

THE DEATH OF PRIVATE GEORGE RICHARD HARROLD AT CAMBRAI

This is the last article that I shall write about the First World War for a little while. It allows me to finish off the events of 1917. Next time I shall look at something completely different. Just in case you are feeling deprived, I have now set up a display in the church! This covers all the men whose names are on the War Memorial.

Anyway, this time I shall look at the death of George Harrold who was in the 1st Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment, which was in the 6th Infantry Brigade of the 2nd Division. As before, it is by following the fortunes of his Division that we can establish what happened to him.

The situation at the end of the last article was that the Germans had retired behind the Hindenburg Line. Cambrai was a key supply point for this Line and the capture of the town and the nearby Bournon Ridge would threaten the rear of the German line. However, the German defences were formidable and the British were well aware of this. The British plan therefore involved the use of a number of new techniques, including the use of tanks to clear paths through the deep barbed-wire.

Phase 1: the tank attack (20 – 21 November, 1917)

This phase began at dawn on 20 November with a bombardment by over 1000 guns. There were six infantry divisions in the front line, and you might like to note two things:

- (i) Among these Divisions was the 12th (Eastern) Division, and the 6th Division, and these divisions respectively contained the 7th and 9th Battalions of the Norfolks.
- (ii) The 2nd Division in which George Harrold served did not take part in this first phase of the battle.

The attacking force initially had had considerable success in most areas and the Hindenburg Line was penetrated with advances up to 8 km. It seemed at first as though a great victory was within reach. But, of the 437 tanks, 180 were out of action by the end of the first day, although only 65 had actually been destroyed. In fact, it was not long before it began to be realised that even all these gains were not enough, and things began to go wrong.

Phase 2: the capture of Bournon Wood (23 – 28 November, 1917)

This time the 2nd Division did take part. But by now the roads were breaking up under the strain of thousands of men, wagons and lorries. A new relief and assault plan was drawn up, but the British started taking heavy losses. Bright hopes had slowly turned into a costly shambles, and offensive operations were closed down on 27 November. Three days later, the German Army struck back.

Phase 3: the German counter- attack (30 Nov – 3 December, 1917)

They struck at 7.30 a.m. on the 30 November and the blow was devastatingly fast and effective. By 9 a.m. they had penetrated almost 3 miles. At one stage Byng's Third Army faced disaster with the real prospect of several Divisions being cut off. Three German Divisions attacked, but they were repulsed. Eventually on 3 December Field Marshal Haig ordered a retirement 'with the least possible delay'. The audacious plan had failed.

The death of George Richard Harrold

It would seem that it was during the first day of the above German counter-attack, on 30 November 1917, that George Harrold died.

His grave

He is buried in The Ontario Cemetery, Sains-Les-Marquion, which is in the Pas de Calais Region. This cemetery was originally made in Sept – Oct 1918 after the capture of Sains-Les-Marquion by the Canadian Division. At that time it contained the graves of 144 Canadian soldiers from Ontario and ten British soldiers from that date. But it was enlarged after the Armistice by the concentration of graves taken from other cemeteries. However, these were mainly taken from German cemeteries; not many British graves were added. Nonetheless, that of George Harrold was moved there. It seems most likely that his body was taken from one of the communal cemeteries (combined German and British), although most of the British in these cemeteries had died as prisoners of war.

Grave Reference III. B. 4.

He was originally entered simply as "Unknown British Soldier", but there is a later entry in manuscript giving his name and number (38361). There is a note at the bottom of the page which says: "Record made for Harrold 26/1/26".

War Diaries

It may be possible to find out more about exactly what happened to George Harrold's battalion by searching the War Diaries, for these can sometimes give a day-by-day account of what was happening in a particular area. However, locating and searching them can be a tedious process.

His Family

The Grave Reference Report states that he was the son of Mr G.B. Harrold of the Royal Oak, "Mitcham", Swaffham. I later found that George Benjamin Harrold was the landlord of the Royal Oak at Mileham from Nov 1913 to Nov 1920. This pub closed in 1983 and became a private house.

In the 1901 census it says that George Benjamin Harrold was born in Hoe and was living in Greengate, Swanton Morley with his wife, Maria and his two sons George and Harry. Also living there, and Head of House was another George, his widowed father, a farmer aged 79. Their house was in between that of Robert Watkins and that of Robert Canham.

In the 1911 census it showed that George Benjamin was aged 59, still married to Maria and still living in Greengate, Swanton Morley. They had two sons, and at that time, George Richard was a farm labourer aged 26 and Harry Robert was a carpenter aged 25.

Harry the younger brother of George Richard

Harry also enlisted, but he served in a unit called the 'Labour Corps'. This was formed in January 1917 and grew to about 390,000 men, about half of whom (like Harry) served in the United Kingdom. The Corps was manned by officers and other ranks who had been medically rated below the "A1" condition needed for front line service. (Harry was rated "B II").

In late 1914, he married Maggie Louisa Tye, the daughter of George C. Tye and Sarah A. Tye. They too lived in Greengate. When Harry enlisted, he was shown as aged 30, married and living in Swanton Morley (so this would have been in about 1916). He survived the war, but he died and was buried in Swanton Morley in October 1929. Maggie died aged 91 in 1976.