

Stokesley a draft outline

Chapter 2 Old contemptibles

Even today the origins of the First World War are a subject of dispute – how the assassination of an Austrian archduke in Sarajevo came to spark a savage pan-European conflict. But the cause of Great Britain's involvement was clear cut. It entered the war in defence of Belgium, a country then less than a century old but whose independence and neutrality were guaranteed by the 1839 Treaty of London to which Britain was a signatory (along with Austria, France, Prussia, Russia, and the Netherlands).

In August 1914 the German Army invaded Belgium (as part of the Schlieffen plan to attack France by way of Belgium thus avoiding the main French fortifications) in violation of the treaty. As a consequence, on 4 August Britain declared war on Germany.

Thus it was to Belgium that the first British troops were sent, via France – with men from Stokesley among them. The initial wave of troops were drawn from the existing regular army, a rather smaller force than the standing armies maintained by the major Continental powers.

Before the war there was no national service in Britain, though there had been a recurring debate as to whether conscription should be introduced as was the case in many European countries. So in 1914 the army was a wholly voluntary one, which men could join as a professional soldier of the Regular Army or as a part-time member of the Territorial Force or as a soldier of the Special Reserve.

At the outbreak of war the British Regular Army was some 249,000 strong, of which 129,000 were based in the United Kingdom, organised into six divisions in the UK. In addition there were 14 Territorial Army Divisions, with an establishment of 315,000 and a

national reserve list of officers and men with military experience with 350,000 members.

Recruits to the regular army had to be physically fit, be taller than 5 feet 3 inches and aged between 18 and 38 (though they could not be sent overseas until age 19). They could choose which regiment they were assigned to and typically joined the army for a period of seven years full time service, followed by another five on the National Reserve.

In 1914, basic training covered physical fitness, drill, march discipline, small arms, essential field craft, etc. Those joining the mounted arms such as the cavalry or artillery would be taught to ride and look after horses. Soldiers joining a specialist trade such as the artillery, engineers or the Army Service Corps would receive further relevant instruction. In particular, infantry were intensively trained in rapid aimed rifle fire. During the course of the war soldiers would also be trained in the special skills needed to cope with new weapons and technology which evolved during the course of the war.

The Territorials were created in 1908 as a part time volunteer army for home defence, combining the previous volunteer force, militia and yeomanry. They were not obliged to serve overseas until 1916, though many volunteered to do so soon after the outbreak of war. Special Reservists enlisted for six years and could be called up in the event of a general mobilisation and be sent overseas.

Recruitment to the New Army began in August 1914 when the government called for 100,000 extra soldiers, peaking in the weeks of late August – to early September, after news of the retreat from Mons. A million men were recruited by February 1915 and by one and a half million by September 1915 when the numbers of volunteers was beginning to fall.

The British Expeditionary Force that set out for France in August 1914 was drawn from the regular army. It became known as the Old Contemptibles, after the German Kaiser Wilhelm II was said to have called them a 'contemptible little army'. Among them were the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards in which served Corporal John Barrett from Stokesley.

Barrett had joined the army as a regular soldier when still quite young. He went to the front at the start of the Great War and was still a youth when he fell early in the autumn of 1914.



Figure 1 Private in the Coldstream Guards 1914

The BEF's first engagement came at the Battle of Mons (also known as one of the Battles of the Frontier) in Belgium in August 1914 where it stood in the way of the German advance towards Paris. Despite inflicting a serious and unexpected blow on the Germans the BEF was greatly outnumbered and forced to retreat.

During the retreat the British fought a rearguard action at Le Cateau in France, inflicting heavy casualties and slowing down the German advance. The BEF then retreated further to the River Marne where the German advance was halted. At their closest the German

Army came within 30 miles of Paris. 1st Battalion the Coldstream Guards were not engaged at Mons or Le Cateau and spent the first month of the Great War marching on the two week retreat from Mons marching 20-30 miles a day.

At the First Battle of the Marne, 6-12 September, the French with British assistance counter attacked and drove the Germans back to a point north of the River Aisne. The First Battle of the Aisne saw a follow-up offensive, but the attempts to force a further widespread German retreat failed. Barrett's unit saw its first action near Voinsles taking 45 casualties from rifle and shell fire as they advanced towards the Aisne. The British attacks against the Germans dug in north of the Aisne river were halted with heavy casualties. John Barrett's unit

suffered 389 casualties on the 14th September, from a battalion which arrived in France with just over 1000 officers and men.

The German Army dug-in behind trenches, marking the start of the long phase of trench warfare, while both sides sought to outflank each other by making for the Channel coast in the so-called 'race to the sea'. The result was something of a draw, as both sides secured some key channel ports and the trenches were extended to the coast.

In October, the Germans captured Antwerp in Flanders and pushed the Belgian Army back to Nieuport near Ypres. The BEF under Field Marshall Sir John French joined the Belgian and French forces defending Ypres. The British held a 35 mile long stretch of the Ypres salient while the French held the southern flank, with the Belgians to the north.

