

33) 11921 Private Albert **WITHERS**

Kia 6/10/17, **Age** 22
5th Bn. Dorsetshire Regiment

Born Clackford, Bedwin, Hants.
Enlisted Newbury

Awarded: 1914-15 Star
British War Medal
Victory Medal

Date arrived in theatre of war: France 13/7/1915

Albert Withers joined up at the beginning of the war into one of Kitchener's 'New Army' battalions, the 6th Dorsetshire Regiment formed on 6/9/1914, they arrived in France on 14/7/1915. Their sister battalion, the 5th Dorsetshire, had been raised the previous month and also had been dispatched overseas in July 1915, not to France, but to Gallipoli. They returned to France in July 1916.

At some point in Albert Withers service he was transferred from the 6th to the 5th Dorsetshire, the date nor reason for this are not known. However, one possibility is that Albert Withers may well have been wounded with the 6th Dorsetshire and returned to the UK. At this point a soldier would be 'struck off' the strength of the battalion and, if suitably recovered, there was no guarantee he would be sent back to his old battalion and his 'mates', the best he might expect would be to be sent back to a battalion of his old regiment (the Dorsetshire) who needed replacements.

However this change came about, Albert Withers, at the Third Battle of Ypres in October 1917, was serving with 5th Dorsetshire.

The 5th Dorsetshire had already taken part in a major attack at Langemarck at 'Third Ypres' in mid-August. Following this, they were taken out of the line and spent the rest of the month and September 1917 behind the lines refitting and training, firstly at Poperinghe and later at Herzelee. During this time, the battalion received replacement troops to make up for losses, Albert Withers may well have been one of these.

As the summer of 1917 continued with the British unable to 'breakout' of the Ypres Salient due to both the dreadful weather/ground conditions and the tenacity of the defending German troops two other factors were now to play very important parts. Firstly, the weather changed and the rain ceased. Conditions were by no mean perfect, but the British attacks towards Poelcapelle and Passchendaele were now starting to gain momentum, this gave some encouragement to the troops in the field and their commanders. Secondly, it was becoming more obvious than not only was the French army taking a greater time to recover, but more importantly in the East, further unrest at home may inevitably lead the Russians to capitulate and pull out of the war. Although it was also becoming clear to the British that a 'breakout' from the Ypres Salient may well come too late in the year to serve any real purpose, fighting would have to continue anyway to maintain German troops on the western front rather than to them being sent to the East to smash through what was left of the Russian army.

At the end of September, the weather changed again to that of near constant daily rain and ground conditions became so dreadful that this is still remembered today from photographs of the 'Battle of Passchendaele', the daily British attacks through the mud would continue to the bitter end, whatever this might be.

As part of this preparation for what would become the 'Battle of Poelcapelle' on 9/10/1917, the 5th Dorsetshire were brought back into the front lines near Poelcapelle, not to make an attack, but to simply hold the line whilst other troops made their plans for this attack in a few days time.

The War Diary of the 5th Dorsetshire takes up the story:

1st October 1917 – Herzeele – *The Battalion still remains under canvas at HERZEELE, the day being spent in general packing up for the move to DIRTY BUCKET CAMP – Operation Orders were issued.*

2nd October 1917 – Herzeele – *The Battalion moved to DIRTY BUCKET CAMP. Motor busses were waiting on the HERZEELE-HOUTKERKE Road to convey them there, 25 men in each bus, they left HERZEELE about 9am and arrived about 9.45am, the remainder of the day being spent on lectures to NCOs and men.*

