The Soldier in the Attic

From dusty boxes to the Western Front: Discovering my grandfather's secret war.

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Foreword

For decades, his war was hidden in plain sight. Not in medals or grand stories, but in a tattered box of papers, waiting in the attic.

My grandfather, Horace “Harry” Leak, was a man of endless songs and gentle laughter, but like so many of his generation, he carried the Great War in silence. The trenches were a closed chapter; the memories, too vast and raw for casual telling.

Yet, as if knowing a day would come when we would need to understand, he left behind a cryptic legacy: over two hundred pages of handwritten notes, scribbled in his later years, mainly by him, but often given legibility by my mother. These were not a formal memoir, but a flood of memories, repetitive, sometimes chronologically adrift, yet pulsing with the undeniable consistency of lived truth. This book is the result of my mission to unlock his past.

I became a detective of his life. I cross-referenced his fragmented accounts with the stark, official prose of the **Battalion War Diaries**. I tracked his movements, from the **1st/7th to the 1st/5th Battalion of the 49th West Riding Regiment**, across **detailed trench maps**, which you can explore within these pages. I read every published history I could find. Where his dates strayed, a forgivable lapse across eight decades, g historical record helped me anchor them. My goal was never to correct or rewrite him, but to build the framework that would let his own voice speak clearly.

And so, Harry’s voice is the heartbeat of this story. His own words, in his own inimitable style, idiosyncratic spelling, punctuation, and all, are presented throughout in blockquotes. To hear them is to hear him. For those who knew him, it will be a conversation renewed. For those who didn’t, it is a chance to meet him.

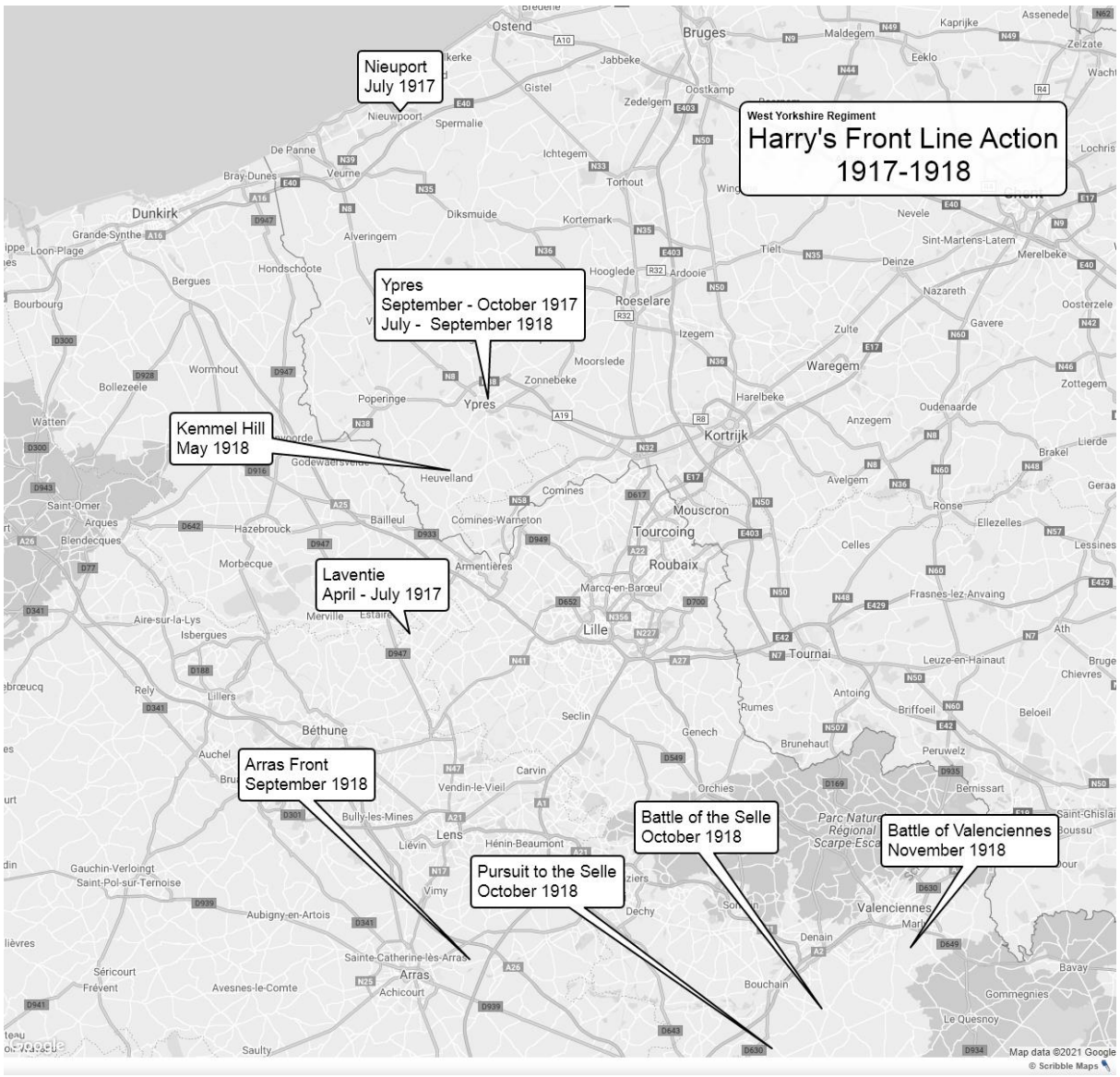
He was no swashbuckling hero. He was just an ordinary Tommy, a humble thread in the vast, terrible tapestry of the war. But his notes reveal an extraordinary resilience of spirit, a man who somehow managed to hold onto his humour, his empathy, and his humanity in the face of mechanized horror. *That* may be his greatest testament.

This, then, is the story I pieced together from the attic shadows. This is Harry’s war.

Horace Leak - Summary of War Record

- Date of birth: 9th September 1895
- Service Number: 23904
- Regiment: West Yorkshire Regiment
- Battalion: 1/7th and 1/5th Battalions
- Rank: Private
- Campaign Medals: Victory Medal, British Medal
- Wartime Chronology: Enlisted 20 November 1915 (approved 21 January 1916)
- Known Movements/Incidents:
- Zonnebeke Gasometer
- Stationed at Cologne at end of war
- Discharged on 21st September 1919

Map: Harry's Frontline Action 1917-1918



Book Format

Some of Harry's words are interwoven into the text to illustrate not only his thinking at the time but also to give insight into the events that were happening around him at that time. However in most chapters there is a final section entitled **Harry's Notes**. These replicate all his notes in full. You might, quite understandably, ask me .. why?

I believe it's important to retain his exact words, to assist any future work and investigation either by myself or others. Who knows, there might be clues there that help unlock a piece of the jigsaw for some other Tommy's grandchildren?

In the appendix section towards the end of the book there are Geo Location reference, links to Google Map locations and the location of the 1/7th and 1/5th Battalions each day, ascertained from the Regimental War Diaries.

The Regimental War Diaries can be downloaded or searched through on the web.

Enlistment and Training: From Civilian to Soldier

Harry enlisted in the British Army on 20 November 1915, with his formal approval following on 21 January 1916. At twenty years of age, he was assigned to the 1st/5th Battalion of the West Yorkshire Regiment, part of the 49th (West Riding) Division. His path to service, however, began much earlier. As he notes, the initial standards for recruitment in 1914 and 1915 were stringent, requiring "fit and in perfect health."

His early attempts to volunteer with friends were repeatedly thwarted by recruiting officers who deemed them physically inadequate. He recalls the humiliating rejections, including one officer's remark that they *"would be useful if only as pull-throughs"*, a sarcastic reference to the cord used to clean a rifle barrel, implying they were merely skinny objects. Another typical dismissal was the taunt, *"Go home and eat a cow between two slices of bread."*

This experience reflects the broader transition from a small, professional army to a mass citizen force, where physical standards eventually relaxed as the war's demands intensified. It was not until late 1915 that he and his companions finally received the 'King's Shilling,' committing them to service with twenty-four hours' notice.

His battalion had already been bloodied by the time he joined. Mobilised in April 1914, it saw its first major action at the Battle of Aubers Ridge in May 1915 and endured the first German phosgene gas attack that December. The unit was destined for further significant battles on the Somme in 1916, including Albert, Bazentin Ridge, Pozières Ridge, and Flers-Courcelette. Harry's training, therefore, was conducted under the shadow of these recent and future trials.

His initial three months of service were devoted to rigorous preparation, first in the Redcar and Newcastle area, then in Northumberland for advanced rifle training. His notes provide a ground-level view of this formative period. At Redcar, he underwent simultaneous inoculation and vaccination, an experience followed by a bemusing medical inspection of his feet by an officer he suspected was a veterinary doctor. *"He told me my feet were perfect, I had a high instep. It was all Dutch to me,"* Harry writes, capturing the confusion of a civilian encountering military procedures.

In Newcastle, the men were billeted in a converted roller-skating rink on St. Mary's Place. Days consisted of *"hard training all day long on the town moors"* in bitterly cold weather, a hardship mitigated only by the "hot meals waiting for us afterwards." This account

underscores the immediate shock of military life, the impersonal medical processing, austere accommodations, and physically demanding training in harsh conditions, all part of tran

Harry's Notes

“Now when war was declared on 4th August 1914 I must admit that England had the most powerful navy in the world, but our army were stretched all over the world, wherever there was British interests.”

“We had reserves in both navy and army and they all soon answered the call and so did all the colonies, Anzacs, Aussies and Canucks. Just to be sacrificed as right up to the end of 1917 our Chiefs of Staff thought the war could be won with the bayonet.”

“Great Britain got caught with their pants down to put it bluntly. Take Gallipoli, the Somme, Ypres. No wonder Flanders was to stem the tide of the German advance.”

“I guess also in the first year our artillery was not getting enough shells for the guns. So they were limited to use them only when really necessary. So this is one thing, if we had had lots of machine guns or Lewis guns the average Tommy would have been a lot happier.”

“In 1914 and 1915 you had to be fit and in perfect health to join the army. In 1914 my two pals and I tried numerous times to get in the army. One recruiting officer made the remark, we sure would be useful if only as pull-throughs’. We were skinny runts you see. We tried various places and the usual skits were thrown at us, like ‘Go Home and Eat a Cow between two slices of bread!’. It was only late in 1915 that we got the ‘Kings Shilling’ to be called up at 24 hours notice.“

“We were sent to Redcar where we were inoculated in one arm and vaccinated in the other. I think he must have been a veterinary doctor because the very next day he came and wanted to look at out feet. He told me my feet were perfect, I had a high instep. It was all Dutch to me.”

“In Newcastle we were billeted in a roller skating rink in St Mary’s Place off Northumberland Road. For the next three months we had hard training all day long on the town moors. It was very cold and we sure enjoyed the hot meals waiting for us afterwards.”

Mediterranean Bound

Following their initial training in England, Harry and his battalion received unexpected orders in early May 1916. They were issued tropical kit, a clear indication of a deployment outside the European theatre, and embarked on a southbound train. On 6 May, they boarded the troop transport Ivernia at Devonport.

The experience was a profound shock to the system for the new recruits. Some 2,000 men were packed into the ship's holds for a voyage that began with a stormy passage through the notoriously rough Bay of Biscay. For Harry, the ordeal was compounded by personal hardship. *"We had a rough passage in the Bay of Biscay,"* he wrote, *"and I did not eat anything as I had the misfortune to only have 1 penny in my pocket. Not enough to buy an apple. I wished I was back in the brickyard earning a decent wage."* This stark contrast between civilian livelihood and military privation marked his abrupt transition to life as a soldier.

After a brief stop in Gibraltar to take on provisions, the ship entered the Mediterranean. Uncertainty and anxiety grew among the men, fuelled by rumours of a dreaded destination. *"We began to feel a little anxious as rumours were going around we were going to the Dardenelles,"* Harry noted. The Gallipoli campaign, which had concluded with a costly evacuation only months earlier in January 1916, still loomed large in the military imagination. Relief, therefore, was palpable when the Ivernia instead dropped anchor in the Grand Harbour of Valletta, Malta, in late May. The island, a crucial British naval fortress and hospital base, would be Harry's home for the next nine months.

In a stroke of luck, he was among sixty men selected to remain in Malta to assist a garrison of older Boer War veterans with base duties, primarily unloading hospital ships. This detail spared him from immediate front-line service. *"Well we were very fortunate to be there… we were glad to as we were not at Gallipoli,"* he observed. Malta was then known as the 'Nurse of the Mediterranean,' receiving a constant flow of sick and wounded from the ongoing campaigns in Salonika and the Middle East. Harry's first month was spent in Floriana Barracks until the pressing need for hospital beds forced his unit into tented accommodation on the Msida Bastion, an old burial ground sloping down to the harbour.

Life in the Malta garrison was a mixture of routine duty, minor misadventure, and adaptation. The site offered the convenience of "'out of work' bathing time" in the harbour, though this led to one serious infraction. After an unauthorised day of swimming, Harry and a friend fell severely ill. *"During the night we both had to be taken to the hospital as we were delirious. The doctor said we had 'Sand Fly' fever."* The three-week hospitalisation, during which he was fed only milk puddings, a food he *"don't like… even as of today"*, was followed by a three-week punishment of confinement to barracks without pay from his commanding officer.

Despite the discipline, he found ways to apply his civilian skills and initiative. When a competition was held for the tidiest marquee, Harry and a mate, Jimmy Grass, undertook significant improvements. *"We collected all the large rocks from the hillside… and made surrounding walls, that kept the goats out. Then we levelled off the floor using soil from the cemetery and mixed it with water. In the high temperatures it set as hard as concrete."* This resourceful engineering project, for which they shared the prize money, highlights how soldiers used pre-war trades to improve their immediate environment.

His personal correspondence also touched on the strains war placed on domestic life. In July, he received a letter from the mother of the girl he was courting in England, informing him she was now "walking out" with a local foreman. Harry's reaction was tellingly pragmatic and perhaps shaped by the pervasive uncertainty of the time: *"I did not bear anyone a grudge as it was well known that I never intended getting married whilst the war was on. It left me rather relieved."*

Duties were varied, ranging from guarding stores during a devastating storm that flattened the camp, to serving on coastal observation posts. *"For the next two months two of us was out every other night with a signaller on observation duty on the sea front. If there was a light shining out in the Mediterranean he would fix a telescope and then draw a sketch of it."* This detail underscores Malta's strategic role as a watchtower in the naval war.

By late December 1916, the interlude was ending. The daily news from both the Eastern and Western Fronts was "very gloomy," and the relentless arrival of casualties was a constant reminder of the wider conflict. In February 1917, the battalion was refitted with standard-issue kit. The tropical gear was exchanged for the uniforms of the European theatre. The rumours now crystallised into orders: they were bound for the trenches of France and Belgium.

Harry's Notes

“We had a rough passage in the Bay of Biscay and I did not eat anything as I had the misfortune to only have 1 penny in my pocket. Not enough to buy an apple. I wished I was back in the brickyard earning a decent wage.”

“After leaving Gibraltar we went up the Mediterranean. We began to feel a little anxious as rumours we going around we were going to the Dardenelles. Anyway they were all wrong, a few days later we dropped anchor in the Grand Harbour in Malta.”

“Well we were very fortunate to be there and we’re kept very busy, but in a way we were very glad to as we were not at Gallipoli.”

“One day my mate and I went down to the harbour and spent the day swimming down there. This wasn’t allowed unfortunately. We got back at 6pm. During the night we both had to be taken to the hospital as we were delirious. The doctor said we had “Sand Fly” fever. We were in the hospital for about three weeks. For the next two weeks we had no solid food, just slop. And, that is why I don’t like milk puddings, even as of today. We were glad to get back to the barracks, until the CO put us on a charge and then gave us three weeks confined to barracks with no pay! “

“There is one thing we get very good meals and we sure enjoyed them as we were on a shilling a day payment and I had made an allowance to Mum of 3/6 a week. I think they made it up to 5 shilling a week for mother.”

“One day they held a competition for the tidiest marquee. Me and my mate Jimmy Grass went for it. We collected all the large rocks from the hillside around and made surrounding walls, that kept the goats out. Then we levelled off the floor using soil from the cemetery and mixed it with water. In the high temperatures it set as hard as concrete. We shared the money around the marquee."

“I was on guard duty at the Main Guard room in Floriana Square opposite the Governors Palace and there was a band playing every afternoon. Well the rule was you were allowed to stand at ease and when I stood like that one time I was kind of doing a tap dance with one foot. Little did I know I was spotted by someone in the Palace. I think it was the Governors son. That resulted in four days confined to barracks.”

“In July I had a letter from the mother of the girl I was courting to say she was ‘walking out’ with the Foreman where she worked at the Paper Mill. In fact I knew him, he went to the

same school as I did. So in a way I did not bear anyone a grudge as it was well known that I never intended getting married whilst the war was on. It left me rather relieved."

"In November six of us were on duty at the cold meat store and it rained continuously for twelve hours. The wind was terrific. When we got back to camp next morning nearly every marquee was flat on the ground. Gee whizz, everyone was busy sorting out belongings and our mates said we was darned lucky to to on guard duty during the storm."

"For the next two months two of us was out every other night with a signaller on observation duty on the sea front. If there was a light shining out in the Mediterranean he would fix a telescope and then draw a sketch of it."

"There was a daily paper printed in Malta and it was very gloomy about the future, both in the east and the western front. It didn't alter the fact that there were still terrific casualties always arriving. In February we were refitted and were guessing where we would be bound for. We was soon to know, it was for France and Belgium."

Off to War: Étaples and the Road to the Front

In January 1917, Harry Leak's Mediterranean interlude ended. His battalion boarded a ship in Valletta harbour bound for Marseille, the primary conduit for British Empire troops entering the French theatre. From there, they endured a four-day journey north in the infamous hommes 40, chevaux 8 (40 men, 8 horses) boxcars of the French freight railways. The discomfort of travel was compounded by a culinary disillusionment that Harry recalled with striking clarity: *"I remember we were all quite excited when the Sergeant told us we were going to have Pork and Beans. What a surprise, a piece of greasy pork on top of a tin of beans. One look at that was enough. It was terrible, felt like we was going from the sublime to the ridiculous."* This moment, the disappointing reality of army rations replacing the "very good meals" of Malta, symbolised a descent into a harsher, more impersonal war machine.

