

Robert Jones

Private

18172

1st Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry



On the 28th November 1894, in the parish of Kington, William Jones married Amy Price, a girl from Gladestry. William and Amy lived at Mulhollam Cottages on the road to Huntington and William was employed as a farm labourer at Mulhollam Farm. A few years after their marriage, in 1897, the focus of this piece, Robert Jones, was born. Robert was followed by Annie in 1900, Ernest in 1903 and the baby of the family, Eleanor in 1907. By the 1911 census the family have moved to Lower Newton just outside Kinnersley and Amy records that she had delivered six children but sadly two had died. William was again working on a farm, now as a wagoner, and fourteen year old Robert had left school but was not in work at the time. It is unclear where Robert went to school but he is not mentioned on either of the Rolls of Honour for Kington Boy's School or Lady Hawkins' School, so we can assume it was neither of those establishments.

As is only too common, comprehensive service records for Robert do not survive but from those which do, we know he enlisted in Hereford into the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, as Private, 18172, Jones. The 12th September 1914 edition of the Kington Times reports that he was one of the first to step forward and volunteered for overseas service. Curiously his age in 1914, just seventeen, would have prohibited him from serving overseas, the official age being nineteen. We must assume that initially he was employed in the battalion depot unit, where he would have been trained and prepared to join the main unit in France when old enough. 1st Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry (KSLI) had served in France from the outbreak of war and was no different from any other battalion in that it regularly welcomed fresh recruits to swell its depleted

numbers. Robert's age might suggest that he did not join the 1st Battalion until after 1915, when he would have been 19 and eligible to serve overseas. To suggest he was serving prior to his nineteenth birthday would be pure speculation. We will never know for sure.

To continue Roberts's story I turn now to Major W de B Woods, excellent transcript of the KSLI War Diaries entitled, *The History of the King's Shropshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914-1918*, published by Naval and Military Press. The 1st Battalion entered France on 10th September 1914 at St. Nazaire but for Robert's story I turn to activity from mid-March 1916.

The battalion were relieved from front line duties and retired to the Calais area where they were billeted under tents at No 6 Camp in Beau Marais just south of Calais. While there the troops were able to rest, recuperate and recover their health. It was not unusual for the men to be taken to the beach to the east of Calais and for training and exercises to be undertaken. The diary records that the weather was 'warm and sunny'. Justified relief from the horrors of the front line. On 26th March the whole of 16th Infantry Brigade, of which the KSLI were part, moved forward to the town of Herzeele on the Belgian border just west of Poperinghe. On 5th April the 1st KSLI were moved still further forward to a camp just outside Poperinghe where they stayed until the 15th. While there the men were employed on building a new railway siding at Poperinghe and cable laying at St. Jean, west of Ypres, not far from the front line. On the 16th they were moved again to Chateau des Trois Tours on the outskirts of the Belgian village of Brielen, where they were held in reserve. They may have been in reserve but even here the men were in range of enemy shells and some casualties were suffered. Employment for the ranks included digging a communications trench to the east of Brielen called Threadneedle Street, very close to the front line.

At this point the enemy were just a few hundred yards to the east of the British frontline and on the 19th April they attacked. The Germans succeeded in taking British trenches at Morteldje Estaminet and in consequence the 1st KSLI were advanced and took up positions to the east of the Ypres-Yser canal. On the 21st April, companies of the 1st battalion were set the task of retaking the lost trenches. At 10pm that evening their attack started. Heavy rain combined with the shell-hole pocked terrain made progress very slow but they advanced and ultimately took their objectives. At daybreak on the 22nd, and in retaliation, the enemy released a murderous artillery bombardment onto the recently re-taken trenches. The bombardment was followed up by a half-hearted infantry counter attack which the 1st Battalion repelled and left them able to consolidate the re-acquired trenches.

War Diaries sometimes include very graphic depictions of battle and complications encountered during actions. I must apologise for what I am about to recount but what follows describes the terrible conditions the men were fighting in.

"After the advance, wounded men were found to have been suffocated in the mud, and in some places the mud was so deep that it was only by crawling

almost flat, throwing their rifles in front of them, that it was possible for the men to advance”.

