

John Walton Bamber 1887 – 1916

July 1, 2006 was the 90th anniversary of the First World War Battle of the Somme in Northern France. To mark the occasion, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation ran several programmes to commemorate this event. At the time, I was quite busy with genealogical research, and as I knew my great-great-uncle John Walton (Jack) Bamber had died during the First World War, I was prompted to see what I could find out about him. A search of the Commonwealth War Graves commission website revealed the information that John Walton Bamber had been a Lieutenant in the 10th Battalion, Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, that he had died on July 1, 1916, and that he was buried in the Gordon Dump Cemetery near Ovillers-La Boisselle in Northern France¹. Furthermore, those buried in the cemetery were mostly casualties that had been moved there from the neighbouring cemeteries created during the 1916 Battle of the Somme. So, I learnt that Jack Bamber had died on the very first day of the battle.

I left my research into Jack Bamber there, until in November 2008, the 90th anniversary of the end of World War I, November 11, 1918, approached. I ordered a photograph of his gravestone, where I found the inscription read “Believed to be buried in this cemetery”. This intrigued and moved me – it seemed possible I was the first direct relative to see his memorial – but what were the circumstances which led to this young man, born in Natal, South Africa, to become a Lieutenant in a British Territorial Battalion, and to die in a great battle, with his grave unidentified? Where and how had he died? What had his war experience been? I decided to see what I could find out

¹ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. *John Walton Bamber*. Retrieved from www.cwgc.org.

with modern access to the Internet, which has made so many records available.

Childhood and Early Life in South Africa

Jack Bamber was born on October 16, 1887, in Ladysmith, Natal, South Africa.² He was the 7th child (and 6th surviving child) of William and Bessie Bamber. He attended Maritzburg College in Pietermaritzburg from October 1900 to June 1902, the same school I would attend more than 60 years later.³ His name is listed among the fallen on the Maritzburg College War Memorial.

In 1899, during the siege of Ladysmith, together with his mother and father, brother Cyril and sister Norah, he was interned in the Intombi Neutral Camp. This was a camp about 4 miles from Ladysmith on the Intombi River, established by agreement between the British forces in Ladysmith and the besieging Boers. Non-combatants and wounded soldiers were allowed to remain in the camp for the duration of the siege. The Boers allowed a train to run from Ladysmith to the camp nightly to transport rations and sick and wounded to the camp. Conditions were difficult, there were insufficient doctors and nurses and the by January people in the camp were dying from diseases such as enteric and dysentery at the rate of 10-20 per day⁴. Jack, Cyril and their mother volunteered as orderlies in the hospital at the camp. She wrote to her sister-in-law that:

"Cyril and Jack went with me and were orderlies, and altho' they are mine I must say they did their duty and the sick were so fond of them. One of the 1L.H. used to often call for the wee laddie and Jack was there at once and would fan him and talk as long as he liked. Poor fellow he did not live long and he did try to get well he was to have been married when our Volunteers

² Calvert Allen, Bessie. (1991) *The Swift Ships* (Unpublished Manuscript).

³ Ancestry.com. *South Africa, Select Academic Records, 1800-1965* Maritzburg College Admission Registers 1876 -1901; Entry Number: 737. John Walton Bamber.

⁴ Moles Genealogy Blog. (2012) *Boer War: Intombi Camp, Siege of Ladysmith*. Retrieved from molegenealogy.blogspot.com

were called out. ... He was our Archdeacon's nephew. He had to lose his legs and suffered very terribly. They both used to fan him and be with him all they could.

I never went to our tent without saying Goodnight to him. He was such a dear youth and used to say 'Oh, those dear boys of yours'. He died suddenly, but had sent to the Archdeacon for a present for them, so they both have the Prayer Books with his name in. Jack never cared to go any more. He said all he liked died, so he used to stay with his father and help in other ways.⁵

After the Boer War he became a member of the Natal Royal Regiment of Mounted Infantry, and he saw active service in the Natal Native Rebellion of 1906 (the Bambatha rebellion). After 1906 he was a member of the Natal Militia, First Reserve, and was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in 1908.⁶

He worked in the Natal Civil Service, as a clerk in the Treasury Department, but resigned in 1912 in order to study for the ministry. He travelled to England with his parents William and Bessie Bamber, arriving on June 19, 1912⁷, and enrolled as a student at St Augustine's College, Canterbury, preparing for Holy Orders. His parents remained in England for two years, departing on August 24, 1914.⁸

10th KOYLI Training in England.

On December 4, 1914, he joined the British Army. His application requested assignment to the Cavalry, preferably the 16-17th Lancers, presumably based on his experience with the Mounted Infantry in Natal, but this was to be a very different war and instead he was commissioned as a 2nd

⁵ (1972) *A Diary of the Siege of Ladysmith: Unpublished Letters from the Siege*. Letter from Mrs. Bamber. Ladysmith: Ladysmith Historical Society.