Their destination was the vast British base depot at Étaples, south of Boulogne. Known to soldiers as the "Bullring," Étaples was the principal reinforcement and training camp for the British Expeditionary Force, notorious for its rigid discipline and brutal training regime. *"The camp we were at was as strict as any prison,"* Harry noted. After a medical inspection declared the men fit, they began a punishing schedule. *"They put you through the mill alright, galloping around in the soft sand from one trainer to another in heavy soled boots. We were glad to get back to camp at the end of the day."* This "mill" was designed to break down civilian reflexes and instill automatic battlefield responses, a process often enforced by harsh discipline from the Military Police ("Red Caps") and specialist instructors.

Harry's independent streak, evident in Malta, immediately clashed with this oppressive system. During a bayonet drill, he voiced a soldier's pragmatic scepticism, saying *"that the bayonet was no good against the machine gun."* The instructor responded by striking his knuckles. In a flash of defiance, Harry recalled, *"Right away I swung the butt of my rifle at his chin but sorry to say, I missed."* He was arrested for attacking a Warrant Officer, a potentially grave offence. At his hearing, the camp commandant examined his injured hand and, angered by the instructor's excessive force, tore up the charge sheet. Harry was excused duties to have his hand treated. This incident, a minor victory against arbitrary authority, highlights the tensions that would famously erupt in the full-scale Étaples Mutiny just months later, in September 1917.

His troubles with discipline continued. At St Omer, he received another punishment of four days' confinement. Around this time, the army issued "green envelopes" for personal correspondence that bypassed the usual censors, provided soldiers certified the contents contained only private family matters. Harry wrote to his brother Harold, also serving in a Territorial regiment. The censor, however, grew suspicious of a letter from one H. Leak to another H. Leak and opened it. *"The contents which I can assure you were not very complimentary,"* Harry admitted. The officer threatened severe consequences, stating *"I could be shot for what I had written."* After an apology, Harry tore up the letter. He reflected, *"the officers that rose from the ranks knew all the tricks of the trade,"* acknowledging the futility of trying to circumvent the army's pervasive control of information and morale.

Following Étaples, the battalion underwent further intensive training in the sand dunes near Dunkirk, again focusing on bayonet fighting. *"I thoroughly detested it,"* Harry wrote. Chastened by his earlier confrontation, he endured the targeted provocations of a sergeant instructor without retaliation: *"I put up with it."* This resignation marks a subtle shift from defiance to a more survival-oriented compliance, a necessary adaptation for the front.

The weeks of relentless training culminated in a purposeful redeployment. At an inspection parade in St Omer, the men were informed they were being transferred to the 1st/7th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment. This news heartened Harry: *"It sure made me a lot happier as that regiment was the Territorials together with the 1st/8th Battalion of the 49th Division. There were quite a lot of chaps from Leeds and district there."* Rejoining a core territorial unit promised the cohesion and local camaraderie absent in the impersonal reinforcement pool of Étaples.

A day later, the battalion moved into the forward zone. Their destination was the front-line sector at Fauquissart, a quiet but active part of the line in French Flanders. The long journey from Malta's harbours was over. Harry Leak, the former brickyard worker from Leeds, was now a reinforced infantryman in a Yorkshire battalion, on the threshold of the trenches.

Harry's Notes

"I remember we were all quite excited when the Sergeant told us we were going to have Pork and Beans. What a surprise, a piece of greasy pork on top of a tin of beans. One look at that was enough. It was terrible, felt like we was going from the sublime to the ridiculous. As far as that and porridge was concerned, I would never sample again."

“On arrival we were all examined by the doctors and declared fit. In a lecture we were told that we would start extensive training.”

“They put you through the mill alright, galloping around in the soft sand from one trainer to another in heavy soled boots. We were glad to get back to camp at the end of the day.“

“The camp we were at was as strict as any prison. The Red Caps caused a lot of trouble. There were four sergeant instructors there that took charge of us and they certainly put us through the mill, as the saying goes.”

“An instructor took a violent dislike to me. I said that the bayonet was no good against the machine gun and during the subsequent bayonet training he gave me a heck of a wallop over the knuckles of my right hand. Right away I swung the butt of my rifle at his chin but sorry to say, I missed. Anyhow I was arrested and put under guard at the camp for Attacking a Warrant Officer.”

“Next morning the camp commandant told me that it was a serious charge. The instructor said he just gave me a slight tap on the knuckles. I showed the commandant my hand and he blew his top at the instructor. I was let off with a caution, he tore the charge sheet up, excused me of all duties and told me to get my hand seen to at the ambulance tent.”

“We were very glad to leave Etaples.”

“A few days later in St Omer I was also picked on by a Sergeant and got four days confined to camp. Just about that time they issued us a green envelope. This would be used for family communications only and not be read by the Censor Officer. I wrote to by brother, Harold, who was also serving in a Territorial Regiment. Unfortunately, the Censor Officer saw a green envelope addressed to a H.Leak, written by a H.Leak and became suspicious. He opened it and read the contents which I can assure you were not very complimentary. He told me I could be shot for what I had written. I apologised and said I was sorry. He gave me the letter which I tore up in front of him. You see, the officers that rose from the ranks knew all the tricks of the trade and it was no use trying to pull the wool over their eyes.”

“Well most of the time on the sands near Dunkirk was bayonet fighting and I thoroughly detested it. Of course the Sergeant Instructor knew that, so he quite naturally picked up on me. He said “Why don’t you curse and swear?” Well you see, I had an awful experience with a most vicious Sergeant Instructor at Etaples after arriving from Malta, so I made sure it was not going to happen again. I put up with it.”

“It sure made me a lot happier as that regiment was the Territorials together with the 1st 8th Battalion of the 49th Division. There were quite a lot of chaps from Leeds and district there.”

Fauquissart Front, Laventie (April–July 1917)

Following the brutal conditioning of Étaples, Harry Leak's introduction to the Western Front was, in a strategic sense, anticlimactic. From late February to mid-July 1917, the 49th Division held a quiet sector of the line near Laventie, between Armentières and Béthune. For the division, this static period served as essential recuperation after the gruelling battles it had endured in the Ypres Salient upon its arrival in France the previous year. For Harry, newly transferred to the 1st/7th West Yorkshires, it was a fortunate reprieve, a *"rather quiet introduction to the war front."*

The battalion war diary, under Lieutenant-Colonel C. H. Tetley, underscores the sector's inactivity. Entries up to their departure on 5 July are routinely punctuated with the notation "nothing to report." No major attacks were launched or sustained by either side. Yet to dismiss this period as merely passive would be to misunderstand the nature of trench warfare. Even a quiet front demanded constant vigilance and exacted a steady toll from snipers, artillery, and trench raids. For the men of the 146th Brigade, these months were a relentless apprenticeship in survival.

Harry's notes reflect both the relative comfort and the ever-present strain of this holding position. He observed favourable conditions initially, a consequence of the German strategic withdrawal to the fortified Hindenburg Line earlier that spring: *"We were lucky, the Germans were retiring as we were approaching. The trenches there were very strong and also very dry. Duck Boards to walk on too."* Well-constructed, dry trenches with proper duckboards were a rarity on the Western Front and represented a significant boost to morale and health.

However, the routine of a quiet sector was punctuated by the grim realities of positional warfare. Harry's account provides vignettes of this daily attrition:

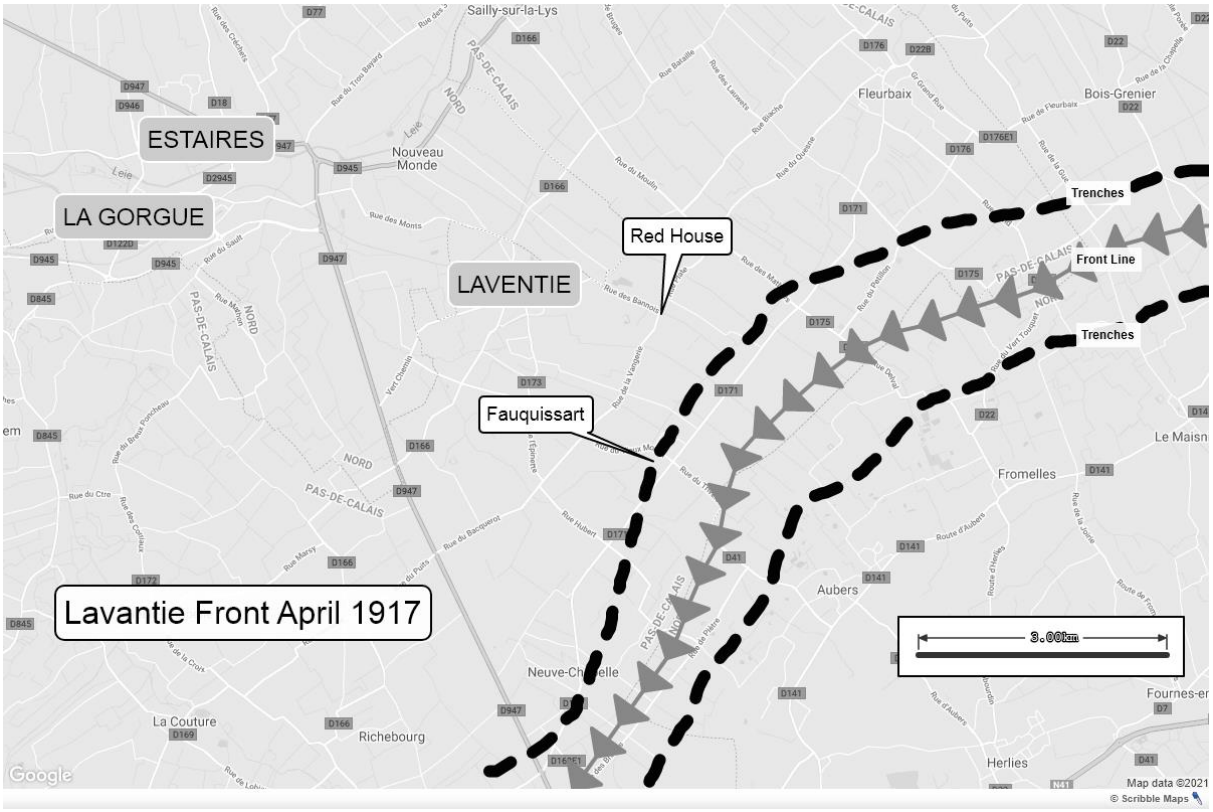
- The Constant Threat: The necessity of moving only at certain times was a hard-learned lesson. *"We were told not to look over the top during the day time but early one morning I saw something I thought was a German helmet. I popped my head up to see, only for a second, and 'Crack!' a bullet went right through my helmet."*
- The Ritual of the Stand-To: The daily ritual of preparing for dawn and dusk attacks, the most likely times for an assault, framed each day. *"We had to be on the firing step at daybreak and dusk. Stand-to we called it."*

- The Brutality of Patrols and Raids: Small, violent actions defined the quiet front. *"Our patrols used to go out into No Man's Land at night to try and capture a prisoner for information. One night our patrol came across a German patrol. Our officer, a young 2nd Lieutenant, challenged them and was immediately shot through the head. Our lads brought his body back."*
- The Psychological Weight: The proximity of death and the strain of constant alertness were inescapable. *"We had a young officer, just out from England. He was in the trench next to me when a sniper got him. He was only with us a week." Another memory highlights the personal cost: "My platoon officer, Lieutenant Brooke, was very popular. He was killed by a shell whilst out with a wiring party. We were all very upset."*

This period also involved rotations that exposed the men to the broader devastation of the region. *"We were relieved and went back to billets in the ruined village of Laventie. All the civilians had been evacuated."* The contrast between the ordered, if dangerous, trench system and the shattered rear areas was a constant feature of front-line service.

The Laventie interlude ended on 11 July 1917. The battalion moved from the trenches to billets in Estaires, before transferring north to the Dunkirk area and the Nieuport front. This move signalled a significant shift. The static warfare of Fauquissart was behind them; they were now heading towards the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), which was in its opening stages. The "gentle introduction" was over.

Map: Lavantie Front April 1917



St. Georges Sector, Nieuport (July 1917)

Harry written record of his war becomes conspicuously sparse for the latter half of July 1917. He confirms his battalion's move to the Belgian coast, noting simply, *"I went there,"* but provides no further detail. This absence is starkly at odds with the historical record of the 49th Division's brief, catastrophic posting to the Nieuport front in that same period. While Harry's silence may reflect the routine erasures of memory or a focus on personal rather than strategic events, it stands in profound contrast to one of the most traumatic episodes the division endured: the first large-scale use of a terrifying new chemical weapon.

Following their quiet tenure at Laventie, the division moved to the coast in mid-July. By the 18th, the 146th Brigade had taken over the St. George's Sector of the Nieuport defences, a labyrinth of waterways and canalised rivers. The sector was divided: the right sub-sector, held by the 1/6th West Yorkshires, was relatively quiet, protected by a broad reach of water. The left sub-sector, however, was a dangerous bridgehead north of the Yser River, subjected to constant shelling. The 1/7th Battalion, Harry's unit, was initially in reserve at Rebaillet Camp.

The front was poorly prepared. The Brigade Diary noted trenches that were "not even bullet-proof" and "communications very bad indeed." All movement depended on bridges converging at Nieuport, making the town and its approaches a fatal funnel. For the first few days, the line was active with patrols and shelling, but the defining horror began on the night of 22 July.

Just before midnight, the Germans initiated a bombardment with a new type of gas shell, identified by its distinctive scream and slight "ping" on detonation. It released Yellow Cross (Mustard) Gas, a persistent, insidious agent that attacked the skin, eyes, and lungs. Captain E. V. Tempest of the 1/6th Battalion left a harrowing account: "The gas was so deadly that if a man received the full force of the explosion he was killed instantly… Before dawn… there were hundreds of men in every stage of the disease… a long line of gassed men groped wearily…" The gas cloud was so thick and novel that men, not recognising the faint smell of burnt mustard, delayed putting on their respirators for fatal seconds. The 1/6th, in the quieter sector, still suffered 38 gassed; battalions nearer the storm endured crippling casualties.

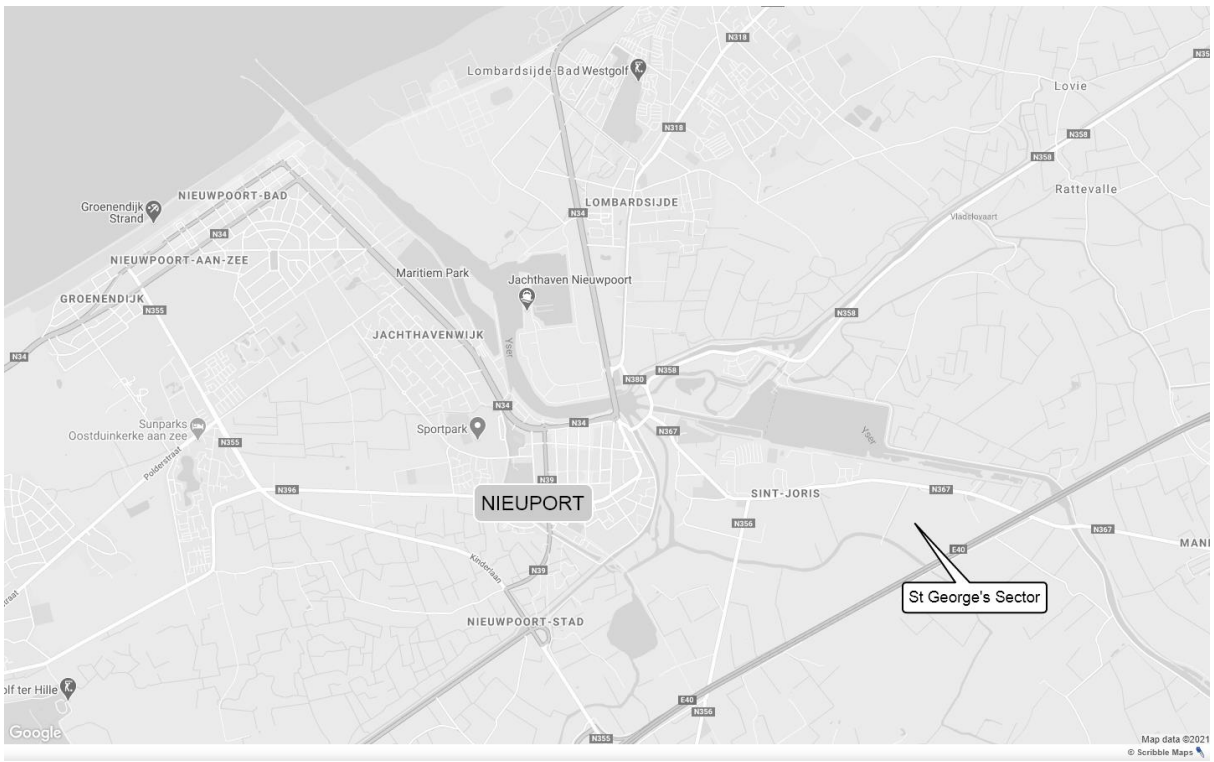
The 1/7th Battalion War Diary for this cataclysmic event is characteristically terse, recording only that the battalion "stood to" and noting an "intense bombardment." Its stark

