

17) 18643 Private Roland **ABBOTT**

Kia 1/07/16, **Age** 22
8th Bn Devonshire Regiment

Awarded: 1914-15 Star
British War Medal
Victory Medal

Date arrived in theatre of war: France, 8/12/1915

Born Aldermaston
Enlisted London
Residence Wolverton

The 8th Devonshire was a 'Kitchener' battalion raised at the start of the war from local civilians in Devon. They had arrived in France in July 1915 and served to the end of the year in and around the Vermelles area, but did not take part in the Battle of Loos. A steady stream of casualties was replaced piecemeal and from the battalion's war diary they had moved to the south and were undergoing training behind the lines at the village of Ailly-sur-Somme when on:

'15th December 1915: A draft of 69 other ranks arrived from Base and were inspected by Brigadier General Deverel and Commanding Officer. The Commanding Officer made a short address to them.' Roland Abbot had arrived with his unit; the timing would mean that he would qualify for the 1914-15 campaign Star, by a matter of days, without firing a shot – not that he would ever have known this...

Roland Abbot and the battalion would now start a long period of training behind the lines and only move up to the front lines on 4th March 1916 at Becordel, just behind the German-held fortified hilltop villages of Fricourt and Mametz.

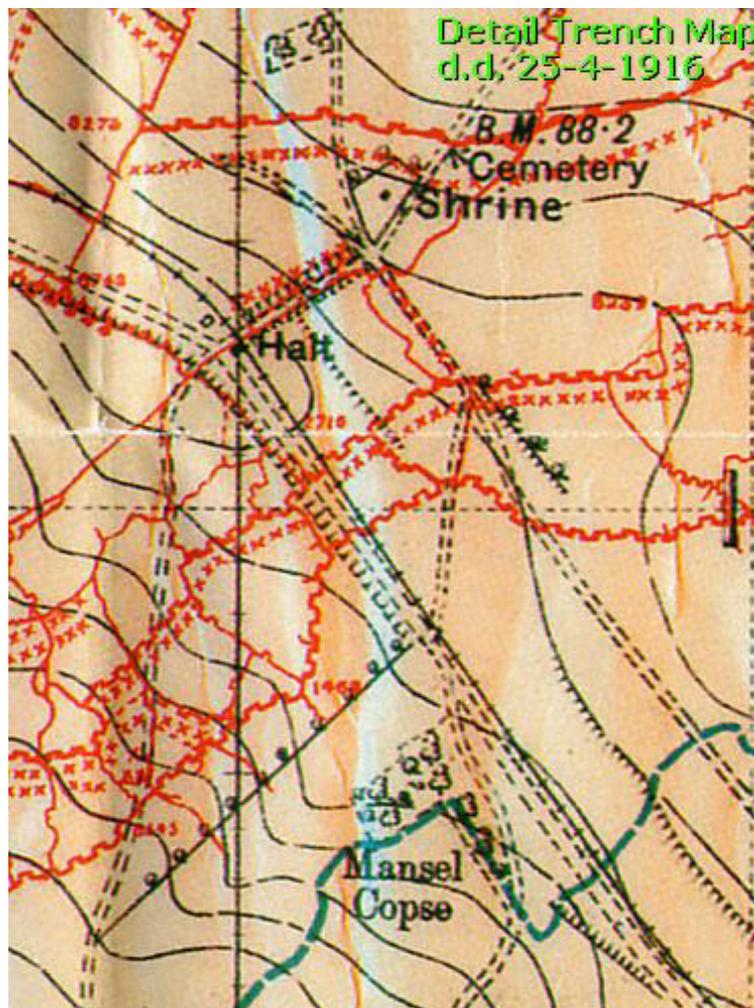
The battalion would now commence the regular duties of an infantry unit spending four days in each of the front line, support/reserve line and at 'rest' in the village of Meaulte, though 'resting' usually consisted of both repetitive training and finding working parties for heavy labour as the British built up their stores for the impending offensive on the Somme. The village of Meaulte, as a 'rest billet', was particularly hated by the British troops during 1916 mainly due to the villagers being distrustful, unfriendly and only too willing to make a profit out of the troops wanting 'omelette and chips with 'vin blanc' as a change for their normal army rations. This rotation process would continue with only minor change in locations until the end of May.



Men of the Devonshire Regiment 'on the Somme' 1916

June 1916 saw the start of intensive attack training for the battalion behind the lines over practice trenches that accurately represented the enemy lines they were to attack in a few weeks time. The effort of the carrying parties redoubled taking the required ammunition up to the line for what would be the largest British bombardment of the war to date; over a million shells would be fired in a week along an 18-mile front. The 8th, and their sister battalion, 9th Devonshire would do their fair share.