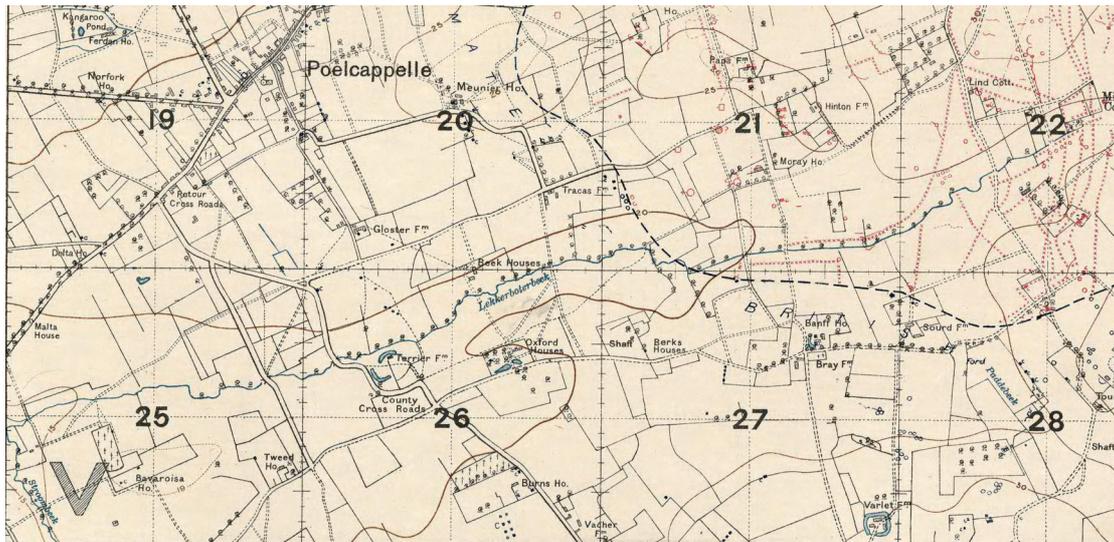
3rd October 1917 – Dirty Bucket Camp – *The Battalion paraded at 8am; ready to move off to SEIGE CAMP, about 3 miles away. Orders had been received to the effect that the Battalion had again to move up to MEURAT SHELTERS at 5pm so the men were resting during the day, at 5pm the Battalion paraded ready to move up to MEURAT SHELTERS, they arrived there about 6.30pm. Strict orders were issued that the men had to settle down to rest immediately – 2nd Lt Dyer was detailed to ensure that strict silence be maintained throughout the night.*

4th October 1917 – Meurat Shelters – *At 3am, A and D Companies had to move out, and proceed up the line, their orders were, that they had to be at HURST PARK at Zero minus 1.5 hours, ZERO being 6am. From HURST PARK, they then had to move up and occupy the present front line vacated by the assaulting battalion, the latter being the 11th Manchester Regt, this they had to occupy by ZERO plus 2 hours. The line vacated by the assaulting Battalion running approx from V 25 a8.7 to V 25 c6.9. Our other two Companies, C and B had orders to leave MEURAT SHELTERS at ZERO minus 0.5 hour, and move in Artillery formation up to the the East bank of the STEENBEEK – about C 5 d5.5 and be in position there by ZERO plus 2 hours, B on right and C on the left, SE and NW of MON. BULGARE (POELCAPPELLE). Immediately on their arrival they had to report their positions to Bn HQ which were at BULOW FARM and to Bde HQ at MON. BULGARE*



‘Life at ‘Third Ypres’ – Poelcapelle October 1917

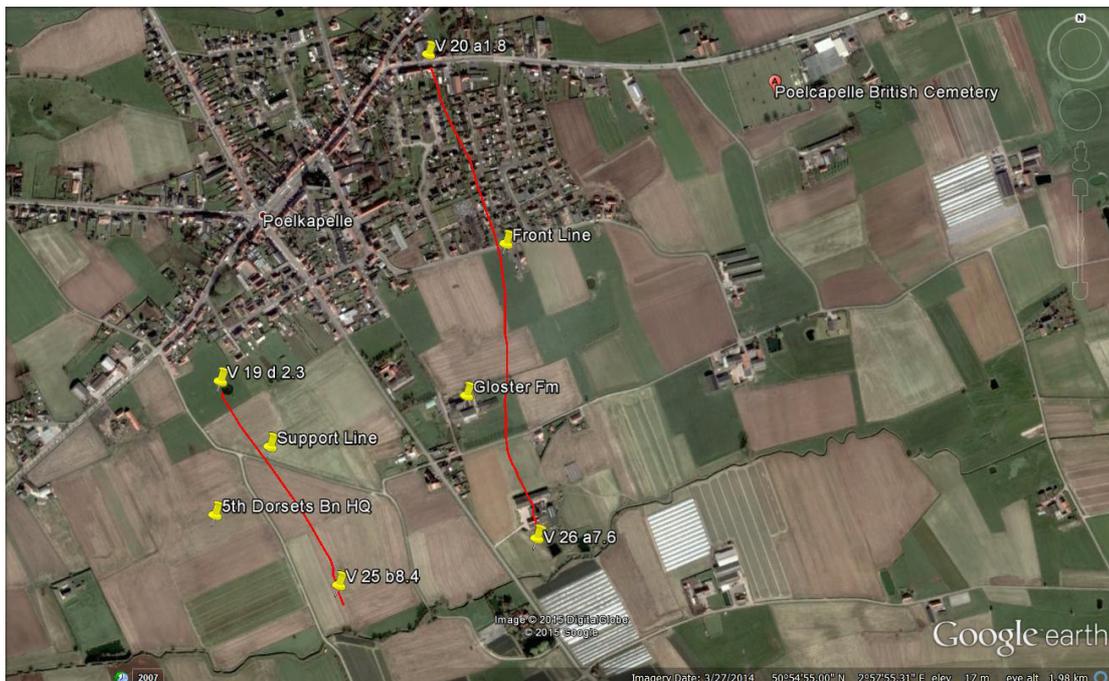
Casualty list: 1 Officer killed, 10 Other Ranks killed, 1 Other Rank died of wounds, 1 Officer wounded, 46 Other Ranks wounded



