

20) 16619 Private Alfred Percy Philip **WICKENS**
(St Nicolas's Wasing)

Kia 27/07/16, **Age** 19
1st Bn. Royal Berkshire Regiment

Born Wasing
Enlisted Newbury
Residence Wasing

Awarded: 1914-15 Star
British War Medal
Victory Medal

Date arrived in theatre of war: France, 26/5/1915

It is very evident from the records that Alfred Wickens joined the army at the start of the war at the age of 17, two years under the official qualifying age. He was one of many thousands who did so and lost his life two years later at the age of only 19.

The 1st Royal Berkshire had been one of the first battalions to arrive in 1914 and by the time Alfred Wickens joined them in June 1915 they had been there almost a year and would have been unrecognisable from the pre-war Regular battalion they once had been.

1916 had been a relatively quiet year for the 1st Royal Berkshire beginning in the northern mining districts of France before moving south to the Arras sector around Souchez. They were still here in the weeks leading up to the start of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. Indeed they had carried out a raid in the Souchez sector at the end of June.

They would miss the start of the Battle of the Somme and only arrive there on 20th July. Twenty days into the battle its character had changed considerably. The first day had been disastrous with 57,000 casualties, but the battle was to continue if the French were to be relieved from the German onslaught at Verdun. Even by the second day of the battle, lessons had been learned, there would be no repeat of the wide frontal attack by lines of men facing uncut wire after days of artillery bombardment against an enemy whose defences were largely intact. An enemy who were not going to give an inch of ground without a bitter struggle and inevitable counter-attack to regain any lost ground.

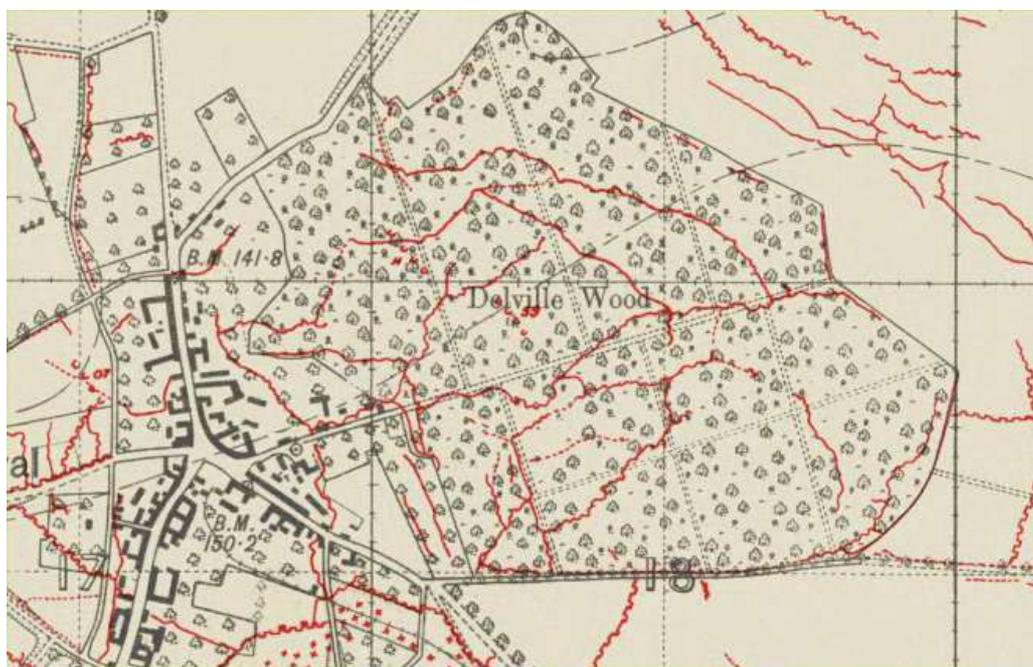
With so few gains, the British were forced to exploit the capture of Montauban, Mametz and Fricourt by pushing northwards towards the Albert-Bapaume Road. This would now involve attacking new fortified hill-top villages and for the first time dense woodland. These places formed the German Second position and this was no less strong than the first had been.

These positions would be attacked on a wide front of 14th July; however the British would employ quite different tactics from a fortnight before. Gone was the long preparatory bombardment, to be replaced by a short one providing the element of surprise. The barrage would only lift slowly moving just ahead of the infantry, a 'creeping barrage', this would both keep the Germans and their machine-guns in their dugouts and provide cover for the advancing infantry. Timing too would be changed, the attack would take place before dawn to take advantage of the half light for cover. Another tactic would be to use captured German flamethrowers with the advancing infantry. The result was a resounding success and 7000 yards of German lines fell into British hands in very rapid time for relatively few losses.

