

Arthur Cecil Caunt

Private

88007

Royal Army Medical Corps



Upon leaving school John William Caunt had trained to be a pharmacist and about 1890 moved to Kington to take up a position as a Chemists Assistant. In the 1891 census we find him lodging at 33 Church Street, the Old White Lion, now a private house. It was in Kington that he met and married a local girl called Annie Elizabeth Geaussent in early 1894. Her father was a master butcher who traded from 16 High Street. Toward the end of 1894 their first son, Christian Caunt, was born followed two years later by a second son and focus of this biography, Arthur Cecil Caunt. In the 1901 census the family were living at 16 Bridge Street with John recorded as a Chemist and Druggist. John was in partnership with Arthur Lewis and together they ran their pharmacy business from 42 High Street. This premise is still used as a pharmacy to this day. John appears to have been something of an entrepreneur and when, in the early 1900's, Kington was promoted as a centre for tourism and wellbeing, he opened a second business from the family home in Bridge Street and promoted himself as an Aerated Water Manufacturer and

older son Christian assisted his father in this venture. John had great plans for his two sons, his plan was to open a second Caunt's chemist in Leominster and ultimately for his two son's to run the shops. Sadly these plans were not to come to fruition.

Arthur's family tell me he preferred to be known by his second name, Cecil and certainly in surviving documents all refer to him as Cecil. Fortuitously his service papers survive and from these we are able to discover how his life changed once war was declared in August 1914. Cecil enlisted in Kington on 16th September 1914. He was just 17 years and 9 months old, which officially made him too young to enlist. At that time the minimum age for enlistment was 18 and 19 to serve overseas. Many 'Boy Soldiers' enlisted to show their patriotism and it is quite possible Cecil's true age was not checked at enlistment due to the huge influx of young men wishing to enlist in response to Lord Kitchener's call to arms. Cecil had been educated at Lady Hawkins' School and quite rightly they were very proud of their ex-pupils who enlisted. In the 19th December 1914 edition of the Kington Times the school proudly lauded the names of all those who had signed up to serve their country. Sadly many were destined not to return to the peace and tranquillity of Kington.

Cecil was one of the early volunteers and although very young on enlistment was embodied as Private 1769 Caunt into the 2nd/1st South Wales Mounted (bicycle) Brigade Field Ambulance. He clearly progressed well through his training and on the 12th August 1915 was advanced to the rank of Acting Corporal. In September of that year Cecil was posted to the 1st Eastern General Hospital in Cambridge, all the while growing in confidence and experience. By September of the following year he was of an age whereby he was old enough to be posted overseas. To prepare him for this he joined the Royal Army Medical Training Centre at Cookham and was then transferred into the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC), Z Company, as 88007, Acting Corporal Caunt. Now of age and fully trained, on the 27th January 1917 he boarded ship in Southampton and set sail for Rouen in France. Rather strangely the record at this time also shows Cecil voluntarily reverting back to the rank of Private which enabled him to draw 4th Rate Corps pay. The logic behind this is unknown.

Primary source documents, that is contemporaneous original documents, have proven very rare whilst researching the brave men of Kington. However occasionally such documents do surface and in the case of Cecil Caunt his family still have the diary he kept while serving on the Western Front. I am most grateful to Dr Ann Caunt, niece of Cecil, and Kington resident, for allowing me access to his diary, which sheds light upon his daily activities. The diary, a small blue covered book, written in pencil, is now fading and Ann has undertaken the challenging task of transcribing Cecil's rapidly disappearing

words. The diary starts with his embarkation at Southampton, bound for France, where he arrived at 9.15am on the 29th January 1917. On the 11th of February he was posted to the 133rd Field Ambulance which was attached to the 39th Division. By train and lorry he travelled across France heading for the Belgian border with his eventual destination being Poperinghe, a town close to the city of Ypres, not far from the front line. His first experience of war happened shortly after arrival in Poperinghe when enemy aircraft dropped bombs on the town and in his words, 'put the wind up him a little'.