Trench Map of Poelcappelle – 5th Dorsets being SW of Poelcappelle ‘village’

5th October 1917 – In the Line HQ Bulow Farm – Holding the Line. Our front line ran from V 25 a3.7 to V 25 c 6.9. D Coy on right holding a frontage of about 350x with the Lancashire Fusiliers on his right. A Coy on the left, with a frontage of about 300x with the 7th S. Staffords on his left. Our two reserve Coys C and B are still in the same place i.e. SE and NW of MON. BULGARE. Owing to our Reserve two Coys, being situated close to Battery positions they came in for a considerable amount of shelling – also in the afternoon our forward two Coys were subjected to a fair amount of attention from enemy artillery, Our casualties were as follows:

Casualty list: 4 Other Ranks killed, 2 Other Ranks died of wounds, 1 Officer wounded, 48 Other Ranks wounded.



Positions of 5th Dorsets – 6/10/1917

6th October 1917- In the Line – On the night of the 5th and 6th the 5th Dorsetshire relieved the 11th Manchester Regt in the front line, our A and D Coys taking over their support line from 2 supporting Coys of the 11th Manchester Regt, our front line extended from about V 20 a1.8 to V 26 a7.6, our support line ran approx from V 19 d2.3 to V 25 b8.4. Both our front line and supports were nothing more than consolidated shell holes, and our Bn HQ was in a shell hole situated about V 25 b3.7 (POELCAPELLE).



Front 'Line' – Poelcapelle October 1917

During the day we had only very slight attention paid to us from enemy artillery – our chief trouble came from front line being under complete observation – the place they paid more attention to than any other was GLOSTER FARM our two Coys in the line had their share from snipers, they moved into shell holes the next day.



Poelcapelle 'village' – October 1917

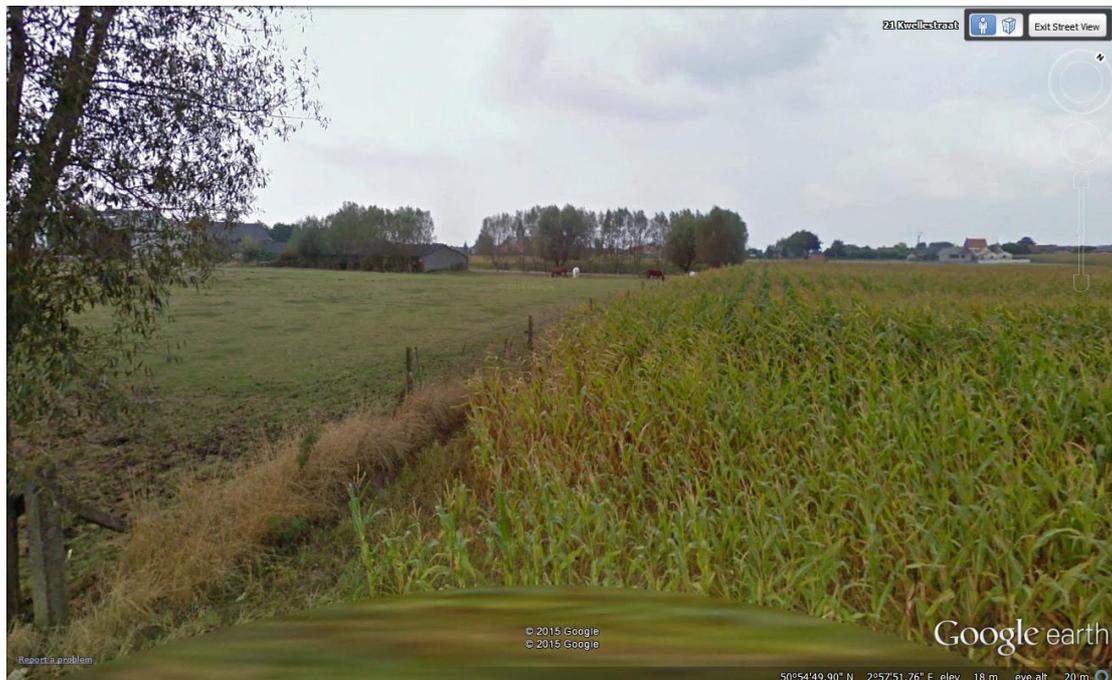
Casualties: 1 Officer killed, 5 Other ranks killed, 3 Other Ranks died of wounds, 8 Other Ranks wounded.

