

THE TIGER



*Honouring the ANZACS:
The Branch Wreath is laid at Welford Road Cemetery,
25th April 2022*

**THE NEWSLETTER OF
THE LEICESTERSHIRE & RUTLAND BRANCH
OF THE
WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION
ISSUE 127 – JUNE 2022**

CHAIRMAN'S COLUMN

Welcome again, Ladies and Gentlemen, to *The Tiger*.

I hope those of you able to attend our last Branch Meeting enjoyed the presentation delivered that evening by Dr Natasha Stoyce. As I explained on the night, a chance conversation was the catalyst for Natasha's visit and I am pleased to advise you that two further Speakers have been engaged in similar circumstances for our Meetings in July and October. Our recent attendance at Welford Road Cemetery for the ANZAC Day commemorations (further details of which can be found on Page 8) resulted in a conversation between Valerie and one of the standard bearers. His friend, also in attendance, was Brian Johnstone who, it transpires, is a veteran of the Falklands War of 1982 and has subsequently agreed to deliver his presentation on that conflict during our July meeting. **Please all note, however, that due to holiday commitments, the July meeting will take place on the third Monday of that month, 18th July.** Brian is also preparing a talk on the Royal Naval Air Service, which we hope to hear in 2023.

Similarly, our Speaker for October will be author Ken Hewitt, who is currently preparing a volume on the 1st Battalion, Leicestershire Regiment in Malaya in the Second World War. With our own Angela Hall indexing the work, another chance mention led to an invitation being extended to Ken, who was happy to oblige. Whilst I realise both talks are somewhat *off-piste* from our main subject – The Great War – I know that many of you are interested in military history in general and/or the history of our local Regiment and I very much hope that you will support and enjoy these meetings.

As always, I look forward to seeing you all on Monday eve – see below for meeting details.

D.S.H.

OUR NEXT MEETING

Venue: The Concert Room, The Elms Social & Services Club,
Bushloe End, Wigston Magna LE18 2BA – 7 p.m. for a 7:30 start

**ALL WELCOME - THERE IS NO NECESSITY FOR ANYONE TO BE,
OR BECOME, A MEMBER OF THE WFA OR THE ELMS CLUB**

30th May 2022

Guest Speaker: Jaimie Green

*Britain's Railways
& The Great War*

Jamie has had a fascination for military and transport history all his life and is a history graduate of Aberystwyth University, his talk tonight being based on his undergraduate dissertation. A re-enactor of multiple periods, a heritage railway signaller, guard and tram driver, Jamie is also a published railway historian and works as a signaller for Network Rail in Shrewsbury.



DATES FOR YOUR GREAT WAR DIARY

JUNE

2 nd	1917	Western Front	Canadian ace, Billy Bishop, awarded Victoria Cross
4 th	1915	Gallipoli	Third Battle of Krithia
4 th	1916	Eastern Front	Brusilov Offensive
4 th	1917	Home Front	King George VI inaugurates OBE
5 th	1916	War at Sea	<i>HMS Hampshire</i> sinks, death of Lord Kitchener
5 th	1917	USA	10 million men begin registering for draft
6 th	1915	Western Front	Battle of Belleau Wood, 1 st US victory
7 th	1916	Western Front	Germans capture Fort Vaux at Verdun
7 th	1917	Western Front	Battle of Messines
9 th	1915	Western Front	Operation Gneisenau
10 th	1915	War in Africa	British/French troops conquer German colony of Cameroon
10 th	1916	Asiatic Front	Great Arab Revolt begins against ruling Ottoman Turks
12 th	1917	Southern Front	King Constantine of Greece abdicates
13 th	1917	Home Front	Gotha Bombers attack London – 100 killed
14 th	1917	Western Front	General Pershing and his HQ staff arrive in Paris
15 th	1916	USA	B & W Seaplane, Boeing Model 1, flies for first time
15 th	1918	Italian Front	Battle of Piave River
16 th	1916	New Zealand	Conscription introduced
19 th	1917	Home Front	British Royal Family adopt surname of Windsor
20 th	1915	Western Front	German offensive in Argonne
20 th	1927	Western Front	Inauguration of Tyne Cot Memorial
23 rd	1915	Italian Front	First Battle of the Isonzo
24 th	1915	Western Front	Chantilly Conference
24 th	1917	Western Front	First US troops land in France
24 th	1917	War at Sea	Russian Black Sea fleet mutinies at Sebastopol
26 th	1918	War at Sea	Australian steamer <i>SS Wimmera</i> sunk by mine laid by <i>SMS Wolf</i>
28 th	1914	Eastern Front	Archduke Franz Ferdinand and wife assassinated in Sarajevo
28 th	1919	Western Front	Treaty of Versailles signed 5 years after assassination – see above
29 th	1916	Home Front	Roger Casement convicted of treason
30 th	1916	Western Front	Haig reports “ <i>The men are in good spirits</i> ”