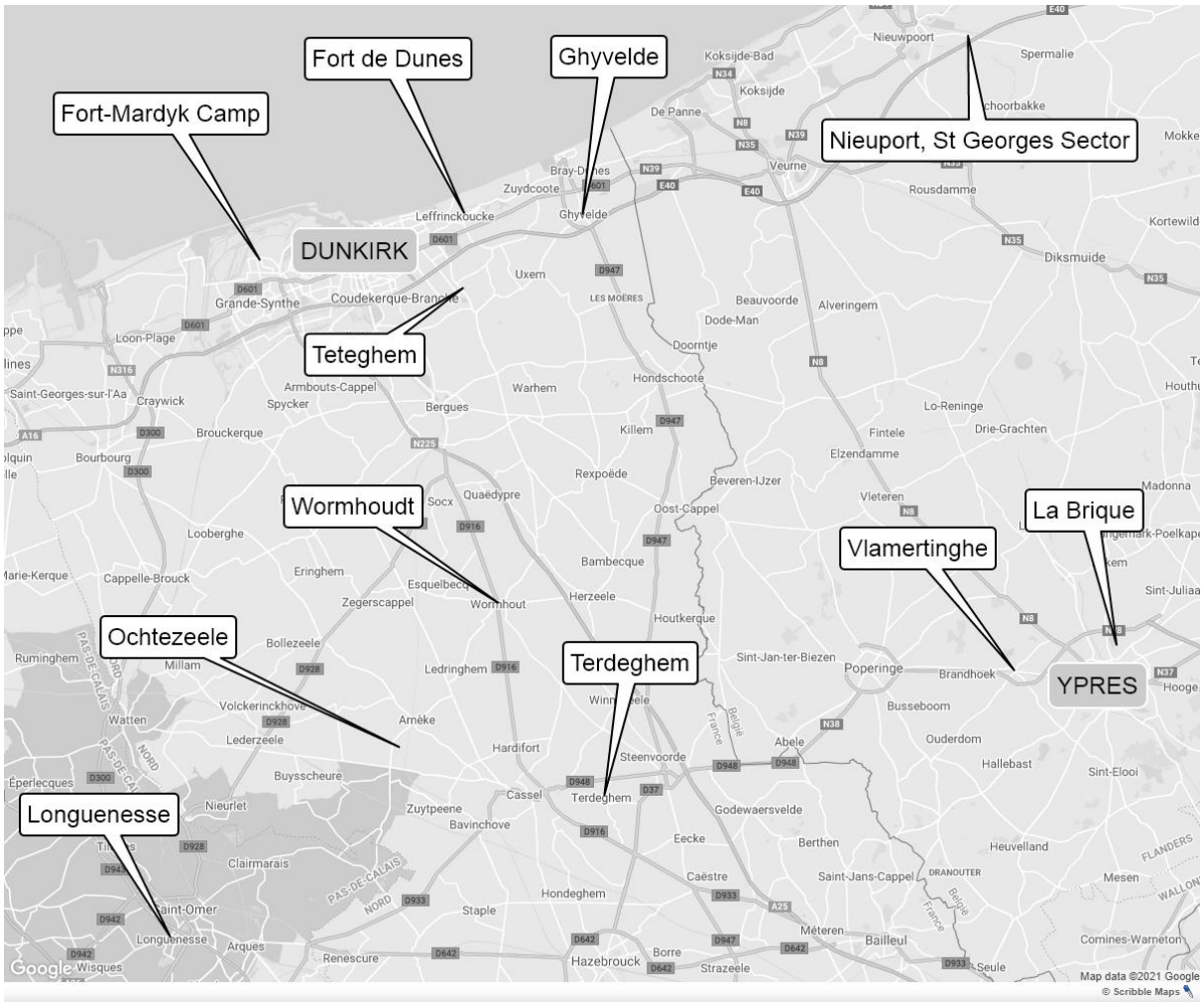
understatement mirrors Harry's own later silence. Between 26 July and 1 August, the 1/7th moved into the front line in the left sub-sector. Their diary entries for this period are brief but telling: "27 July: 'B' Coy in front line. 'A' & 'C' Coys in support. 'D' Coy in reserve. Fine day. Intermittent shelling. 2 ORs wounded. 28 July: Enemy shelled front line, support & reserve trenches & back areas with gas shells from 10.30pm to 3.30am. Casualties 1 Officer & 20 ORs gassed, 3 ORs wounded." This confirms that Harry's battalion, though perhaps spared the very worst of the 22nd, directly experienced the continuing gas attacks in a sector described as "extremely unpleasant and noisy."

Harry's lack of commentary on Nieuport is perhaps the most telling part of his story from this period. It suggests several possibilities: the chaos was so overwhelming it defied simple recounting; his duties in reserve or support spared him the direct, visceral horror witnessed by others; or, like many soldiers, he psychologically compartmentalised the episode as too traumatic to revisit. His silence speaks volumes, standing in stark relief against the vivid, horrific descriptions of survivors and official historians who declared it "one of the most awful experiences" of the division.

By early August, the battered division was relieved. The brief, brutal coastal interlude was over. For Harry, the "quiet introduction" to the front was now irrevocably past. The next move would not be to another static sector, but into the opening phases of one of the war's most infamous campaigns: the Third Battle of Ypres. The experience of Nieuport—whether directly endured or witnessed in its aftermath—would have been a brutal preparation for the mud and high explosives of Passchendaele.

Maps: Nieuport, Approach to Ypres, Reserve Camps




Fort de Dunes
Ghyvelde
Fort-Mardyk Camp
Nieuport, St Georges Sector
DUNKIRK
Teteghem
Wormhoudt
La Brique
Vlamertinghe
Ochtezeele
Terdeghem
YPRES
Longuenesse
Google
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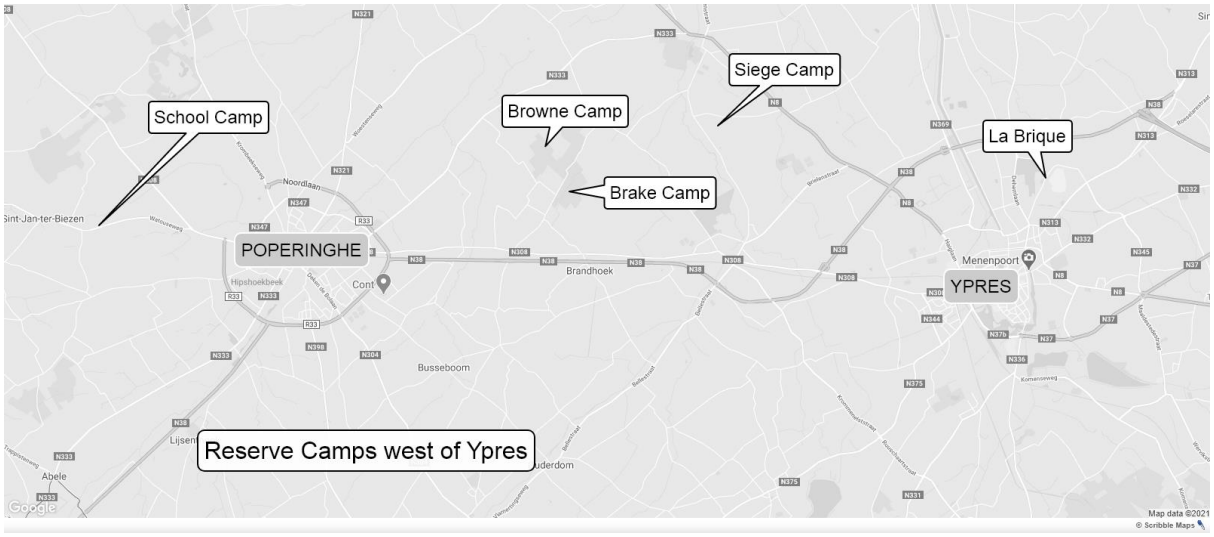
Siege Camp
School Camp
Browne Camp
La Brique
Brake Camp
POPERINGHE
YPRES
Reserve Camps west of Ypres
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Poelcappelle – The Third Battle of Ypres (October 1917)

Following the trauma of Nieuport, September 1917 was a month of ominous preparation for the 1/7th West Yorkshires. Training in the Dunkirk coastal areas gave way in early October to a move into assembly positions west of Ypres. The battalion was now part of the massive Allied offensive known as the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele).

Harry Leak, looking ahead to the attack scheduled for 9 October, captured the infantryman's dread of the unknown: *"It bothered us that we knew we were to be in that mass attack and didn't know any more than the Germans. We realised it would be a very tough job so all we had was to live in hope even if we die as the Jerries had too many machine guns for our liking."*

The 146th Brigade was ordered to attack on a three-battalion front, with the 1/7th in the centre. Their objectives were the German strongpoints codenamed Peter Pan and Wolf Farm. The attack began at 5:20 a.m. under a creeping artillery barrage, but the conditions were catastrophic. The ground was a "clinging mud and spongy morass" following weeks of rain and shellfire. Men already "dog tired" from the approach march struggled to advance through the quagmire, losing direction and failing to keep pace with the protective barrage.

Harry's experience in the days leading up to the attack illustrates the surreal horror of the Salient. Observing the landscape from the line, he was stunned: *"It was just like one giant horseshoe and the destruction, well it was bad… There was nothing standing, only stumps of trees."* His account of the approach to the line is a classic description of the Ypres nightmare: moving in single file over *"very slippery, very muddy ground,"* navigating a narrow duckboard track flanked by camouflaged field guns whose sudden discharge caused him to fall into a water-filled shell hole. He was saved only by his comrades hauling him out by his rifle.

The attack itself quickly bogged down. German machine-gun nests, particularly in the Bellevue pillbox complex and protected by vast fields of uncut wire, halted the advance across the brigade's entire front by 9:30 a.m. The 1/7th suffered heavily, losing most officers and senior NCOs. Isolated groups, including Harry's, became pinned down. *"There were*

about 50 of us and only room for a few. An officer yelled 'Spread out and get in shell holes'," he recalled. *"Three of us were the very last to get in a shell hole… we sure was pinned down by gunfire. Even through the night and all next day they kept spraying bullets just above our heads."*

Amid the chaos, individual acts of bravery stood out. Rifleman C. A. Capp of the 1/7th single-handedly rushed and disabled a machine gun that was enfilading his company, an act for which he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. The battalion, however, was decimated. By the afternoon, the 146th Brigade had suffered approximately 2,500 casualties.

The relief by New Zealand troops on the night of 10-11 October was slow and dangerous, conducted under heavy shellfire. Harry and two comrades, isolated and unaware the relief had occurred, remained trapped for three days. *"We did not know until the third day our division had been relieved… we found we could not stand,"* he wrote. Numb, exhausted, soaked and incapacitated by trench foot, they were eventually discovered by an Anzac medic evacuating his own wounded. He informed them their division had been gone for over 24 hours.

What followed was one of the most extraordinary episodes of Harry's war: a desperate, solitary crawl to safety. With sandbags wrapped around his feet and knees, he inched his way rearwards. Separated from his friends and battling exhaustion, he resorted to rolling down what he believed was Warrington Road to make faster progress, guided by the skeletal ruins of Ypres on the horizon. After hours of movement under intermittent shellfire ("*I was alone and scared to death"*), he was finally found by two officers and a padre near Zillebeke Lake, who arranged for his stretcher evacuation to an aid station.

An Analysis of Survival: The Warrington Road Discrepancy

Harry's consistent, vivid recollection of escaping via Warrington Road presents a historical puzzle. Official maps and war diaries suggest the closest aid stations were at Kansas Cross and Spree Farm, approximately 3 kilometres southwest of the battlefield. Warrington Road, however, lies some 9 kilometres south of Ypres, in a sector his battalion had not operated in.

Several plausible explanations exist for this discrepancy, none of which invalidate the core truth of his harrowing ordeal:

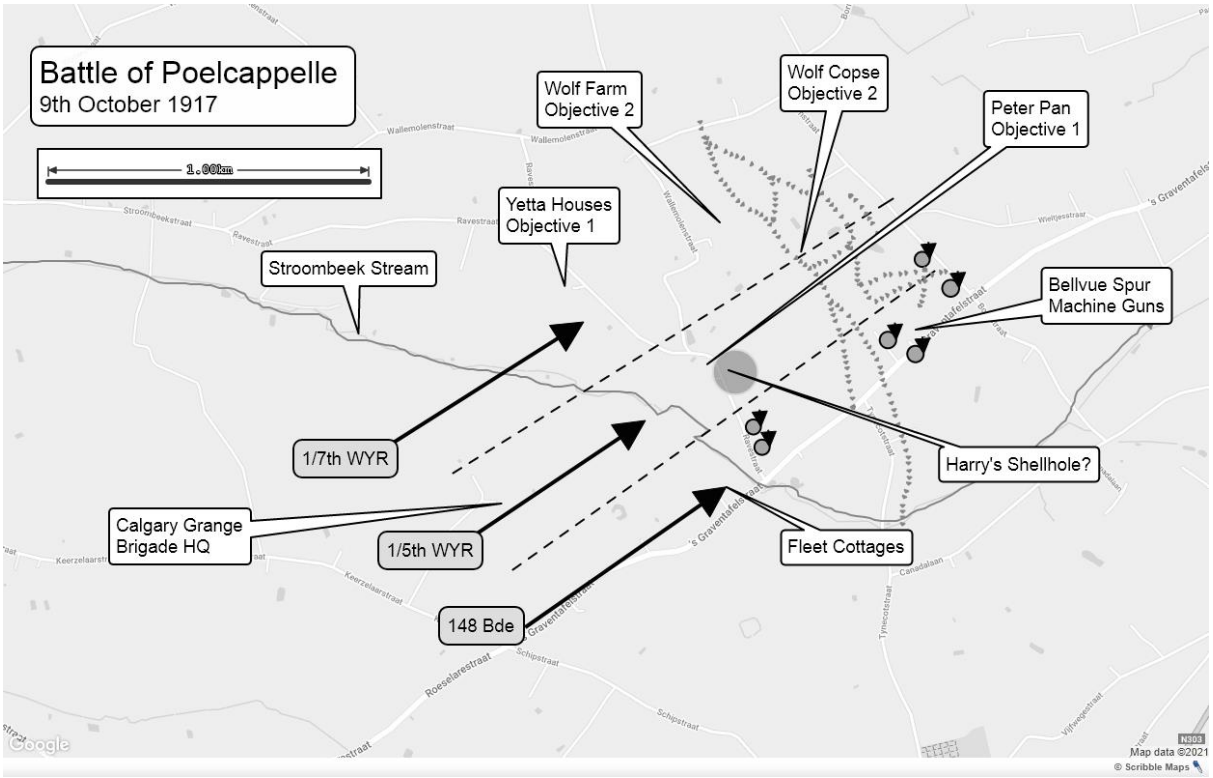
1. Disorientation and Drift: The attack itself suffered a "slight loss of direction." Isolated and pinned down, Harry's small group may have become further disoriented, sheltering further south than the battalion's main line.

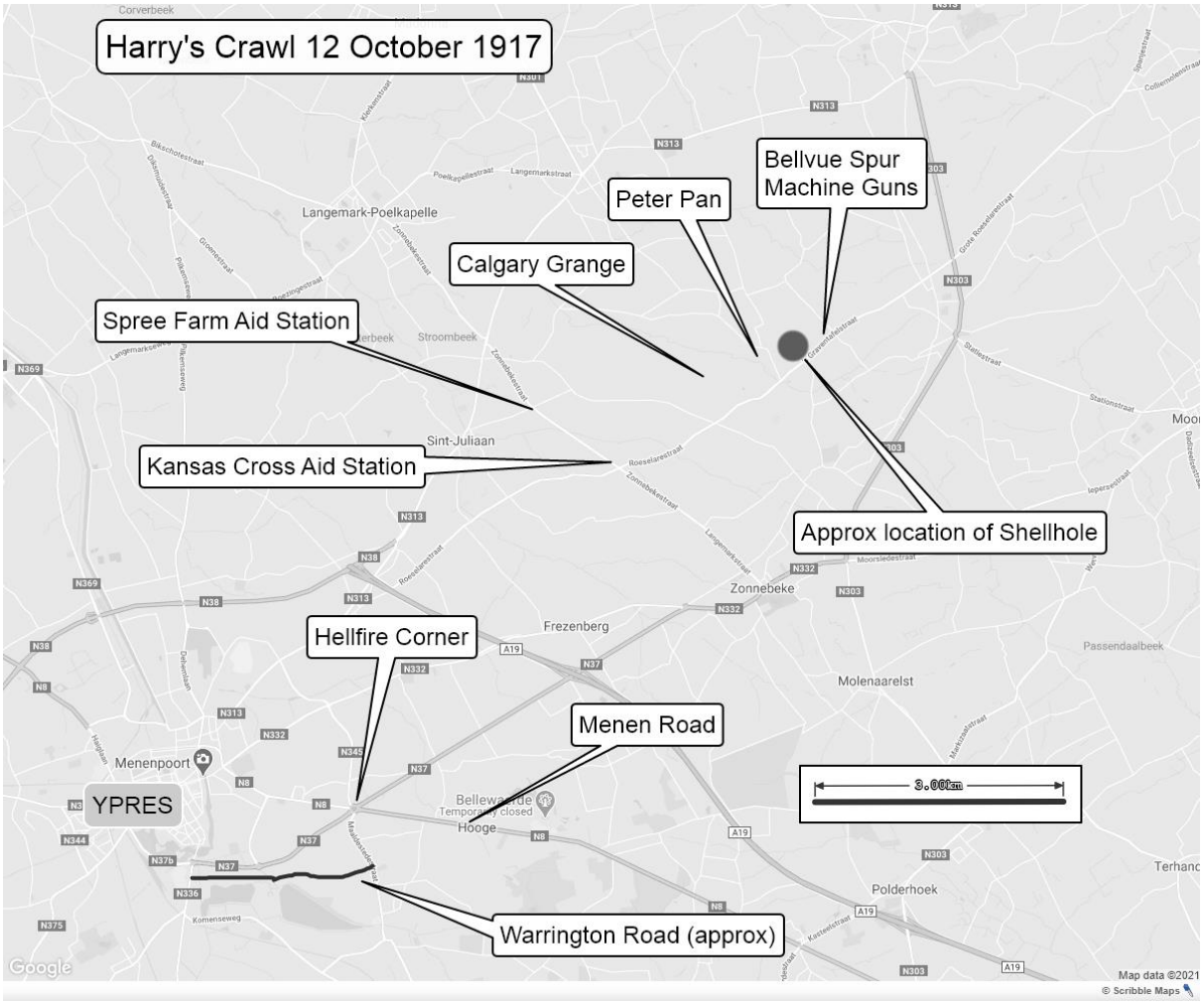
2. Guidance from the Anzac Medic: The medic who found them was taking wounded to an aid station near Ypres. Following his direction—a beacon of hope—would logically lead a survivor away from the immediate, chaotic front-line posts and towards the larger medical infrastructure in the Ypres area.
3. The Psychology of Landmarks: For a wounded, exhausted man, the unmistakable silhouette of Ypres' ruins provided a permanent landmark. "Warrington Road," "Hellfire Corner," and "Zillebeke Lake" may have served as mental shorthand for the general route to salvation, place names that crystallised in memory over time, representing the feeling of a long, hellish journey rather than a precise cartographic record.

His story's consistency over decades of retelling confirms its foundational truth: a multi-day ordeal of isolation, exposure, and a superhuman effort to self-evacuate from a corpse-strewn morass. The precise geography matters less than the psychological and physical reality it represents, the ultimate soldier's trial of surviving the aftermath of a failed attack in Passchendaele.

The cost was immense. The New Zealanders who relieved the 49th Division found wounded men "famished and untended on the battlefield," many of whom died of exposure before they could be recovered. Harry Leak was one of the fortunate few who crawled out of that mud. His war, however, was far from over.

Maps: Battle of Poecapelle and Harry's Crawl





Harry's Notes

“It bothered us that we knew we were to be in that mass attack and didn’t know any more than the Germans. We realised it would be a very tough job so all we had was to live in hope even if we die as the Jerries had too many machine guns for our liking.”

