



THE SOMME BATTLEFIELD

1st July to 18th November 1916

The British Army on the Somme was a mixture of the remains of the British Expeditionary Force, Regular army and Reserves; the Territorial Force; and the volunteers of Kitchener's Army. Many of Kitchener's Army were 'Pals', recruited from the same places and occupations, whose losses had a profound social impact in Britain. Several groups of friends, brothers, cousins, or work pals from the Lingfield area volunteered for service together. Our 'brothers in arms' experienced the same bond of community; their response to their country's need had a profound social impact on this local community.

Our area lost 24 young men in the battlefields of the Somme. Several men came home from the Somme with permanent disabilities. Gas was used by the Germans and the Allies; many were killed, some by gas from their own side when the wind suddenly changed direction and blew the gas over their own men. Many survivors continued to suffer the effects of gas poisoning long after their return home.

The Royal Sussex Regiment was fighting in the Somme area for several days before the big offensive. Their War Diary recorded the events of the day in June 1916 when Archibald Joseph, Albert Warriner and Raymond Staplehurst died.

"The enemy attacked at about 10 am and succeeded in entering the trench system on our right and bombed down the trenches (in front of Vrely-Rouvroy Road). He was repeatedly, driven back by bayonet charges down the trench but we were unable to eject him entirely as there were no bombs available. Finally a block was formed by Lewis Guns... Bombs arrived about 5 pm after which there was little difficulty in holding the enemy...[later the same day]... Gas lasted about 40 mins in 3 continuous waves. Men wore their gas helmets for 1 hour and 20 mins. A heavy bombardment went on during the gas also heavy machine gun fire. A large number of men were gassed."

THE SOMME OFFENSIVE began on 1st July 1916

The War Diary of the Somme offensive, now at The National Archives, reveals that Sir Douglas Haig, Commander-in-Chief of Allied forces, sent his first plan of the Somme offensive to GHQ in April; thereby allowing the forces under his command to arrive at their full strength in personnel, guns, ammunition and material before July. "An intense

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bombardment may cause more moral effect on account of its intensity and the attack will come as a surprise at the conclusion of the bombardment. There will, in consequence, be no time for the enemy to bring up guns and reserves to meet the attack...It must be remembered that the Germans did not reinforce at LOOS even though there was a 4 days bombardment..." The Germans too, of course, learned lessons from LOOS!

The details of Haig's plan were sent in a letter to General Joffre, Commander of the French forces: "GAS. I propose to employ gas to the fullest extent on the 2 defensive fronts at Maricourt and Hebuterne and to employ gas mixed with smoke along the fronts to be attacked, to compel the enemy to put on his masks and thus place him at a disadvantage to our men who will not be wearing masks.

Summary: a bombardment of 48 – 60 hours duration by all available guns, howitzers and trench mortars. Gas to be used only on the defensive fronts, except in small quantities smoke to be used all along the front."

Allied artillery pounded German lines for a week before the attack, firing 1.6 million shells. The sound of the bombardment could be heard in south-east England. British commanders were so confident about the success of the bombardment that they ordered the troops to walk slowly towards the German lines. Once they had been seized, cavalry units would pour through to pursue the fleeing Germans; 50,000 horsemen were prepared behind the Allied frontline to round up the remains of German battalions.

The reality was the German trenches were deep underground and heavily fortified. Much of the German wire entanglements remained intact after the bombardment had ended and many of the British shells failed to explode.

Around 7.30am on 1st July, whistles blew to signal the start of the attack. As the 11 British divisions walked towards the German lines, the machine guns started and the slaughter began. Although a few units managed to reach German trenches, they could not exploit their gains and were driven back. Schwaben Redoubt, a German stronghold, was won and lost again in twenty-four hours. By the end of the first day, the British had suffered 60,000 casualties, of whom 20,000 were dead. Sixty per cent of all officers involved on the first day were killed.