On the 30th June 1916, on the eve of the 'Big Push', the 8th Devonshire moved into their Assembly trenches opposite the German lines between the German-held villages of Mametz and Montauban on the hillside opposite them. On the following morning, the attack would be led by the 9th Gordon Highlanders. They and the 9th Devonshire in Mansel Copse would follow up this attack and take the village of Mametz and the enemy line towards Montauban. At least this was the plan...surely after seven days of bombardment, cutting the wire and destroying the enemy positions, there could be no one left alive – as they had been told...anyone left alive would be so demoralised at the sight of hundreds of men advancing in lines towards them at a walking pace, they would not put up much of a fight – would they?



Location of trenches leading up to 1/7/1916



Aerial photograph of the key locations around the village of Mametz – 1st July 1916

The following is taken from the War Diary of the 8th Devonshire:

30/6/1916

Battalion paraded at 11pm and marched into trenches in the following order of companies B, D, A and C Company, less two platoons. The battalion arrived in trenches and were in the following positions at 3:45am, 1/7/16: B Company in PERONNE AVENUE, D Company LUDGATE CIRCUS, A & C Companies in LUCKNOW REDOUBT. Two platoons of C Company rejoined the battalion at 6:25am.

1/7/1916

A ZERO hour 7:30am, B Company moved from PERONNE AVENUE to RESERVE TRENCH via 68 STREET their left on 69 STREET, their right in touch with D Company. D Company occupied 67 SUPPORT. A & C Companies moved from LUCKNOW REDOUBT to LUCKNOW LANE, C Company picking up their 2 platoons at ESSEX AVENUE. A Company with their right on LUCKNOW AVENUE. This was the situation at ZERO hour.

The attack on Mametz would be led by the Gordon Highlanders and 9th Devonshire, with 8th Devonshire to move up in support some time later to consolidate the position.

1 July 1916: The 7th Division attacks Fricourt and Mametz.



Remarkable photograph taken of the attack by the Gordon Highlanders shortly after 7.30am on 1/7/16 from the Devonshire positions – the men on the right have already fallen to scything machine-gun fire, many of those still standing are about to...

At 8.40am, A Company moved up into RESERVE TRENCH having B Company in touch with their right. This made two Companies in RESERVE TRENCH, One company in 67 SUPPORT and one company in LUDGATE LANE. At 8-6am [sic] OC B Company reports 91st Brigade are on EAST of MAMETZ. Parties of Gordons can be seen in MAMETZ but seemed to be bearing off to the East of our objective.

The following entry for 10.30am is perhaps key:

10:30am, B Company were moved from RESERVE TRENCH and sent forward to support the left of the Gordons and right of the 9th Devons. OC B Company moved his troops via MANSEL COPSE into the hollow of the BRAY-FRICOURT Road. This company did not move again as a whole until 4pm when all its officers had been wounded and CSM Holwill assumed command.



Taken from the entrance to Mansell, here is the Fricourt – Bray Road, the ‘Bank’ and on the left distance is the village of Mametz, on the right horizon is the site of Dantzig Alley trench. It is perhaps just here that Pte Roland Abbott was killed by the machine-gun sited at ‘The Shrine’ – the Google Earth yellow line ‘conveniently’ follows the line taken by the 8th (and 9th) Devons!

10.40am, C Company took up positions in RESERVE TRENCH vacated by B Company at 10.15am. OC Gordons was lent D Company 8th Devon Regt to use as support to his battalion if required.

10.45am, Officer commanding D Company reports two of his platoons sent forward to support the right of the Gordons.

10.20am, Colonel STOREY ordered the advance of A Company to support the right of the 9th Devons Battalion Head Quarters. They moved in the direction of the HALTE. The four officers of this company were either killed or wounded and I got no information as to the whereabouts of this Company until late in the evening when 2/Lt DUFF reported to me he had picked this Company up.

3.30pm, C Company, my last company in RESERVE TRENCH were given orders to proceed to HIDDEN WOOD via MANSEL COPSE. This company sent two platoons over the top of RESERVE TRENCH but Lt SAVILLE seeing numerous casualties took remainder of company via 70 STREET and proceeded to his objective with practically no casualties at all.

4pm, I sent out 2/Lt Duff to collect B Company and push on in support of C Company to HIDDEN WOOD.

4.20pm, Lt/Duff report[ed] having found remnants of B Company in MAMETZ TRENCH and working through trench with Gordons in direction of DANTZIG SUPPORT and HIDDEN WOOD.

5.10pm, This same officer reported having joined up with 2/Lt JOSEPH of C Company also A Company men under CSM Melhuish also some 9th Devons, we have worked under the bank to HALTE and beyond, and are now working around to HIDDEN WOOD. I have taken and sent back many prisoners from under the bank including four officers.