“In the Ypres Salient it was the custom when in the front line or support to ‘stand to’. That meant the everyone had to be ready in case of attack by the enemy. After a couple of hours we used to take turns to go into the dugout. Well, I stayed on watch until well into the afternoon."

“I was amazed looking over the bulge of the Salient. It was just like one giant horseshoe and the destruction, well it was bad. In daylight the troops must have gone through hell in 1915 and 1916 defending Ypres. There was nothing standing, only stumps of trees. Looking back over the lake, I thought that anybody who gets out of this was will be very lucky.”

“A few nights later we were in semi darkness over very slippery, very muddy ground for such a long time. It was a case of 6 paces between each man. It was very difficult to walk between shell holes.”

“By what we could see in the darkness it was most horrible and we got to a duckboard track about a yard wide, but had to keep getting off due to shell fire. The track went in between two camouflaged field guns. Our guide had never told us about these. Both guns blasted off with a blinding flash and my foot went don on a broken piece of duckboard. I fell over into a hole well above the shins and slowly sank deeper.”

“I was very lucky to go in feet first and also lucky that it happened by the edge. My pals were close by and one chap grabbed hold of the muzzle of my rifle and I hung onto the butt. I got out.”

“Some time later we reached a dugout. They had my puttees off in no time and then boots and stockings. I said there was a towel in my haversack. Gee I sure rubbed my feet and legs. Fortunately it was a warm wind. One of the chaps took my stockings out to dry. I put one foot in my cap comforter. He said “What are you going to do with the other foot?”. Anyhow he lent me his.”

“Now when in the front line or support it was the custom to be all ready for action before daylight so I put my bare feet in my boots and was in the trench for hours until about one o’clock keeping a good lookout.”

Hospitalisation and Recuperation (November 1917–April 1918)

Harry Leak's war entered a new phase the moment he was lifted onto a stretcher near Zillebeke Lake. The solitary struggle for survival in the mud gave way to the systematic, if overwhelmed, machinery of military medicine. His evacuation from the Passchendaele battlefield began a months-long journey of physical recovery that would unexpectedly redefine the course of his life.

His path followed the standard casualty chain rearward. From the aid station, he was moved to a field ambulance and then to a large marquee, where he was reunited with the two comrades from his shell hole. They waited four days for transport, a delay indicative of the massive backlog of wounded from the failed offensive. In a moment of surreal coincidence, a doctor treating him in France, upon hearing he was from Leeds, asked if he knew a Dr. Fergus. *"I said 'Yes, he's our family doctor!'"* Harry recalled, a fleeting connection to home in the impersonal vastness of the war.

He was eventually admitted to a large hospital in Wimereux, near Boulogne. The severity of his condition became clear when he discovered his two mates were not in his ward. A nurse informed him, *"I was in a worse condition than them."* His body, pushed beyond its limits by exposure, starvation, and stress, had broken down; his legs were terribly swollen and he was *"like a skeleton."* A doctor offered him a coveted place as a "sitting case" on a hospital ship to England, stating he would be of no use to the army for three months. Harry gratefully accepted.

In mid-December 1917, he boarded the hospital ship St. Patrick bound for Dover. As his train northwards pulled away from the coast, he allowed himself a moment of profound reflection: *"I closed my eyes and prayed and hoped that never again would I be in the Ypres Salient. Having said that, I was really lucky as there were many thousands less fortunate."* This acknowledgment—gratitude mingled with guilt—encapsulates the veteran's enduring burden.

His destination was a large hospital in Whalley, Lancashire. A week before Christmas, still fragile, he accepted an offer to move to a convalescent home. With nineteen other soldiers, "mainly cockneys," he was sent to three converted houses in Colne, near Burnley. *"By gosh,*

it was really wonderful," he wrote. The contrast could not have been more absolute: from the freezing, corpse-choked mud of Flanders to the warmth, *"good food and attention"* provided by a cook and six nurses. He was the only Yorkshireman among the group, but here, regional rivalries were subsumed by shared convalescence. *"What a marvellous Christmas and New Year we had."*

It was during this period of healing that fate intervened. At a local pantomime, a box of sweets was passed along his row. *"I turned around to thank them and sat directly behind me was Belle."* Belle, who would later become his wife, had entered his story. In a poignant reflection written over sixty years later, after her passing in 1980, Harry made the profound connection between his worst trial and his greatest blessing: *"Funny thing is, I would not have met her if I had not been in the Passchendaele area… I sure am very grateful that from something very bad something marvellous came to me and my family."*

His recuperation was effective. By the end of March 1918, he was medically assessed as "fit and well," feeling *"100 per cent better than I ever was."* The army's machinery now reclaimed him. He received orders to report to a training depot at Earsdon, near Alnwick in Northumberland. On the eve of his departure from Colne, he met Belle outside the gate. Tentatively, he offered a commitment: *"I said to her, apart from sending a letter to my parents I do not write to anyone but if you give me your address I will send a letter to you."* With this simple promise, a lifelong partnership began as his return to war loomed.

His physical wounds had healed, and a new emotional anchor had been found. But the war was entering its most desperate phase. The German Spring Offensive had begun on 21 March 1918, shattering the British front. The army into which he was being rebundled was fighting for its survival, and trained infantrymen were a scarce commodity. Harry Leak, restored to health, was now destined for the crucible of the war's final, bloody year.

Harry's Notes

"After I reached the aid station they transported me to a field ambulance and then into a large marquee and there I found my two shell hole mates. We were in that marquee four days awaiting transport to take us well to the rear. I told a doctor what regiment I was with. He said "Do you live in Leeds?" He then asked me if I knew a Doctor Fergus. I said "Yes, he's our family doctor!"

“Finally we got to a large hospital in Wimereux near Boulogne. I was well attended to by the doctors. What puzzled me was why my two mates were not in the same ward. Next morning I asked the sister. She told me that I was in a worse condition than them.”

“Two days later one of the nurses said to me “I guess you will be in England for Christmas, your knees to you thighs are terribly swollen and you are like a skeleton”. The Doctor asked if I would like to go to England as a sitting case as I would be no use to the army for the next three months. I thanked him. After another 5 days, around the 156th or 16th December I boarded the hospital ship, St Patrick and arrived at Dover. “

“As I settled down on the train heading north I closed my eyes and prayed and hoped that never again would I be in the Ypres Salient. Having said that, I was really lucky as there were many thousands less fortunate.”

“We eventually got to a large hospital in Whalley, Lancashire. It was just 1 week before Christmas. I was asked if I would like to go to a convalescent home. I said yes.”

“Along with 19 others, mainly cockneys, we went to three houses in Colne, just outside Burnley. By gosh, it was really wonderful. Good food and attention, thanks to the cook and six nurses. I was the only Yorkshire chap. What a marvellous Christmas and New year we had.”

“At a pantomime one day a box of sweets was passed around from the back to the front. I turned around to thank them and sat directly behind me was Belle.”

“Well on 15th March my dear wife passed away in Leeds Infirmary and I sure was broken hearted. I was like a pilot without a plane. We sure had a happy 56 years of happy married life, although it was very hard to make ends meet. But Belle never lost heart.”

“Funny thing is, if I would not have met her if I had not been in the Passchendaele area. I wouldn’t have had 56 years of happily married life with Belle.”

“I sure am very grateful that from something very bad something marvellous came to me and my family.”

“By the end of March 1918 I was marked fit and well and I must admit I was 100 per cent better than I ever was. Two days later I had notification to report to Earsden (Alnwick) a few miles from Newcastle.”

“Just before I left Colne I met Belle outside the gate. I said to her, apart from sending a letter to my parents I do not write to anyone but if you give me your address I will send a letter to you.”

Back to France (April–June 1918)

Harry Leak returned to France on 20 April 1918, disembarking at St. Martins Camp near Boulogne. His arrival coincided with the closing stages of the Battle of the Lys, a massive German offensive that had torn through the British lines in Flanders throughout April. While this spared him from the offensive's immediate chaos, he was now assigned to a unit that had borne its brunt: the 1st/5th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment. This battalion, like many others, had been severely mauled in the Spring Offensive and was desperately rebuilding.

He was immediately marked as a veteran. Arriving with a draft of one hundred men at Abeele (southwest of Poperinghe), he noted, *"There were at least 100 of us and not a recruit amongst us. We had all been in the line before."* This seasoned draft was a vital asset. When an officer asked if he would like to train as a No. 1 Lewis Gunner—the soldier responsible for firing the squad's light machine gun—Harry accepted. The role carried extra danger, as the gunner was a primary target, but also extra responsibility and an additional sixpence a day in pay. After a ten-day course, he passed, dryly noting, *"Out of the four gun teams I was the only one that hit the target, I suppose more by luck than judgement."*

His return also reaffirmed a conscious personal choice regarding rank. *"In 1917 and many times during 1918 I was asked if I wanted a stripe. I always said no, thank you,"* he wrote. His reasoning was starkly pragmatic and burdened by the experience of command: *"when you had authority to tell anyone to do something in the line, and they catch for it, you are responsible for their death. That's why I finished a full blown private, like I started."* This refusal speaks to a profound understanding of the weight of leadership and a preference for the defined, if deadly, role of a specialist.

Throughout May and June 1918, the 1/5th Battalion absorbed a flood of reinforcements. Over 900 new officers and men joined, a testament to the catastrophic losses of the preceding months. Harry observed the changing character of the unit: *"They sure had a lot of young chaps, quite a few from the south and quite a few from Manchester."* These were no longer the regional Territorials of 1916; they were a mixture of young conscripts and volunteers from across Britain, many aged only 18 or 19, hurried to the front with minimal training.

The battalion's task was now one of integration and education. As its war diary and regimental history confirm, weeks were devoted to intensive training: basic musketry, Lewis

gun drills, and brigade-level attack exercises on the beaches and fields behind the lines. This training was interspersed with fatigues to strengthen the defensive lines between Poperinghe and Ypres. For Harry, this period was a familiar, if arduous, cycle of preparation. *"Once more it was hard training,"* he noted, his perspective now that of an old hand alongside the new boys.

By the time he reached the battalion in the Poperinghe area, he was aware of its recent history. The 1/5th had been, in his words, "'wiped out' during the recent German Offensive," and his draft was intended "to 'make up numbers'." The front they took over west of Ypres was, for the moment, quiet. This lull was deceptive. It was a period of deliberate rebuilding and retraining for an army that was shifting from desperate defence to preparation for its own offensives.

For Private Harry Leak, Lewis Gunner, the respite was over. The seasoned survivor was now a key component in a rebuilt battalion, his skills essential for the young soldiers beside him as the war entered its final, mobile phase.

Harry's Notes

"I arrived back in France 20th April 1918. After spending the night in St Martins Camp a party of 100 of us arrived at a place named Obele. There were at least 100 of us and not a recruit amongst us. We had all been in the line before."

"An Officer asked me if I would like to be No1 Lewis Gunner. I said yes and for 10 days I was on a course. What's more, I passed alright and my pay was 6d a day more. Out of the four gun teams I was the only one that hit the target, I suppose more by luck than judgement. We drove the instructors mad as we were only supposed to fire short bursts."

"The next two weeks were pretty hectic. After 10 days I had passed all the tests. Next day he handed me a Webley revolver and two days later we were in support on the front line."

"In 1917 and many times during 1918 I was asked if I wanted a stripe. I always said no, thank you. My excuse for that was that when you had authority to tell anyone to do something in the line, and they catch for it, you are responsible for their death. That's why I finished a full blown private, like I started." Throughout May 1918, the flood of 'new blood' promised by General Cameron poured into the 1/5th battalion, with 17 officers and 592 other ranks joining. In June, July and August a further 9 officers and 326 Other Ranks arrived."

“They had had more casualties in the last action. They sure had a lot of young chaps, quite a few from the south and quite a few from Manchester. Once more it was hard training.”

The Lost Platoon: Kemmel Hill, May 1918

For decades, the story Harry Leak told of his most traumatic combat experience existed in a historical void. The war diary of his own 1/5th West Yorkshires showed no action for early May 1918. His vivid account of a leaderless platoon, abandoned in a field and decimated at dawn, seemed implausible, a phantom battle. It was only through meticulous cross-referencing of higher brigade diaries, sparked by a forum inquiry, that the truth emerged: Harry's story is a perfect microcosm of the desperate improvisation and systemic failure that characterized the British front after the German Spring Offensive of 1918.

First let Harry describe what happened ...

“I expected them at 5am and they had not arrived at 7am. 15 minutes later 4 shells exploded 40 yards behind us. A short while after a load of Germans came out of a wood 400 yards away. There must have been 200 of them. If we had spent the night digging holes to fire from we would have stood a better chance. Thank goodness everyone in the platoon had seen service before in the front line. They knew to hold their fire until the Germans were much closer. Wasn’t long before we knew the situation was hopeless. Our chaps had done well, but they were outnumbered by about 10 to 1. First burst of fire from us and the Germans lost a number of men. We did not get off scot free as three of my team were killed, another badly wounded. My No2 said it looks like we are being prisoners.”

“We both scampered up the slope about 150 yards, dug a quick funk hole and set the Lewis Gun up. I have often thought that was the daftest thing I ever did as we only had 2 panniers of ammunition left (47 rounds).”

“It was a hopeless situation and I was watching the Germans put the wounded on stretchers. They certainly were busy, they also had casualties. Five of our chaps had their hands on their heads.”

“My No2 said there was someone creeping up on us through the grass. I said keep your eye on him. I was more concerned with the Germans at the foot of the slope. If they come up here I’ll take the cocking handle of the gun with me, but leave the gun so I could run faster.”

“The person crawling to us through the grass was a British officer. He said those are Germans down there. I told him I was well aware of that. He replied, well fire. I said they are

picking up the wounded. He replied, fire anyway. I was very abrupt, I said I will not, there was 30 of us down there and now there are only the two of us left. My No2 said fire a little burst to pacify him. I let a few rounds go towards the man in the moon, way above their heads."

"Little did I know but by firing off that burst it nearly cost us our lives. We got back in the funk hole and were kneeling facing each other. A bullet from a sniper just whizzed past my right ear and if my mate had not had his gas mask on his chest he would have been a dead duck. He had his hands in front of his gas mask and it was really incredible. The bullet went between two of his fingers of his left hand and it just skinned the skin off. Did not smash a bone. He lost quite a lot of blood though. And that is God's truth."

"Right away we were off running to where that Officer had disappeared. About 50 yards away we met six or seven soldiers amongst the trees. I asked if they were 49th Division, they said no they were the 4th Division. They told us the 49th were over there about as mile to our right. In the darkness of the previous night we had been dumped in the wrong field. We sure was boiling mad that we had been left in that situation."

In late April, the 1/5th Battalion had been shattered. From its remnants, and those of other battalions, the 146th Brigade formed a "Composite Battalion" of experienced survivors. As the 147th Brigade's war diary reveals, this unit was used as a emergency reserve for a frantic series of failed local attacks aimed at stabilizing the line near Kemmel Hill. Harry's platoon was one small piece of this desperate effort.

On the night of 1/2 May, part of this composite battalion was moved forward to establish outposts. In the darkness and confusion, Harry's Lewis gun team and a platoon of infantry were led into a field and left with the promise of relief at dawn. They were not in a trench, but in the open, a forward listening post for an operation that was already unravelling. The promised relief never came. At first light, they were spotted and attacked by a force ten times their size.

Harry's narrative of the doomed defence, his escape with his No. 2, and their eventual stumbling into the lines of the 4th Division is confirmed by the chaotic paper trail. The 1/5th's diary notes the composite company's return on 5 May with 22 fewer men, the exact administrative notation for the casualties Harry described. The official record of his ordeal was there all along, just filed under a different, hastily assembled command.

This episode is more than a personal tragedy. It illustrates the brittle state of the British Army in that sector: reliant on ad-hoc units, plagued by failed coordination with allies, and where

complex orders dissolved at the point of contact, leaving small groups of soldiers to pay the ultimate price. Harry's persistent, detailed memory has provided a human lens on a hidden line in a brigade war diary, recovering a lost story of courage and breakdown on the slopes of Kemmel Hill.

The Official Silence and the Hidden Ledger

The 1/5th West Yorks' diary for early May 1918 shows no front-line action, only training and church parades. Yet, the same diary coldly notes the return of the composite company on 5 May with 22 fewer men than when it left. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records and the International Committee of the Red Cross prisoner lists you consulted provide the grim, human corroboration for this administrative discrepancy. These 22 "missing" Other Ranks are the official, silent ledger entry for the men Harry saw killed, wounded, and captured.

The reason for the silence is the key discovery: between 28 April and 5 May, Harry was not on the books of the 1/5th Battalion. He and his comrades had been drafted into the 146th Brigade Composite Battalion, a makeshift unit of survivors thrown together to plug gaps in the line after the carnage of the Battle of the Lys. This battalion was then placed under the operational command of the 147th Infantry Brigade. Therefore, the true context for his ordeal is buried not in his own unit's diary, but in the message logs and orders of the 147th Brigade.