Remembering Sergeant Victor Chapman

Lafayette Escadrille

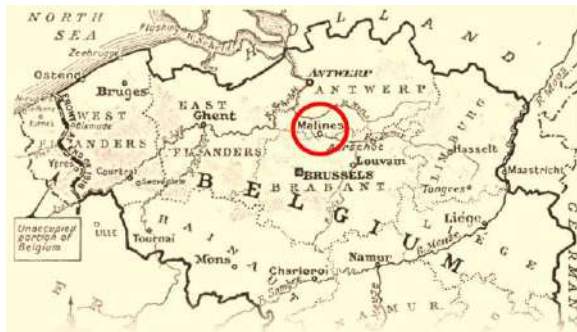
(17th April 1890 – 24th June 1916)

Although born in New York, Victor Chapman was residing in France when War was declared and enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Later transferring to the French *Aéronautique Militaire*, Chapman qualified as a pilot and flew alongside fellow American volunteers in what became known as the *Lafayette Escadrille*. On 24th June 1916, whilst flying in the Verdun sector en route to delivery oranges to a wounded comrade in hospital, Chapman was shot down and killed, the first American pilot to die in the War.



THE BELGIAN PROMENADE AT MENAI BRIDGE (PORTHAETHWY), WALES by Lynn Roffee

When the 1st Germany Army, under the command of Karl von Bulow, invaded Belgium in August 1914 many Belgian people were driven from their home town of Malines (known today by its Flemish name of Mechelen) in the northern part of the country. In October 1914, sixty-three Belgian refugees from this town, comprising men, women and children, found refuge in Menai Bridge, on Anglesey (Ynsy Mon) in Wales. They arrived by train at Menai Bridge Station (south of the Straits) and the Royal Welsh Fusiliers carried the refugees' possessions; bundles wrapped in tablecloths and sheets perhaps illustrating the speed in which they had left home. The refugees were taken in vehicles to Menai Bridge town passing the Royal Welsh Fusiliers who were guarding the bridge.



*Occupied Belgium in 1914.
Malines is ringed in red*



*Pre-War Malines Cathedral
and the Grand Place*

When the refugees arrived in the town, they were warmly welcomed by the large assembled crowd at New Hall where the Bishop of Bangor greeted them in French. The Chairman of the Menai Bridge Urban Council, Mr. J. G. Bacon, gave an address in English, which was translated for the refugees into French: *Your coming among us is tinged with pain, for your beloved country has been ravaged by a cruel and ruthless foe.... We all hope that the touches of kindness which I am sure you will receive on every hand, will remind you that behind the dark cloud there is a silver lining which we trust is the dawn of a new day. May God bless your noble King and Queen... your country, a small nation with a great heart, and your brave soldiers, who are fighting for the nation's life. May you have that quiet confidence in the British people who have always befriended small nations, and who are today giving their lifeblood for your country.*

After the formal reception at New Hall the local band, who were outside, played *La Brabançonne/De Brabançonne*, the Belgian National anthem. Upon hearing this, many of the refugees cried. It was an overwhelming situation for them; no doubt tired from the journey and a new enforced situation and uncertainty about their future. The refugees were provided with a meal and were given a medical checkup before being taken to their accommodation.

The North Wales Chronicle dated 2nd October 1914, reported that Colonel John Bulkeley Price J.P., D.L. of Plas Cadnant, had provided the use of two house's rent free at Menai Bridge. A total of three houses had been made available at that time, to fifty-one of the refugees and the remaining twelve were housed at Llandegan Village Hall which had been made into suitable accommodation.

Residents in the area had provided furniture, linen and cookery utensils which they willingly gave. *The North Wales Chronicle*, of 9th October 1914, reported that two houses, *Bod Idris* and another in Nant Terrace had been furnished by local people. Locals had also donated money or gifts in kind and further contributions were made and, later that month, a fourth house was being prepared for further refugee arrivals. At the end of October two Belgian boys with collecting boxes were stationed outside of *Bod Idris* all day. The money raised went to the Belgian Refugee Fund. The sum of £10.10s was collected which is worth about £1,200 today.