7th October 1917 – In the Line – Through the day the enemy did very little shelling in the Bn area, his heavies paid considerable attention to our back area and along the POELCAPELLE ROAD.

Casualty List: 2 Other ranks killed, 1 Other Rank died of wounds, 3 Other ranks wounded.



View south along 5th Dorsets front line position – today



5th Dorsets front line, 'Gloster Farm' on right, Poelcapelle in distance

8th October 1917 – *On the night of 7-8th October, the 5th Dorsetshire Regiment were relieved by 3 Coys of the 9th West Yorks Regt and 1 Coy of the York and Lancs Regt...*

The 5th Dorsetshire war diary entry for 6/1/1917 makes mention of eight other ranks 'killed' or 'died of wounds', though their names are sadly not listed in this day's 'Casualty List'. The day had been effectively 'quiet' apart from the German snipers taking a steady toll from their elevated positions. It is practically certain Albert Withers was one of these eight men killed this day. His body was not identified, though it is likely to be one of the thousands of 'unknown' British soldiers buried in the nearby Poelcapelle British cemetery.

Today Albert Wither's name is commemorated on the:

TYNE COT MEMORIAL, Belgium, Panel 92.

SON OF WILLIAM AND ANN WITHERS, OF RAG HILL, ALDERMASTON, READING.

TYNE COT MEMORIAL



Location Information

The Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing forms the north-eastern boundary of Tyne Cot Cemetery, which is located 9 kilometres north east of Ypres town centre.

Historical Information

The Tyne Cot Memorial is one of four memorials to the missing in Belgian Flanders which cover the area known as the Ypres Salient. Broadly speaking, the Salient stretched from Langemarck in the north to the northern edge in Ploegsteert Wood in the south, but it varied in area and shape throughout the war.

The Salient was formed during the First Battle of Ypres in October and November 1914, when a small British Expeditionary Force succeeded in securing the town before the onset of winter, pushing the German forces back to the Passchendaele Ridge. The Second Battle of Ypres began in April 1915 when the Germans released poison gas into the Allied lines north of Ypres. This was the first time gas had been used by either side and the violence of the attack forced an Allied withdrawal and a shortening of the line of defence.

There was little more significant activity on this front until 1917, when in the Third Battle of Ypres an offensive was mounted by Commonwealth forces to divert German attention from a weakened French front further south. The initial attempt in June to dislodge the Germans from the Messines Ridge was a complete success, but the main assault north-eastward, which began at the end of July, quickly became a dogged struggle against determined opposition and the rapidly deteriorating weather. The campaign finally came to a close in November with the capture of Passchendaele.

The German offensive of March 1918 met with some initial success, but was eventually checked and repulsed in a combined effort by the Allies in September.

The battles of the Ypres Salient claimed many lives on both sides and it quickly became clear that the commemoration of members of the Commonwealth forces with no known grave would have to be divided between several different sites.

The site of the Menin Gate was chosen because of the hundreds of thousands of men who passed through it on their way to the battlefields. It commemorates those of all Commonwealth nations, except New Zealand, who died in the Salient, in the case of United Kingdom casualties before 16 August 1917 (with some exceptions). Those United Kingdom and New Zealand servicemen who died after that date are named on the memorial at Tyne Cot, a site which marks the furthest point reached by Commonwealth forces in Belgium until nearly the end of the war. Other New Zealand casualties are commemorated on memorials at Buttes New British Cemetery and Messines Ridge British Cemetery.

The TYNE COT MEMORIAL now bears the names of almost 35,000 officers and men whose graves are not known. The memorial, designed by Sir Herbert Baker with sculpture by Joseph Armitage and F.V. Blundstone, was unveiled by Sir Gilbert Dyett on 20 June 1927.

The memorial forms the north-eastern boundary of TYNE COT CEMETERY, which was established around a captured German blockhouse or pill-box used as an advanced dressing station. The original battlefield cemetery of 343 graves was greatly enlarged after the Armistice when remains were brought in from the battlefields of Passchendaele and Langemarck, and from a few small burial grounds. It is now the largest Commonwealth war cemetery in the world in terms of burials. At the suggestion of King George V, who visited the cemetery in 1922, the Cross of Sacrifice was placed on the original large pill-box. There are three other pill-boxes in the cemetery.

There are now 11,956 Commonwealth servicemen of the First World War buried or commemorated in Tyne Cot Cemetery, 8,369 of these are unidentified.

The cemetery was designed by Sir Herbert Baker.