The village of Mametz had been taken as well as Dantzig Alley, the evening and night was spent getting the remainder of the 8th Devonshire into their allotted positions. As far as this sector was concerned the day had been a success and the objectives had been successfully taken from which a further advance would be staged the following day. The casualty return for the 8th Devonshire for 1/7/16 was Officers: 3 killed, 7 wounded, Other Ranks: 37 killed, 153 wounded and 7 missing. By the standards of the day, the 8th Devonshire had been both successful and got off lightly as regarding casualties.



The village of Mametz following capture 1/7/1916

1st July 1916 was the worst day in the history of the British Army. Approximately 57,000 men had fallen, 19,000 killed, 35,000 wounded, the remainder missing. Most of these had fallen in the first hour of the attack. The week-long artillery preparation had not destroyed the enemy positions, deep dugouts in the chalk safely housed the Germans ready for the attack, and the wire had not been cut in many places. The result of many lines of attacking British troops walking towards uncut wire and trained machine-gunners had really only been tremendous casualties. The lack of adequate communication when things were going wrong and a rigid artillery plan based of success meant that the artillery uselessly firing on reserve positions could not be brought back. On most of the 18 miles, there had been a complete slaughter. However here at Mametz and further east at Montauban, there had been success and planned objectives were taken. It would later be revealed that the German intelligence, for once, had been in error here. They knew about the attack, but did not believe the British would also attack these two villages, as such, a lesser number of Reserve troops had been left to hold them and after putting up a strong fight, lost these positions.

Roland Abbott lost his life this terrible day during the course of this attack with the 8th Devonshire. He was buried in:

DEVONSHIRE CEMETERY, MAMETZ, France, B. 3

SON OF HARRY ABBOTT, OF FAIR VIEW, PRESTON CANDOVER, BASINGSTOKE

This location, because of what happened next, helps clarify the situation as to possibly explain what is likely to have happened to him. In the afternoon and evening of 1st July, the Padre and men from both the 8th and 9th Devonshire collected the bodies of the dead of these battalions who had fallen advancing from the original assembly trench in Mansel Copse as they moved towards the Bray-Fricourt Road. The war diary entry for 10.30am makes mention of B Company men of the 8th Devonshire making just such an advance. It is thus probable that Roland Abbot was one of these men and was shot down here.

The next section below describes the cemetery, but what actually happened here before and the battle, is not covered in the war diary above. For both battalions of the 8th and 9th Devonshire, these stories became a legend that has grown and makes this small cemetery, one of the most frequently visited cemeteries along the whole western front.

DEVONSHIRE CEMETERY, MAMETZ



Location Information

Mametz is a village in the Department of the Somme, 6.5 kilometres east of Albert.

Historical Information

Mametz was within the German lines until 1 July 1916 when it was captured by the 7th Division, and Mametz Wood, north-east of the village, was cleared on the days following 7 July.

The 8th and 9th Battalions of the Devonshire Regiments, which were part of the 7th Division, attacked on 1 July 1916 from a point on the south-west side of Albert-Maricourt road, due south of Mametz village, by a plantation called Mansel Copse. On 4 July they returned this location and established a cemetery, burying their dead in a section of their old front line trench. All but two of the burials belong to these battalions.

Devonshire Cemetery contains 163 Commonwealth burials of the First World War, ten of which are unidentified.

The cemetery was designed by W H Cowlshaw.

The Three 'Legends' of Devonshire Cemetery, and now a fourth...

1) Captain Duncan Lenox Martin

He was commander of "A" Company of the 9th Devonshire. As the preparations for the Battle of the Somme offensive were progressing, Captain Martin grew increasingly concerned about the known location of a German machine gun in the French civilian cemetery ('The Shrine') on the southern outskirts of Mametz village.

This machine gun was opposite the British Front Line from where the Devonshire were to make their advance. Captain Martin was aware that the German machine gunners would have a clear view of his men when they began the attack across the 400 yards of No-Mans-Land toward the German Front Line. He went on leave before the battle and made a plasticine model to show his son of the positions, Capt. Martin now more closely examining the field of fire that the machine gun would have from the cemetery.

He brought this model back to France with him to show his superiors – but no one wanted to know or listen, the plan of the attack would be successful...However he did share his concerns with his fellow company officers including Lt. William Noel Hodgson, his Bombing Officer – he too would share his commanders concerns...and fate.

On the morning of 1st July Captain Martin was one of the many Devonshire officers to be killed by the ferocious German machine gun fire as he advanced across the open valley towards the German line and Mametz village. *(So too, would Pte Roland Abbott...)*

Captain Martin is buried in Grave reference A.1.