By early December one of the Belgian families left Menai Bridge to return to their farm in Malines. The family had received a letter stating their farm was virtually intact. Another family left a few days later despite warnings and appeals from both from locals and the Belgian and Dutch Consuls in London who thought the information was incorrect. Within a few days, two further families arrived in Menai Bridge to replace them. In January two additional families arrived to replace those returning home to Belgium.

Local Councillor T. J. William, who was headmaster of St Paul's school in Bangor, taught English language to the refugees. In January 1915, the local paper reported the children of Belgian refugees, in Menai Bridge, showed *little aptitude in acquiring a knowledge of the Welsh language*. Jacques Overbeeke, a Belgian refugee living in Carnarvon, wrote an article, published in *The Herald* on 4th June 1915, in which he explained the language difficulties Belgians had with the Welsh language:-

"Impressions of a Belgian Refugee" by Jacques Overbeeke

He wrote: *...One real difficulty for us here is the language. The Carnarvon grocers and butchers know the difficulty they have in understanding our wives when they are buying in their shops. The Belgian has not a language that he can call his own; one half of the Belgians speak French, following the French grammar. The other half speak Flemish, the grammar of which is somewhat the same as Dutch people. There is not a Belgian language. Nobody can say "I speak Belgian". Certain Belgians speak only French, other speak only Flemish. Many know the two. With regard to the Welsh language, we cannot yet think of it. It seems to us too difficult to learn. But we much like to hear you speak, and above all to hear you sing in Welsh. In Belgian there is not a village without a choir. You Welsh like as much as we do the singing and the choirs. It is the beauty of Nature with which you are surrounded which creates in your souls a love for the melodious songs of your Fatherland.*

The Belgian refugees were very grateful to the people of Menai Bridge for providing them with food and shelter. As a gesture of thanks and appreciation of the hospitality provided to them, the refugees constructed a promenade along Menai Strait foreshore. It was approximately a 500 metre long walkway that extends from Carreg yr Halen (small tidal island), close to the Menai Bridge, and the Causeway at Church Island (Ynys Tysilio). It is understood that most of the Belgian men were skilled in marquetry. The Urban District Council provided all of the materials and equipment. The promenade was completed in early 1916 and the refugees who



The Belgian Promenade, Menai Bridge

worked on it were paid 10d (10 pence) a week, or 2/10 (2 shillings and 10 pence) in the case of married men. According to *The North Wales Chronicle* of 25th February 1916, most of the Belgian refugees had left Menai Bridge by that time and had found work in England.

By the early 1960's, storms and high tides had eroded both the promenade and the causeway to Church Island. Refurbishment work commenced in 1963 and the promenade was re-opened on 10th July 1965 by Mr Eduard Wilhems, aged 66, the only surviving member of the original refugee labour force who carried out the building construction project. The £3,000 cost of the



ABOVE LEFT: Eduard Wilhems as a young man; CENTRE Eduard (left) at the “opening of the Promenade, 10th July 1965; RIGHT Rosalie Jones (ne De Jong) with her eldest child, William

promenade's refurbishment was met from accumulated interest from a bequest from the late Mr. J. G. Bacon (the former Chairman of Menai Bridge Urban Council) who died in on 11th November 1918. According to *The North Wales Weekly News*, published on 15th July 1965, the Belgian Promenade had never been officially opened until the previous Saturday.



*William & Rosalie Jones
in later life on
the Belgian promenade*

Eduard and his wife also took the opportunity to catch up with old friends and to visit the only refugee who did not return to Belgium after 1918. That was Rosalie Jones (nee De Jong) who married William Hugh Jones, a local man. Rosalie and William's first child, William, died of pneumonia when he was two years old. They had 5 more children, the youngest child being a daughter, Elvire. William was a Great War veteran and his Attestation records shows that he enlisted in the 6th Battalion, The Royal Welsh (Welch) Fusiliers (Territorial Force) on 12th September 1914. He had lied about his age – he was just 16½ years old and records show he served for just three days before being found out. However, according to the Medal Roll he later served as a Gunner/Driver in The Welsh (Caernarvonshire) Heavy Battery R.G.A. (T.F.). Most of his military records are missing but according to his family it is believed that William fought in battles around Ypres and Passchendaele. At some point during the war William was injured by shrapnel and he still had some pieces remaining in his leg when he died at the age of 87.

