

28) 26909 Private James (Reginald) **BLAKE**
(St Nicolas's Wasing)

Dow 8/06/17

15th Bn. Hampshire Regiment
Formerly 1504 Hampshire Yeomanry

Born Wasing
Enlisted Winchester
Residence Reading

Awarded: British War Medal
Victory Medal

Date arrived in theatre of war: not known

James Blake would have joined up at the start of the war and became a member of the Hampshire Yeomanry, training to be a cavalryman. As with Albert Skeates, James found himself transferred being to the infantry when it was realised that keeping so many trained cavalymen back in the UK when the need in France was for infantry troops. It is not known when this transfer took place, only from his medal entitlement; he did not arrive in France until after 1st January 1916.

The 15th Hampshire Regiment was a 'Kitchener battalion' formed at the start of the war from civilian volunteers. Primarily from Portsmouth, they bore the title the 'Pompey Pals', one of the few such 'southern' battalions to bear the 'Pals' label. However, following losses and constant replacements, the battalion would have lost its former character by 1917.

For the British, the Battle of Arras had petered out by the end of Spring 1917. The French Army had stabilised once more, but was in no condition to launch another massive summer offensive. Britain would be on her own this year as regards attacks. Other factors had come into play. In the East, the Russians following constant military disasters had now started to go through the first of two revolutions in the year which would mean their rapid exit from the war if Germany were now to attack. At sea, unrestricted submarine warfare was now decimating allied shipping. As importantly, this was extended to US shipping supplying the Allies across the Atlantic. This in turn would cause the USA to declare war on Germany. However, the USA were so unprepared for direct military intervention that it would be another year before their 'limitless' resources of fresh soldiers were likely to have any impact on the western front. However, for Britain, it was vital that the submarine threat be contained in order to maintain food supplies and war materiel – and thus continue the war.

General Haig had never wanted to fight on the Somme in 1916, he knew the German position here was much too strong, and he simply had inherited the plan and done his best to produce a result. Haig had favoured a large British offensive in Flanders, to both push out of the wretched Ypres Salient into the open Belgian countryside and up along the Belgian coast to destroy the German submarine bases. Although the plan to push up the coast (even using a D-Day style amphibious landing) had to be abandoned (due to the Germans learning of the plan and staging their own offensive to prevent such an attack by the British (and Belgians)), the emphasis was now to simply break-out of the Ypres Salient.

In order to do this, it was first necessary to stage an attack to capture the Messines ridge, situated to the south of Ypres. This low range of hills, held by the Germans since the lines here had frozen in 1914-15, gave the Germans complete observation over the Ypres Salient thus preventing the British from pushing out. The task of capturing the Messines Ridge was given to General Plumer, whilst the main offensive in the Ypres Salient itself could be planned – separately...

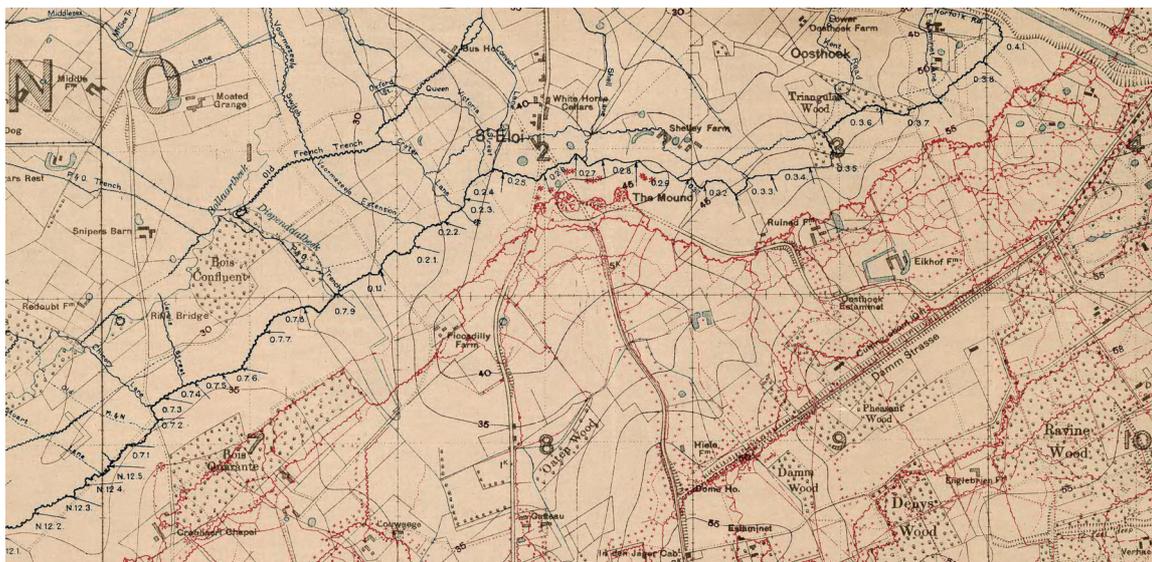
The British had been planning to capture the Messines Ridge for years. For this, 21 underground tunnels had been dug underneath the Ridge since 1915 and filled with tens of