One key village captured that day was the village of Longueval. This task had been allotted to the 9th Scottish Division to whom had been attached the four battalions of the South African Brigade who had freshly arrived in France from fighting in Africa. The South Africans had been allotted the task of simpler task of 'mopping up' following the capture of Longueval by Scottish troops.

The 3000 men of the South African Brigade made their way forwards along the Montauban-Longueval road (it takes about 20 minutes to walk this distance), but they found themselves held up as the Scottish battalions were finding the capture of Longueval more difficult than they anticipated. The German artillery retaliation fell squarely on the South African Brigade causing huge losses. Unable to capture Longueval, the South African Brigade were now called up, not to 'mop up' but to actually complete the capture of Longueval. To the relief of the Scottish 9th Division, the South African did just that, but things did not end here...

Beyond Longueval was Delville Wood (Devil's Wood), held by the Germans. The South Africans pushed forwards, and without orders, captured the wood almost entirely. No one had expected this to have happened, so no one believed it had really happened and the South Africans found themselves holding Delville Wood with no support. They would hold Delville Wood for the next **six** days. The Germans shelled the wood constantly at shelling rates of 400 shells a minute for hours on end. The positions held by the South Africans were well known, they were the old German positions, it being impossible to dig new trenches in a wood under such circumstances. Between bombardments, the Germans launched attack after attack to regain their lost positions. Slowly the South Africans were pushed back and having run out of ammunition, facing the final German attack, half of them attacked with bayonets only thus giving a chance for the wounded to be evacuated, the attackers were never seen again. Fewer than 100 unwounded South Africans were able to leave the Wood...



Trench map Delville Wood and Longueval – July 1916

...The British had had a tremendous opportunity and now had lost it, the South Africans' sacrifice and courage had been for nothing. It would still be necessary to attack and retake Delville Wood. This would take another month that the British could not afford if a breakthrough was to be achieved. The cost in human life to capture Delville Wood for the second time would be 26,000 lives.

Albert Wickens and the 1st Royal Berkshire's arrival on the Somme arrival on the Somme would coincide with the very start of the process to recapture Delville Wood. Having travelled by train arriving at Longueau (railhead near Amiens) on 20/6/16 and then were marched 16 miles to Morlancourt. In broiling heat and with packs above 70lb plus rifle and ammunition – this was no easy task. Here they spent the next three days preparing for an attack in a location and under circumstances they would not see the reality of until the day of the attack itself.

In this attack, the 1st Royal Berkshire would be 'in support', moving up with the attacking battalions and providing whatever support might be required by such battalions. If the attack went well (which it did), it might be expected they may see very little of the fighting. However, they could expect to be equally on the receiving end of any German artillery retaliation for the whole time (which they did...).

24th July 1916

[Sandpit Valley, Morlancourt] Battalion training in the 'Attack' in the morning. Moved at 6pm and marched via FRICOURT and MONTAUBAN and relieved 1st R.Scots Fusiliers in LONGUEVAL village and western portion of DELVILLE WOOD

25th July 1916

[Longueval] Relief complete 6.30am...Shelling in the neighbourhood of the village was very heavy and rendered movement difficult. Dispositions of companies were as follows: Three companies front line, one in support. The village was shelled intermittently throughout the day. At 8pm orders were received to withdraw the right and left front companies on the relief by a company of the Durhams and a company of the Shropshies. The front centre company and the support company were to remain in position.

26th July 1916

[Bernafay Wood] B & C companies on relief proceeded to dugouts on western edge of Bernafay Wood

10am – CO's conference at Brigade Hdqs. Where it was announce that the Brigade would attack DELVILLE WOOD on the morning of the 27th, the Bn to be in support.

5pm – Company commanders and CO went up to view the ground over which the attack was to be carried out. A company was detached under orders of OC 28th Royal Fusiliers

8.45pm – Co and Company commanders returned. Gas Shells commenced to fall in the wood and helmets had to be worn almost continuously until midnight.

27th July 1916

2am – Battalion moved to DELVILLE WOOD and took up position on southern edge of wood, and lay down in 'jumping off' formation immediately in front of SOUTH STREET

