13) 13124 Private Gilbert Leonard **SAUNDERS**
(St Mary's Aldermaston)

Kia 13/10/15, **Age** 27
8th Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment

Born Aldermaston
Enlisted Aldermaston

Awarded: 1914-15 Star
British War Medal
Victory Medal

Date arrived in theatre of war: France, 7/8/1915

LOOS MEMORIAL, France, Panel 93 to 95.

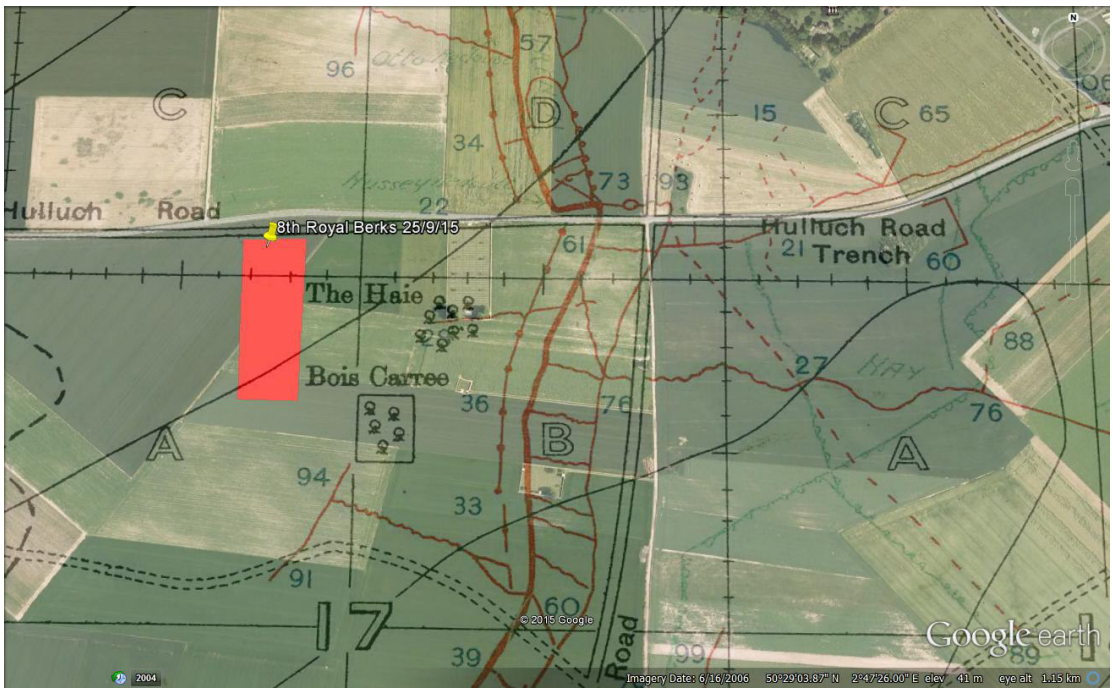
The 8th Royal Berks were formed in Reading in September 1914 at Kitchener's call for men to join the army. They were to follow the Earl of Derby's promise that 'men who joined up together as friends would serve together as friends'. This was the start of the 'Pals battalions'. As well as recruiting in Reading, 'mobile' recruiting would have taken place in local villages – Aldermaston being just one of them. The men undertook their training in the local area as well as Salisbury Plain and Sutton Veney. They would be some of the very first of 'Kitchener's Army' to be sent to France arriving at Le Havre on 10/8/1915.

Soldiers of the Royal Berkshire Regiment in training

Here there was a twist of fate – at this time a Guards Division was being formed in France. This would leave gaps in existing divisions and the 8th Royal Berks would now find themselves being substituted from the 1st Coldstream Guards in the 1st Brigade of 1st Division. This was a tremendous honour. Other units of the brigade included the 1st Black Watch and 1st Cameron Highlanders, regular army units, well experienced, fighting in France since Mons at the beginning of the war…but here too was a tragedy in the making…the 8th Royal Berks, totally inexperienced and inadequately trained, would now be expected to fight alongside these seasoned troops in what would become one of the most dangerous spots in the largest battle the British Army had yet fought, just weeks after their arrival.'

In their War Diary, the 8th Royal Berks, having landed in France would be more bothered about sore feet on marches (they had just been issued new boots) and the constant breaking down of their field cookers, than what was to come. On 17/8/15 they would

undertake a few days training in quiet trenches near Bethune and the same again a week later. In September, they along with the rest of 1st Brigade would be taken behind the lines for two weeks intensive training for the attack they would be making towards the end of the month. This is all the practical experience of war they would now get. For this battle, the British would be using poison gas as part of the attack for the first time.



Assembly positions 8th Royal Berks, Hulluch Road, Loos

As late as 20/9/15, the battalion's officers made their reconnaissance of the trenches they would be making their attack on just five days later. The 8th Royal Berks finally moved into their assault trenches, bringing more cylinders of gas with them, on the evening of 23/9/15. They would spend the following day reorganising their positions ahead of the attack scheduled for 6.30am the next morning.

British soldiers attacking through gas cloud – Battle of Loos 25/9/1915

At 5.50am on 25/9/15 the final British bombardment opened up to cut the German wire. The German artillery responded, causing but few casualties in the 8th Royal Berks positions. Specialists turned up to open the gas cylinders in the front line. Due to faulty equipment, the cylinders leaked gas into the trench poisoning many of the 8th Royal Berks. At 6.28am the gas ceased and was replaced by smoke. Two minutes later, the British artillery lifted allowing the 8th Royal Berks to advance alongside their regular comrades. The German artillery and now machine-gun fire cut swathes through the lines of the advancing men, still the 8th Royal Berks went on. In this time, the wind had changed direction blowing the gas back into the advancing waves of British troops, more casualties. They found the enemy wire uncut and were held up here making stationary targets for the machine-gunners. Once through the wire, they found the German front line unmanned apart from the machine gunners. They continued to advance and took both the German second and third lines. They reached a German fourth line and even took part of this. They had lost too many men to hold this position and were gradually forced back during the day. The casualties for the 8th Royal Berks at this stage were estimated at 50%.