thousands of pounds of high explosives. When detonated, the resulting explosion (the largest in world history till the atomic bomb) would destroy the German defences allowing them to be taken by an advancing infantry following a carefully and slowly advancing artillery barrage. The bitter lessons of the Somme and Arras had been learned.

At 3.10am on June 7th 1917, 19 of the 21 mines were detonated and effectively blew the top off the Messines Ridge. The Germans had been fooled into believing that British were about to attack (which they were, but the Germans had no idea about the mines beneath them...) and had packed their front line trenches with extra men to withstand the attack. The explosion vaporised 10,000 German soldiers in a flash. The sound of the explosion rattled windows in London. What was left of the Germans could not withstand the British attack and Messines Ridge was captured very quickly with limited losses. For the British, this planned attack was just about the most successful attack of the war. Compared with previous battles, the whole had been almost a 'cake-walk'.

The 20th mine would detonate at the height of an electrical storm in 1955 and cause fatalities to livestock only – and the 21st is still there to this day, somewhere, waiting...

The 15th Hampshires would take part in the Battle of Messines at the village of St Eloi, which would be the site of one of the 19 mines detonated at the start of the battle. They had arrived in the front line trenches here on 31/5/1917 after a period of 'rest' behind the lines.



Trench Map of the St Eloi Sector immediately before the attack at Messines 7/6/1917

Their time in the line even before the offensive was 'hot', taking casualties daily:

1/6/1917 (St Eloi Sector) – Between 3am and 4.30am Enemy artillery was fairly active on our Support lines also at Voormezele – 1.45pm he sent over about 15 5.9's in rear of Old French Trench repeating the operation from 4.45 to 5pm.

During the day our artillery has been steadily bombarding the enemy front, support and reserve lines, chiefly of Damm Strasse, Pheasant Wood and Craters and a vigorous burst of rapid fire on the right of our front from 6 to 6.10pm.

It was observed that the enemy wire in front of the Craters is considerably torn. Our trench mortars here shelled the Craters at intervals throughout the day.

Two patrols went out from our trenches for general reconnaissance during the night. Weather fine with bright sunshine.



The mine craters at St Eloi today, now water-filled village ponds choked with weed.



2/6/1917 (St Eloi Sector) – Enemy Trench Mortars shelled our Front line opposite Craters during the morning and again at 3pm.

Our Support and Reserve trenches and Voormezeele were shelled slightly with 5.9 and 7.7 at short intervals during the day and out front line was also shelled between 3 and 4pm, the trench being blown in at places.

The enemy lines on our right were heavily bombarded for about 1 hour, when a raid took place from our lines.

At 9.40am a British plane came down in flames south of the Canal and shortly afterwards another landed, under control, near Spoil Bank. This one rose again at 3.30pm

Last night, the enemy in retaliation for the raid on our right, bombarded our front line and communication trenches. He used a number of coloured lights, on one occasion one burst into three red lights and immediately 6 Rum Jars [trench mortar rounds] were put over.

A patrol for general reconnaissance went out, who reported that no sign of the enemy's movement could be obtained and that his wire is practically demolished, much movement not possible owing to moonlight.

Weather fine with bright sunshine.

3/6/1917 (St Eloi Sector) – Enemy artillery has been active shelling chiefly our Reserve and Support lines, also Voormezeele and area further back.