⁶ National Archives (UK). *Officers Service Record*. J.W.Bamber. WO339/17207 351177.

⁷ Ancestry.com. *UK and Ireland, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878-1960*. 1912 SS Inkonka, J. W. Bamber.

⁸ Ancestry.com. *UK and Ireland, Outward Passenger Lists, 1890-1960*. 1914 SS Umtali. Wm Bamber.

Lieutenant in the infantry. His commission was published in the London Gazette of December 18, 1914.⁹

His initial training was in Cambridge, as he wrote to the Warden of St Augustine's College from there in January 1915. He writes that "*The course is over today and tomorrow morning I join the regiment at Maidenhead*". This was the 10th Battalion, Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (10th KOYLI).

The 9th and 10th battalions were formed in September 1914 as part of Kitchener's "New Army" – those attracted to join by the famous WWI poster "Your Country Needs You". The units were formed at Berkhamstead, and the first CO of the 10th KOYLI was Lt-Col. A.W.A. Pollock. They became part of 64 Infantry Brigade, together with 14th and 15th Bn. Durham Light Infantry, and moved to Halton Park, Wendover, and thence into billets in Maidenhead.



Figure 1: World War I recruiting Poster featuring Lord Kitchener. Public Domain via Wikimedia.

⁹ The London Gazette. Issue 29011 Page 10823. Retrieved from www.thegazette.co.uk

The short period of training in Maidenhead was to end in April 1915, when 21 Division (of which the 10th KOYLI were part) were at Halton Camp for training which would continue until September 1915, when the battalion sailed for France.¹⁰ During his time in Maidenhead, Jack attended church at All Saints Church, where he met and fell in love with Doris Anderson, daughter of Dr and Mrs. Anderson of 9 Castle Hill, Maidenhead. I am indebted for information about this to Doris's son Nick Mayne, who provided me with copies of a letter from Jack to Doris on the eve of the Battle of the Somme, and to Ken Smith, of All Saints Church in Maidenhead, who became interested in Jack's story and published a meticulously researched book about Jack's life and death. For further details and a glimpse of the extensive records about Jack held at the Library and Archives of Canterbury Cathedral, I thoroughly recommend reading this book.¹¹ Before Jack left for France, he and Doris were engaged to be married.

The battalions were inspected by Gen. Sir. Arthur Wynne on March 27, 1915, when 9th and 10th KOYLI were each upwards of 1000 strong. In August they marched to Witley Camp in Surrey. The brigade became part of 21 Division and remained in this division for the remainder of the war.

At 4:20 am on September 11, 1915, the battalion entrained at Milford station, close to their camp at Witley in Surrey – from there they travelled to Southampton. HQ and Transport together with the CO boarded SS *California*, the remainder of the battalion under the command of Major Ellis boarded the SS *Empress Queen*. At 9:30 on September 12 they docked at Le Havre in Normandy, where they disembarked and spent the night. The following day they entrained and travelled to Audrincq, then marched to their billets in Zutkerque.¹²

¹⁰ Bond, Lt Col. R.C. (1929) *History of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Great War 1914-1918. Vol. III* London: Humphries & Co. Ltd.

¹¹ Smith, Ken. (2018) *From Ladysmith to the Somme*. Self Published.

¹² Unless otherwise stated the following information is taken from the battalion War Diary. National Archives (UK). *War Diary, 10th Battalion Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry (WO/95/2162)*.

Battle of Loos and in the Trenches in Northern France

The next few days were spent in training and exercises but on September 20 they were ordered south to join the battle of Loos. They were made to march from Zutkerque to Loos over the next 3 nights, leaving at 7:30 P.M. and marching until past midnight, a total of about 40 miles. On September 25 they went into action at Loos.

The battalion War Diary takes up the story:

Sept 26, 1 am. Bivouacked in fields with remainder of brigade until 12 noon when the Bde moved off to trenches in front of LOOS. The battalion arrived just before daybreak and occupied a line of old German trenches about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile NW of LOOS, with the 9 KOYLI on the left and DLI Bns dug in on left front. Trenches were under shell fire all day and at 1 pm other attacks having failed, the 10 Bn were ordered to advance to road at bottom of valley facing German redoubt and to take up a position there in readiness to support the 9 Bn KOYLI who were assaulting the redoubt. Assault unsuccessful and at four pm Bn retired under very heavy shelling to a line of old German trenches a mile in rear of original line taken up during the night before. At 1 am the Battn. was relieved by units of the Guards Div. and marched back in scattered detachments to bivouac at PHILOSOPHIE three miles behind the firing line. Capt Dale was wounded by shell fire about 2.30 pm on the 26th while gallantly rallying the Battn. After they had fallen back to the top of ridge. Capt L.A. Day, Lieut. Sheffield, 2 Lieut. Stoddard were also wounded or gassed during the day and 2 Lieut. Lee went into hospital on 27 also suffering from Gas poisoning.