Life at the front was hard for Cecil with long, unsociable hours of tedious fatigues and spells in a dispensary, dispensing medicines. By mid-February he found himself at a place called Vlamertinghe, half way between Poperinghe and

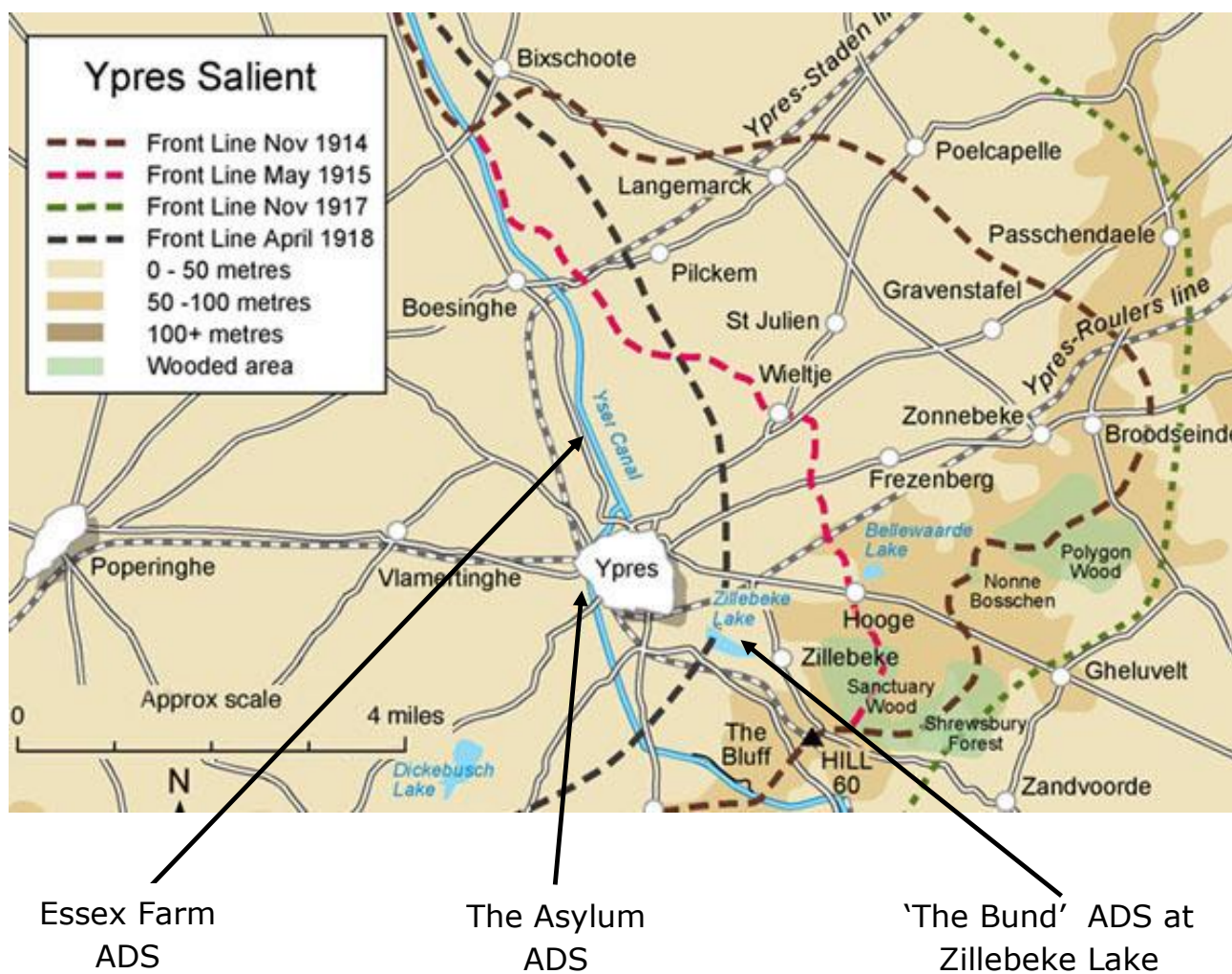


Ypres, all the while he was getting closer to the front. On the 1st March he walked into Ypres and tells of the ruined city he was confronted by, flattened by enemy shelling. He comments on the old cathedral and the fact only one wall was left standing. He was based at an Advanced Dressing Station (ADS)

located in a commandeered mental hospital called the Hospice du Sacre Coeur. Known locally as The Asylum, it was located to the west of Ypres railway station not far from the Poperinghe Road. By the time Cecil arrive the building had all but been destroyed by enemy fire. He was then moved even closer to the front, to an ADS called The Bund located to the south of Ypres at a place called Zillebeke. Here there was a large man-made reservoir, a bund containing water, and it was alongside the reservoir that The Bund ADS was established. Cecil was frequently required to advance to the nearby frontline and extricate wounded soldiers back to the ADS for treatment. This proved to be exhausting but valuable work. Cecil informs us that nowhere was safe from enemy fire at this time. Regularly he was under fire, with the Bund 'rocking' because of the shelling. He typically spent 48 hours on stretcher duty at the front, followed by time spent at the dressing station, all the while under fire. By now Cecil was an experienced stretcher bearer and ADS staff member. As new recruits were sent to the Bund, Cecil was detailed to show them the ropes. Advancing to the lines, evacuating the wounded, always trying to keep safe.

Eighteen days after arriving at the Bund he was relieved and returned to Vlamertinge. Night shifts, dispensing medication and general fatigues filled his time there. The work at Vlamertinge was hard but he did manage to get some down time. He relates a story of a football match he was involved in between night and day staff. He was not too impressed by the score with the day staff winning 2:1, but perhaps that was to be expected.