Our artillery was again active steadily bombarding enemy Front, Support and Reserve lines, increasing to vigorous bombardment at 11.20am and 3pm lasting about half an

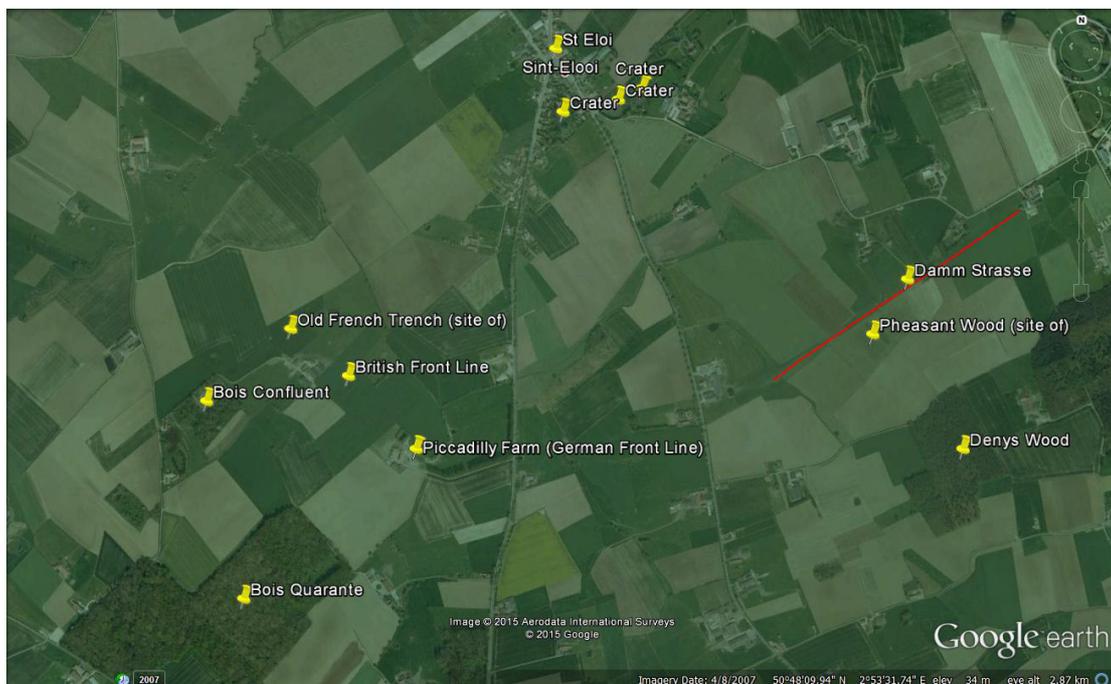
hour in each case. 11.30 – 11.45am our Stokes Guns [trench mortars] were dropping shells on Craters 2, 3, 4, and 5.



Bombardment of the Messines Ridge – June 1917

Considerable aerial activity on both sides, but no encounters [dog-fights] have been seen.

Patrols of one Officer and 14 other ranks went out from our trenches to patrol and if possible penetrate enemy's lines. But owing to enemy's gas shells were obliged to return, unsuccessful. A covering patrol and also two other reconnaissance patrols went out, but could hear no movements in enemy's lines.



Aerial Plan of the St Eloi Sector – major features highlighted.

4/6/1917 (St Eloi Sector) – Between 12 midnight and 2am the enemy sent over gas and lachrymatory shells into our front and support lines, necessitating the wearing of box respirators, and his artillery has been fairly active throughout the day chiefly shelling our support and communication trenches and also on Voormezeele.

Our artillery has been steadily bombarding the enemy's front, support and reserve lines, Damm Strasse and Pheasant Wood. Our light, medium and heavy Trench Mortars bombarding enemy front line between 1.50 and 2.45pm.

Three patrols left our trenches to reconnoitre enemy's wire, which was found to be very weak and in places non-existent.

The usual Standing Patrol reported that no enemy movement could be seen or heard. Weather fine.

5/6/1917 (St Eloi Sector) – Enemy artillery has been active again today:- 2.30 to 5am he sent over about 8 7.7cm High Explosive on the right of 'Old French Trench', including two direct hits on the Regimental Aid Post. Voormezeele and area behind were also shelled, at intervals throughout the day.

Our artillery has been steadily bombarding enemy lines as yesterday.

The battalion were relieved by the [not stated] and marched to Middle Camp West (Bivouac) where remainder of the day was spent in cleaning up.

Weather fine and hot.