The battalion then marched to Lignes les Aire arriving on the 29th, where they spent some time drying their equipment "...many of the men without waterproof sheets or greatcoats".

The battle of Loos was generally considered a failure – the reserves (of which 9th and 10th KOYLI formed a part) were considered to have been deployed

too late to be effective, and preparation was poor (for example the need for the battalion to march long distances immediately prior to the battle). Heavy casualties resulted, particularly among the 9th KOYLI, with little advance to show for it.

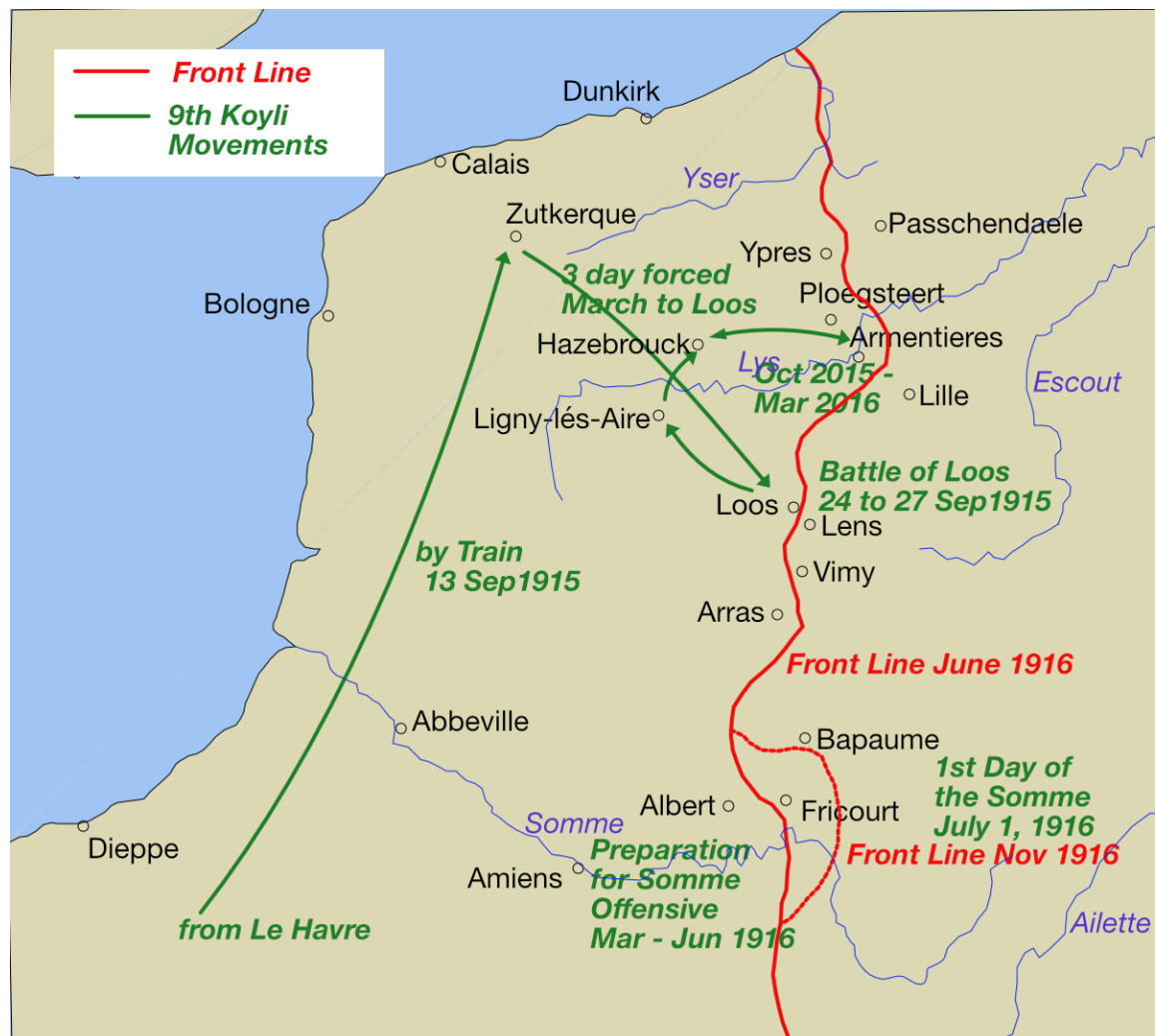


Figure 2: Movements of 9th KOYLI on the Western Front, Sept 1915 to June 1916

After Loos, on October 1, the battalion “marched from LIGNES LES AIRE at 4:30 am and arrived at BOESEGHEM at 1 pm went into billets for the night and left again at 9 am. Marching NE through HAAZEBRUCK arrived at ROUGE CROIX at 2 pm.” They spent some days in training, including a test mobilization, which the diary reports: “Time one hour and ten minutes. All

companies and Transport ready to move off.” On October 8/9 they marched via Bailleul to Papot where four platoons (one from each company) went into the trenches. “Enemy very quiet ...but for a few Shrapnel Shells...Three German aeroplanes overhead the whole morning, heavily fired upon by our guns with no result.”

