenny, Corinna and Penny. He passed away in 1996 leaving his memoirs for Jenny to explore. My thanks go to Mrs Jenny Daniel, Albert Henry Hamer's grand-daughter, who has graciously supplied much of the family history for this piece and to whom I am eternally grateful.



Three generations of Hamer's

David aged about one and a half, Albert Henry and Benjamin



Researched and developed by Mark Wheatland