In 2014 a ceremony was held in Menai Bridge to mark the centenary of the Belgian Promenade. Amongst the invited guests was Elvire Cowell (nee Jones) whose mother was Rosalie Jones nee De Jong.



Elvire Cowell, nee Jones, seen far left with Menai Bridge Mayor Michael Davies and his wife Edwina at the unveiling of the Belgian Promenade commemorative plaque in 2014. The local Press recorded that “the 400 metre promenade beside the Menai Strait still attracts plenty of walkers and is part of the Isle of Anglesey Coastal Path”.

In World War II, more than 25,000 Belgian Jews and Romani prisoners were brought together at Malines transit camp, also known as Dossin barracks. It was a detention and deportation centre, and gathered the prisoners ahead of their deportation, by train, to the concentration and extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. According to the Kazerne Dossin - The Memorial, Museum and Documentation Centre on the Holocaust and Human Rights in Mechelen - just 1,207 prisoners survived the horror.



An overhead view of the Anglesey coastline with the Belgian Promenade marked in yellow. The Promenade is also shown on the map above.

Whilst over 100 years have elapsed since these refugee's sort shelter here in the UK, it's comforting to know that the British, along with many other nationalities, continue as our ancestors did, to offer hospitality and humanitarian aid, to those that find their countries invaded by an aggressor.

Thanks to Elvire Cowell, and her son, Derek Cowell for permission for the use of Elvire's photos, and to Antoni Vitti @RefugeesinRhyl for his assistance.

YOUR BRANCH IN ACTION . . .

The recent celebrations in Leicester city centre for St George's Day on 23rd April led to a rare opportunity to see inside St George's Church (now a Serbian Orthodox Church) which was opened especially for the day. Readers may be aware the Church has a War Memorial in the churchyard, but may not know there is also a commemorative plaque inside to Ordinary Seaman Leonard Cornelius, an Altar Server at the Church, who was killed onboard *H.M.S. Defence*, lost with all hands on 31st May 1916 during the Battle of Jutland. Unfortunately, the base of this impressive tablet, shown right, was obscured by two heavy plastic cabinets, but luckily the inscriptions remained on view. Cornelius is also remembered on the War Memorial in the churchyard outside, the gates of which were also open on the day.



Our cover photograph this month (taken by Paul Bardell) shows Valerie laying the Branch Wreath at Welford Cemetery on the morning of 25th April - ANZAC Day. After a three year absence, the Service was well attended, with a number of WFA members present.

LEFT: Valerie laying the Branch Wreath on ANZAC Day morning. RIGHT: The Australian flag marks one of the ANZAC graves. (Photograph by Nicola Brown)



On 20th May, the Branch was also represented at a Service in Hinckley to mark the centenary of the unveiling of the town's War Memorial in 1922. Situated on Castle Hill (part of the remains of Hinckley Castle) the Memorial consists of an octagonal column on a stepped base, surmounted by a robed figure representing an Angel of Mercy, whose outstretched arms were designed to cast a shadow on the names of the fallen on Armistice Day.



Hinckley War Memorial, 1923

A Wall of Remembrance faces the figure and lists on copper panels the names of the 384 men from Hinckley who fell in the Great War. Further panels for fatalities of the Second World War were added in 1951.

In poignant reference to the original unveiling in 1922, great effort was taken to replicate the events of that day, with the original Union Jack used once more in the proceedings, Colonel Robert Martin of Rothley replicating the actions

of his great uncle in re-unveiling the Memorial Wall, whilst descendants of Hinckley families who each lost three sons in the conflict laid wreaths against the Memorial Column as the mourning mothers had done in 1922. The music once again was provided by the bandsmen of the Salvation Army.



Valerie with the Branch Wreath, one of thirteen laid at the Memorial (bottom right) following the removal of the original flag (top right)



*ABOVE; The Order of Service
OPPOSITE: The Band of the Salvation Army entertains the assembling guests & Valerie views the floral tributes laid on the Memorial Column*

As in 1922 a large number of the public gathered to witness the occasion, which was thankfully completed without the predicted showers of rain. Congratulations must be sent to Royal British Legion Standard Bearer, Ian Walker, and WFA Member and County Town Representative for Hinckley, Greg Drozd, for their considerable contributions to the event, with Greg delivering a most impressive history of the Memorial (shown below) as part of the Service. Readers may have seen both Ian and Greg being interviewed by Amy Payne of BBC East Midlands News on the evening bulletin that same evening.