6/6/1917 (Middle Camp West) – The battalion details and reinforcements marched to Divisional Reinforcement Camp, Reninghelst and at 8.50pm The Battalion marched to position of Assembly which was accomplished without opposition from the enemy and after arrival no difficulty arose in lying down in the open between 'Old French' and 'Locality' trenches, where the enemy's barrage had previously been fairly consistently watched and which was allowed for.

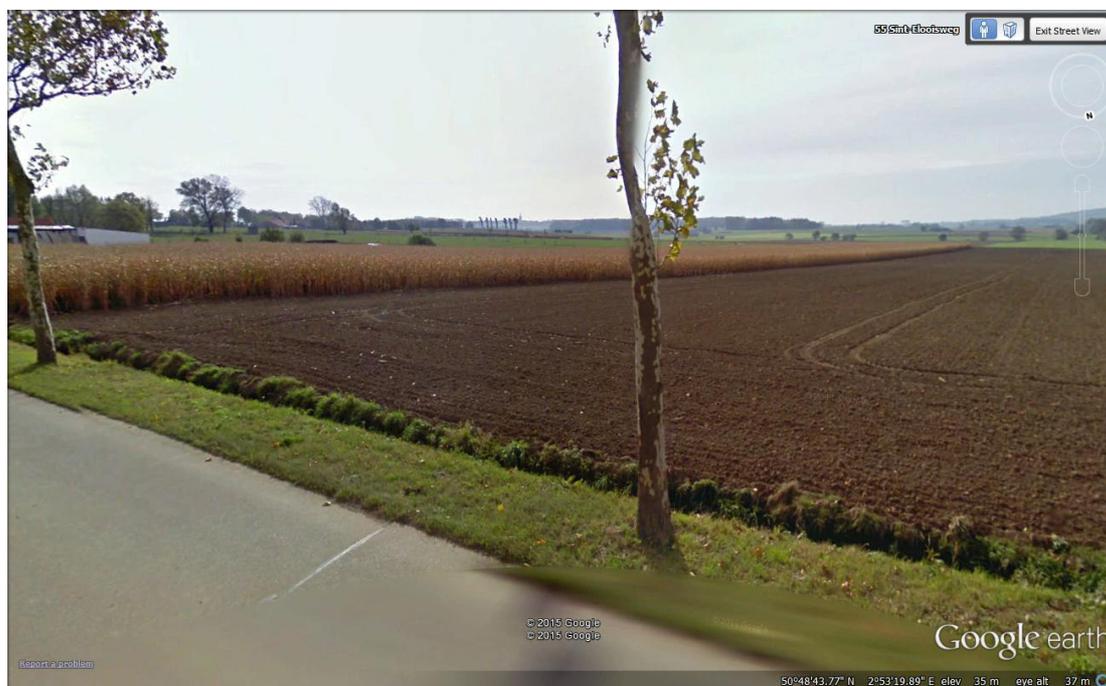
A draft of 13 other ranks joined the battalion for duty.



A forgotten relic of the Great War at Messines – British wire picket – put to modern use

This 24 hour break allowed the cadre of the 15th Hampshire to be broken off together with any new arrivals to the battalion. These men would be safe and not take part in the upcoming attack. This would be a heartbreaking time for those there – some would know they would be safe, others knew they may well have only 24 hours to live and suffer an agonising end to their lives. There would be handshakes and handing over of possessions and letters home to loved ones. James Blake now knew he would be in the attack the following morning.

The Attack on Messines Ridge



The view from 'Old French Trench' today – Messines Ridge in the distance

7/6/1917 – 12.10am, we had however a few casualties including 2nd Lt M. Moore and 2nd Lt Daniels, both wounded.

At Zero Hour (3.10am) we blew a large mine under the enemy's crater at St Eloi at the same time our Artillery opened barrage, when the 123rd Brigade commenced attacking – Two hours later we moved up in Artillery formation to the DAMM STRASSE and upon arrival there we deployed into position ready for the attack. Our own barrage was excellent on the right but very ragged on the left and centre. At this point we lost Lt Norman (wounded in leg).

6.50am – We moved forward on our objectives. Heavy casualties were caused by the guns remaining on the second objective on the left, and it was not until artillery were informed, that it was finally occupied, after this the barrage had moved forward. Shortly after reaching final objective, Capt Gorman, 2nd Lt Cooper and 2nd Lt Wright were wounded.