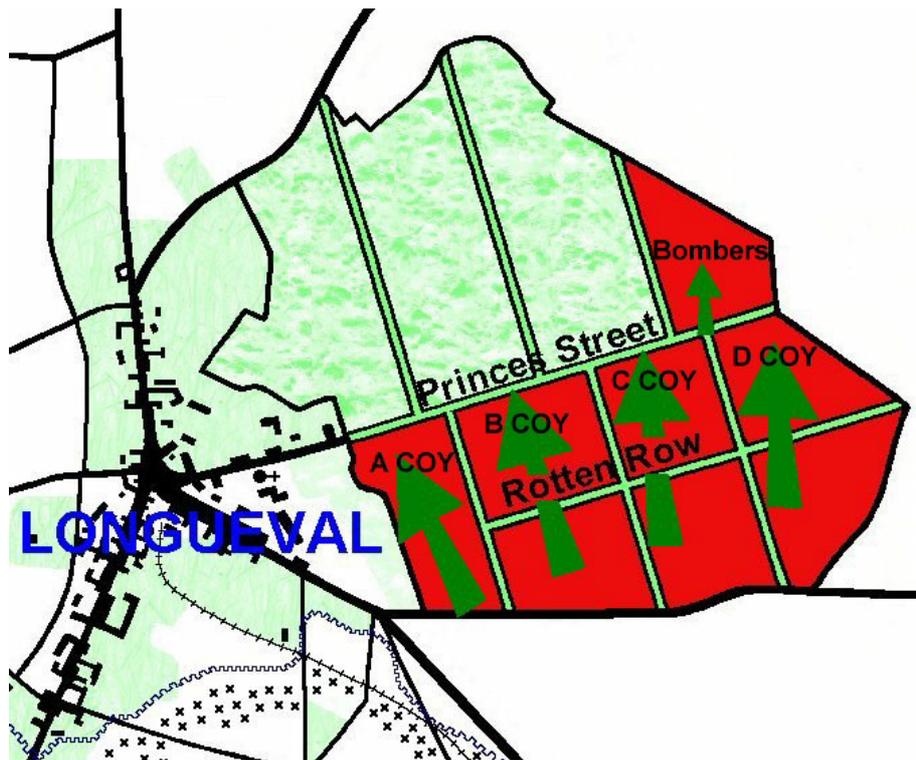
4.15am – Companies were disposed as follows, Left A Coy (Capt Weston) in support to and under orders of 28th RF. Left centre, B Company (Capt West). Right centre, C Company (Capt Gregson-Ellis). Right D Company (Lt Reid). Right company was detailed for protection of right flank.

5.10am – Our bombardment of LONGUEVAL commenced.

6.10am – Our bombardment of DELVILLE WOOD commenced.

7.10am – Leading waves of 1st Kings Royal Rifle Corps and 28th RF moved forward from their assembly trenches.

7.12am – Battalion, less A company, advanced in two waves in support. Bn Hdqs in centre of leading wave. After advancing 270 yards, the leading battalions halted. The Battalion halted and dug in at this point. Our bombardment had lengthened by this time [a 'creeping barrage'] to the northern portion of the wood.



Attack by 1st Royal Berkshire – 27/7/1916

8.10am – Advance continued. The battalion finally halted and dug in on the PRINCES STREET line, this being the objective. During the advance from SOUTH STREET, enemy's rifle fire was considerable, but extremely inaccurate. Enemy machine-gun, apparently fired from direction of LONGUEVAL village, enfiladed the advance and consolidating parties. Another machine-gun was traversing opposite the centre of the advance. These two guns ceased firing, having apparently been silenced just before the Battalion reached PRINCES STREET.

9am – By the time the Battalion was dug in, Enemy opened extremely accurate HE fire enfilading the position right to left. Consolidation of the line continued throughout the remainder of the day, and a very fair line was made. Weather throughout the day was very warm and no water supply was available, other than that carried in the bottles. The line was continually shelled from 9am to 8pm

10.40am – Officer from 1st KRRC support trench came back and stated that enemy were bombing along right flank of his battalion, and that the position was being retained with difficulty. Orders were immediately issued for bombs to be collected (each man was carrying two bombs). This was done with very little delay and the bombs were sent up with 12 bombers from the two centre companies. A pigeon message to Brigade was sent off, 'Send up bombs, very urgently needed'



British troops in Delville Wood, July 1916

10.50am – An old dump containing 30 boxes SAA and about 100 boxes of bombs was discovered about 50 yards in front of PRINCES STREET line, this evidently been left there in a previous advance, and overlooked by the enemy. Parties were detailed to take quantities of bombs and SAA to the KRR support trench

11.30am – Another officer from the KRR arrived at Bn Hdqs and asked for further reinforcements to assist in holding the left flank of the battalion. He stated that 12 men and a Lewis Gun and team would be sufficient (12 men and 2 Lewis Guns and teams were sent forward immediately together with a further supply of bombs.

4pm – Same officer from KRR returned and stated that the right of the firing line of his battalion had been slightly pushed back, and the Lewis Guns which had sent up, knocked out. Reinforcements were then sent forward consisting of the remainder of the Right centre company under 2/Lt Childs (who was killed shortly after he had got his party into position). The remainder of the Left centre company was transferred to the position vacated by Right centre company in order to be prepared to counter-attack. Pigeon message was then sent to Brigade to the effect that firing line had been reinforced, and only a small number of men were left in hand for support, and that reinforcements were urgently required. Enemy shelling lessened about 5pm

9pm – From this time onwards until dawn the situation was quiet with little or no shelling.

