

18) 16753 Private Arthur **POPEJOY**

Kia 3/07/16

5th Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment

Awarded: British War Medal
Victory Medal

Date arrived in theatre of war: France, not known

Born Aldermaston

Enlisted Newbury

It is not possible to say with certainty when Arthur Popejoy joined his unit, the 5th Royal Berkshire, out in France. He was not awarded the 1914-15 campaign Star and thus his arrival must have taken place sometime after 1/1/1916. The battalion had been out in France since June 1915.

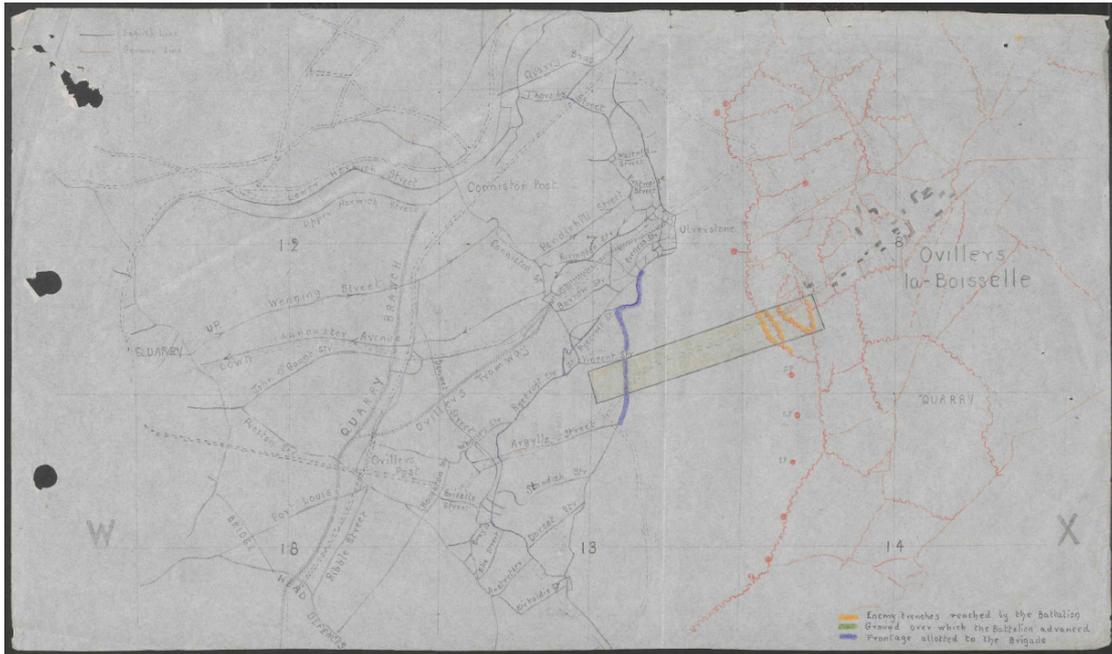
However, January to June 1916 saw the 5th Royal Berkshire holding the line in the Bethune sector. Following the Battle of Loos in September-October 1915, this had been a fairly quiet sector apart from trench-raiding that had become a particular feature at this period.

The 5th Royal Berkshire moved down to the Somme area (Albert) on 16th June 1916 by train from Lillers. Here they remained in the rear areas (Franvillers) training for the large Somme offensive that would begin on 1st July. They would miss the slaughter of the first day itself, but would be brought up to the front line within 48 hours.

The sector they would be brought to would be the lines in front of the village of Ovillers la Boisselle. This and the neighbouring village of La Boisselle had been the objectives of the 34th Division (Kitchener battalions, all from Tyneside), neither had been taken - the width of No-man's land had been at its widest here, the line of advance had been up two valleys termed 'Sausage' and 'Mash', all the troops had advanced together in one attack. The slaughter of these men crossing at walking pace across completely open ground for almost a mile before reaching uncut wire was simply tremendous and the 34th Division suffered the highest casualties on the day, running into many thousands of men. On their arrival, the war diary of the 5th Royal Berkshire indeed makes mention of the large quantities of dead strewn around. Another commentator said, 'It would be perfectly possible to have walked across No-man's land on a carpet of khaki, never having to step on the ground'.

To the north of Ovillers la Boisselle, none of the objectives of the 1/7/16 were gained and it was not likely they were going to be given the British losses and the strength of the German positions. To the west, the villages of Montauban and Mametz had been taken according to plan. As a result, the village of Fricourt could no longer be defended and was given up by the Germans on the night of 1/7/16. Despite the losses, the offensive had to continue, after all it was working – the French Army fighting and hanging on at Verdun since February would see an end to German attacks as their reserves were being withdrawn from Verdun to the Somme to stop the British breaking through.