Two Dormansland men were lost that day: 2nd Lt. John Spence McGowan and Private Albert Charles Spalding. Before the end of the week Corporal Victor Galloway of Blindley Heath and Private Robert Chapman of Lingfield had also been killed.

Men from the Royal Sussex Regiment took part in the French Counter Offensive near Soissons, between July 20th and August 1st; Private Harold Marden of Baldwins Hill, Private A.W. Holcombe and Corporal Archibald Pettifer (both from Lingfield) all lost their lives fighting with the Royal Sussex Regiment.

The next two months saw bloody stalemate, the Allies advanced only 8km (five miles). On 15th September Haig renewed the offensive, using tanks for the first time. The tanks made little impact, many broke down. Torrential rains in October turned the battlegrounds into a muddy quagmire; tanks, men, and equipment were stuck in deep mud.

2nd Lt. John Spence MCGOWAN was reported killed in action on the first day of the Somme offensive, 1st July. Documents held in The National Archives show the confusion and chaos at the time of his death: “Will you have enquiries made please, we can hardly send on the identity disc to the relatives without an explanation as to how the disc came to be recovered. You will observe the officer is still reported as ‘Missing believed Killed’.

McGowan’s mother in Dormansland had been informed that a Burial report had been received. Enquiries were made of witnesses to his death. One Private soldier informed the officer that ‘about 7.45 Lt. McGowan was killed by machine gun fire near our own barbed wire, I was 2 yards off on the left...his servant, Pte. Leat was wounded in the head at the same time’.

Another injured informant wrote “I saw him going right over the German second line...he went through with the bombers...Not many came back who were with him, in fact I know of no one, and we lost out of our battalion 471...[he] was very brave, and was exceedingly well liked in the platoon”.

Two months later McGowan’s mother received a letter: “that a report has just been received from Army Headquarters that the late 2nd Lt. J.S. McGowan, Devon Regiment, was buried at a spot west of the village of Ovillers, La Boisselle, 2 ½ miles north-east of Albert”. Sadly, there is now no known grave for 19 years old, 2nd Lt. John Spence McGowan, his name is engraved on the Thiepval Memorial for the Missing. His grave site, like so many others, was probably fought over many times during the battles of 1917 and 1918, all identification markers have been lost in the battle fields. In 2014 the bodies of unknown soldiers are still being found and reburied as ‘Known only to God’.

The last letter to Mrs A.C. McGowan was sent 22 November 1916: “Madam, You and Miss Cecily Mary McGowan, are owed thirty one pounds, seven shillings, and fivepence each, in all sixty two pounds, fourteen shillings and tenpence. Money found on deceased £4 2.6d, Allowances (to 1.7.16) £ 0. 2.4d, Gratuity £69.15.0d. They also received his personal effects: 1 note case, 1 Identity Disc, 1 Field Report pad.

LT. THE HON. B. D. BUTLER was born April 18th 1876 at Swithland Hall, Leicestershire, the younger son of The 6th Earl of Lanesborough. He had a first class Cricketing Career before the war, played for Marylebone Cricket Club on several occasions between 1910 and 1914.

He served in 23rd Service Btn Royal Fusiliers (1st Sportsmans Btn.) from February 1915. Lt. Butler was killed on 18th August 1916. Ironically in April 1916 he was at home on leave (at Little Farindons, Dormans Land) when he was taken ill with influenza. His doctor confined him to bed, further extended his leave and recommended a course of Dowsing Light Baths. A week later he was in “much pain, rheumatism chiefly affects his legs, arms and wrists. Under these circumstances he is quite unfit to return to France. I strongly recommend a course of treatment at Bath”. By 21st April 1916 Butler wrote to his Regiment’s Medical officer, “I beg to report that I am now fit for duty and return to my Regiment on Saturday 22nd April but the Army Medical Officer further extended his leave to 2nd June 1916 when he was due for another Medical Board.

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His rheumatism, the M.O. concluded, was entirely due to his Field Service but he was considered fit for General Service and returned to the Somme front.