The map below shows the proximity of the places Cecil visited and worked at and the positions of front lines throughout the war years



On the 7th April he saw his first case of gas poisoning and the following day Vlamertinge was swamped with casualties, 400 to be precise, following an immense enemy bombardment of the lines. Night duty in Vlamertinge was followed by a period of night dispensing duty back in Poperinghe at a place called 'The College'. Working in the dispensary did not inspire Cecil and while in Poperinghe he volunteered for general fatigue duty, cleaning, humping coal and other menial but necessary tasks.

While at Poperinghe he started attending Confirmation Classes with his chum Jack Taylor. He managed to fit the classes in around all his other duties,

sometimes completing work exhausted, and then attending his classes. But it wasn't long before he was again sent to the front. This time he assisted Staff Sergeant Williams in establishing a Dressing Room at the Asylum in Ypres. The pair of them had a 'jolly narrow squeak' when an anti-aircraft shell landed close to them, exploding just five yards away. From the Asylum he made a trip to Essex Farm ADS on the banks of the Yser Canal north of Ypres, to see his mate Harry Hurm and to wish him happy birthday. Cecil



Essex Farm Advanced Dressing Station

was very impressed by the facilities at Essex Farm with its concrete bunkers and electric lighting to work by. A far cry from the basic conditions afforded him at the Asylum. Cecil talks of many happy trips made to Essex Farm ADS. He also talks of watching the enemy shells landing and the spectacular sight of the explosions and the resultant mud and debris which rose high into the air in huge eruptions. He relates the story of a 5.9" shell which landed very close to the Asylum. He and his chums raced into the cellar where the Dressing Station was located and sheltered. He estimates some 300 shells were aimed at the Asylum in that attack. The attack lasted half an hour and in that time 'Fritz' had demolished what remained of the Asylum and destroyed water carts and vehicles. But the comment Cecil then makes is very revealing.