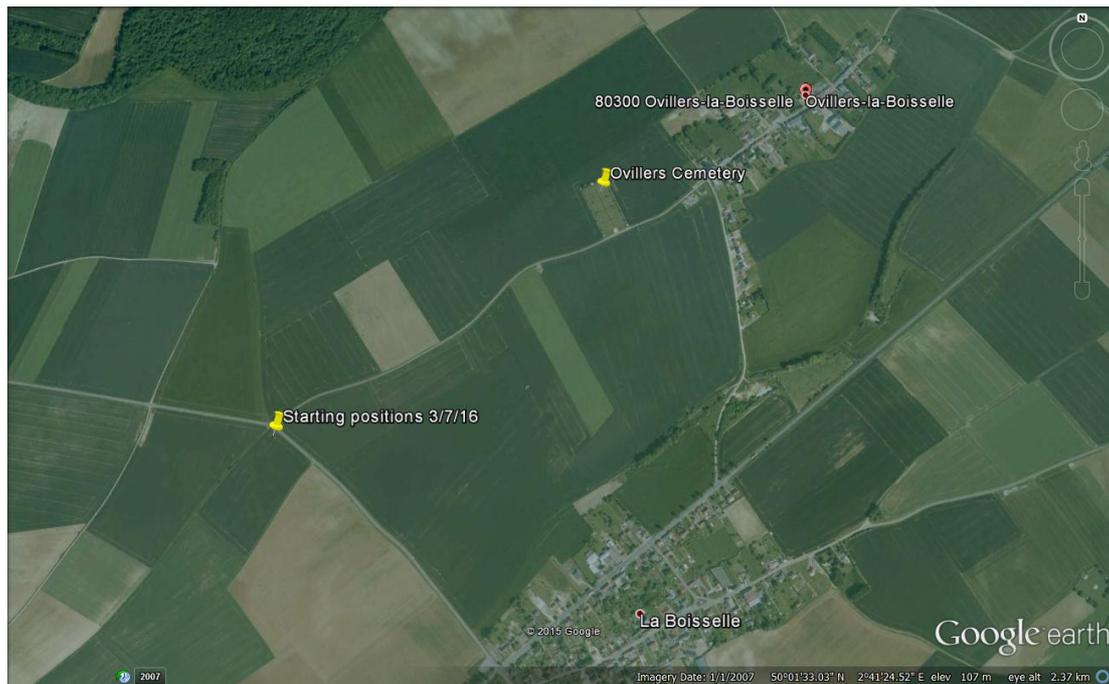
It was decided to exploit the few gains of 1/7/16 in the Somme and push northwards. To ensure the left flank of this British advance it was necessary to secure the villages of Ovillers la Boisselle and La Boisselle astride the main Albert-Bapaume Road. This task would now befall to the 12th Division, part of which would be the 5th Royal Berkshire – their objective would be the fortified village of Ovillers la Boisselle.



Trench map included in 5th Royal Berkshire war diary showing line of attack along road to Oville-la-Boisselle

Valuable lessons had been learned from the attack of July 1st and would be employed in the attack of the 3rd:

- a) The attack would take place at daybreak, taking advantage of the reduced light to shield the attacking troops.
- b) The density of troops making the attack would be greater i.e. more men on a reduced front thus concentrating the effort. There would now be 8 waves of attacking troops.
- c) Attacking troops would be prepared to meet uncut wire and a greater number of wire-cutter would be carried.
- d) Captured positions would be thoroughly 'mopped up' leaving no survivors to then fire on the advancing troops from the rear.
- e) The artillery bombardment ahead of the attack on the enemy trenches would be just 10 minutes in order to increase the surprise factor of the attack.
- f) During this bombardment, attacking troops would move forward across No-man's land so be ready to attack the enemy trenches immediately the barrage lifted.
- g) After the initial bombardment, the artillery would lift, but only onto ground immediately behind the final objective and thus continue to protect the attacking troops.
- h) The final attacking waves would bring entrenching equipment and materials etc. ready to make a rapid defence of captured positions against any German counter-attacks.



Ariel photograph of the locations – the same road to Ovillers la Boisselle is still there...

After possibly months of static trench warfare to the north and a few weeks of preparation for such an attack, Arthur Popejoy and the rest of the 5th Royal Berkshire would now be counting down the hours before the attack at dawn on 3rd July 1916. Their war diary provides a comprehensive description of what now was to happen:

Narrative of Operations:

The artillery arrangements were altered at the last moments, and one hour's bombardment actually took place prior to Zero, which was at 3.15am [any element of surprise would now have been lost...]