ON THE NOTICEBOARD



**AT RISK
WAR MEMORIALS
OPEN DAY
SATURDAY
28th MAY 2022**

The Chancel,
Rear of All Saints Church,
Highcross Street, Leicester

11.00A.M. – 4.00P.M.

Visit www.leicester-rutlandatriskwarmemorials.btck.co.uk
for further details

JAMES COLLINS, A.M. by David Humberston

Although one of the rarer gallantry decorations awarded during the Great War, the Albert Medal (named after Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria) was in no way inferior to its better-known counterparts, as the following story will illustrate. Indeed, until the institution of the George Cross in 1940, it was Britain's premier decoration for civilian acts of gallantry, with awards also being made to servicemen in non-combat situations.



James Collins (left) was born in Lochee, Dundee, on 6th November 1895 and was considered by many to be one of the city's most promising young footballers, playing in the centre-half position for St Joseph's F.C. Following the outbreak of War in August 1914, Collins enlisted the following January in the Royal Army Medical Corps, originally joining the 11th Field Ambulance until May, when he transferred to the 14th. By the end of that month, he was on active service in France.

As a footballer, any injury to his legs and feet would have major consequences to his future career and the young Collins would obviously have been aware of this fact. Nevertheless, on 11th November 1917 Private (Acting Corporal) 49809 Collins would display gallantry of the highest order in the most dangerous of circumstances. It was later written:

Near an advanced dressing station in France, (later identified as La Bergere, near Monchy le Preux) a lunatic soldier escaped from his escort and ran away along a trench. Collins ran after him, and when he got near him the man threatened to throw a bomb at him. Collins closed with the man, who then withdrew the pin from the bomb and let it fall in the trench. In an endeavour to save the patient and two other soldiers who were near, Collins put his foot upon the bomb, which exploded, killing the lunatic and injuring Collins severely; fortunately, the two soldiers were not hurt. Collins, who could easily have got out of the way, ran the gravest risk of losing his life in order to save others.

Whilst today, considerably more sympathy would be afforded the "lunatic" soldier, the account leaves no doubt of Collins' bravery, which led to the award of an Albert Medal, Gold Class; one of just 45 ever awarded for actions on land. Collins, as might be expected, had now suffered severe injuries, particularly to his lower right leg. He was advised to have the limb amputated, but to his credit refused to allow the Doctors to do so, thus keeping his hopes of becoming a footballer intact.

Although he would endure 14 operations over the next two years to save his right foot, in April 1918 Collins was able to leave hospital in Woolwich for a day, accompanied by his mother, to meet the King and receive his medal. Subsequently discharged from the Army in May 1919 with a 30% Disability Pension, James Collins, with shrapnel still present in his toes and ankles, left Dundee for mid Wales and began playing football once again, representing the Red Cross at Llandrindod Wells. Here he came to the attention of Swansea Town, a club founded as recently in 1912 who had become original members of the Football League Third Division South when that league was established in 1920. According to one source, James Collins was the first professional player to sign for the Club in the post-war era.



*James Collins with his mother outside
Buckingham Palace, April 1918*



*The Albert Medal awarded to James Collins
in 1917*

James Collins would make his debut for Swansea in the second league game of the 1920-21 season playing mostly in either the wing-half or centre-half positions. Injuries to regular forwards the following season saw Collins deputise in the attack and on one occasion he scored thrice in a match against Bristol Rovers, Swansea winning the game by eight goals to one.

In total, Collins represented the Club on 275 occasions, 21 appearances being in the 1924-25 Season, when Swansea won the 'Third Division South League' Title and were promoted to Division Two for the first time in their history. To their credit, Swansea finished that season in fifth position and also reached the semi-finals of the F.A. Cup, with Collins playing in each of the seven ties. In the quarter finals, Swansea were drawn at home to Arsenal, a team that would finish second in the First Division in their first season under the managership of the legendary Herbert Chapman. Swansea, however, triumphed 2-1 and went forward to meet Bolton Wanderers, who won by three goals to nil and went on to defeat Manchester City and lift the trophy.

After his playing career ended, James Collins became a football coach at Chester F.C. before volunteering again for active service in 1943, this time with the Royal Engineers. He departed for France the following year but suffered a serious injury to his leg whilst in Holland, which led to further spells in hospital and a further three operations. When peace resumed Collins struggled to find himself a position within football and instead joined the NAAFI staff civilian section, volunteering to work in both Palestine and Haifa, in Israel.

