

THE MEN OF SOUTH-EAST SURREY WHO SERVED WITH THE WEST SURREY REGIMENT

The villages of Lingfield, Dormansland, Blindley Heath and Crowhurst lie in the South-East corner of Surrey but many young men who were recruited, volunteered, or enlisted during the First World War chose to serve with the West Surrey Regiment; the Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment (QRWSR), affectionately known as 'The Queens'.

Several of the Queens recruits were part of the Territorial Battalions who had trained with the Army Cadet Force at the Drill Hall, off Racecourse Road, Dormansland, near Lingfield: the 4th Battalion, Royal West Surrey Regiment (G Company).

Private George Herbert Woodhams was born in Dormansland. He joined the Territorial Army Cadet Force at the Drill Hall and eventually joined the Regular Army, 1/4th Battalion of the Queens. When war was declared the battalion was put on standby for overseas service and was posted to India. They embarked at Southampton on 29th October 1914 and landed at Bombay on 3rd December. The battalion remained in India until the end of the war. George Woodham died on Armistice Day, 11th November 1918, probably of sickness. He was buried at Karachi, Sindh (now Pakistan).

Private Percy Selby served with the 2nd/4th Battalion at Gallipoli. He was the son of Albert & Esther Selby of Cypress Villa, Blenheim Rd, Lingfield. Percy Selby volunteered in Lingfield in 1914 and joined the 2/4th Btn. The Queens (Royal West Surrey Reg). The battalion sailed for Gallipoli on 17th July 1915. Within days of arriving on the Gallipoli Peninsula Percy Selby had been killed. He was killed on 9th August 1915 aged 20. He has no known grave, his name is inscribed on the Helles Memorial.

Private Richard Charles Coomber was one of three brothers who lived at Cernes Farm in Dormansland. He was a Regular Soldier with the 1st Battalion and left England in August 1914 with the British Expeditionary Force, they landed at Havre on 13th August. An account left by Lt. Col. A Elias Morgan, best describes the battalion's experience of the Battle of Marne where Richard Coomber died:

“Thursday, Sept 17 was the first of our black days. We were in the trenches with the Zouaves [Algerian troops of the French Infantry] ...we had to stick a most terrible onslaught of the enemy...in this action we lost between 3-400 men. Later we were visited by Sir Douglas Haig, who also complimented the battalion on its splendid behaviour. Afterwards we were sent to the rear for a rest. The village ...was infested with spies and one could not even exercise the horses without being fired upon.”

The battalion left the Aisne for Belgium on Oct 19. Richard Coomber was wounded a week later in the 1st Battle of Ypres, he died of his wounds on 27th October 1914. He was buried at Ypres Town Cemetery Extension.

Richard's brother, Corporal Robert Sargent Coomber, worked as a Cowman/labourer on their father's farm before recruiting in the Regular Army on 8th January 1908. His period of service with the 2nd Battalion was 12 years: 7 years with the Colours and 5 years in Reserve. Robert extended his period of service to 12 years with the Colours in February 1914, while serving in Pretoria.

He was promoted to Corporal on 23rd September 1914 and crossed the Channel to Belgium on 4th October 1914; part of the reinforcements for the British Expeditionary Force. The battalion landed at Zeebrugge on 6th October. Less than 4 weeks later he was reported Killed in Action, 31st October 1914 (4 days after the death of his brother). The events of 31st October were recorded by Lt. Col Elias Morgan:

“October 31 will always be remembered in the regiment...The regiment was in the trenches, and as usual I went up in the evening with the cooks. We arrived at some crossroads, where we came upon Major Watson, DSO, Lt. Boyd, a sergeant, a corporal, and 5 men, who told us they were all that was left of the Queens.

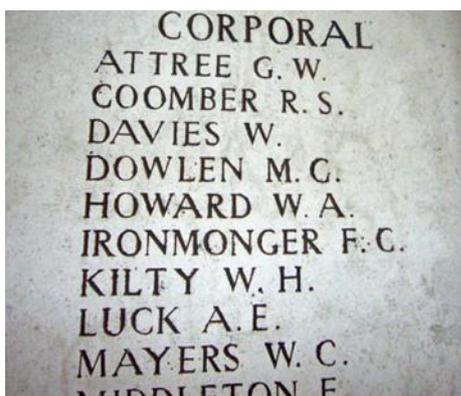
According to one of the men, a signaller, it seems that after sustaining the brunt of a particularly furious German attack the Queens suddenly woke up to the fact that the remainder of the division had retired, leaving them cut off. They were practically ringed in by the enemy, and were enfiladed on both flanks and in the front by machine guns.

The Queens stuck it, and put up a splendid fight against a vastly superior force. Men were falling at every hand, but they couldn't break the ring...

Some of them managed to escape through an unprotected hedge, and they were those we met. Of the fate of the others little seemed to be known, and although our losses must have been enormous, numbers we know were taken prisoners.

That night all we could muster of the 737 officers and men of the battalion which began that morning was 50 men, including employed men such as transport and cooks.”

Robert Sargent Coomber has no known grave. His name is recorded on the Ypres, Menin Gate Memorial.



Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial

Private Edgar Buckland lived at Baldwins Hill, the son of a policeman. He left school at 13 and went to work as a Houseboy for a gentleman in Dormans Park but left 2 ½ years later to be a Builder's labourer. He was 17 years old when he recruited in the Regular Army, the 2nd Battalion, The Queens in April 1911. He too was killed at Ypres, on 22nd October, he has no known grave and his name is recorded on the Ypres, Menin Gate Memorial.

Private Frank Woolgar volunteered for service at Guildford on 25th August 1914, one of Kitchener's New Army. He crossed to France with reinforcements of the 1st Battalion. He was killed on 8th May 1916 and was buried at Cambrin Churchyard Extension, age 26.

Private Sydney Thomas Hodge, was another of Kitchener's New Army. He too joined the 2nd Battalion; he died of wounds received in France, on 19th May 1915, age 22. He was the son of George & Harriet Hodge of Lingfield and husband of Ellen Hodge of 4 Anchor Cottages, Blindley Heath.

A total of 136 local men served with the Queens (Royal West Surrey Regiment) in the First World War; 30 of those men died.

©Janet H. Bateson
June 2014

References:

Surrey History Centre: Queens Royal West Surrey Regiment Collection:
QRWS/1/3/3 G Register of recruits;
QRWS/18/1: 8th Bat The Queens War Diary, 21 8 15 to 30 4 19;
QRWS/30/ELIAA/1 Scrapbook Lt. Col. A. Elias Morgan