Between September 1915 and May 1916, 21 division were not involved in any major actions – they spent time in and out of the trenches and in training. The time was spent in the region of Armentieres.

The War Diary of the 10th KOYLI provides glimpses of their experience of trench warfare during this period, which can be characterized by a few days in the trenches followed by longer periods in billets in reserve. Also notable is the lack of motorized transport – as in earlier armies, these men marched wherever they needed to go. Unfortunately, there is no direct mention of Jack Bamber in the War Diary.

On the night of October 13, the battalion took over the trenches in Ploegstert from the 8th Kings Own Lancasters – the relief started at 9 pm and was complete a 4:25 am *“in thick damp mist”*⁷. On the evening of October 15 *“Enemy rifle grenade landed in Bay 38 Trench 125. Took off head of Pte J.W. LUCKMAN who was in M.G. emplacement and 2Lt. WINGHAM had a narrow escape”*

(John William Luckman, age 25, from Barnsley, Yorkshire, left a wife Edith and is buried in Ploegsteert Wood Military Cemetery, Belgium.)¹³

On October 19, the battalion was relieved by 15 DLI and went into reserve, on Oct 21 *“Three Companies proceeded to LE BIZET to bathe”*

The rest of October was spent in training, a highlight of October 27 was *“Detachment of eighty men and two officers proceeded to BAILLEUL to form part of Representative Battalion of the Bde to be seen by HM”*

¹³ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Retrieved from cwgc.org

Most of November was in training, other than a spell in the trenches at Houplines from November 18 to 24. Jack wrote to the Sub-Warden of St Augustine's.¹⁴

We are now occupying trenches at Houplines near Armentieres. The approach to the trenches is exposed, so the wagons go up at night and dump rations about 1500 yards [a mile!] behind, then ration parties come and carry them up. It is fairly safe. As usual I have had good luck, no casualties among men or animals. Last Thursday was the warmest day I have had. We went up at 8 in the morning, dumped and were returning, when the Germans opened fire with high explosives shells. We had about 3 miles to go on the pave and to make matters worse it was slippery with ice. My horse slipped once and came down with me, and two or three of the drivers had falls too. Trotting is forbidden in that locality as the road runs parallel to the German lines and is only 1200 yards away. The noise is considered to attract shells. So there we were, with shells bursting behind us or in front of us but never on us. The shells followed us into Armentieres and then the enemy indulged in a little hate for about 3 hours. There is a fair proportion of the civilian population left – women principally. The poor creatures were frantic, running hither and thither to escape the bombardment. The marvel is that none of them were hurt. Among our troops there were 20 casualties, one man only being killed

The War Diary does not recount this incident but reports one man killed on Nov 19. (Pte R Foster, died Nov 20, 1915, age not given, and is buried in Houplines Communal Cemetery).¹⁵

On November 30 they went into the trenches at Armentieres. Here “*Rain. Trenches falling in and very wet...men losing their gum boots in the mud*”⁷ The battalion was relieved on the 6th December by 15 DLI and it took them from 6:30 am until 12 pm due to “*...only two avenues available and men above their waists in mud and water*”⁷ From 12 to the 16th they were back in the

¹⁴ Smith, Ken. (2018). From *Ladysmith to the Somme*. Self-Published.

¹⁵ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Retrieved from cwgc.org.

trenches, then again from December 24 to 30, so Christmas was spent on the front line although *“Xmas passed off very quietly. No overtures of friendship made by friend or foe. A great deal of night firing”*⁷. On December 29 *“At 6:15 pm we blew up mine on German parapet opposite trench 88. Enemy retaliated with heavy rifle fire for a few minutes”*

January 3, 1916, was a *“Bathe and Rest Day”* – one hopes that there had been other opportunities to bathe since last mentioned on October 21! The battalion was back in the trenches from Jan 5 to 11 and again from Jan 17 to 23. On January 25 the battalion was involved in an operation when *“At 9:55 pm 4 officers and 53 Rank and File entered the German Trenches... The party crossed No Mans Land without being observed and found the German Front line unoccupied. ... The whole party were back in our trenches by 11 pm.”* One officer was slightly wounded; the officers were Capt. King, Lt. Harrison and 2Lts Burkett and Cockcroft (who was wounded). The war diary gives an uncharacteristically detailed account of this incident, leading one to believe that raids on this scale were unusual events.