By April 1949, Collins had returned to Britain, taking up a position back with Chester F.C. working with the younger players. After managing the reserve XI in 1962-3 season, Collins' health began to decline and he returned to Lochee in Scotland, where he passed away on 20th September, some four months after the season ended. He was just 67 years of age.

In 2014, the Gold Class Albert Medal awarded to James Collins was sold at auction by London auctioneers, Spinks. The story of Collins' bravery was widely reported at the time, especially when the Medal, valued at between £5,000 - £7,000, was bought by an anonymous collector for £21,600 (£18,000 plus fees and commission).

WYGGESTONIAN BROTHERS AT WAR (PART III)

by Roy-Anthony Birch

Having begun my series on the Eaton brothers in March 2022's "TIGER" with an appraisal of the intrepid middle brother, Arthur Ernest Eaton D.S.O. R.E., whose service I suggested was perhaps *the* most distinguished among the Wyggeston Grammar School's entire wartime Roll, my contribution to April's "TIGER" featured the Leicestershire Regiment's 11th "Pioneers" Bn.'s time on the Western Front, with particular reference to the eldest of the three. Charles William Eaton of the 11th, it may be recalled, offered a glimpse of what he called "*the lighter side of our life behind the firing line*" via the columns of *The Leicester Daily Post* of Monday 19th June 1916; this being the piece with which I drew my own contribution to April's "TIGER" to a close.

Hence, I resume by drawing still further on Charles William's regular sporting dispatches published in *The Post* under the byline "by C.W.E."; preferring now to eschew the denizens of the boxing arena such as "The Eye Closer", "The Death Trap", and "The Hinckley Terror", and turning instead to what many perhaps prefer to think of as a less belligerent pursuit. Still in June 1916, and with "*a full cricket set*" now at the 11th's disposal, C.W.E. seemed especially pleased to report that "*matches are played each evening and rouse a great deal of interest and rivalry. There is no grass on the pitch, but by means of a good deal of skill and willing labour, it plays remarkably well*". With the Divisional Band's medleys enlivening the atmosphere, he continued; "*except for an occasional burst of Shrapnel, it was quite possible to imagine oneself at home again*".

As with so many letters and the like intended for home consumption, however, one doubts whether these apparently idyllic tableaux can be altogether true. At least according to the newspaper, a match in which a team of "Pioneer" N.C.O.s & Men seemed to be giving an Officers' XI a good run for their money, failed to be completed: N.C.O.s & Men 1st innings 22 all out, with a certain Captain Thornton, an honest all-round amateur sportsman of whom we shall hear more, taking 6 wickets for just 1 run; Officers 1st innings 99 all out; N.C.O.s etc. 2nd innings 100 for 5. The match, of course, may have been drawn – we are not told. But one suspects that something other than the proverbial "rain stopped play" – nothing, surely, to these hardy souls, may have curtailed the proceedings: rather, a volley of uncomfortably adjacent projectile perhaps, of which the 11th were to experience plenty as the fighting intensified.

Casualties, in the customarily understood sense, were indeed to increase as the "Pioneers" moved ever closer to the firing line to work in increasingly exposed positions. But disease and illness continued to take their toll, sometimes, rather ironically, with troops in nominally safer surroundings. An outbreak of scabies recorded in the Battalion Diary in June 1916, for example, reminds us of the risk of men being too closely confined and for too long in fetid and ill-ventilated, often insanitary conditions, with shortcomings in the diet known to exacerbate their plight. One can only wonder how or why such a situation was allowed to develop, even among a comparatively modest number, especially when June 1916 was readily accepted as a time of intense and unprecedented Allied activity requiring the maximum input from troops of every hue.

Broadly speaking, however, the monotony of their existence, more than anything, was likely to have affected any who became less enthusiastic as 1916 progressed; any who might have preferred to be more directly "up an' at 'em". Not that this is to suggest any general malaise within the ranks

or that the role of the Pioneers was of diminishing importance. On the contrary. It is just that the nature of the tasks demanded of them remained largely unvaried, even within weeks of the 11th's Continental deployment back in March. "Continue as before" could quite easily and may indeed have been the order of the day, so that the very orders became as routine as the tasks to be performed. At the beginning of December, for instance, with the Battalion now based in and around Bethune, "A" Coy., under the command of the aforementioned Captain Thornton, were working on communication trenches and trench mortar emplacements "*near the Brickstacks*", while "B" Coy. were still "*clearing trenches*"; a far less straightforward undertaking, no doubt, than this simple Diary entry might imply.