On 18th August he was killed in action. Place of burial not known. Small articles of specially sentimental or intrinsic value belonging to the deceased were sent to Cox's Shipping Agency for delivery to his next of kin. Strangely, nearly a year later his sister and executrix, Lady Winifred Butler, was informed by the War office that on **“30 May 1917: A report has been received which states that the late Lt. Butler is buried in Fricourt Wood. The grave has been registered in this office and is marked by a durable wooden cross with an inscription.”** No trace of that burial site remains. Lt. Butler's name is inscribed on the Thiepval Memorial. A photograph of the stone that bears his name is below, alongside a photograph of his cricketing days.



CAPTAIN HENRY LLOYD MARTIN was killed on 28th September. His home was Crowhurst Land Farm, Dormansland. A very popular man in the community, he formed the 1st Dormansland Troop Boy Scouts which joined with the Lingfield Troop to form the 1st Lingfield and Dormansland Troop in 1909. Henry Martin became District Scoutmaster of the East Surrey Association.

Military service was important to Henry Martin. He was educated at Tonbridge School from 1893-1895 where he joined the Tonbridge School Cadet Corps as 'Sapper'. When he became a member of the Stock Exchange in 1901 and joined the family firm of Messrs Martin & Hilder, he also joined The 20th Middlesex (Artists') Rifle Volunteers for 3 years. After the declaration of war Martin applied for a Commission in the Regular Army for the Period of the War, 9th Sep 1914. He was commissioned as Temp. Lieutenant on 23rd Sept. 1914 and joined the 7th Battalion, The Queen's (Royal West Surrey Regiment); the battalion was formed at Guildford in September 1914. (All war service volunteers were given temporary ranks for the period of the war.) He gained promotion to Temporary Captain on 13th March 1915.

The battalion left Codford Brigade Headquarters by train for Folkestone, on July 27th 1915 and crossed to Boulogne. Captain Martin's role was Intelligence Officer and

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Company Commander of B Company. His concern for the Lingfield and Dormansland Boy Scouts remained, he wrote several letters to individual scouts as well as an address to be read out to the Boy Scouts in the event of his death.

He was slightly wounded by an accidental explosion of bombs behind the trenches on 25th May 1916. His father, as next of kin received a telegram: "Capt. H.L. Martin 7 Royal West Surrey Dept. admitted to 1 Red Cross Hospital, Le Touquet 28. 5. 16. Gun shot wound thigh accidental slight will send any further reports". He was discharged to Base details at Etaples on June 1st.

Captain Martin fought in the Somme Campaign. During the battle for Trones Wood he received a further 'slight wound' on 13th July but recovered to take part in the Battle of Thiepval Ridge. The 7th Battalion Queens War Diary has the details of the Action on 28th September 1916:

"The Batn. started to leave Blighty Valley at 10.15 am. On debouching from N.E. corner of Authville Wood it was seen that all movements between here and Thiepval were in full view of enemy observation balloon. Shortly after 12 noon the batn & D Coy, 8th Norfolk Reg were formed up in the open in their attacking lines. B Coy (Capt H.L. Martin) right and C Coy left .

From about 11.30 am till after the hour of attack enemy maintained heavy shrapnel barrage and long range rifle and machine gun fire on the forming up places of the batn which luckily caused few casualties. At 1 pm one artillery barrage opened and the batn moved forward to the attack.

Bulgar Trench was found to be weakly held and the occupants were disposed of without much difficulty. After crossing this trench...direction was extremely difficult to maintain owing to lack of landmarks...Some opposition was encountered in Martins Lane and by this time heavy rifle and machine gun fire was coming from SCHWABEN REDOUBT but while leading B Company's successful attack on Schwaben Redoubt, Thiepval, Captain Martin was killed in action by a shell." [28th Sept]

The Schwaben Redoubt was perhaps the most formidable in the German second line. A battlefield fortress or 'redoubt' it had all-round defences and a maze of subterranean passages and tunnels. The position included medical facilities and a telephone exchange.