On January 26 in Armentieres a welcome break was a *“Battalion dinner in the evening at No 35 Rue Nationale. The first social meeting we have had since we left England. The CO proposed ‘A long life and a wretched one for the Kaiser’. Assembly unanimous.”* On January 29 they went back to the front line until February 9. From February 19 to 25, they were again in the trenches, and during this period *“Capt. BETHEL killed on morning of February 20th in right communication trench... whilst setting his men a fine example in heightening parapet of communication trench”*. (Christopher Bethel, age 31, is buried in Cite Bonjean Military Cemetery, Armentieres, France. He was a Barrister-at-law in London in civilian life.¹⁶

According to Jack Bamber’s letters to the Warden of St Augustine’s, he was home on leave at some point during February 1916.

¹⁶ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Retrieved from cwgc.org.

The battalion was in the trenches from March 6 until March 15, then in training until March 30 when orders were received for 21 division to join the XIII Corps. 29 Officers and 821 men travelled by train to Longeau, near Amiens, and then marched to La Neuville on the bank of the River Somme.

Preparing for the Somme Offensive

April and May were spent mostly in training and in support, interspersed with some periods in the front lines near Fricourt. In preparation for the coming battle, time was spent in training for the assault in the practice trenches at La Neuville and Buire.

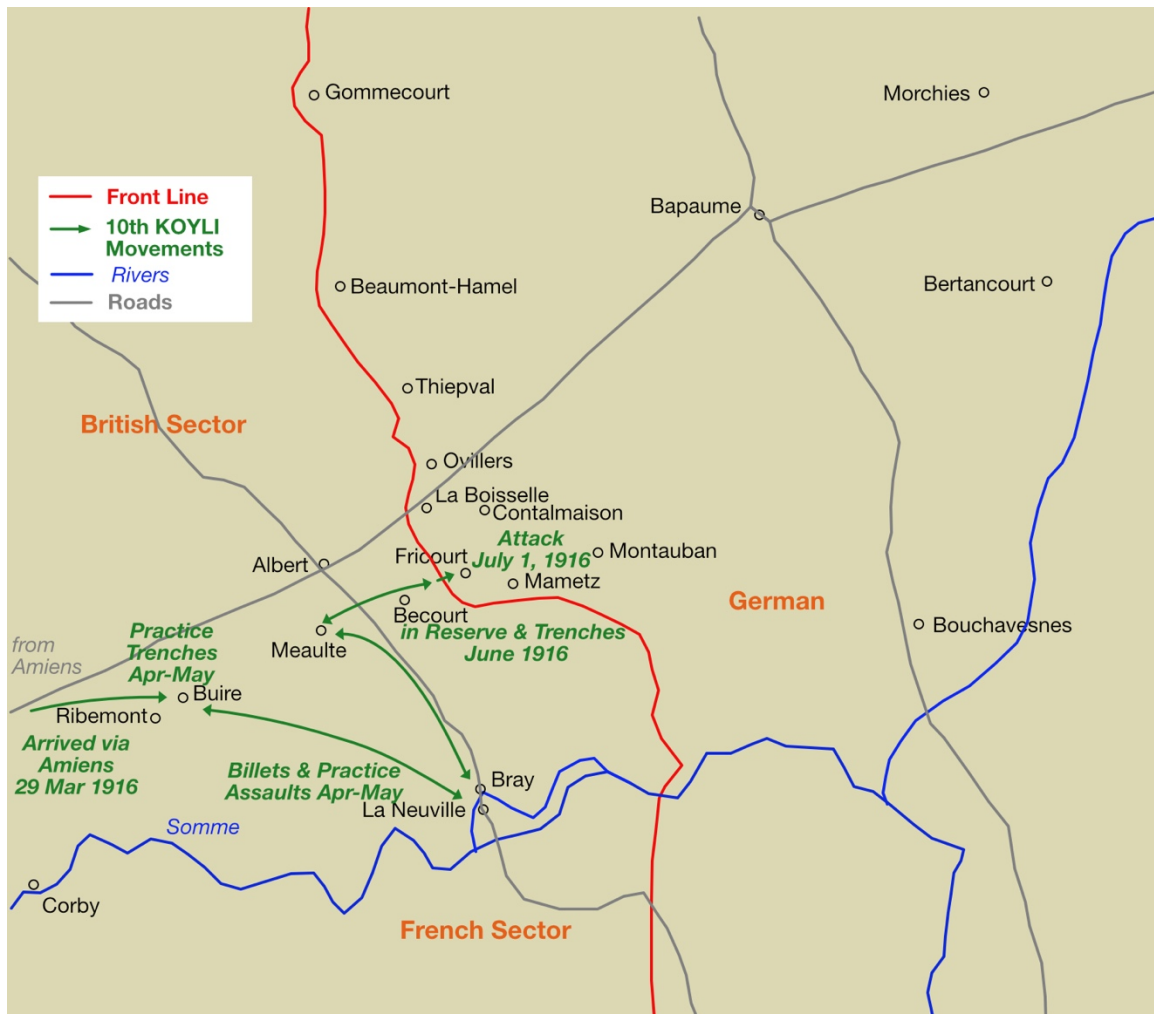


Figure 3: 10th Koyli preparations for the Battle of the Somme – April to June 1916, showing 10th KOYLI movements and places mentioned in the text

In early April 1916 Jack attended a training course for Company Commanders at a training base near Amiens. Normally a Company Commander would be a Captain, however Jack by now was evidently a full Lieutenant, possibly given command of a company and made a temporary Captain due to the shortage of officers. In April, the War Diary contains the following entries:

April 12: Operation order received to move back to LA NEUVILLE on 14 inst.

