



DEWSBURY SACRIFICES

# *From the Front*

*September 2016*

*Edition 2*

**On July 1<sup>st</sup> 1916** Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig launched his major offensive against the Germans on a 25 mile stretch along the River Somme. The site was chosen partly to relieve pressure on the French forces which were being bled white at Verdun.

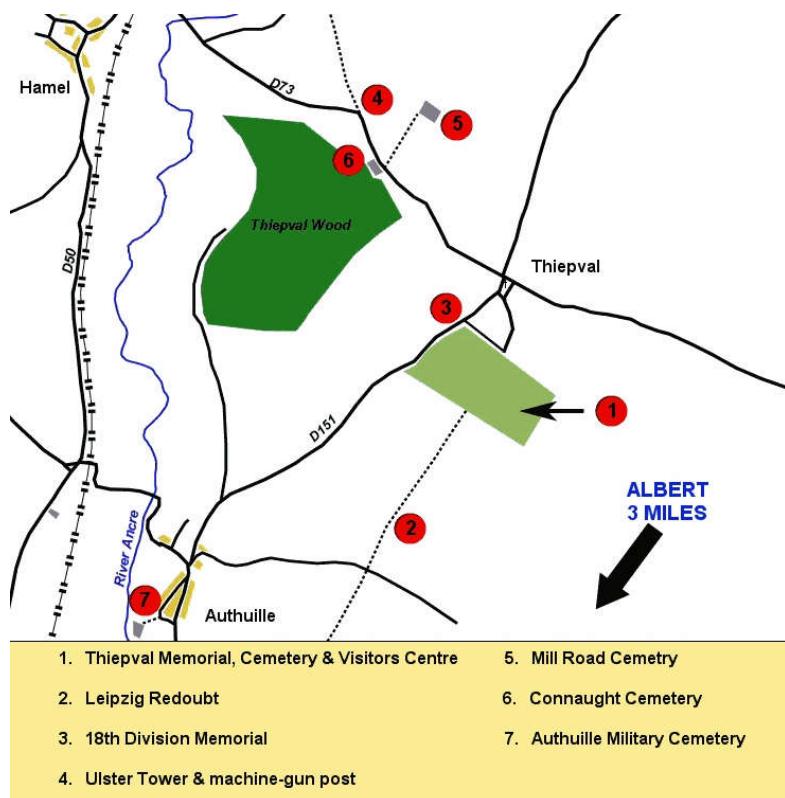
The attack was preluded by the firing of a million and a half shells into the German held positions and it was anticipated that this barrage would obliterate the German soldiers who sat in their trenches awaiting the advance of the infantry. Also it was expected that the defences, including the barbed wire, would be smashed to eternity. Everyone now knows the result, the British and Commonwealth troops were told to walk across no-man's land and occupy the enemy positions and await the big break through by the cavalry who were poised behind the infantry ready to open up the route to Berlin. Sadly this did not happen as the German troops were not only aware of the forthcoming danger, due to intelligence reports, aerial observation and the detonation of mines, but had been in occupation for a long time and had made themselves deeply entrenched. As the progress of the infantry was noted the Germans emerged from deep dugouts, re-set their machine guns and proceeded to mow down the advancing troops as a scythe man cuts down grass.

There was even dissent amongst the top brass of the Allies, Sir Henry Rawlinson, who was in charge of the Fourth Army who would spearhead the attack was a believer in a "bite and hold policy" meaning that any small advance would have to be consolidated before the whole laborious process re-commenced. This was anathema to Haig, a cavalryman who wanted to make sweeping incursions against the enemy. This caused friction amongst the leaders and led to the prolongation of the battle to the cost of the amassed troops.

At the end of the first day some 60,000 casualties had been experienced by the Allies and this included the 42 from Dewsbury. He casualty figures for the rest of the month reveal that a further 39 men from the County Borough were amongst the Fallen. A further fifteen men from Dewsbury were lost in August.

Throughout the rest of July and August the British and Commonwealth troops continued to attack and managed to achieve some significant progress, mainly in the south of the line, although this was a costly business in human terms. In the northern sector of the battlefield very little advance had been made and Thiepval in particular, which stood on a prominent ridge, although it was surrounded on three sides by the end of August, still held out. This, in reality, was a salient jutting out into the British lines and preventing them from taking possession of the entire ridge from Thiepval to Pozieres. A renewed attack to capture Thiepval was therefore planned for the 3<sup>rd</sup> September involving three divisions including the 49<sup>th</sup> West Riding Division. This force contained many men from Ravensthorpe who served with the Prince of Wales Own West Yorkshire Regiment and the Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment. They set off from Forceville at 5.30pm on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September and crossed the River Ancre at Authuille. Their objective was to capture the German position known as "The Pope's Nose", a stronghold around the village of Thiepval which formed a salient and prevented all progress.