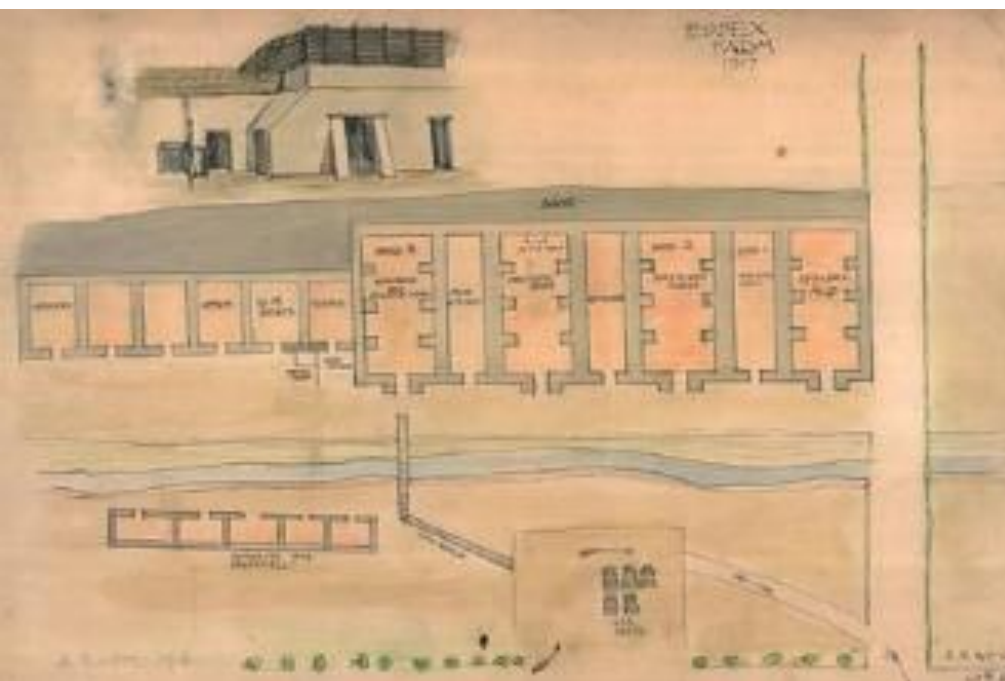
Unimaginable hardship. During the early morning bombardment of the 22nd, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Luard, was severely wounded. Sadly the battalion's leader was not the only casualty on that day. Robert Jones was also mortally wounded on the 22nd April 1916. He was taken to a Casualty Clearing Station, nearby, where he surrendered to his injuries on **24th April 1916**. As for Lieutenant Colonel Luard, he also survive until the 24th, when he too passed away. In his book, Major Wood makes the following observation. *“The story of this minor operation cannot be too simply told. Its estimate depends not upon gains and losses, but upon the fact that courage, devotion to duty and discipline, had enabled men to achieve, in mud, darkness, and pouring rain, what was seemingly impossible”.*

During the attack the battalion lost 3 officers and 22 other ranks killed and 5 officers and 135 other ranks wounded. Six men were recorded as being missing. That evening the battalion were relieved and retired to safety. On the 27th the survivors were paraded for their Army Commander, General Plumer, and on the following day, none other than their Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, congratulated the men in person. Sir Douglas told them that the success of the operation was entirely due to *“The high standards of discipline which abound in this battalion”*. Sadly, Robert never heard this address.

Robert is buried in Essex Farm Cemetery in the Belgian village of Boezinge, grave reference II.P.3. The cemetery is named after a local farm the British had imaginatively called Essex Farm. During the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915 a medical facility was established to the south of the farm. Rudimentary dugouts were constructed to deal with casualties and later these were augmented when reinforced concrete rooms were built to protect the men and



Essex Farm dugouts with Ypres/Yser Canal on the left



facility. It is likely this was the dressing station Robert was brought. The photograph above shows the dugouts, which were renovated and preserved in the 1990's and can still be seen at the rear of the cemetery today. Below is a sketch of the Advanced Dressing Station at Essex Farm drawn in

1917 by Lance Corporal A R Watt of the 69th Field Ambulance. The Canal can be clearly seen and also the one way admissions route for vehicles on the opposite side of the canal.

Essex Farm Cemetery is also remembered for one particular incident in May 1915, which resonates to this day. It is considered by many to be the location in which Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae of the Canadian Army Medical Corps, composed his famous wartime poem 'In Flanders Fields'. The inspiration for the poem was an incident which touched McCrae profoundly. During the early days of the Second Battle of Ypres a young Canadian artillery officer, Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, was killed. The Brigade chaplain was not available to bury Helmer so, as Brigade Doctor, McCrae was requested to conduct the service. That evening, following the burial John McCrae was seen, sitting quietly in the cemetery, it is said composing his now famous poem. I think it only fitting that McCrae's poem be reproduced here, not just for Robert, but for all those who gave the ultimate sacrifice, fighting in Flanders fields.



Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae
Soldier, Physician and Poet

In Flanders Fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

John McCrae, May 1915

Private, 18172, Robert Jones, of 1st Battalion King's Shropshire Light Infantry, was awarded the British War and Victory Medals and 1915 Star.