2) Lieutenant William Noel Hodgson, MC

In the early hours of the morning of Saturday 1st July 1916 Lt. William Noel Hodgson was in position with his comrades, anxiously waiting for Zero Hour at 07.30 hours. Due to the severe damage from German artillery fire the British Front Line trench was unsuitable for the battalion to assemble in ready for the attack, so the men were about 250 yards behind the British Front Line trench. At Zero Hour the men of 9th Devons advanced from their position behind the Front Line trench, with the 2nd Battalion Border Regiment on their left and the 2nd Battalion the Gordon Highlanders on their right.

It is believed that Noel Hodgson wrote the now-famous war-poem "**Before Action**" on 29th June, fully knowing of what was about to happen if that machine-gun position had survived the bombardment...

The 9th Devons had about 400 yards of No-Mans-Land to cross in the Carnoy valley before they could attempt to break into the German Front Line south of Mametz village. As soon as the first men of the Devonshire reached No-Mans-Land they were exposed to fire from German machine guns. Many were cut down in No-Mans-Land and the battalion suffered heavy casualties. Lieutenant Hodgson was Bombing Officer in the attack. He was responsible for keeping the men supplied with grenades during the attack, which would be especially important if they got into the German positions. Within an hour of the attack it is said that Lieutenant Hodgson was killed. He was aged 23.

He would never again see a sunset...

“Before Action”

By all the glories of the day
And the cool evening's benison
By that last sunset touch that lay
Upon the hills when day was done,
By beauty lavishly outpoured
And blessings carelessly received,
By all the days that I have lived
Make me a soldier, Lord.

By all of all man's hopes and fears
And all the wonders poets sing,
The laughter of unclouded years,
And every sad and lovely thing;
By the romantic ages stored
With high endeavour that was his,
By all his mad catastrophes
Make me a man, O Lord.

I, that on my familiar hill
Saw with uncomprehending eyes
A hundred of thy sunsets spill
Their fresh and sanguine sacrifice,
Ere the sun swings his noonday sword
Must say good-bye to all of this; -
By all delights that I shall miss,
Help me to die, O Lord.

3) “The Devonshires Held this Trench, The Devonshires Hold it Still”

In spite of the heavy casualties lost, both battalions of the Devonshire had progressed with their attack and the German-held village of Mametz was captured by the British 7th Division. All but one of the officers of the 9th Devons were killed or wounded. The British Front Line position did, therefore, successfully advance to a new position by the end of the day.

On 4th July 1916, three days after the first day of the Battle of the Somme, a ceremony was held at the burial site of the 161 Devonshire Regiment men. A wooden cross was put up at the time by the survivors of the 8th and 9th Battalions of the Devonshire Regiment. The following words were carved on the wooden cross: “The Devonshires held this trench, the Devonshires hold it still.”



In the 1980s Lieutenant-Colonel Graham Parker was leading a tour of British Army soldiers and officers to the Somme battlefields, some of whom were officers from the Devonshire Regiment. He told them the story of the wooden cross with its famous motto, and that it was presumed that it had been stolen as it had disappeared after remaining at the entrance to the cemetery for many years after the First World War.

The Devonshire Regiment officers decided to do something about this and immediately they returned home they started a collection to pay for a permanent monument to

be put in the place of the missing cross. The stone memorial which now stands at the entrance to the cemetery was placed there soon after.

The words "The Devonshires Held this Trench, the Devonshires Hold it Still" once more stand in proud memory of the men lying in this cemetery...



4) 'These are my boys'

The author when on a private visit with a party to Devonshire Cemetery witnessed the following...

An 'unknown old lady' on the trip at the end of the story of the cemetery, suddenly said to everyone, 'These are my boys...' Looking round, we saw that she had stood apart now holding an empty jar, and she continued...

'These are my boys, I have come to this spot as often as I have been able to over the years, but I know this will be my last visit, I will not come here again. I come from Devon, and visit after visit I have brought a jar of soil from my Devon garden with me and now each of these graves has a part of Devon here too. I know the names of all these boys and write a birthday card each year for each of them....these are my boys and it is now time for me to say my final goodbye to them.'

We stood in silence, not a word was said...tears flowed, we knew this day we had shared something very special with this unknown old lady, something none of us would ever forget...

...finding that Pte Roland Abbott, now commemorated on the Aldermaston Centenary Plaque and having served and fell with the 8th Devonshire and buried here in this cemetery, has finally given me the chance to tell this very special personal story...(Author).



ATE
ES
RIMENT
16

18643 PRIVATE
R. ABBOTT
DEVONSHIRE REGIMENT
1ST JULY 1916

200
F. J. M
DEVONS
1ST