Captain Martin's personal effects were sent to his father in Limpsfield: 1 Pocket Case containing 4 Half-Penny stamps, 1 Officers Advance Book (45 Francs paid to Base Cashier 14 Oct 1916), 1 Identity disc, 1 French-English Dictionary, 1 Common Prayer Book, 1 New Testament, 1 Letter Case with letters & photos, postcards, correspondence etc.

Although the details of his death are known, no details of his field grave remain. His name is inscribed on the Thiepval Memorial, see below.

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His photograph is also included in the Somme Panel of the Missing in the Thiepval Museum; which depicts 600 men from the 72,000 who are commemorated on the walls of the Memorial.

Local men who fell during the battle for the Somme:

- July 1 Albert Charles Spalding, 2nd Btn. Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) No known grave. Thiepval Memorial.
- 1 John Spence McGowan, 2nd Btn. Devonshire Reg. No known grave. Thiepval Memorial
 - 3 Victor Galloway, 6th Btn. The Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg) Ovillers Mil.Cem.
 - 7 Robert Chapman, 6th Btn. Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) No known grave. Thiepval Memorial
 - 14 George Charman, 7th Btn. Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) No known grave Thiepval Memorial
 - 14 Arthur French, Royal Engineers (54th Field Coy. R.E.) No known grave Thiepval M.
 - 28 Philip Leppard, 22nd Btn. Royal Fusiliers No known grave Thiepval Memorial
- Aug. 13 Ernest Edward Caush, 8th Btn. Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) No known grave Thiepval Memorial
- 16 William T Faulkner 9th Coy Machine Gun Corps (Infantry) Guillemont Road Cem.
 - 18 The Hon. Brian Danvers Butler, Kings Royal Rifle Corps, 7th Btn. Delville Wood Cem.

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- 20 Harold John Marden, 9th Btn. Royal Sussex Reg. Dive Copse (Died of Wounds)
- 21 Edward John Simmons, 8th Btn. Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) No known grave Thiepval Mem.
- Sept. 3 Ernest A. Warrell, 17th Bat. Kings Royal Rifle Corps, Knightsbridge Cem. (Somme)
- 15 John Best Barson, 20th County of London Bat. London Reg. No known grave Thiepval Mem.
- 15 Albert William Holcombe, 9th Btn Royal Sussex Reg., Died of Wounds St. Sever Cem., Rouen
- 28 Henry Lloyd Martin, 7th Bat. Queen's (Royal West Surrey Reg.) No known grave Thiepval Mem.
- 29 Archibald Henry Pettifer, 4th Btn. Royal Sussex Reg No known grave Tyne Cot M.
- Oct 4 Percival H Godley, 32nd Bat. Royal Fusiliers A.I.F. Burial ground
- 7 Guy Allen Axtell, 6th Btn. Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Reg) No known grave Thiepval Mem.
- 8 Harry Hodge 1st/6th Bat. London Reg (City of London Rifles) No known grave Thiepval Mem.
- 27 (Meridith) Charles (Clifton) James, 1st Bat. Worcestershire Reg. No known grave Thiepval Mem.
- Nov.18 Alick George Stoner, 7th/ 2nd Bat. Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) Stump Road Cem.
- 18 Edward Bysh, 7th Bat. The Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg.) Stump Road Cem.

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References:

Imperial War Museum: IWM 66/144/1 (mid-Jul 1916) letter Lt. Will Mulholland
The National Archives: WO 158/321 WAR DIARY: BATTLE OF THE SOMME; WO 158/322 Vol. 1: 4th Army; WO 339/41047 Lt. Hon. B.D. Butler;;Summary of Operations

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24th June to 13 July; WO/158/322; Daily Reports & WO 158/324; WO 229/55683 John
Spencer McGowan; WO 339/20529 Captain Henry Lloyd Martin
West Sussex County record Office: RSR/MSS/2/66 : Deaths 1914-1918 AUBERS
RIDGE RSR MSS/4/73-74; RSR/MSS/7/17 War Diary of 9th Btn
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