28th July 1916

6.45am – It was discovered that the 1st KRRC had been relieved by a battalion of 6th Brigade and that the Battalion was also going to be relieved by the 6th Brigade.

9am – Enemy commenced to shell with heavy guns including 8” gun gire from which became intense for short periods from 2 to 4pm, but finally subsided at 4.30pm

5pm – In consequence of instruction received from Brigade, Battalion withdrew to MINE SUPPORT TRENCH, the flank company – ‘D’ – were unable to withdraw until after dark owing to proximity of the enemy.

Casualties Officers: 1 Killed, 5 Wounded, 2 Missing
 Other Ranks: 37 Killed, 152 Wounded, 55 Missing
 [Total 252, Battalion went into action at strength 450 – i.e. 56% casualties]

Some of the fatalities to the 1st Royal Berkshire would have occurred to the men sent up with the two Lewis guns and the subsequent reinforcing party, however with the accurate

and near constant shelling throughout the period of the attack and afterwards, many men would have been lost here too. Alfred Wickens was one of these men, his individual fate not known. His body was either not identified or recovered...Today his name is commemorated on the:

THIEPVAL MEMORIAL, France, Pier and Face 11D

SON OF CHARLES AND ELIZABETH JANE WICKENS, OF WASING HILL, ALDERMASTON, READING.

...Given the South African link to Delville Wood, the whole of the wood was gifted by France to South Africa in perpetuity after the war and this has become the country's National War Memorial. The ferocity of the fighting was such that no living trees remained and all was desolation. The trees were replanted and now the wood is as it once was. Before the war, the wood had been frequented by local people for recreation and 'lanes' had been cut for people to ride horses through its pleasant glades. These lanes too were recreated; stone obelisks denote these lanes now bearing the names of trenches that were once here, 'Princes Street' is one of them.



Princes St, Delville Wood - today

One replanted Hornbeam sapling placed next to the stump of a shell-blasted tree stump, grew around it and over the years grew to almost cover the original stump, though this can still be easily seen. This tree is one of the most visited parts of the wood, alongside the memorial and museum here.



**Royal Berkshire cap badge, found in Delville Wood during construction of museum
1990's**

Just to the south of the wood (where the 1st Royal Berkshire formed up for the attack), is Delville Wood Cemetery containing many thousands of British and Empire graves. A significant proportion of these could not be identified. It is perhaps here that Alfred Wickens is buried in an unidentified grave, or maybe he lies undiscovered yet, along with the other 10,000 bodies that Delville Wood is believed to contain within its now peaceful arbours...



Delville Wood – 100 years on

THIEPVAL MEMORIAL



Location Information

The Thiepval Memorial will be found on the D73, next to the village of Thiepval, off the main Bapaume to Albert road (D929).

Each year a major ceremony is held at the memorial on 1 July

Historical Information

On 1 July 1916, supported by a French attack to the south, thirteen divisions of Commonwealth forces launched an offensive on a line from north of Gommecourt to Maricourt. Despite a preliminary bombardment lasting seven days, the German defences were barely touched and the attack met unexpectedly fierce resistance. Losses were catastrophic and with only minimal advances on the southern flank, the initial attack was a failure. In the following weeks, huge resources of manpower and equipment were deployed in an attempt to exploit the modest successes of the first day. However, the German Army resisted tenaciously and repeated attacks and counter attacks meant a major battle for every village, copse and farmhouse gained. At the end of September, Thiepval was finally captured. The village had been an original objective of 1 July. Attacks north and east continued throughout October and into November in increasingly difficult weather conditions. The Battle of the Somme finally ended on 18 November with the onset of winter.

In the spring of 1917, the German forces fell back to their newly prepared defences, the Hindenburg Line, and there were no further significant engagements in the Somme sector until the Germans mounted their major offensive in March 1918.

The Thiepval Memorial, the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave. Over 90% of those commemorated died between July and November 1916. The memorial also serves as an

Anglo-French Battle Memorial in recognition of the joint nature of the 1916 offensive and a small cemetery containing equal numbers of Commonwealth and French graves lies at the foot of the memorial.

The memorial, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, was built between 1928 and 1932 and unveiled by the Prince of Wales, in the presence of the President of France, on 1 August 1932 (originally scheduled for 16 May but due to the death of French President Doumer the ceremony was postponed until August).

The dead of other Commonwealth countries, who died on the Somme and have no known graves, are commemorated on national memorials elsewhere.