In response to the Flanders Offensive of General Erich von Falkenhayn the Belgians opened the sluice gates and flooded the land around the River Yser between Dixmude and Nieuport. Faced with the resulting two mile wide water barrier, Falkenhayn turned his sights on the city of Ypres.



Figure 2 Here they come: Coldstream Guards
1914 William Barnes Wollen

The First Battle of Ypres is sometimes divided into three phases:

- 1/ The Battle of Langemarck
- 2/ The Battle of Gheluvelt
- 3/ The Battle of Nonne Bosschen

It was in the second phase, the Battle of

Gheluvelt, where Corporal John Barrett met his end.

The significance of Ypres and the Yser river/canal was its position as the last barrier to the Germans driving forward to the Channel ports of

Calais and Boulogne and hence a threat to British supply lines. Conversely, a breakthrough at Ypres would have let the Allies move forward into the flat plains of Flanders. The failure of either side to make much progress at Ypres set the template for the coming years of trench warfare, characterised by the superiority of defence over attack.

On 20 October 1914, the Fourth and Sixth German Armies launched a joint offensive, north and south of Ypres in an attempt to encircle the BEF, following up with a further attack on 21 October. At Langemarck, north of Ypres, on 22 October the British 1st division repulsed an attack by the German reserve infantry, but an allied offensive on 24-25 October failed to make headway.

To the east of Ypres, the British front line was bent at right angles around the hamlet of Krusecke, near Gheluvelt, facing the German held ridges at Becelaere and Passchendaele. On 26 October the German 54th Reserve Division attacked; the British trenches on the forward face of the slope had covered roofs made from timber and planks leaving the infantry vulnerable to high explosive shells. The Germans overran two battalions of the British 2nd Scots Guards and 1st Grenadier Guards and Krusecke was taken.

At this point a new German army under General von Fabeck arrived, giving the Germans a numerical superiority of two to one, and went into battle early on the morning of 29 October. The British had been forewarned of the attack, due to intercepted radio traffic. In addition, rumour had it that the attack would come from Krusecke, south of the road from Menin to Gheluvelt road, and would focus on the Gheluvelt crossroads, where the Menin Road crossed between Krusecke and Poezelhoek.

The crossroads were held by the British 1st and 7th division. The left of 7th division south of the crossroads was held by the 1st Grenadier Guards of 20th Brigade, and 1st Coldstream Guards of 1st (Coldstream) Brigade which held the right of 1st division.

The trenches they occupied were support trenches, rather than forward trenches, having been dug when Krusecke was still in British hands. As at Krusecke, they were deep and narrow and covered overhead, mostly by planks with earth on top. This was no protection

but rather an additional danger in the face of high explosive shells. They made observation difficult and prevented the use of bayonets.

The ideal would have been to prepare a new line of forward trenches but there was no time to do so. Unlike the later years in the trenches when the ground was barren, at this stage the area was dotted with trees, foliage, cottages etc making observation difficult. The only wire in front of the trenches was a rudimentary single wire to which cans with pebbles in them were attached to serve as an alarm.

The 1st Coldstream by now numbered only about 350, too few to hold the front assigned to it, being 1500 yards north of the crossroads. Reinforcements, a company of 1st Black Watch, were sent to help but there were still insufficient men to fill all the gaps in the line. Most of the trenches were in short lengths with considerable gaps, though the two left companies of 1st Coldstream were in one continuous trench.

It was foggy on the morning of 29 October when the Germans commenced their attack at 5.30am. The time of attack was as expected but they came not from the south (Kruisecke) but from north of the Menin Road. Three battalions of the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, including in their number one Adolf Hitler, attacked

the positions held by the Black Watch and the two Coldstream Guards.