April 15: Rest

April 16: All available Ranks on digging trenches on high ground NW PONT NOYELLES Rd

April 23: Marched from LA NEUVILLE at 9 am

While at La Neuville a photograph was taken of the officers of the 10th KOYLI in front of the chateau in La Neuville, a copy of which was kindly provided to me by Nick Mayne, son of Jack's fiancée Doris. The British and French were now planning the major offensive, which would become known as the Battle of the Somme.

The 10th KOYLI War Diary for June allows us a glimpse into the activities of the battalion as they prepared for the battle. As before, the time is spent in the trenches, then back into reserve again, all the while taking steady casualties.

On June 1 the Battalion "...marched into MEAULTE to form Bde. Reserve" In the front line were the 9th K.O.Y.L.I. among others. On the 3rd, "*Work parties as usual*" though the diary lists 2 other ranks killed and 3 wounded on that day. On the 4th "*Hostile gun fire directed on our battery emplacements and Battn. HQ shelled from 3/4 pm: 4.5 cm gun from direction of MAMETZ WOOD.*" 2 other ranks were killed and 9 wounded.

It is difficult to identify those who died on June 3rd and 4th. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission identifies four members of the 10th Bn. who died on June 3rd and one who died on June 4th, which does not match the War Diary records. On June 3rd Pte E. Davies (aged 30) of Leeds,

son of George and Betty, and Sgt. F.C. Field (aged 34) of Bradford, husband of Sarah Alice, were killed and are buried in Norfolk Cemetery, Becordel-Becourt. Also on June 3rd, Pte. Martin Byram (aged 25) of Wakefield, son of William and Jane, died and is buried in Meaulte Military Cemetery, and Pte. Jack Ambler (aged 21) of Normanton, husband of Violet, died and is buried in La Neuville Communal Cemetery, Corbie. Jack Ambler's wife, Violet, died in 1918. On June 4, 1916, Lance Corporal F. Dodds (age and family not given) died and is buried in Meaulte Military Cemetery.¹⁷

On June 6, the *battalion "relieved the 1st E. Yorks. In left sub-section just W. of FRICOURT."* They remained in the trenches until June 11, when the 8th Somerset Light Infantry in turn relieved them.

During their time in the trenches the casualty list showed 7 other ranks wounded. On June 12 they "*marched to LA NEUVILLE into the corps reserve.*"

It may have been about this time that the Commanding Officer, Lt. Col. King, issued the order of battle for the Battle of the Somme. The orders still survive, as part of the war diary for July 1916, still bearing pencilled notes in the margin. The Battalion was to have the 9th K.O.Y.L.I. on their right, and the 15th Royal Scots on their left, with the 1st E. Yorkshire in support. Their objective was to seize the eastern edge of Shelter Wood as well as Crucifix Trench. The attack would be preceded by four days of bombardment, the days being designated V, W, X, Y and Z. Smoke and Gas was to be used when the wind was favourable. The battalion would move into the trenches on the night of X/Y and were to cut the wires on the Battalion Front.

When the barrage lifted, the troops were to advance, following closely behind the lifting barrage to take advantage of the cover provided. A and B companies were to lead the attack; C and D would follow in support. Jack Bamber, as OC D Company, would lead the support company on the right.

¹⁷ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Retrieved from cwgc.org.

Each man would carry 220 rounds of ammunition and 2 grenades. Four meals would be carried per man. In addition, in the supporting companies each man would carry either a pick or a shovel, and supporting companies would carry additional ammunition and grenades.

The orders conclude with miscellaneous orders for the battalion, including *“The word RETIRE is not to be used under any circumstances and no man will be justified in letting go a forward position once he has obtained same”*, and the orders warn the attackers to *“...be on the lookout for Germans getting up to fire from their trenches into the backs of the men in front. Men should be ready to shoot down into each Trench as they reach it...”*