Reconstructing the Crisis: A Brigade in Chaos

The 147th Brigade's war diary excerpts paint a picture of a desperate and chaotic situation:

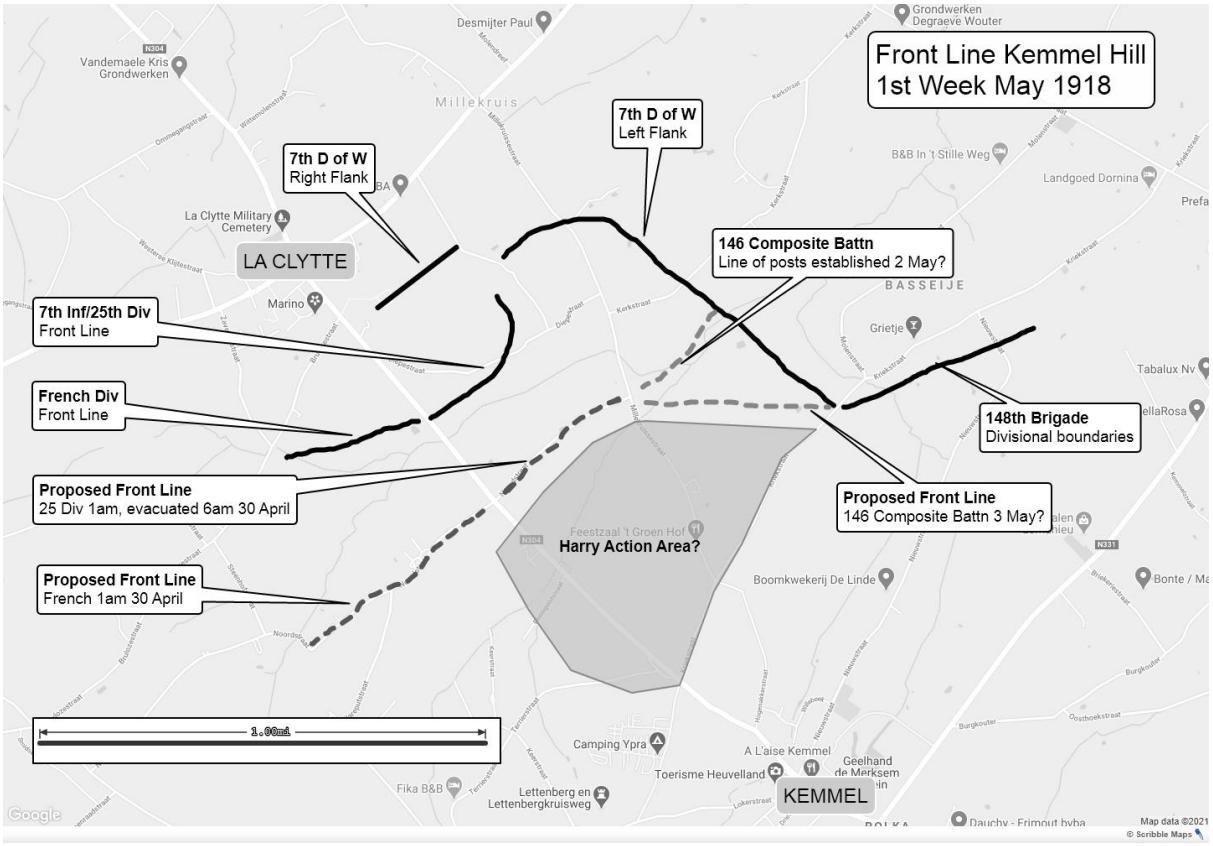
- A Fluid and Failed Plan: On 30 April, the brigade attempted an operation to connect with French troops and advance the line. It failed, met with a "terrific barrage." Orders for 1 May speak of pushing forward to establish a new line, with the timing uncertain ("may be advanced to night fall tonight").
- The Composite Battalion as a Fire Brigade: The 146th Composite Battalion was the reserve for these precarious operations, to be used to "conduct or hold the new front line." They were the crisis troops, moved forward under darkness into assembly areas.
- Confusion and Isolation: Messages detail complex relief plans with other battalions (the 1/4th and 1/6th Duke of Wellington's) and the eventual handover to French forces. In this whirlwind of orders and counter-orders, a small group could easily become misplaced.

Answers to Harry's Questions

The brigade-level context provides powerful, if tragic, answers to the questions that haunted him:

1. Why were they in a field overnight? They were almost certainly a forward outpost or "line of posts" for the planned (but aborted) brigade operation. The officer placing them was following orders to establish an advanced position.
2. Why were they leaderless? This speaks to the ragged nature of a composite unit. The officer may have been a specialist deploying Lewis gun teams, expecting a junior NCO to take charge—a link that failed in the disorganization. It also reflects the critical shortage of experienced junior leaders after weeks of heavy fighting.
3. Why weren't they relieved? The larger operation they were supporting collapsed. Under heavy shelling and with plans changing hourly, their isolated position was likely forgotten or deemed too dangerous to relieve. They were sacrificed to the fog of war.
4. Why was there no support? Their platoon was likely forward of the consolidated British line. The main units were pinned by the same barrage and, unaware of their precise location, were following orders to hold the primary defence, not launch a rescue.
5. Who were the "4th" they met? This is a crucial clue. As the 49th Division was being relieved by the French, Harry and his mate, escaping south, stumbled into the sector of the British 4th Division. This confirms they were in a gap between units, utterly disconnected from their command.

Map: Front line Kemmel Hill 1st week May 1918



Harry's Notes

"We had to parade in battle order and we thought we were off for another four days in the line. We set off around 7pm walking and it was quite dark. What's more we couldn't see anything. I sure got a surprise when the officer took our platoon and gun teams into a field and told us to spread out and face the way he was. He said, Gunner Leak, take your team right to the end and we will see you in the morning. Get your oil sheets on the ground and rest."

"What puzzled us was that there was not even a lance corporal with us. If only the Germans had known that we should have been taken prisoner quite easily without firing a shot. All of us were awake before it got light."

"I expected them at 5am and they had not arrived at 7am. 15 minutes later 4 shells exploded 40 yards behind us. A short while after a load of Germans came out of a wood 400 yards away. There must have been 200 of them. If we had spent the night digging holes to fire from we would have stood a better chance. Thank goodness everyone in the platoon had seen

service before in the front line. They knew to hold their fire until the Germans were much closer. Wasn't long before we knew the situation was hopeless. Our chaps had done well, but they were outnumbered by about 10 to 1. First burst of fire from us and the Germans lost a number of men. We did not get off scot free as three of my team were killed, another badly wounded. My No2 said it looks like we are being prisoners."

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"My No2 said there was someone creeping up on us through the grass. I said keep your eye on him. I was more concerned with the Germans at the foot of the slope. If they come up here I'll take the cocking handle of the gun with me, but leave the gun so I could run faster."

"The person crawling to us through the grass was a British officer. He said those are Germans down there. I told him I was well aware of that. He replied, well fire. I said they are picking up the wounded. He replied, fire anyway. I was very abrupt, I said I will not, there was 30 of us down there and now there are only the two of us left. My No2 said fire a little burst to pacify him. I let a few rounds go towards the man in the moon, way above their heads."

"Little did I know but by firing off that burst it nearly cost us our lives. We got back in the funk hole and were kneeling facing each other. A bullet from a sniper just whizzed past my right ear and if my mate had not had his gas mask on his chest he would have been a dead duck. He had his hands in front of his gas mask and it was really incredible. The bullet went between two of his fingers of his left hand and it just skinned the skin off. Did not smash a bone. He lost quite a lot of blood though. And that is God's truth."

"Right away we were off running to where that Officer had disappeared. About 50 yards away we met six or seven soldiers amongst the trees. I asked if they were 49th Division, they said no they were the 4th Division. They told us the 49th were over there about as mile to our right. In the darkness of the previous night we had been dumped in the wrong field. We sure was boiling mad that we had been left in that situation."

**"We crossed three roads before we got to see any of our lot, must have walked a mile and a half. The Sergeant said they had been looking for us all over. He asked me where have we*

been? I blew my top, told him he was full of tripe and almost got on a charge. I asked an officer why had no one come for us. Did they not hear any shell fire nor noise of any sort? We were dumped in that field and only two of us got out. Six or seven were taken prisoner and and at least going on for 30 casualties. Some had paid the supreme sacrifice."

*"Seems we were put into the wrong field as we found out that we were in front of another Division on the blinking left."**

"I called them twerps! The Sergeant said he would have me up before the CO. I replied, I wish you would. He was from B Company and we was in A Company. Well, it was all hushed up. Next day we went back, I think it was, to Obeele to get reinforced. That is where we got about 50 recruits, all young lads. Quite a few were from Kent and the London District. I got three in my gun team."

"We left that spot and did not have any further contact with the Germans for quite a while. Soon after that we were back in the Ypres Salient up either side of the Menin Road, in trenches or down the other at the edge of Zillebeke Lake."

Ypres Summer Reinforcement (May–August 1918)

Following the chaos and decimation of the Kemmel Hill action in early May, Harry Leak's war entered a phase of tense routine. The 1/5th Battalion, now rebuilt with drafts of young replacements, was tasked with holding a static section of the Ypres Salient throughout the summer of 1918. This period was defined by vigilance, the grinding realities of trench life, and the slow rebuilding of a battalion's strength in a landscape of enduring desolation.

After the trauma of the composite battalion, Harry returned to the familiar, if dreary, rhythm of his unit. The pattern was regular: "During the next two weeks it was always the same routine. Then we moved to the Pop front to hold the line. We would spend time in the line and then time in support." "Pop", Poperinghe, served as the crucial rear-area hub, a place of brief respite.

The battalion's sector covered ground tragically familiar to Harry from Passchendaele, operating around Zillebeke, Dickebusch, and towards Zonnebeke. He was struck by the altered geography: *"The bulge was so small compared to what it had been in 1917."* This was astute; the German Spring Offensive had driven British forces back perilously close to Ypres, leaving the front lines just 2,000 yards east of the city.

The Texture of Trench Life

Life in this stagnant sector was a mix of boredom, minor misery, and sudden danger. Harry's notes capture its essence. The pervasive infestation of lice ("chats") led to a memorable incident where he successfully petitioned an officer for a steam bath for 200 men—a rare triumph for morale, celebrated with songs on the march back. Yet, as he pointed out to a sergeant, without fumigated clothes, the relief was temporary.

Patrols defined the nightly activity. While the divisional history notes the enemy was often passive, these forays were deadly serious. In mid-June, a fighting patrol east of Hellfire Corner aimed to secure identification failed, costing the lives of two men, including Harry Herman, and wounding six. Harry's expertise as a Lewis Gunner was repeatedly tested. When two staff officers questioned his readiness, he demonstrated his skill and fieldcraft by firing

from an alternate position, a decision vindicated minutes later when shells bracketed his original post.

The battalion rotated between the line north of the Menin Road and quieter sectors south, near Zillebeke Lake. A rare break in the Ypres Ramparts in late July offered a moment of dark levity when Harry and a comrade, caught swimming in the canal, hid from their sergeant in the bushes *"laughing like blazes."*

A Changing Character and a Quiet Finale

The character of the battalion continued to evolve. On 30 July, Major General Cameron presented gallantry medals, a ceremony affirming the unit's reconstitution. In early August, they held an exceptionally quiet line north of the Ypres-Roulers railway. Harry described the sodden discomfort of Lewis gun posts in water-filled shell holes and the nightly ritual of exercising frozen feet under the glare of enemy flares. He also noted the Germans' advantage: *"they had pill boxes to get into during the day."*

Danger, however, was never absent. On 11 August, Second Lieutenant Lewis Mitchell was killed by a sniper while patrolling. Harry, ever the veteran, schooled the new lads on the distinctive "metallic click" of incoming Whizbang shells. Yet, he could take pride that during this final tour, his platoon suffered no casualties.

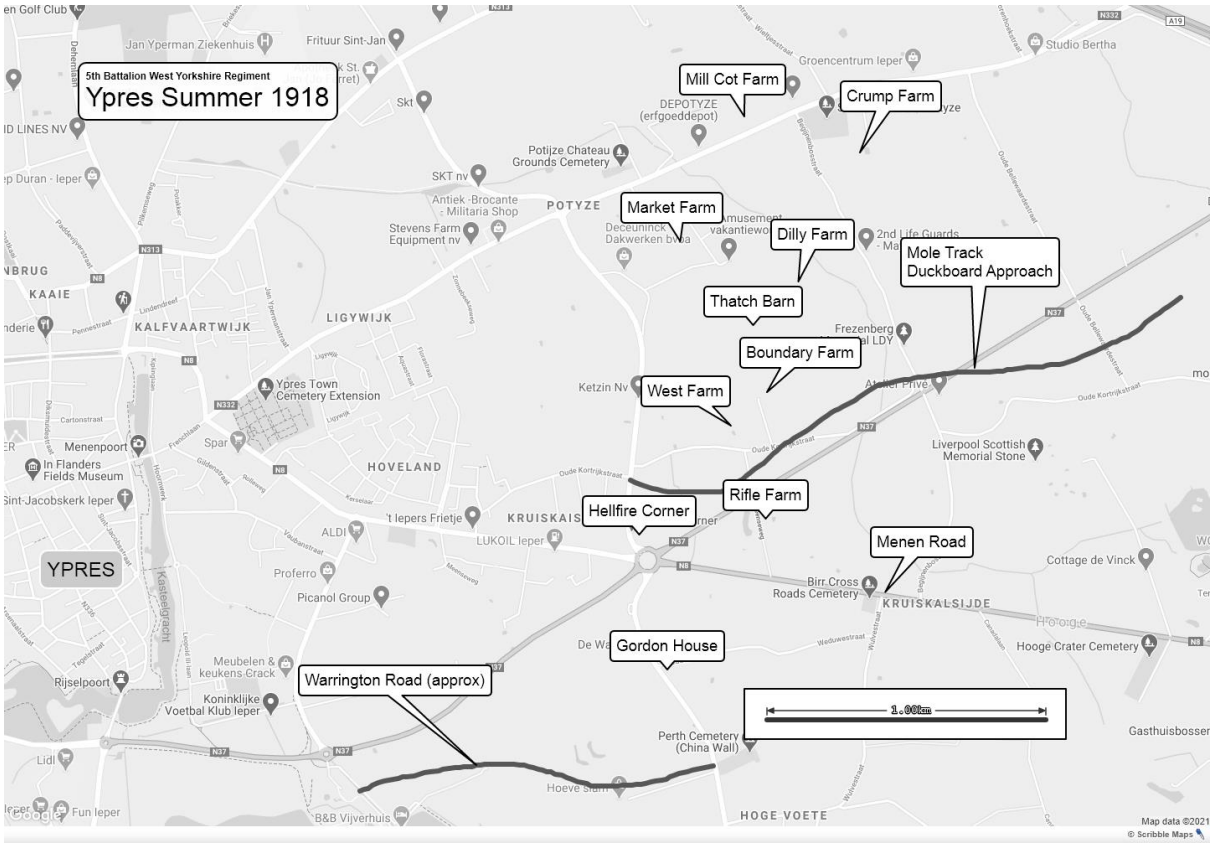
Among the ranks was a figure of future notoriety: Second Lieutenant Maurice Wilson, MC. Wounded on 19 July, Wilson had earned his ilitary Cross for holding an isolated post under intense fire during the spring battles—Ma deed echoing Harry's own recent ordeal at Kemmel. Wilson would later become famous for his fatal, eccentric solo attempt to climb Mount Everest in 1934.

The End of the Salient

In mid-August, the 49th Division was relieved. The static war in the Salient, which had defined Harry's service since 1917, was over. *"The very next day we left the Ramparts of Ypres,"* he wrote. The battalion moved to the coast near Calais for intensive training in attack tactics in the dunes. The Allied armies had launched the Hundred Days Offensive, and the war was becoming one of movement. As Harry heard, the Americans now held the line at Ypres and were enduring the German "kitchen sink." For the 1/5th West Yorkshires, the next

destination was Cambrai. The long defensive struggle was finished; the final advance was beginning.

Map: Ypres Summer 19188



Harry's Notes

“During the next two weeks it was always the same routine. Then we moved to the Pop front to hold the line. We would spend time in the line and then time in support.”

“A few days later we were back in the Salient up towards Zonnebeke, Kemmel, Dickebusch on one side of the Menin Road or up towards Langemark on the other. Most of the time we were in the Zillebeke trenches and we sure got used to that area. I saw that track many times in the next couple of months without further trouble.”

“I was sure surprised looking in the direction of Zonnebeke. The bulge was so small compared to what it had been in 1917. There must have been some bitter fighting and the German attack certainly got close to Ypres.”

“An Officer asked me if we had any complaints. I said would it be possible to have a steam bath as not only are we terribly filthy, but lousy too? He noted my complaint. Two days later 200 of us had a five mile/two hour walk to where we stripped off for thirty minutes hot steam bath. We had to undress in a field and take a towel with us. The sergeant asked me if I had enjoyed it. I told him I would have enjoyed it more if our clothes had been fumigated. “I invited the Sergeant to come into our huts and watch the lads running lighted candles up the inside seams of their trousers burning out the ‘chats’. As we were marched off the Officer asked us how we enjoyed it. We surely did so we all started singing ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’. All the way back we were singling Tipperary and all the old war songs. I can honestly say I enjoyed every minute of that day.“

“Two staff officers paid us a visit. Doesn’t make them any wiser! As they sauntered along the trench one asked me if I was sure the Lewis Gun would fire. I said, yes. He wanted me to prove it. I stood up, took the gun off the top of the trench and walked two bays further over. Then I fired off a burst. The Officer said, why did you take the gun over there? I said, so we wouldn’t give our position away. A few minutes later shells burst just in front of the position I had been firing from.”

“We were mostly in the line trenches in front of Zillebeke Lake but one time, in reserve, we went into the Ramparts of Ypres. This pleased me as I had never been there. It was the end of July and the canal had a dead end to it. Gee, the weather was very warm and tempting. A lad and I and went for a swim under the overhanging bushes of the canal. We were just thinking of getting out when we heard the melodious voice of our Sergeant was shouting for us. So we hid in the bushes laughing like blazes.”

“It was difficult setting up a Lewis Gun Post in shell holes as one had to get used to having ones feet in water from dawn to dusk. At night we used to get out exercising our feet but one had to stand perfectly still if the Germans fired very lights up. At about that time the Germans was about 400 yards from us, but they had pill boxes to get into during the day.”

“With Whizbangs you first heard a metallic click and in seconds a terrific explosion. They didn’t make a large hole in the ground but made a heck of a bang. I told the lads of our platoon to keep well down in the trench if they hear the click as these shells threw lots of shrapnel around.”

“During that spell at Ypres I am pleased to say that we didn’t have one casualty.”

“The very next day we left the Ramparts of Ypres. We later heard that the yanks had taken over and the Germans had thrown everything but the kitchen sink at them. Well on the move again and our destination was Cambrai.”

Arras Front (September 1918)

In mid-September 1918, Harry Leak and the 5th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment, left the training dunes of Calais. They were now part of the British Expeditionary Force's relentless Hundred Days Offensive, the war's final, grinding push. Their destination was the Arras front, a sector that had seen ferocious fighting in 1917 but was now the springboard for an advance towards Cambrai and the formidable Hindenburg Line.

After a long journey, the battalion arrived at Foufflin-Ricametz, west of Arras, in the early hours of the morning. They spent the next three weeks in a state of poised readiness, training and labouring in reserve around Lancaster Camp. The atmosphere was one of gathering momentum. On 20 September, they moved into the front line between Roeux and Plouvain, occupying ground recently seized by the 51st (Highland) Division. Here, the war's character was different from the stagnant Ypres Salient. The enemy, though desperate, was retreating, fighting a fierce rearguard action. The battalion was *"shelled in earnest,"* suffering seven casualties on 23 September alone.

It was during this period of forward movement that Harry experienced one of the war's most starkly personal tragedies. Advancing into the outskirts of an unnamed town (likely one of the shattered villages near Roeux), his unit took shelter. *"We had a position on some steps that led down to a Château. We went down into the cellar and smelt something cooking. Someone had killed some rabbits. Anyhow, the taste was good."* This moment of minor respite—foraging for food in an abandoned cellar—was shattered within the hour.