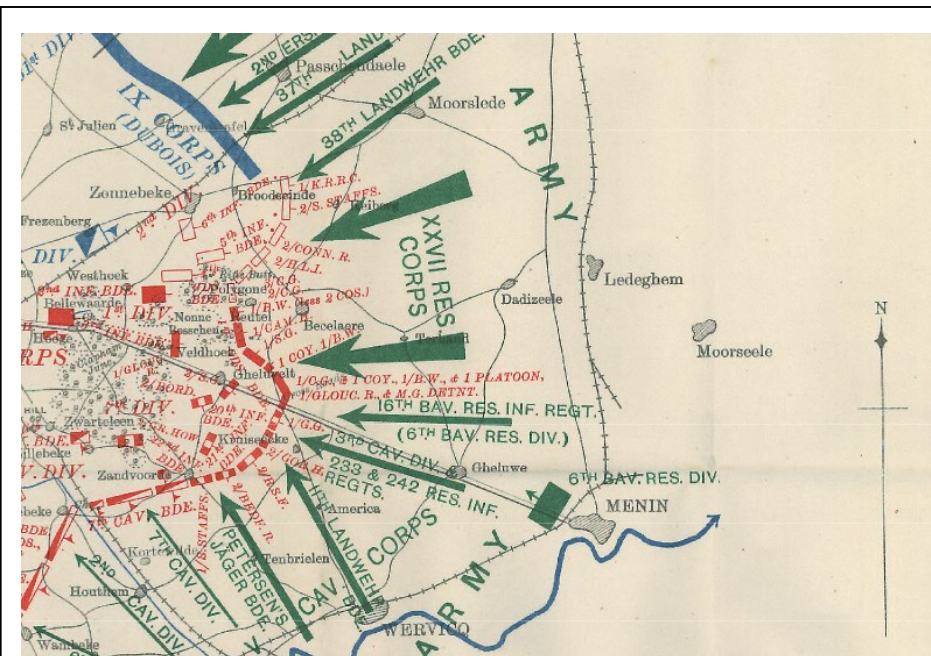


Figure 3 Situation 28 October 1914

Initially the attack was repelled by fire but the British troops suffered problems with their

guns. At least two of the British machine guns jammed, leaving them reliant on rifle fire, which in turn was hindered when the troops found many of their cartridges were too big for their rifles. This seems to have been a significant factor hampering the British response. With the British fire becoming less effective, by 6.30 the Germans broke through and captured most of the Black Watch company and the two right Coldstream companies.

Further to the left, another two companies of the Coldstream and one of the Black Watch also came under attack from 5.30 but held their position. Then, after 10.00, in spite of efforts to cover their now exposed flank, the same fate overtook them. Attacked at close range from the flank and the rear, the 300 Guardsmen and Highlanders were killed or captured almost to a man [1]

The total loss suffered by the 1st Coldstream was 10 officers and 180 men, with only 80 men left at the end of the day, out of the 1000 who had landed in France. The Black Watch companies fighting alongside them lost 5 officers and 250 men.

In gaining the Gheluvelt crossroads the Germans had acquired a good point from which to attack the city of Ypres. But while they then succeeded in taking the town of Gheluvelt their attempts to break through to Ypres failed and their last effort to do so was on 10 November.

The First Battle of Ypres was extremely costly for the British and wiped out large numbers of experienced officers and men of the old Regular Army, Corporal Barrett amongst them. (Some British accounts of the battle portrayed it as a wholly or largely British affair, but this ignores the substantial part played by Belgian and French forces in the defence of Ypres). As for the Germans, they also suffered heavy losses and failed to make the breakthrough they desired. British casualties were about 60,000, a loss the British could ill-afford. French casualties were set at around 50,000, and German losses at 130,000 men.

Writing some time later, Gefreiter (Private) Adolf Hitler (who later in the battle won the Iron Cross 2nd Class for rescuing a man under fire) gave this gung-ho view of events from the German side ...[box

item with quote from AH ...] but other German eye witness accounts report confusion and chaos on the battlefield [2].

Corporal Barrett's name is on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, one of four British and Commonwealth memorials to the missing in the battlefield area of the Ypres Salient in Belgian Flanders. The memorial bears the names of 54,389 officers and men from United Kingdom and Commonwealth Forces (of a total of 90,000 with no known graves). To this day, remains of WW1 casualties are still being uncovered in the former battlefields when disturbed by agricultural or construction work.

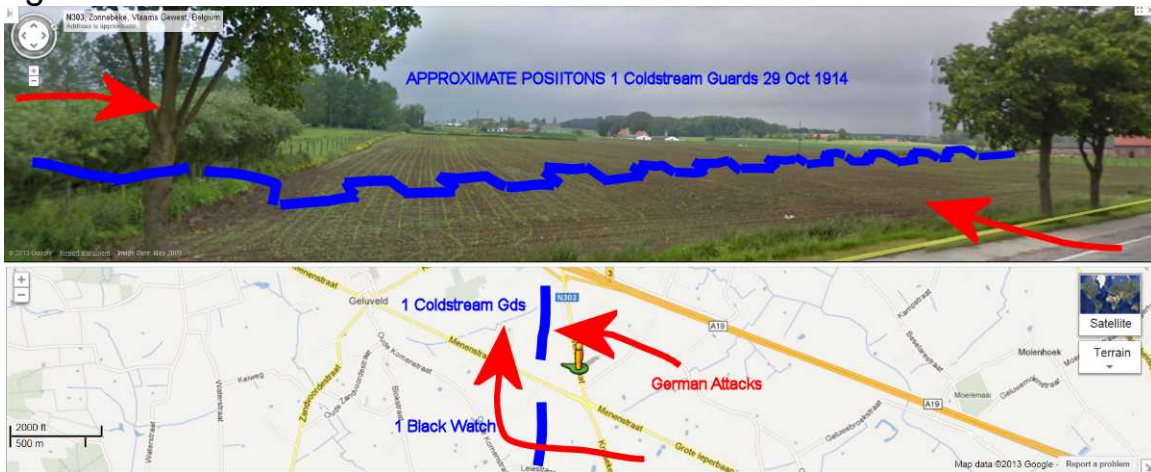


Figure 4 The field where John Barrett fell fighting Adolf Hitler and the rest of Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment No 16(Street View)

[1] Official History

[2] Sheldon

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