This long bombardment had the effect of drawing considerable hostile fire on our own front system of trenches – the result was that companies suffered considerably whilst waiting for the moment to assault, and also in 'No-man's land' from the hostile barrage of shrapnel and High Explosive.

The assaulting companies succeeded in crawling forward through the gaps we had cut in our own wire, and advanced in quick time almost up to the German front line trenches, before our artillery lifted, and without being detected by the occupants of the trenches.

The wire in front of the enemy's front line had been completely destroyed, but there were many larger shell holes, which formed considerable obstacles – some wire in front of 'Shrapnel Terrace' was encountered [an objective].

All four companies appear to have kept good direction with the exception of the Right assaulting company which advanced too far to the right, this error was rectified before entering the German front line trench.

The leading waves seemed to have suffered little or no casualties from rifle or machine-gun fire until they had crossed the German front line – there appear to have been none of the enemy actually in the front line trench [a suitable precaution by the Germans, it made more sense when expecting an attack not to hold the front line (which was being bombarded), but to have them in the support lines, ready to drive the attacking troops back]. After crossing the front line the leading waves pushed on over the second trench, and into what is known as 'Shrapnel Terrace'. Here some of the enemy were encountered, and hand-

to-hand fighting ensued – many dugouts were bombed [‘mopping up’], and it became obvious that unless we could procure a plentiful supply of bombs, it would be impossible to hold on to what ground we had gained [another lesson to be learned...]

It proved to be a very dark morning, and in the darkness it was extremely difficult to recognise friend from foe, or even the trenches themselves which had been considerably damaged by own own shell fire, besides which, the noise of the bombardment which had now lifted to the northern outskirts of the village, and the fire of innumerable machine-guns, was deafening, and made it quite impossible to hear orders given...

There is no doubt that some men penetrated as far as the village, and were eventually killed or cut off...

The German dugouts appear to have been quite undamaged by the heavy bombardments, and as soon as we commenced to throw bombs down into them, the enemy swarmed out of entrances further along fully armed with bombs, so that there is no doubt that they were connected by some means underground [the Germans had been in the same trenches for two years, they had not been idle, they had created quite a complex underground system in this time, shell-proof with many entrances and exits – the British were now starting to understand what they were up against on the Somme...]



Captured German trench Ovillers la Boisselle July 1916 – the parapet has just been ‘reversed’ to facilitate defence against German counter attack, several exhausted troops are resting.

There is no doubt that there were many instances of extreme bravery by small isolated bombing parties, and which were only defeated by the supply of bombs becoming exhausted.

The Commanding Officer and Adjutant went forward shortly after the last wave had left, it was still quite dark, and impossible to distinguish faces 50 yards away. On reaching the German front line trenches, about 100 men were found, between there and the second line.

Considerable bombing was heard on the right and in front, and the enemy could be seen advancing from the left. There was much confusion in the darkness and men from the

7th Suffolks and 9th Essex were seen to be mixed up our own. The noise was deafening, and it was impossible to and it was impossible to make oneself heard.

The bulk of the men fell back to the German front line trench, so were inclined to go further, others stood on the top and appeared to know not what to do – only one officer could be found in this locality (Captain Wace) and he was endeavouring to rally the men, and to get them to go forward. After a brief reconnaissance the Commanding Officer decided that it would be quite impossible to retain our hold on the German front line trench, which was almost completely obliterated, and extremely deep, exposed as were to an attack from both flanks as well as from the front. It would have been impossible to have consolidated sufficiently in the time available, added to the fact that we should probably have had to remain there throughout the entire day quite unsupported, and entirely cut off, with no stocks of bombs or SAA.

By this time, the enemy had started a steady crossfire with machine-guns across No-man's land..., so the Commanding Officer withdrew with what men he could collect and make them dig in the Albert-Ovillers sunken road facing south.

This road afforded complete protection from the north, and defiladed from the east. About 80-100 men were dug in here, and remained throughout the day, quite unmolested, they were withdrawn by order of the GOC as soon as it was dark.