"A large shell exploded about 60 yards away from where we were. There were 12 casualties, most of them were dead. One of them was Stan Brogden, son of a friend of my family. We used to work in the brickyard together. The blast blew both his legs off." The loss was not an anonymous statistic; it was a friend from his civilian life, a connection to home severed by a random shell. Harry's bleakly pragmatic response to his officer, *"well that's what war is all about. It is either kill or be killed"*, masks a profound grief, evident in his action of writing home to ensure the Brogden family received the terrible news before the impersonal War Office telegram arrived.

The Unidentified Château: A Historical Footnote

The site of this tragedy remains unidentified. Battalion war diaries from this mobile phase are often sparse in geographical detail, noting map coordinates rather than place names. The "château" may refer to a substantial farmhouse or manor on the outskirts of Roeux, Gavrelle, or Plouvain. Its anonymity in the record is itself telling; in the rapid advance, such locations were temporary shelters and tragic waypoints, not places to be memorialised in unit journals.

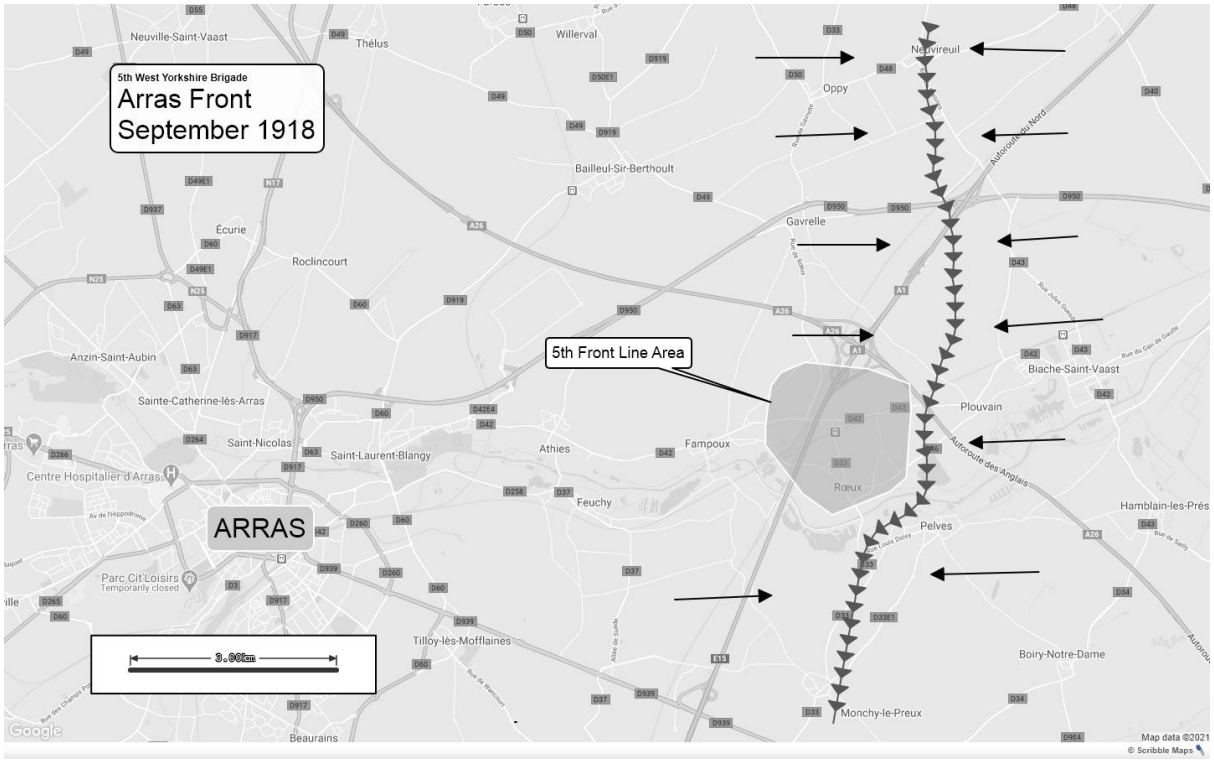
After this sharp combat, the battalion withdrew to barracks in Arras itself for a fortnight's respite and preparation. The city was a maelstrom of final preparations. *"It seemed as if the whole BEF was on the move,"* Harry observed, as troops and machinery flooded through towards the east. Here, the battalion trained intensively for open warfare and studied maps of their next objective: Valenciennes.

Even in the relative safety of the rear, danger persisted. Harry, dug into a railway embankment, witnessed a dramatic aerial attack: *"a German air plane swooped down and I fired a full magazine of bullets but didn't hit his plane."* His action was in vain, as the observer crews of three British balloons ahead of him successfully parachuted to safety before their aircraft were destroyed.

This period also saw a symbolic consolidation. In mid-August, the 2/5th Battalion had been disbanded, and the 1/5th now reverted to its traditional title: the 5th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment. Shedding the "Territorial" designation of the 1/5th, they were now a veteran unit of the regular army order of battle, ready for the culminating battles of the war.

As September ended, the great push was imminent. The lessons of the costly patrols at Ypres and the shocking attrition at Arras had been absorbed. The battalion, with Harry as a battle-hardened Lewis gunner, was now part of a vast, mechanised force poised to breach the last major German defensive system. The death of Stan Brogden was a brutal reminder that the war's final minutes would still demand a heavy price.

Map: Arras front September 1918



Harry's Notes

“We entered the outskirts of town and were told that the Germans were at the other side of town. We had a position on some steps that led down to a Château. We went down into the cellar and smelt something cooking. Someone had killed some rabbits. Anyhow, the taste was good.”

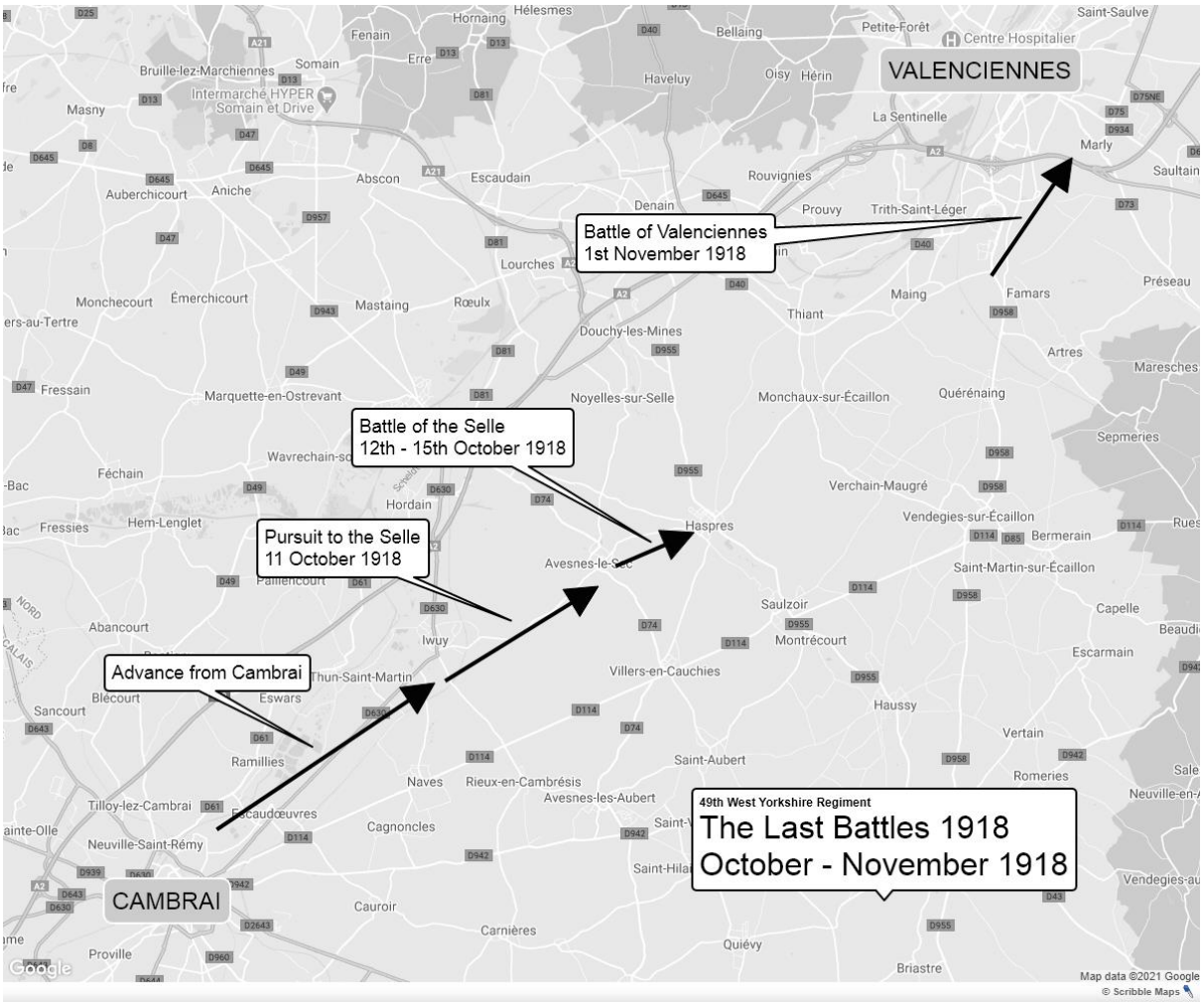
“We had only been in the cellar of the château an hour when a large shell exploded about 60 yards away from where we were. There were 12 casualties, most of them were dead. One of them was Stan Brogden, son of a friend of my family. We used to work in the brickyard together. The blast blew both his legs off. I wrote home and told my parents and my Dad told the family. They had had a letter saying he was missing.”

“The Officer said I am sorry your friend “caught it”. I said, well that’s what war is all about. It is either kill or be killed.”

“We came out to the Arras Front and was sleeping in holes we had dug in the railway embankment. In front of us were three observation balloons. Well, a German air plane

swooped down and I fired a full magazine of bullets but didn't hit his plane. In less than three minutes the occupiers of each balloon jumped out before being hit themselves."

Map: The Last Battles



The Pursuit to the Selle (October 1918)

By early October 1918, the war had transformed. For Harry Leak and the 5th West Yorkshire Regiment, the static miseries of the Ypres Salient were a distant memory. They were now part of the relentless, grinding advance of the Hundred Days Offensive. On 7 October, they left Arras, moving by bus towards Cambrai, crossing the shattered remains of the Hindenburg Line at the Canal du Nord, their spirits lifted by the soldiers' anthem, 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'.

They entered the fight at a critical moment. The Canadian Corps had fought to exhaustion at the Second Battle of Cambrai. On 10 October, the 49th Division was called forward to take over the attack. The 5th Battalion's objective for 11 October was part of a brigade push from Iwuy towards the ridge beyond, with the distant goal of securing crossings over the River Selle.

The Attack and the Panic of the Tanks

Advancing in support behind the 1/6th and 1/7th Battalions, the 5th moved forward at 9:30 a.m. under a *"terrific barrage."* Harry's account captures the chaotic, close-quarters combat that followed. His team cleared an enemy aid station where a German fired a revolver, forcing them to lob Mills bombs inside. He witnessed a darker moment of pillage, intervening when a comrade stole a watch from a weeping German prisoner. *"I played heck with my team mate but he wouldn't give it up,"* he noted, a small incident revealing the fraying of discipline amid the brutality of advance.

The attack initially succeeded, with the leading battalions seizing the ridge. Then, the unthinkable happened: German tanks appeared. *"We were held up by 2 German tanks,"* Harry wrote. These lumbering machines, unknown to the Yorkshiremen, caused *"a mild degree of panic"* and a temporary retreat. Harry's team took cover in a sunken railway embankment, where his veteran's instinct for survival kicked in. Fearful of being caught with enemy souvenirs if captured, he hid "2 revolvers and a pair of binoculars" in a cap comforter some distance away.

It was here that Harry had a memorable encounter with leadership. As they shivered in their hole, *“The Colonel came and visited us... Gee, we were sure surprised when he gave us his bottle of rum!”* This officer was Lieutenant-Colonel C. W. Oddie, whose calm presence and personal gesture steadied the men during the crisis. The battalion helped rally the line, and the unsupported German tanks eventually withdrew.

Stalemate at the Ridge and the Final Push

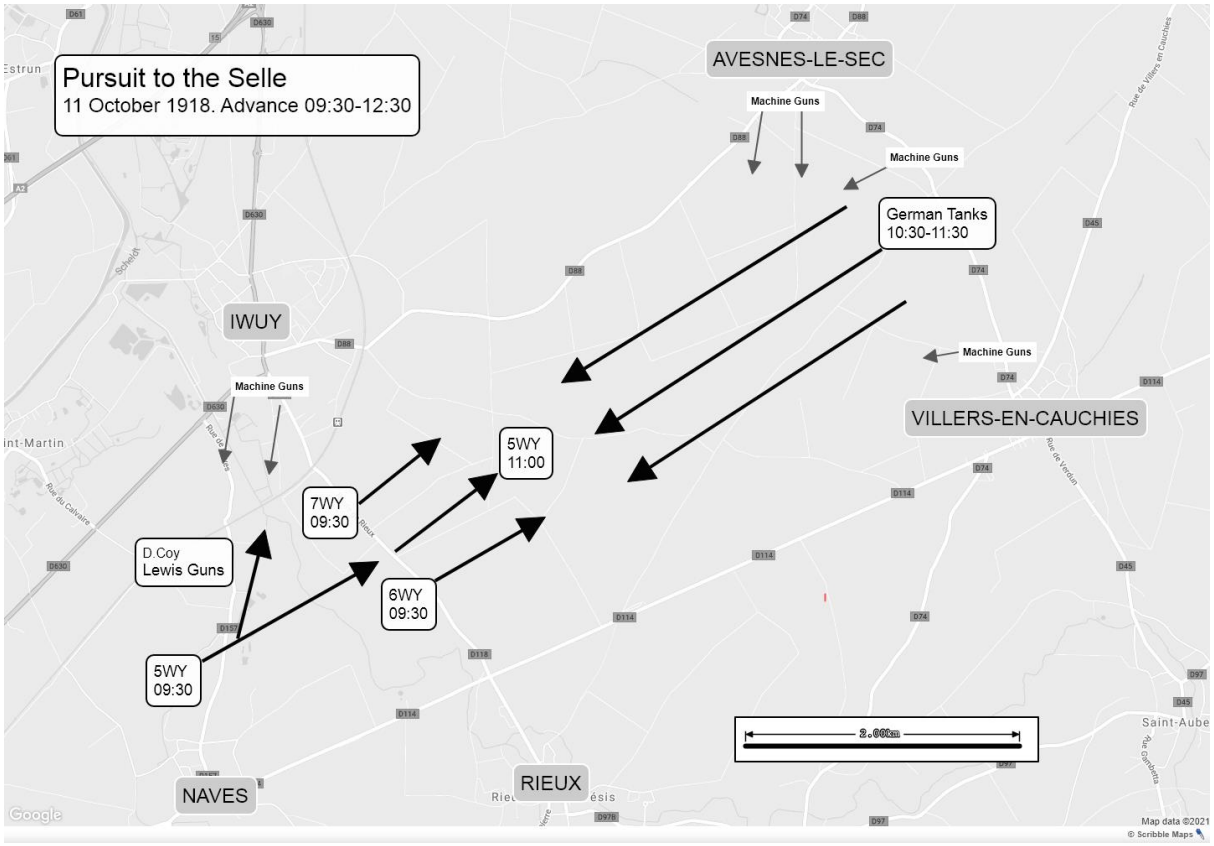
The attack stalled under heavy shelling. That night, the 5th Battalion was ordered to hold the bitterly cold, shell-swept ridge. The following day, 12 October, they discovered the enemy had withdrawn. In a rapid advance without a preparatory barrage, they secured the railway line near Avesnes-le-Sec. Harry, exhausted, noted the surreal nature of the pursuit: *“I looked like a junk man with two revolvers slung around my neck along with binoculars.”* He even sold his battlefield souvenirs to an officer.

The final objective was the River Selle. For two days, the battalion attempted to “trickle” forward and secure bridgeheads. Patrols led by men like Second Lieutenant Henry Berghoff (who won the Military Cross) and Sergeant Kavanagh made valiant attempts under fierce machine-gun and artillery fire, but the German defence of the riverbank proved too strong.

By 13 October, the battalion was exhausted. They were pulled back into divisional reserve at a beetroot factory near the Iwuy-Rieux road. The great push had gained vital ground but was spent. For Harry, even at this late stage, the end was not in sight. *“The average Tommy did not think he was nearing the end,”* he recalled. *“So off we went back for a rest and I suppose more training for open warfare.”*

After the trauma of the tanks, the close-quarters killing, and the frozen vigil on the ridge, there was only the expectation of more fighting ahead. The war’s finale was approaching, but for the weary infantryman, it was simply another pause before the next battle.

Map: Pursuit to the Selle October 1918



Harry's Notes

"The guns opened up with a terrific barrage and we had to not get too close to the barrage or we would get a "basin full" as the old saying goes!"

"We came to an aid station We were going down some steps when a German fired a revolver at us. I think the Officer was slightly wounded in the ear. We sure did a quick about turn. My mate and I lobbed a couple of Mills Bombs. They finally came out and they were a tattered bunch of scarecrows. Nearly every one was bleeding. This was about 9:30 in the morning."

"There is one thing I did not like that happened. A soldier asked what time it was. A young German prisoner pulled out a watch. One of my team grabbed it off him. The young German could understand English but couldn't talk it. He made out his fiance gave it to him and tears were running down his cheeks. I played heck with my team mate but he wouldn't give it up."

"We were held up by 2 German tanks and we got in a sunken railway embankment for the night . We were in a hole that Jerry had used as a post for their machine gun nests. I was a

little apprehensive as I personally had a few souvenirs, 2 revolvers and a pair of binoculars. I slung them in a cap comforter about 20 yards away from us as the tanks were only about 200 yards away. It was quite a while until our artillery got their range and we sure did breathe a little easier, so I got my junk back."

"Would you believe it? The Colonel came and visited us, asked us how we was. I replied that we were very cold as there was just our gun team in that part of the road. Gee, we were sure surprised when he gave us his bottle of rum! It warmed us up. I think his name was Colonel Oddie. Some said he was a lawyer from Bradford."