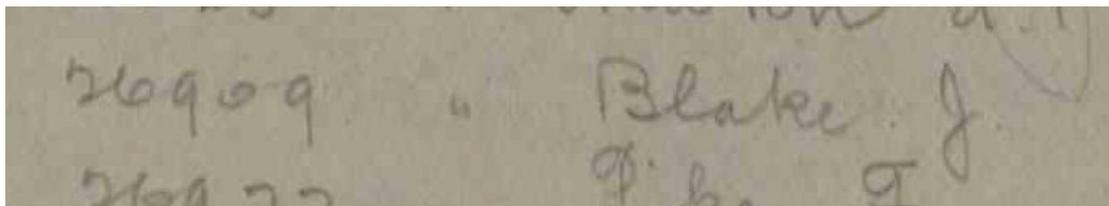
9.10am – It was observed that enemy were moving in the valley beyond 'Obscure Row' and at 10.15am, 500 men were rushed over the ridge just behind to join them, these were received with pretty heavy Lewis Gun fire, and several casualties were caused, from this period onwards, various attempts to make a local counter-attack on Denys Wood were made, these took place at 10am and 3 and 7pm. None of the attacks were in any degree successful and the one at 3pm was unexpectedly met by our own attack carried out by 24th Division. Prior to these attacks, we were subjected to intense bombardments, which died away when our artillery opened fire.

Our casualties were not heavy, A Coy suffering most severely and 2nd Lt Reeper? Of C Coy was killed.

8/6/1917 (Obscure Support trench) – We occupied OBCURE SUPPORT until 3.15am, the 8th, when we were relieved by a unit of 73rd Brigade and then came back to 'Old French Trench' and remained there, being joined by the Battalion reinforcements in the evening.

The 15th Hampshire had been in support to the main attack that had captured all its objectives. Their role was to pass through and capture the final objectives around Denys Wood. There was no plan to 'push on' rather to take this limited objective with as few casualties as possible and hold it - overall everything had been a success, the British now held what was left of the Messines Ridge, the next stage, the plan to push out of the Ypres Salient could now go ahead.

The war diary of the 15th Hampshire is better than many as it provides details of all the men (officers and other ranks) killed and wounded (mostly omitted in the transcript above). In an appendix at the end of this month's diary is the casualty list for 7/6/1917. This list gives 38 other ranks as being killed, 3 missing in action and 131 wounded. Listed among the 'killed' for 7/6/1917 is:



This is now known to be incorrect and James Blake had been wounded (probably severely) in the action on 7/6/1917, but not killed and had been taken through an Aid Post quite a way to the north to a Casualty Clearing Station at 'Mendinghem'. There is no such place as 'Mendinghem' in Belgium, the British troops had noticed that many of the local villages in the area ended with the suffix '-inghem' and consequently 'christened' three of the local Casualty Clearing Stations here as 'Bandaghem', 'Dozinghem' and 'Mendinghem' referring to their function.



Treating the wounded at an Aid Post – Messines 1917

Sadly, here James Blake succumbed to his wounds the following day and was buried in the cemetery associated with this Casualty Clearing Station. Today he is buried at :

MENDINGHEM MILITARY CEMETERY, Belgium, I. D. 19

**SON OF THE LATE GEORGE AND ANNIE BLAKE, HORNIT COTTAGES,
ALDERMASTON, BERKS.**

MENDINGHEM MILITARY CEMETERY



Location Information

Mendinghem Military Cemetery is located 17 Kms north-west of Ieper town centre on the N308 connecting Ieper to Poperinge and on to Oost-Cappel.

Historical Information

Mendinghem, like Dozinghem and Bandaghem, were the popular names given by the troops to groups of casualty clearing stations posted to this area during the First World War.

In July 1916, the 46th (1st/1st Wessex) Casualty Clearing Station was opened at Proven and this site was chosen for its cemetery. The first burials took place in August 1916. In July 1917, four further clearing stations arrived at Proven in readiness for the forthcoming Allied offensive on this front and three of them, the 46th, 12th and 64th, stayed until 1918. From May to July 1918, while the German offensive was at its height, field ambulances were posted at Proven. The cemetery was closed (except for one later burial) in September 1918.

There are now 2,391 Commonwealth burials of the First World War in this cemetery and 52 German war graves.

The cemetery was designed by Sir Reginald Blomfield.