"C" Coy., meanwhile, had been moved to Annequin to work under the 18th Infantry Brigade in the La Basse sector. But with their duties also largely comprised of clearing trenches and now of preparing positions for "A" frames, one fancies that the dictum of "a change" – here only of scenery at best, being "as good as a rest" would not have applied. What does particularly catch the eye as one peruses the Diary, is what I shall call "the geographical transition" towards the Pioneers' new working areas. No longer do men of the 11th find themselves in north of England territory, as it were; in Colne Valley, Barnsley Road, Huddersfield Road, or Skipton Road, from earlier in the year, but usually instead, spending December in London and home counties' familiars such as Hatfield Road, Hertford Street, Hitchin Road, Edgeware Road, and Kings Road, giving useful clues as to which regiments or units had preceded them. ("C" Coy., now with 18th I.B. working in Dundee Walk, rather bucked the trend).

December 1916 also brought a perhaps only to be expected increase in the number of casualties, especially among companies detailed to work in the furthest forward positions. One man was killed by a sniper at 8 a.m. on the 10th, three hours before the Adjutant, Captain H.M. Raleigh, returned to duty from no. 33 Casualty Clearing Station at Bethune, having been slightly wounded on the 4th. His place had been filled temporarily by Lieutenant Tatham as Acting Adjutant; he, we recall, being one of three other subalterns promoted Lieutenant alongside Charles William Eaton in March 1916. (See April 2022's "TIGER" p. 15 for the full list). But December 4th was of still greater significance regarding casualties, witnessing what proved the mortal wounding of Captain Sidney Percy Thornton, Officer Commanding "A" Coy. The Pioneers. This exemplary officer, the fourth son of Leicester businessman John Moore Thornton (1840-1887) of Messrs. Thornton and Mawby "hosiery and sock manufacturers", had been struck by a trench mortar bomb at noon on the 4th "*while with his men in the front line system*". His death, at the age of 39, was recorded at 9.30 the following morning and members of "A" Coy. were granted special dispensation from duty and to attend his funeral at 2 p.m. on December 6th.

It seems reasonably safe to suppose and even to assume that the promotion of Lieutenant Charles William Eaton arose directly from Captain Thornton's death: Supplement to *The London Gazette* 27th January 1917: THE LEICESTERSHIRE REGIMENT; "Temporary Lieutenant C.W. Eaton to be Temporary Captain with effect from 6th December 1916". Whether or not the newly-appointed Captain took command of his predecessor's company, the Bn. Diary seems not to say. Certainly there is no mention of his having done so immediately. Either way, 1916 closed with work and responsibilities remaining much as before for the officers as well as for the men apparently, and with not even a hint of any formal celebrations either at Christmas or New Year.

What was to be one of the bitterest winters in memory brought no respite, with Diary entries recording the customary daily round of work "*in connection with communication trenches and trench mortar emplacements and all communication trenches in 16th Infantry Brigade area*".

Revetting of trenches becomes an increasingly common task throughout December, while “B” Coy. might have felt the hardest done by at one point, being charged with wiring and revetting, *and* draining trenches. Whether or not “D” Coy. would have felt safer for working on “*deep dug-outs at Sidbury Hill*” would have been for them to say. But with “C” Coy. clearing, revetting, and laying footboards in trenches in the front line at Boyau (20th December), a heightened sense of danger is likely to have been felt, if not articulated. The enemy had already come uncomfortably close on 17th December when a party from “C” Coy. was forced to retire early “*owing to a trench mortar bombardment*”.

Changes of location rather than of activity characterised the opening weeks of 1917, with the Bn. moving to Essars on February 12th en route to a wholesale change of direction, in every sense, a fortnight later. With Bn. HQ and the transport section forming an advance party to set up in Mazingarbe, by February 28th all four of the Pioneers’ companies stood ready to embark on a range of new duties, often in conjunction with other units. Some were quite literally, preparing to dig down and deep as well as in, while others took responsibility for overseeing lines other than those of the firing-step variety. March 1st found “A” and “D” Coys., now billeted in Noeux-les-Mines, working with 170th Tunnelling Company, while “B” and “C” worked with 253rd Tunnelling Company; with “C” Coy. now ensconced at Vermelles. “B” alone remained in Mazingarbe.

Troops were further dispersed on March 4th; “A” Coy., now billeted at Maroc to be attached to 16th Infantry Brigade for work in the line, while two platoons of “B” were ordered to Loos for work under the command of 18th Infantry Brigade. “C” Coy. remained in Vermelles to support 71st Infantry Brigade in the line. “D” Coy. were also posted to Vermelles to combine with both the 170th and the 253rd Tunnelling Companies.