"The Germans had retreated in the night.. From then on it was open, flat country so we had to contend with machine gun fire and shell fire from tanks. Unfortunately our second Lewis Gun team 200 yards on my right were all killed by a shell from a tank."

"It seemed as if jerry was on the run alright. I must confess we were all very tired. The next day we were on the way out and were relieved. Here is the funny part. I looked like a junk man with two revolvers slung around my neck along with binoculars. In fact I sold them to the Colonel. To cap it all my braces were tied around my middle and I had not many buttons on my trousers."

"Even at that time the average Tommy did not think he was nearing the end. So off we went back for a rest and I suppose more training for open warfare."

The Battle of the Selle & The Final Push (October–November 1918)

The failure to force an immediate crossing of the River Selle on 13 October brought not an end, but a pause. The 5th West Yorkshires, battered and depleted, were pulled back to Escaudoeuvres on 16 October for a week of recuperation and reinforcement. For the first time in weeks, the men found "comfortable conditions" in billets at Iwuy. This brief interlude was the calm before the culminating storm of the war.

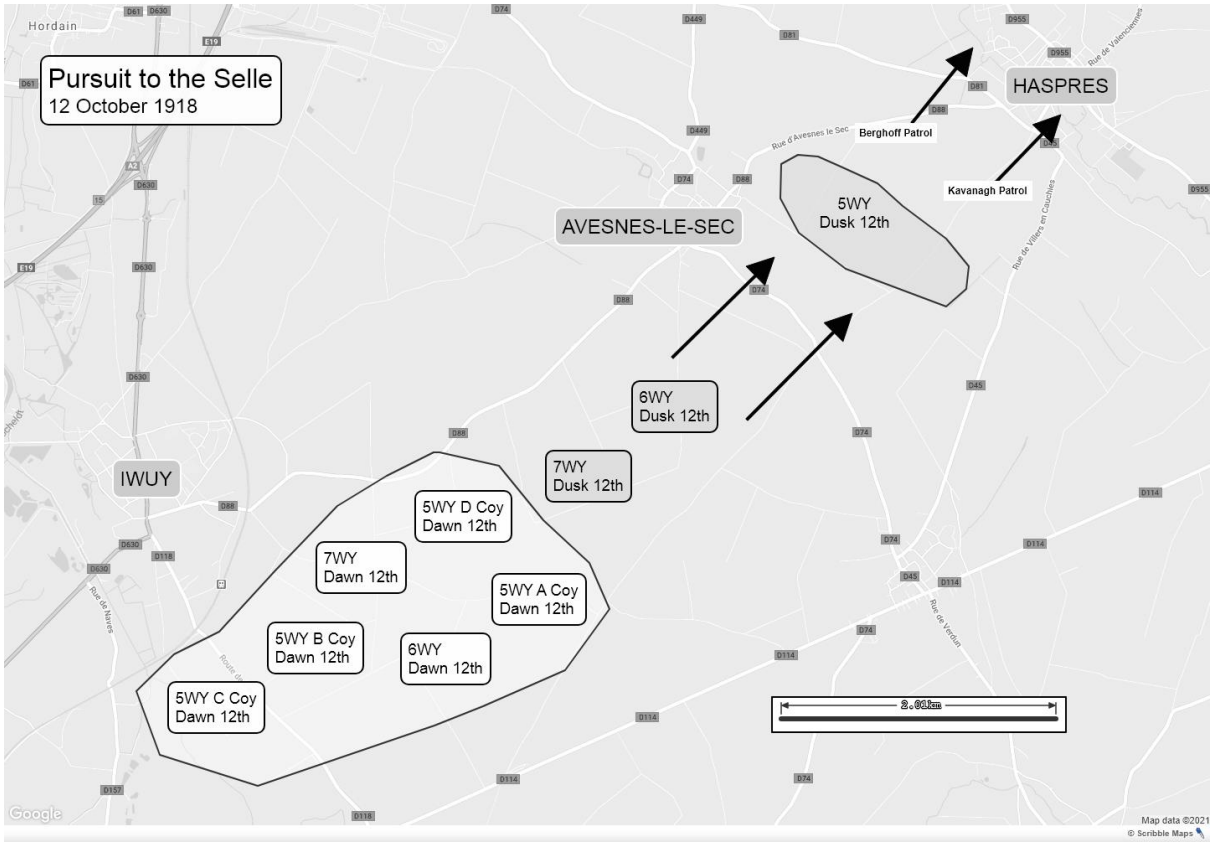
The battalion's role in the set-piece Battle of the Selle (17-25 October) was one of tense preparation rather than front-line assault. While other divisions launched the main attack to establish bridgeheads across the river, the 5th Battalion was held in reserve, its task to be ready to exploit any breakthrough. The focus was on gathering the intelligence needed for the next leap forward. In a feat of remarkable bravery that underscored the high stakes, the battalion's new Intelligence Officer, Second Lieutenant George Todd, earned the Military Cross for a 13-hour solo reconnaissance into the enemy-held village of Saulzoir to confirm the state of the bridges—all of which were destroyed.

By late October, the British advance had secured crossings. The way north to Valenciennes, a key German-held city, was now open. The 49th Division was tasked with its capture. For Harry, the character of the war had changed utterly. The grinding attrition of the trenches and the terror of set-piece barrages were replaced by a war of movement. *"On we went for the next few days keeping the Germans on the run,"* he wrote, adding with striking candour, *"and I know it sounds daft but I was rather enjoying it."* This sense of momentum and purpose, of pursuing a retreating enemy under the overwhelming support of their own artillery, offered a psychological liberation after years of static defence.

The advance towards Valenciennes in the first days of November was rapid. The battalion war diary for this period likely details a sequence of march orders, brief encounters with rearguards, and the occupation of villages whose names blurred into one another. The enemy was withdrawing in earnest, but the danger was not past. Isolated machine-gun nests, booby traps, and destructive artillery fire targeted roads and crossroads to slow the pursuit.

For Harry, now a veteran Lewis Gunner, this final advance was the payoff for years of endurance. The landscape was no longer a shattered wilderness but a series of liberated French and Belgian towns. The objective was clear, the enemy was visibly crumbling, and for the first time, an end to the fighting seemed not just a hope, but an imminent reality. The push to Valenciennes was the beginning of the end.

Map: Pursuit to the Selle October 12 October 1918



Harry's Notes

“It seems the 49th Division and Artillery had really opened up the way to Valenciennes.”

“On we went for the next few days keeping the Germans on the run and I know it sounds daft but I was rather enjoying it.”

The Battle of Valenciennes – The Final Assault (October–November 1918)

The war had entered its final, decisive phase. By late October 1918, the British advance had reached the outskirts of Valenciennes, a key German-held industrial and railway centre. For the 5th West Yorkshires, the task was clear: breach the city's southern defences in a set-piece attack that would be their last major battle. The objective was not just a town, but a symbol of the unstoppable Allied momentum.

Preparation at Famars

On the night of 28/29 October, the battalion moved into position east of Famars, a name resonant with regimental history. As Adjutant Captain Bernard Ablitt noted in the war diary, it was here in 1793 that their forebears in the 14th Regiment of Foot had won the battle honour 'Famars' and the right to the regimental quickstep, 'Ça Ira'. They were now to fight over the same ground, a poignant link across 125 years.

The plan for 1 November was complex and ambitious. A heavy creeping barrage would pave the way for a two-company assault across the River Rhonelle, using portable bridges, with the goal of advancing 4,000 yards to the railway line south of Marly. The attack was scheduled for 5:15 a.m., to cross the river under cover of darkness.

Harry's Advance: Chaos and Luck on the Left Flank

Harry, almost certainly with B Company on the left flank, provides a riveting account of the chaos and dark humour of the assault. His team, positioned 200 yards ahead of the main line, advanced without a watch to time the barrage lifts. The first major obstacle was a complete surprise: "No one had told us there was a river to cross." Unwilling to wade through another Ypres-like swamp, he instinctively led his team left, where they discovered an intact bridge.

His decision to sprint across this potentially mined bridge under fire was an act of desperate bravery. Taking shelter in a barn, they were immediately hit by a shell—likely from their own artillery—which brought the roof down on them. Uninjured, they pressed on, clearing

buildings where they found a German officer who had taken his own life. Harry took the officer's revolver, a grim souvenir. They eventually linked up with a British lieutenant who was furious at their unsanctioned, lucky advance, berating them as "a lot of silly damned fools" for using an unsecured bridge.

The Official Battle: A 'Promenade' Under Fire

The broader battalion attack unfolded with mixed fortunes. As described by Captain Tempest, it began almost as a "promenade," but this underestimated the punishing German artillery fire between Famars and the Rhonelle, which caused significant casualties, including all three officers of C Company. At the river, acts of individual heroism defined the day. Second Lieutenant John Rushforth earned the Military Cross by wading waist-deep under fire to place the first bridge, then spending hours clearing Aulnoy and capturing over 600 prisoners.

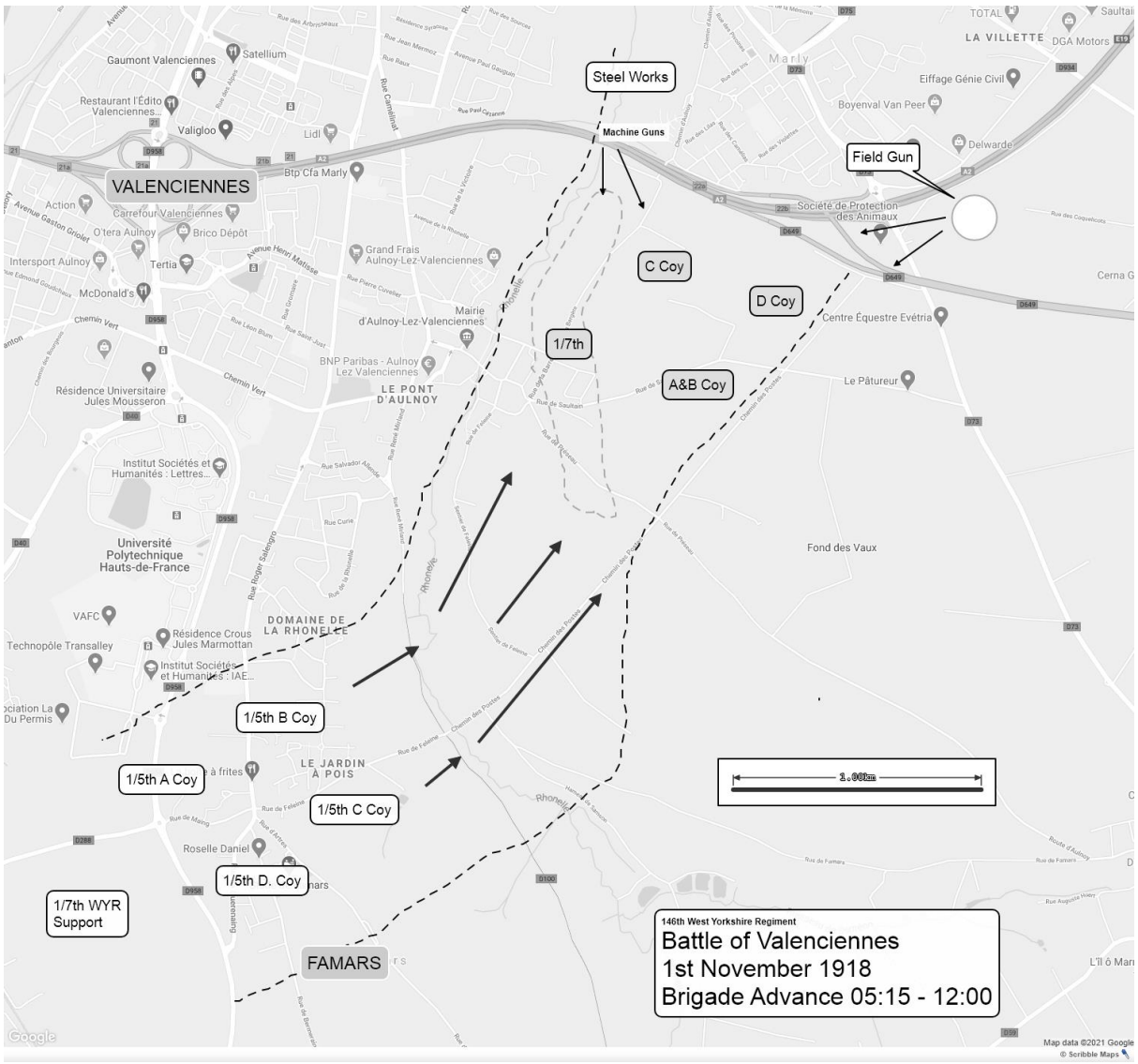
By mid-morning, the advance had stalled. On the right, companies were pinned down by machine guns near Saultain. On the left, where Harry fought, the assault was checked by fierce resistance from the Valenciennes steelworks. The situation became "rather serious," with flanks exposed. Captain Wycherley, commanding the forward companies, was forced to withdraw 500 yards and dig in, holding the line against a German counter-attack that afternoon.

Achieving the Final Objective

It was not until 8:30 p.m., under cover of darkness, that the battalion could surge forward to secure its final objective. They were relieved at 4:30 a.m. on 2 November, marching out of the front line for the last time in the war. The cost had been high, but Valenciennes had been outflanked and would fall to other units shortly after.

For Harry, the day was a microcosm of his entire war: reliant on instinct and luck, witnessing sudden death (the obliterated Lewis gun team he saw), taking trophies from the enemy, and surviving through a combination of grit and chance. As they dug in on their final objective, a staff officer remarked that "the war is nearly over." The truth of this was now undeniable. The great set-piece attack was done. All that remained was the pursuit.

Map: Battle of Valenciennes 1 November 2018



Harry's Notes

"We knew something was going to happen as I had to establish my Lewis Gun Post about 200 yards ahead and left of the other Battalions. My team and I was ready on the left of our Battalion. We were told the artillery was going to open up at 5:15am and every three minutes we had to advance 100 yards. Then the creeping barrage would continue on another 100 yards. Joke of it was, not one of us had a watch!"

"I really do think what a marvellous job the Artillery did. They were perfect. They lifted about four times and we eventually reached a river. No one had told us there was a river to cross. I was flabbergasted as with the exception of my No2 Gunner, the rest were all rookies. Well we

finally get to a river which we did not know anything about and I had had enough soakings in the slime, mud and water of Ypres. I certainly was not swimming to the other side!"

"Even though we were at the edge of the river I said we will drift to the left. The shells were going over our heads and into the small town. We had been walking about five minutes when we could see a bridge in the distance."

"I said once we get on that bridge which was only wide enough for a horse and cart it would be to our advantage. What surprised me though was that not a single bullet had been fired at us. I told my team to get to the bridge by crawling through the grass and then to run like the devil across the bridge into that red-tile roofed barn on the other side. The barn had no door. We ran fast and as soon as we got off the bridge bullets started going over us. We all reached the barn safely although bullets kept coming through the open doorway and hitting the back wall."

"We had only been there five minutes when a shell hit the roof which fell on top of us. Well we escaped serious injury, a few knocks. Through a hole in the wall we could see farm buildings to the right about 50 yards up the road. As they had already been shelled we decided to move there."

"The shell was probably from our artillery which were going over our heads towards their machine gunners. My No2 said we had better move. I said it is the tail end of the barrage that was exploding 60 yards in front of us."

"An old woman came out of a shattered building and told us in broken English there was a German officer in one of the huts. I kicked the door open but he was dead. He had shot himself. I took his revolver as it was in his hand."

"We had a good rest there. Lot of credit to my team as that was the very first time they had been under fire. We had been there about half an hour when I heard English voices. Around the corner of the building came an English Lieutenant and about 10 of his men."

"He said how long have you been here? We told him the story. He said why did you not cross on the pontoon bridges? I said because we didn't know about them. We were told to advance 100 yards every 5 minutes. He said of all the lucky fools, you could have been blown up. The roof was blown by our own artillery. If I get out of this I will have somebody's guts for garters. You are a lot of silly dammed fools! Did you not think that that bridge could have been mined?"

“We stayed with them as they mopped up in the town. We went into the square and the Germans offered no resistance. Inside half an hour we had about 20 prisoners, they all looked about 16 years of age. They were in nice clean uniforms. I have often wondered what they thought of us as we looked like a lot of scruffy tramps to them. We handed them over to the 1/6th who were in support.”

“The Officer told me the main place we had to capture was Aulnoye. I and my team got in a sunken road right in sight of Aulnoye but part of our Division was held up at the railway crossing so there was a gap between Companies. Just as it was getting dusk our Battalion finally reached their first objective but the 1/6th (on our right) was having strong opposition and they had to call on the 1/7th for help. After a while they reached their objective and got the railway crossing and the village of Aulnoye.”

“Then it was on to the second objective. We had gone through a very large field and had no contact with the Germans. We knew it would not be long. Our Battalion was to our right a good 60 yards behind. Suddenly a shell exploded 30 yards ahead. We flopped onto the grass and another shell exploded well to our right which hit another Lewis Gun team, all casualties. I told my team to run like the deuce and the next shell landed behind us.”

“That was the procedure of the Germans. Fire a few shells and then scatter. Three times that afternoon we were held up for a while. Both our Battalion and the 1/6th were attacking on a broad front, supported by the 1/7th. Little did we know it was our final objective of the war.”

“We dug in, in a sunken road. Some staff officers congratulated us and made the remark that the war is nearly over as they have captured some submarines in the Channel. Colonel Totty remarked that their boys (the Germans) had had enough.”

Ceasefire (November 1918 – January 1919)

The Battle of Valenciennes marked the end of the 5th West Yorkshire Regiment's war. The last man of the battalion to be killed was 27-year-old Samuel Smith from Tadcaster, caught in a shell blast on 4 November 1918—one week before the Armistice. His death underscored the war's cruel, arbitrary end; the advance continued relentlessly, pushing the shattered German army back towards the Sambre.

The battalion itself, its fighting duty done, was pulled into reserve. They were billeted in empty houses near Evin-Malmaison, a small town where the Germans had held prisoners of war. Here, they entered a strange limbo. Rumours of peace, persistent for weeks, grew more urgent. On the evening of 10 November, news of an imminent ceasefire reached Brigade HQ. As signals officer Kenneth Mackay recalled, the intelligence seemed "part of a pleasant dream," met with disbelief by men afraid to hope.