'In this strafe neither the RGA (Royal Garrison Artillery) nor our fellows had any casualties, nor was the battery in the Asylum damaged'.

It would appear that an artillery battery was located at the Asylum. A strange



40419-46 — Ypres. Hospice du Sacré-Cœur.

The Sacré-Cœur's hospi

place to locate a battery considering it was an ADS and RGA Batteries were notorious for attracting enemy fire. He retired to bed at 11pm 'this having been a memorable MAY DAY'.

The weather on the Western Front in the May of 1917 was most pleasant. Many mornings Cecil would wake up to

glorious sunshine, but in spite of the weather, the dead and dying continued to arrive at the Asylum. On the 5th May he tells of the battery at the Asylum firing about 14 shells at the enemy. Understandably this enraged the Germans who responded in kind and landed about 120 shells on the Asylum. It appears what remained of the Asylum provided some cover for the battery but left the Dressing Station very vulnerable to enemy counter fire. Some of the writing in Cecil's diary is indecipherable but we can just make out that on the 9th May he was confirmed by the Bishop of Khartoum, at what looks like St Tuda's church, adjacent to Essex Farm ADS. That evening he returned to the Asylum and the very next morning took his first Communion. On the 11th May he returned to the Canal Bank and Essex Farm. Here he had another 'narrow squeak' when a shell landed very close to him and a colleague. Diving into a shelter afforded them protection but he admits it was a very fortunate escape. Poignantly the next page in the diary is blank, as are all the remaining pages in the little blue book. Arthur Cecil Caunt was killed in action on the **12th May 1917**.

The circumstances of Cecil's death are tragic in the extreme. An account posted in the 26th May edition of the Hereford Times states that on the 12th May, Cecil was working with six colleagues in an underground Dressing Station at the Asylum which the Germans were shelling heavily. In a letter to Cecil's family written by the RAMC Chaplain he stated;

"It was an important station and Cecil had done excellent work there under always trying circumstances. He never knew the danger of it, but rejoiced in his work and did it well. A shell penetrated, down the rear stairwell, into the cellar and killed him instantaneously, which was very merciful".



Three other RAMC personnel died in this tragic incident, Private's Tillyard, Timpson and Boyle, two others were seriously injured. How many times had they dived into the cellar for shelter? Tragically, on this occasion, their luck ran out.

Cecil and his three comrades were buried on the 13th May and many of his friends and colleagues attended the service. The article goes on to explain that Cecil had been confirmed on the canal bank at Ypres on the 9th of May by the Bishop of Khartoum and the chaplain added *"He received his first communion just 48 hours before his death. We all miss him very much"*. Cecil is buried at

Poperinghe New Military Cemetery, grave reference I.E1.5. The cemetery is located six and a half miles west of Leper, formerly Ypres. Poperinghe was vitally important to the allies because it was the largest place near to Ypres which was reasonably safe. Initially a Casualty Clearing Station (CCS), due to German advances it became necessary to move the CCS back and Field Ambulances took their place. The New Military Cemetery was opened in June 1915 and now contains 677 Commonwealth burials. Cecil's name, along with many other Kington men who died, was read out at a Peace Service held at St Mary's Church, Kington on 6th July 1919. Cecil served just three and a half months in Belgium but for the service he gave his country he was awarded the Victory and British War medals.

In conclusion, it is always interesting to discover what happened to other family members. As for Christian, he attended many of the military tribunals held throughout 1916. He received temporary service exemptions due to him being his father's assistant at the Chemist shop which they ran together at 42 High Street (now Rowlands Chemist, 2015). However in January 1917 this exemption was withdrawn and he too joined the army. Initially in the Liverpool Regiment, then the Labour Corps, he ended his service, as did his brother, serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Dr Anne Caunt is living proof that Christian survived the war. She is his daughter and heartfelt thanks must go to her for allowing such intimate details of her uncle's experiences and demise to be published.