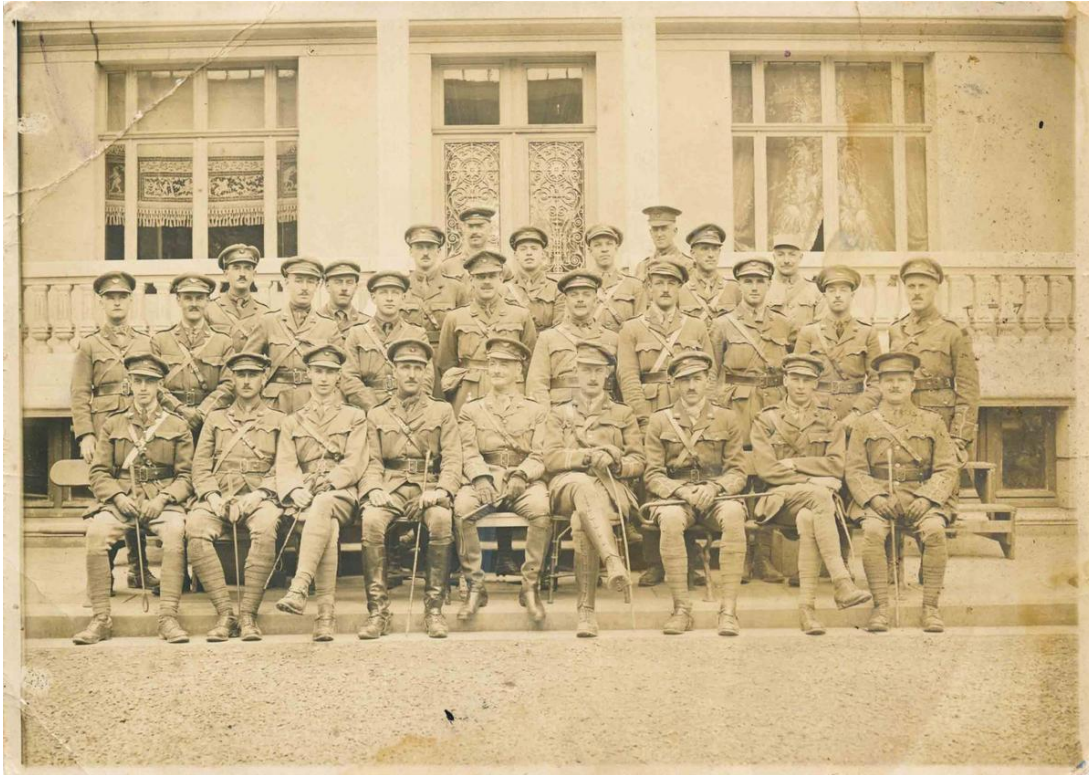


Figure 4: Officers of 10th Battalion, Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, in La Neuville, April 1916. Jack Bamber (2nd from left in the front row) is identified as Lt. Bamber, O.C., D Co. At least 8 of these officers, including Jack Bamber, would be killed on July 1, 1916 on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.¹⁸

On June 19, the battalion moved to Buire – they were still there on June 25 – this was “V” day and the barrage commenced though *“little of it could be heard at BUIRE”*.

On the afternoon of June 28 (“Y” day) the battalion moved up to the assembly trenches, but at 2 pm the attack was postponed for 48 hours. This was due to earlier violent thunderstorms on the 23rd and 26th, leading to the decision to allow the terrain to dry out before the attack¹⁹. On June 30 they again moved into the assembly trenches. The diary notes *“(The) Hostile line*

¹⁸ I was able to identify the date and location of this photograph because an almost identical photograph of the Officers of the 9th Bn KOYLI was taken at the same time. The location was identified by Paul Reed and published at battlefields1418.50megs.com/9koyli.htm Once the location was identified the War Diary entries provided the date.

¹⁹ Youell, Duncan and David Edgell. (2006) *The Somme Then and now – a visual history*. London: DK Publishing.

has now been bombarded slowly for 4 days with intervals of intense bombardment and discharges of smoke and gas.”

During the 292 days since arriving in France in September 1915, the 10th KOYLI had spent 103 days in the front lines, or about 1/3 of their time in France. Casualties had been light, and even during the Battle of Loos they had not taken heavy casualties. Nothing could prepare them for what they were about to experience.

The First Day of the Somme

The preparations for the battle, and the experience of the troops assembling on the night of June 30 has been well documented in several books.

The bombardment got under way on 24 June 1916....There was an artillery piece for every seventeen yards of the German Front to be attacked. The artillerymen had a daily routine of firing an 80-minute concentrated barrage, using all the guns. After which a steadier but continuous firing continued for the remainder of the day. At night, half the guns were rested...At night the scene was spectacular, and one hundred miles away, in Kent and along the southern coast of England, it could plainly be heard.... The British increased the number of trench raids, in an effort to ascertain the effectiveness of the shelling. Reports varied...many officers could plainly see through their field glasses that much of the wire was still intact.²⁰

By the time the attack took place, 150,000 shells every day for a whole week had been fired, more than in the whole first twelve months of the War.²¹

On 30 June, the attack troops stored away their personal effects, handed in their greatcoats, and prepared to begin the long march towards their appointment with destiny. The rain storms which had delayed the offensive were over and it had turned into a fine summer's afternoon...