11 November 1918: The Armistice

For Harry, the moment arrived during a routine parade. As his officer inspected the men, the battalion band abruptly struck up the National Anthem. *"It was a surprise to us all,"* Harry wrote. An officer came running down the street, waving his arms and shouting the news that the Armistice would be signed the next day. The Great War would end at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

His reaction was not one of public celebration but of personal connection. Using the sudden rupture in discipline, he slipped away on a five-mile walk to find his cousin, Harry North, in the Army Service Corps, to share the news and celebrate quietly with family. *"I was not missed at all!"* he noted—a fitting, low-key escape for the private who had survived by wit and instinct.

For others, like Ernest Law, the dominant emotion was a numb relief, with "no celebrations." Formality quickly reasserted itself. At 1:30 p.m., Colonel Oddie commanded a brigade parade featuring speeches, a thanksgiving service, and the bands playing God Save the King and La Marseillaise for their French hosts.

The Unfamiliar Peace

With the fighting over, the army faced the novel problem of what to do with tens of thousands of soldiers. The answer was a regimen of “spit and polish,” relentless route marches, and an unexpected curriculum of lectures. Officers like Captain Tempest spoke on art; others instructed on world affairs, extolling the British Empire and warning of the “evils” of Bolshevism. It was a clumsy attempt to re-civilise men and reorient them towards a peacetime world many could scarcely remember.

Confronted with a bleak lecture on post-war “dole queues,” Harry made a pragmatic decision. When asked if any would volunteer to stay on for another year, he was among the first nineteen to step forward. For a man whose skilled trade in a Leeds brickyard had been replaced by expertise with a Lewis gun, the security of army pay and rations, however meagre, offered a known quantity in an uncertain future.

Amidst this odd interlude, small pleasures regained their significance: the profound luxury of a proper wash and de-lousing, and a spectacular Christmas dinner of turkey and plum pudding with rum sauce, served on cardboard plates. *“Chaps were licking their plates like cats and dogs,”* Harry recalled—a final, vivid image of soldiers savoring simple abundance after years of deprivation.

The 5th Battalion’s war was over. The journey that had begun for Harry Leak in November 1915—through the training camps of Redcar, the garrison of Malta, the mud of Passchendaele, the gas of Nieuport, the tanks at the Selle, and the final assault at Valenciennes—had reached its end not with a grand battle, but with route marches, lectures, and a hearty Christmas meal, as the long, slow process of bringing an army home began.

Harry's Notes

“We arrived at a town called Evin Malmaison. It was a nice small town, where the Germans had a Prisoner of War camp, we were billeted nearby in empty houses. The nearest large town was Douai about ten miles away.”

“On the 10th November we went on parade as we were going on a route march to keep fit. Our Officer, Mr Jones, was inspecting us when all of a sudden a few of the band started playing the National Anthem. It was a surprise to us all. An Officer ran down the street waving his arms shouting that the Armistice would be signed the next day.”

“I had a cousin, Harry North, in the Army Service Corps, so I told my No2 to make excuses if I was missed and off I went. I walked a good five miles before finding them and giving them the good news. I stayed for tea and stayed overnight, celebrating. I was not missed at all!”

“After three or four days spit and polish it was nothing but route marches and lectures. During one lecture he painted a black picture of dole queues. He asked if any of us wanted to stay on for another year. I was one of the first to step forward. There were 19 of us signed a paper to stay on in the army.”

“One thing that came in handy was we were able to have a good wash and clean our clothes, not forgetting to do some de-lousing.”

“We sure had a smashing Christmas Dinner. Lots of turkey and pudding with rum sauce. It was funny as it was all served on cardboard plates. Chaps were licking their plates like cats and dogs.”

Army of Occupation (March 1919 – Demobilisation)

The Armistice of November 1918 did not mean immediate homecoming for the soldiers of the British Army. For the 5th West Yorkshire Regiment, the final chapter of service saw them transition from conquerors to guardians. On 2 March 1919, the battalion left France to form part of the British Army of the Rhine, the occupation force in the defeated German Empire. Their destination was Cologne.

For eight months, their existence was one of garrison duty: endless training, equipment maintenance, and guard details along the Rhine. Fraternisation with the German populace was initially forbidden. As Ernest Law observed, the locals, particularly outside the city centre, were “scared to death,” living behind drawn curtains, having believed propaganda that the British would slaughter them. A tense, silent atmosphere prevailed, which only gradually thawed into an uneasy normality.

Harry’s Final Adventure: Leave and the Charge of Desertion

For Harry, this period began with a final, characteristic misadventure. In January 1919, he and a comrade were granted seven days’ leave in England—a precious taste of home. Returning to France on time, they encountered the bureaucratic chaos of the demobilising army. The Railway Transport Officer (RTO) had no record of their battalion’s movement. Stranded and penniless, they were shuttled between rest camps for three weeks, *“getting really fed up,”* before finally being routed to Germany.

When they eventually found their unit in Cologne, their scruffy, delayed appearance had severe consequences. *“We finally arrived in Cologne looking more like hobos than soldiers,”* Harry recalled. They were immediately arrested and charged with desertion. It was only the official stamp in their pay books, placed there by the first RTO, that proved their whereabouts and secured their release, with a chastened sergeant bearing the brunt of the officer’s ire.

Life on the Rhine

Once reinstated, Harry settled into the monotonous routine of occupation. His duties included weekly baths and guarding the docks near the iconic Hohenzollern Bridge. He recalls one period of heightened tension when *"the Germans were getting awkward over the peace terms,"* prompting a move further into German territory. There, he discovered a warehouse containing twenty thousand bags of flour, which made for *"the most comfortable bed."*

For a soldier who had endured the trenches, it was, as he put it, *"one long holiday."* The favourable exchange rate made their pay go far, and the duties were light. Upon returning from another leave, he found the division infused with 500 new recruits. The farce of being made to salute "by numbers" alongside these fresh faces was short-lived; his officer, recognising Harry's long service, quickly found him a staff job for the remainder of his posting.

Demobilisation and the End of Service

After a year in Germany, his army career concluded not with a parade, but with a journey. He travelled back to England via the Rhine and Amsterdam, finally disembarking at Harwich. The formal end came at the Ripon Demobilisation Centre. "That ended my army career," he wrote simply.

Private Harry Leak, who had enlisted as a *"skinny runt"* in November 1915, had survived. He had refused promotion, borne witness to the century's horrors, and carried the mental and physical scars of Passchendaele, Kemmel Hill, and the Selle. He returned not to hero's fanfare, but to the quiet process of rebuilding a civilian life—a life that would be built alongside Belle, the woman he met because of the war.

His story, from a Leeds brickyard to the Army of Occupation on the Rhine, is a complete arc of the Great War citizen-soldier's experience: the fervour, the trauma, the endurance, and the long, complicated road home.

Harry's Notes

"We took things very easy and second week in January two of us were told we could go on leave for seven days in England. We got back to France on time but the RTO Officer didn't

know where the Battalion was. We had no money so he gave us ten franks and stamped the date in our Pay Books."

"Anyway for the next three weeks we were in various rest camps and getting really fed up. Finally we got to St Omer. Another RTO Officer put us on a train to Germany and we had to asked to be put off at a place called Erinfeldt. Our Battalion was billeted in an empty engineering works, our company in a warehouse."

"We finally arrived in Cologne looking more like hobos than soldiers. Tired and scruffy. On arrival we were escorted to the guard room and told we were being charged with desertion. I said that we did get back to France on the proper day. He said, do you have proof? Of course, and our Pay Books proved our whereabouts. He sure told the Sergeant off."

"I used to go to the baths twice a week and on guard duty on the docks quite close to the Hohenzollern Bridge for two weeks. One time when the Germans were getting awkward over the peace terms we went over the bridge further into Germany. I liked it there as there was a building close with twenty thousand bags of flour in it. They made the most comfortable bed."

"I was in Germany and to me it was one long holiday and our money went a long way. I think it was over 1.50DM to the pound."

"After returning from leave the Division had acquired 500 new recruits. My first day back I was stood in a line saluting by numbers. The Officer, Mr Jones, smiled at me, knowing my army war service, then asked me to put up with it for a few days whilst he found me a staff job, which he did."

"After a year on duty in Germany, which included plenty of time off a few of us came back via the Rhine and got to Amsterdam by barges. Then a boat to Harwich. Finally a train to Ripon and that is where I was demobbed. That ended my army career."

Reflections

“I know I had some very rough times over on the Western Front, we sure was very lucky. During my stay over there I had lots of good pals that were not as fortunate as myself. I often think of them as we got on well together. When out of the line we really enjoyed ourselves, singing away to our hearts content.”

“I can honestly say the only quarrels I had was with a couple of Sergeants but we privates, we worked as a team. I sure met a lot of swell chaps.”

“On the Ypres front I will be honest and say what I felt at the time. I suppose you could say I was a fatalist. My belief was that I could have been in the deepest dugout, but when your time is up, it was up. You were gone. I consider that in my whole life I have been fortunate to have 56 years of happily married life with my wonderful late wife.”

Harry’s Battlefield Return 1982, 67 years later

“My ambition for many years had been to tour Belgium and France. Last year I had three days with friends of my family and I remarked that I had never seen a map which I dearly wanted to see with Famars and Aulnoye. However, Dennis Mitchell, from Market Harborough, supplied me with one last year and I was very grateful.”

“I had often said I would like to spend a few days on the Western Front where I had been in 1917 and 1918 in the 49th Division. Well my dream came true. I had a very pleasant surprise three weeks ago. My grandson, Michael, called me to tell me that he had booked a flight from Manchester to Brussels for the 23rd April.”

First Day

“We enjoyed the flight and also got a car. I was very thrilled and the first day we set off from Brussels to Mons starting out from 7:30am arriving at Mons at 8:30am. To me that was marvellous, as that is where the regular soldiers with their rapid fire engaged the Germans. We stayed three quarters of an hour and went on to Valenciennes, then to Aulnoye, then on to Famars, where the 49th Division was in action of which I was Lewis Gunner No1.”

“Then on to Maing, resting in the camp, later to Cambrai and on to Arras. Then to Douai and lastly to Evin Malmaison, where I was billeted in houses quite near the German Prison Camp during World War One. We were there three days and on the 10th November 1918 we were notified that the armistice was going to be signed 11th November.”

“Well, after a tiring journey, we arrived back in Brussels 9:30am”

Second Day

“Once again, leaving at 7:30am on the way to Ypres, where we sure had a very busy time. Then on to Zillebeke Lake, then on to Gheluvelt, following on to Hill 60 and Hill 62. Then Sanctuary Wood.”

“On the return journey we passed through Zonnebeke and Brooseinde and lastly to Passchendaele. “

“The attack on Passchendaele in 1917 and 1918 there was about 400,000 casualties, besides thousands of others in other parts. In other words it was wholesale slaughter. No wonder Passchendaele is christened ‘hell’!”

“I myself was in the Ypres front in the 1st 7th West Yorks in 1917 and invalided home in December, suffering from Trench Feet in the same year, 1917. I was back again in Ypres with the 5th West Yorks. I sure have plenty to write about. What I need is a very good secretary.”

“By the way, my next birthday is in September. I will be 87 years young and still going strong and enjoying my retirement.”

Lyn Macdonald

Within Harry’s handwritten notes there are numerous copy letters to a “Lyn Macdonald”. She has written many World War One historical books mainly reliant on recollections from old soldiers, such as Harry.

Since leaving her job as a BBC Radio producer in 1973, Lyn Macdonald has established an unrivalled reputation as an author and historian of World War I.

She has produced six volumes of superb popular history, remarkable for their extensive use of eyewitness accounts. She is the recording angel of the common soldier. "My intention," she says, "has been to tune in to the heartbeat of the experience of the people who lived through it." Besides drawing on the oceans of contemporary letters and diaries, she has captured the memories of a dwindling supply of veterans.

We have two of her books to see whether any of Harry’s memories are replicated but sadly, he is not mentioned. Nevertheless these are superb historial works and should be read by all who have interest in World War One.

“They Called it Passchendaele: The Story of the Battle of Ypres and of the Men Who Fought in it. 1917”

“The Roses of No Man's Land”

References

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Harrogate Terriers 1/5th (Territorial) Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the Great War by John Sheenan

Passchendaele – the story of the Third Battle of Ypres 1917 by Lyn Macdonald

The West Riding Territorials in the Great War by Laurie Magnus

Trench Maps of World War One - available from https://maps.nls.uk/ww1/trenches/ or from https://library.mcmaster.ca/maps/index-wwi-trench-maps-and-aerial-photographs

The Great War Forum https://www.greatwarforum.org/

Battalion War Diaries - https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/british-army-war-diaries-1914-1922/

Geolocations

- St Georges Front 51.12955, 2.79344
- Calgary Grange 50.89452, 2.97932
- Wolf Copse 50.90146, 2.99204
- Peter Pan 50.89875, 2.98804
- Wolf Farm 50.90186, 2.98955
- Yetta Houses 50.9008, 2.98215
- Bellvue 50.89926, 2.99707
- Kemmel N.14.b.6.7 (146th - right flank) 50.7965, 2.81843
- Kemmel N.9.c.2.2 (146th - left flank) 50.79904, 2.82262
- Kemmel N.15.b.0.6 (146th – new line left flank) 50.79603, 2.82849
- Zillebeke Lake 50.84008, 2.89585

- Hellfire Corner 50.8495, 2.91658
- Siege Camp 50.87288, 2.82128
- Brake Camp 50.86368, 2.7862
- Hill 60 50.82398, 2.92903
- D Company Lewis Guns – attack on Iwuy 50.2207, 3.3222
- Iwuy village 50.23313, 3.3216
- Avenses-le-Sec village 50.25097, 3.37518
- Villers-en-Sec village 50.22872, 3.40154
- Famars 50.31528, 3.5196
- Aulnoye 50.33034, 3.53062
- R.Rhonelle crossing area 50.31994, 3.52799
- German MC guns 50.33531, 3.55787
- Steel Works, Marly 50.33982, 3.54251

Google Maps

- St Georges Front https://goo.gl/maps/TcGCEkJ5ozB9CWby7
- Calgary Grange https://goo.gl/maps/tXAxDKFJ5y6hTLyh8
- Wolf Copse https://goo.gl/maps/thKEPNcd7Wpd1PXQ8
- Peter Pan https://goo.gl/maps/Dro5RQS9zUZ7jgpb9
- Wolf Farm https://goo.gl/maps/LcpoYeMnqCCmAbaS6
- Yetta Houses https://goo.gl/maps/nD18sXVs9rKxCx7w5
- Bellvue https://goo.gl/maps/DNpWy26JMsq1z6Ew9
- Zillebeke Lake https://goo.gl/maps/r6i9euvGDKFoRSkH7
- Hellfire Corner https://goo.gl/maps/Eph3jjHvau4ejyCf8
- Siege Camp https://goo.gl/maps/Gt1aJP3gY19qeLPT8/
- Brake Camp https://goo.gl/maps/HUAbee7FBKCrNAEB9
- Hill 60 https://goo.gl/maps/Yg2xA38hMm1uuXANA
- D Company Lewis Guns – attack on Iwuy https://goo.gl/maps/qegsCFRVbEfqivjf9

- Iwuy village https://goo.gl/maps/2JF44gBPhaXVzdNy7
- Avenses-le-Sec village https://goo.gl/maps/c8uDtHrTh8RqXUo77
- Villers-en-Sec village https://goo.gl/maps/MUv1tHFjLDCFKZCaA
- Famars https://goo.gl/maps/9dMGmevao45fmUd16
- Aulnoye https://goo.gl/maps/EKbKS6NwQrqVUEVdA
- R.Rhonelle crossing area https://goo.gl/maps/5AsfnSAugeCkofgNA
- German MC guns https://goo.gl/maps/6EtaDAcPi5Zyyd4t8
- Steel Works, Marly https://goo.gl/maps/V3VDMDnJt8rrJTns7

Locations from 1/7th War Diaries

March 1917

- Front line Fauquissart (right sub-sector)
- eserve either at Levantie or Red House

April 1917

- Front line Fauquissart (right sub-sector)
- Reserve either at Levantie or Red House

May 1917

- Front line Fauquissart (right sub-sector)
- 12th - 18th Reserve at La Gorgue
- Reserve either at Levantie or Red House

June 1917

- Front line Fauquissart (right sub-sector)
- Reserve either at Levantie or Red House

July 1917

- 1st - 5th Front line Fauquissart (right sub-sector)

- 6th - 10th Laventie
- 11th - 13th Estaires training
- 14th - 16th Mardyk Camp
- 17th Fort de Dunes
- 18th - 26th Ribaillet Camp
- 26th to 31st Front line St Georges (left sub-sector)

August 1917

- 1st Front line St Georges sector (left sub-sector)
- 2nd Oost Dunkerke
- 3rd to 31st Ghyvelde
- 4th to 28th Teteghem training in sand dunes
- 29th to 31st Ghyvelde training in sand dunes

September 1917

- 1st to 24th Ghyvelde [Dunkirk]
- 25th Teteghem [Dunkirk]
- 26th Wormhoudt [Nord department in N.France]
- 27th - 28th Ochtezeele [Nord department in N.France]
- 29th - 30th Longuenesse [St Omer]

October 1917

- 1st Longuenesse
- 2nd - 3rd Terdeghem [Steenvoorde]
- 4th - 6th Shrine Camp
- 7th Vlamertinghe
- 8th Bricke
- 9th - 11th Calgary Grange [Battle of Poelcappelle]

Locations from 1/5th War Diaries

June 1918

- 1st to 3rd June Camp Proven area F1.c.6.2
- 4th - 11th Siege Camp Divisional reserve
- 12th - 17th Left sector, right sub-sector. Thatch Barn, Dilly Farm, Boundary Farm
- 18th - 22nd Ypres I8.b.30.85 Brigade Reserve KAAIE Defences
- 23rd - 29th Left sector, right sub-sector
- 30th Divisional reserve, Brake Camp

July 1918

- 1st - 7th Divisional Reserve Brake Camp
- 8th - 23rd Left sub-sector, right brigade. Menin Road, Hellfire Corner, Mole Track, Rifle Farm, Gordon House, West Farm, Goldfish Chateau
- 24th - 30th Siege Camp in reserve
- 31st - Reserve Battalion, left sector. Suicide Corner, KAAIE defences, Dead End

August 1918

- 1st - 8th Reserve Battalion, left sector. Suicide Corner, KAAIE defences, Dead End, Lille Gate Baths
- 9th - 16th Left sub sector, right brigade. Mill Cot, Crump Farm, Market farm, Cambridge Road
- 17th - 18th Siege Camp, reserve Brigade
- 19th Pigeon Camp, Proven
- 20th - 22nd Herzeele
- 23rd Nortkerque
- 24th - 28th Tournehem
- 29th - 30th Foufflin-Ricametz