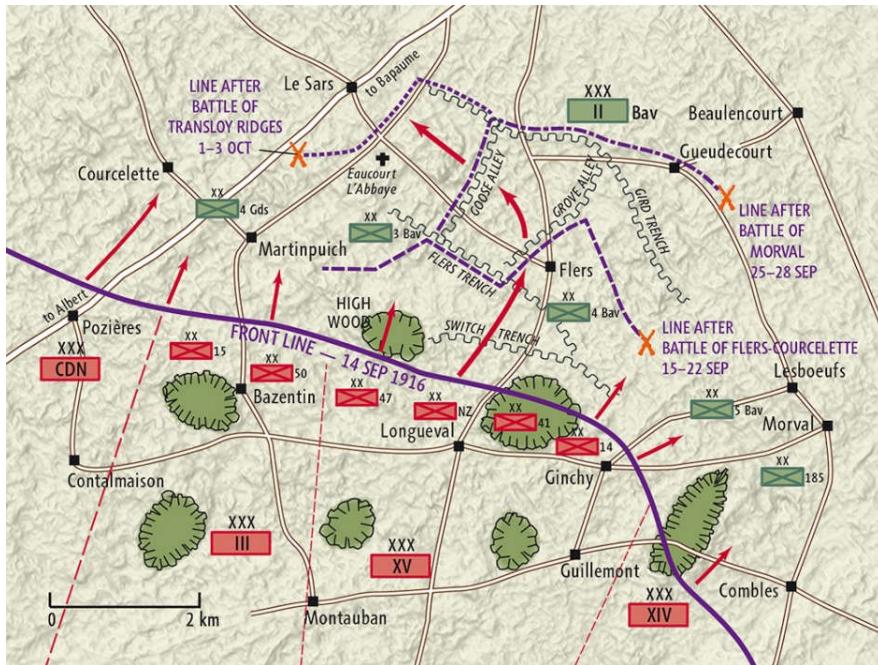
Briefly the attack failed as one Brigade did not reach its objective and the second Brigade, although it reached its target, was not able to hold it. The cost in human terms was high and the 147 Brigade's War Diary indicates that the 1/14 Duke of Wellingtons WR Regiment suffered the loss of 32 officers and men killed, 113 wounded and 187 missing. In 146 Brigade the 1/6<sup>th</sup> West Yorkshire's incurred 18 killed, 125 wounded and 157 missing.



The second great offensive of the month was timed for the 15<sup>th</sup> and took the form of an attack upon the villages around Flers and Courcelette. Sir Douglas Haig took the controversial decision to employ the embryonic new weapon in the assault. This was the tank and had been so christened because from its conception the authorities had insisted that they were perfecting a new kind of water tank to alleviate the sufferings of soldiers in the heat of battle. The distilled wisdom amongst the upper echelon was that it should be kept in reserve and only employed when it could be used en masse to ensure a major breakthrough.



Led by Sir Henry Rawlinson 12 divisions and 49 tanks attacked the German front-line. The Germans were taken by surprise and in only three days the British captured 2km of German held territory. However, mechanical failure led to the breakdown of many of the vehicles and Rawlinson's Fourth Army was unable to hold onto its gains. After an unsuccessful second attack on the 25<sup>th</sup> September the offensive at Flers-Courcelette was brought to an end.



September was a month of heavy losses in personnel. The period saw the dismissal of General Erich Von Falkenhayn on the 29<sup>th</sup> August and the taking over of command by General Paul Von Hindenburg and General Erich Ludendorff. The continued slaughter convinced the new commanders that an alternative strategy must be found in order to prevent the Allies inflicting on Germany the objective which the Germans sought to inflict upon the Allies “being bled white” This led to the construction of the new defensive series of forts known as the Hindenburg Line designed to give the advantage to the defender. The War had entered a new phase and caused a different focus of attack to emerge.

During this period at least 56 men from Dewsbury were killed and untold numbers wounded or missing. The cost of the War, in human terms was rising as was the concern of the nation’s leaders and politicians. Clearly there were serious consequences ahead if some solution to these problems could not be found.

ASK 28<sup>th</sup> July 2016