March 3rd brought an instant reminder of the 11th Bn.’s increasing vulnerability, as one Sergeant and nine other members of “C” Coy. were admitted to Field Ambulance suffering the effects of exposure to gas shells. Meanwhile, a party of 12, under 2nd Lieut. Warden, had proceeded to Les Brebis Station to take charge of a trench tramway system, while a second contingent, totalling 28, with Lieut. Barclay commanding, was ordered to Kingsbridge Station - Had “The Devons” preceded them, to supervise another trench tramway system? As if to dispel any lingering doubts as to what was in store, March 5th saw “B” Coy. deployed in Railway Alley. Again, indications of the company to which Captain Eaton may have been attached are somewhat elusive so that I cannot currently say whether he was with “the kickers” or with those responsible for what the Bn. Diary called “*laying steel*”. But on March 5th 1917 he is known to have gone to Boulogne for a course of instruction in camouflage. This, as might have been sensed already, was almost certainly the last time he was able to glimpse the coast of Old Albion.

By August 1917, the 11th Leicesters had moved to Dicksbusch and were engaged in the building of a light railway at the side of Zillebeke Lake, one of several then under construction in the Ypres Salient. Under the command of various battalions of Canadian Railway Troops, their work continued for most of the remainder of 1917, with the Pioneers “*laying steel, digging drains, ballasting, and laying gradients*” for the burgeoning railway network, which included “*a special line, south of Poperinghe*”. Other duties, such as the effective maintenance of telephone links between the connections nerve centre and the Light Railway exchange, were not only key to the upholding of the Pioneers’ reputation, but vital to the success of operations in the sector generally.

Given the vulnerability of troops undertaking these mostly outdoor tasks, casualties throughout the latter half of 1917 were comparatively light. There was, nevertheless, a steady stream of men

being hospitalised through usually unspecified maladies, while even sporadic enemy strafing invariably took its toll; sometimes coming from what by now had ceased to be unexpected quarters. A Diary entry for 25th August, for example, reported that *“a hostile aeroplane dropped bombs on the roads leading to the work and killed one man and wounded 12 others, three of whom died shortly afterwards. Eleven of these men belonged to the 1st/17th London Regiment and were attached to the 11th Bn. for police duty on the Light Railway and were proceeding to their posts at the time of the attack”*.

By then, however, enemy action had deprived the Bn. of one of its own most senior subalterns, with a Diary entry for 9th August 1917 describing what was literally the officer's final hour: *“Captain C.W. Eaton was wounded and succumbed to his wounds about 1 hour afterwards”*. Writing to Mrs Christiana Eaton, the Captain's widowed mother, the Commanding Officer of the Battalion said: *“The whole of the Battalion's officers, N.C.O.s, and men, will feel his loss, as everyone was fond of him, and I myself know I have lost an extraordinarily good officer and a man I could always rely on. The poor lad has given his all and made the biggest sacrifice anyone can for his country, and in our grief, I think we ought to remember this”*. The C.O. also told how the officer was laying in his tent, having been out early in the morning, when suddenly, at about 3.30 p.m. and with the district already being bombarded quite extensively, the Germans put a shell right into the middle of our lines. It burst with a terrific explosion and a piece of the projectile flew through the Captain's tent and hit him. The doctor was said to have arrived *“at once”* to administer first aid, prior to the patient being admitted to hospital *“in a very short time, where they did all they could for him”*. But, as the C.O. regretted, *“without avail”*.

As if to add a further layer of poignancy to an already sad situation, it subsequently emerged that the intention had been for all three Eaton brothers to rendezvous at the Leicester's camp in Belgium on what proved to be the day before Captain Eaton died. But with the postponement of what would have been their first meeting for some 12 years, presumably for operational reasons, we are left to reflect that their coming so excruciatingly close to enjoying one-another's company for what might still have been the final time was, perhaps, the greatest cruelty. But Arthur Ernest and Norman – he, formerly of the Leicestershire Yeomanry and now also with the R.E., might at least have derived some small consolation from being able to attend Charles William's funeral *“some distance behind the lines”* and, as survivors of the War, from visiting his final resting place in The Huts Cemetery (grave reference II. B. 11.), approximately 6 kms. or 4 miles south-west of Ypres.



The Huts Military Cemetery, Dickebusch

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