Location of 8th Royal Berks positions south of Hulluch Road, Loos - today

For the next few days, the survivors held and consolidated their positions, food and water now being in very short supply. They would witness further attacks to both right and left. They pulled back to their original starting positions of 29/9/15 before being taken out of the line altogether.

In the days that followed, the 8th Royal Berks received numbers of replacements from their 3rd and 9th battalions. By 12/10/15, the 8th Royal Berks were back in the same positions, again ready to make another attack the following morning.

At 1pm on 13/10/15 poison gas was again released in the wake of the artillery barrage and twenty minutes later, the 8th Royal Berks once again went ‘over the top’. This time they were cut down by artillery and machine-gun fire from the outset and never reached the German positions. Again decimated, the 8th Royal Berks were withdrawn from action the following day.

For the Battle of Loos Sept-Oct 1915, the 8th Royal Berks lost 250 men killed. To get their total casualties, the number of those wounded etc need to be added. In the Great War for an action this would be approximately three times those killed. In total this would represent about 1000 men – this would represent a full battalion. These first battalions of Kitchener’s Army had paid the ultimate price for their place in history.

Gilbert Saunder’s body was never identified, he is thus commemorated at:

SON OF MR. AND MRS. ENOCH SAUNDERS, OF ALDERMASTON, READING.

LOOS MEMORIAL

Location Information

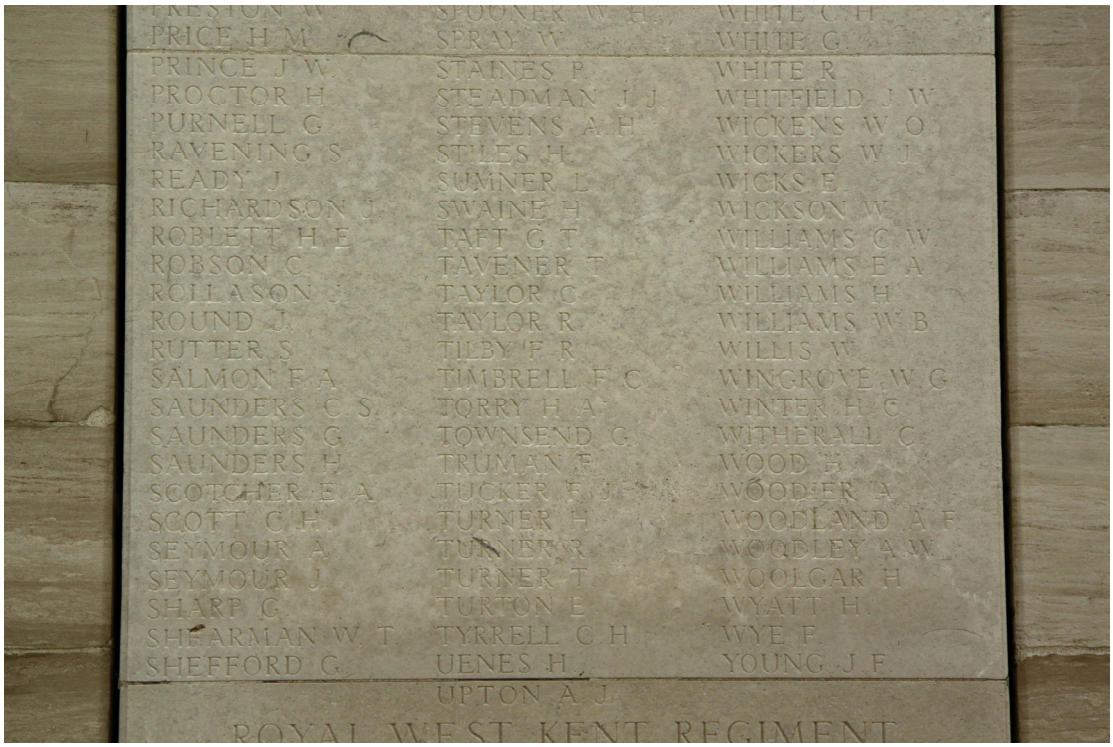
The Loos Memorial forms the sides and back of Dud Corner Cemetery.

Loos-en-Gohelle is a village 5 kilometres north-west of Lens, and Dud Corner Cemetery is located about 1 kilometre west of the village, to the north-east of the D943, the main Lens to Bethune road.

Historical Information

Dud Corner Cemetery stands almost on the site of a German strong point, the Lens Road Redoubt, captured by the 15th (Scottish) Division on the first day of the battle.

The name "Dud Corner" is believed to be due to the large number of unexploded enemy shells found in the neighbourhood after the Armistice.

The Loos Memorial commemorates over 20,000 officers and men who have no known grave, who fell in the area from the River Lys to the old southern boundary of the First Army, east and west of Grenay. On either side of the cemetery is a wall 15 feet high, to which are fixed tablets on which are carved the names of those commemorated. At the back are four small circular courts, open to the sky, in which the lines of tablets are continued, and between these courts are three semicircular walls or apses, two of which carry tablets, while on the centre apse is erected the Cross of Sacrifice.

The memorial was designed by Sir Herbert Baker with sculpture by Charles Wheeler. It was unveiled by Sir Nevil Macready on 4 August 1930.