Lieutenant and Adjutant Gold was killed on this road, just behind the CO. the failure to maintain our hold on the captured trenches may be put down to the following facts:

- a) The extreme darkness, which had not been anticipated*
- b) The length of our bombardment, which resulted in the enemy putting up a heavy barrage of shrapnel and HE*
- c) Excessive casualties caused to officers, their NCO's, bombing squads and the Lewis Gun teams (4 were put out of action) at an early stage in the operations*
- d) Little or no damage was done to the enemy's dugouts by our bombardment.*
- e) Some units undoubtedly lost direction and therefore did not reach their objectives, thereby causing lack of cohesion and cooperation*
- f) Heavy casualties of last waves caused in crossing 'No-man's land'*

The war diary continues:

3/7/16 4pm: The battalion which consisted of about 70 men, and the CO was ordered to go to ALBERT defences for the night...

Casualties for the operations against OVILLERS were:

Officers: Killed 2, died of wounds 2, wounded 3, missing 7

Other ranks: Killed 2, wounded 212, missing 104.

The numbers here tell their own story, there would have been approximately 500-600 men in the initial attack, just about all the 'missing' would have been actually 'killed in action'. The 60 men left in the defensive trench would rejoin that night. Others not accounted for in these figures, would have to make their way back as best they could.

The attack had been a failure; a change of plan at the last minute had extended the initial bombardment to an hour. This may have served to demolish further the enemy defences but, more importantly, the enemy was now fully alerted to be able to pull back their troops from the front line to safety and call down their own bombardment on the attacking troops. Once in the enemy lines, a shortage of bombs made the clearing of the complex underground system of dugouts impossible. The enemy too were far from easily giving up well sited trenches without a fight. By midday, the 5th Royal Berkshire with too few men found themselves holding an untenable position and were thus forced to withdraw, many more had initially advanced further and were now cut off – and would eventually be 'mopped up' themselves.



The view towards Ovillers la Boisselle today, it is along this road that Arthur Popejoy and the 5th Royal Berkshire advanced at dawn on 3/7/16

The fate of Arthur Popejoy in this failed attack is not known other than he lost his life. The village of Ovillers la Boisselle would only be captured (the Germans actually withdrew in fear of being cut off due to British gains on either side of the village) on 17th July.

Arthur Popejoy is buried in OVILLERS MILITARY CEMETERY, France, VI. M. 9 which is situated along the line of his actual attack that morning and actually is on the site of the German front line the 5th Royal Berkshire briefly held on 3rd July 1916. Today he is buried in Plot VI, this did not constitute the original cemetery of July 1916. His body was recovered later from elsewhere. This might suggest he one of those along with others of the 5th Royal Berkshire who had advanced further that morning only to be cut off, desperately holding their ground, hoping for relief that would never come, until the last man fell taking the last stories of these men that afternoon with him...

OVILLERS MILITARY CEMETERY



Location Information

Ovillers is a village about 5 kilometres north-east of the town of Albert off the D929 road to Bapaume. The Military Cemetery is approximately 500 metres west of the village on the D20 road to Aveluy.

Historical Information

On 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the 8th Division attacked Ovillers and the 34th Division La Boisselle. The villages were not captured, but ground was won between them and to the south of La Boisselle. On 4 July, the 19th (Western) Division cleared La Boisselle and on 7 July the 12th (Eastern) and 25th Divisions gained part of Ovillers, the village being cleared by the 48th (South Midland) Division on 17 July. The two villages were lost during the German advance in March 1918, but they were retaken on the following 24 August by the 38th (Welsh) Division.

Ovillers Military Cemetery was begun before the capture of Ovillers, as a battle cemetery behind a dressing station. It was used until March 1917, by which time it contained 143 graves, about half the present Plot I. The cemetery was increased after the Armistice when Commonwealth and French graves were brought in, mainly from the battlefields of Pozieres, Ovillers, La Boisselle and Contalmaison, and from the following two cemeteries:-

MASH VALLEY CEMETERY, OVILLERS-LA BOISSELLE, was about 200 metres North of Ovillers Military Cemetery. It was named from one of two valleys (Mash and Sausage) which run from South-West to North-East on either side of La Boisselle. It contained the graves of 76 soldiers from the United Kingdom who fell in July-September 1916.

RED DRAGON CEMETERY, OVILLERS-LA BOISSELLE, was midway between Ovillers and La Boisselle. It was made by the 16th and 17th Royal Welch Fusiliers, and named from their

badge. It contained the graves of 25 soldiers who fell in August 1918, all of whom belonged to the 38th (Welsh) Division, and all but three to the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

There are now 3,440 Commonwealth servicemen of the First World War buried or commemorated in the cemetery. 2,480 of the burials are unidentified but there are special memorials to 24 casualties believed to be buried among them. Other special memorials record the names of 35 casualties, buried in Mash Valley Cemetery, whose graves were destroyed in later fighting. The cemetery also contains 120 French war graves.

The cemetery was designed by Sir Herbert Baker.