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

*Men of the Sheffield City Battalion were concerned to see several German balloons, or “sausages” as they called them, flying overhead, plainly observing the many thousands of Tommies marching towards the line. The route...took them past large, freshly dug pits – mass graves ready for burying the dead of tomorrow.*²²

*Throughout June 30, the British troops moved forward through Albert, fanning out along the trenches...It was slow going. In an article... Sergeant R. H. Tawney ... recalled the walk forward. ‘It was a perfect evening,’ he wrote, ‘and the immense overwhelming tranquility of sky and down, uniting us and millions of enemies and allies in its solemn, unavoidable embrace, dwarfed into insignificance the wrath of man and his feverish energy of destruction. One forgot the object for which we were marching to the trenches. One felt as though one were on the verge of some new and tremendous discovery; and the cheering of the knots of men who turned out to watch us pass seemed like the last faint hail of landsmen to explorers bound for unknown seas. Then the heat struck us, and at the first halt we flung ourselves down, panting like dogs.’ Tawney added, ‘It was a tiresome job getting up to the trenches. I don’t know anything more exasperating than walking one to two miles with a stoppage every ten or twenty yards, especially when you’re one of a long string of tired men and have a rifle and other traps hitched on to you. It was some wretched machine-gun section which inflicted this torture on us. Either because they hadn’t learned how to carry their beastly instruments, or because they would go nosing up every wrong turning, they made us spend nearly two hours in getting through trenches that we’d known for five months’.*²³

10th KOYLI formed part of the 21 division attack to the north of the village of Fricourt.

²² Youell, Duncan and David Edgell. (2006).

²³ Prior, Robin and Trevor Wilson. (2005) *The Somme*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

64 Brigade was to attack to the North of Fricourt, and 10th KOYLI were to attack at zero hour, 7:30 am on July 1. This part of the Somme battlefield did offer some slight advantages to the British compared to other sectors.



Figure 5: Soldiers of the 1st Battalion, Lancashire Fusiliers, in a communication trench near Beaumont Hamel, possibly on 1 July 1916. Imperial War Museum, Public Domain, via Wikimedia.

“...the situation which faced the XV corps was more favourable than that which applied in the North. ... This section of the line was on the lower, forward slope of the ridge and immediately behind the British front the ground sloped upward to form the Morlancourt-Maricourt Ridge. This mean that from many areas of British held territory there were excellent views of the German positions as far back as Mametz Wood. Moreover, because of the right angle, Allied artillery to the south of Fricourt could enfilade the German line to the north and allied artillery around Bécordel could enfilade it to the east. These factors of improved observation and

opportunities for enfilade fire meant that the bombardment of the enemy front line was far more effective than had been the case in the north. Hence the German machine-gun and rifle fire facing the British forces attempting to cross no man's land was considerably reduced.

There was a further factor which contributed to this situation: the employment ...of... a creeping barrage... As applied on 1 July the bombardment only fell on the German front line at the outset and moved beyond it at too fast a rate (100 yards in two minutes) for the troops to keep pace....Nevertheless by keeping the heavy artillery bombardment on the German line until zero hour and instructing their troops to move into no man's land before zero hour and then cling as closely to the creeping barrage as safety would allow, the XV Corps staff undoubtedly helped to minimize the casualties inherent in this perilous crossing.”²⁴

“At 7.20 A.M. the British barrage reached a crescendo as the gunners poured shells at the maximum possible rate into the German lines.... It was about this time that the first infantrymen were allowed to move. A few commanders had decided to allow their leading waves to go out into No Man's Land just before zero hour and lie down nearer the German trenches. The soldiers clambered up the ladders, filed through their own wire and then spread out into the straight lines required by the plan, before lying down to get what shelter they could in the open. The crescendo of fire falling on the German trenches meant the men could do so in safety but some brave Germans were already manning their weapons.”²⁵

²⁴ Prior, Robin and Trevor Wilson. (2005)

²⁵ Middelbrook, Martin. (1972). *First Day on the Somme: 1 July 1916*. London: W.W. Norton & Company.

from the platoon and section commanders. The Battle of the Somme had started. The first away were those lying out in No Man's Land. The long lines rose, men looked to left and right as if to correct their dressing on a parade ground and set off after their officers at the steady, well-rehearsed pace towards the enemy.²⁷

The 10th KOYLI were among the battalions who had moved into No Man's Land before the barrage ended. A description exists of their experience at zero hour:

Before zero hour his platoon had gone out a few yards into No Man's Land and lain down waiting for the signal to attack. Promptly at 7.30 A.M. the platoon commander blew his whistle and the K.O.Y.L.I.s rose. At that very moment a German machine-gun opened fire on them and caused many casualties.... then, without warning, the German barrage fell in the centre of No Man's Land, a salvo of heavy shells falling among the leading wave.²⁸

The British and French were attacking simultaneously across a 30-mile front. Unfortunately, in most places the barrage had not been as successful as expected. The shelling had not adequately cut the wire, and the German's emerged from their deep trenches, set up their machine guns and began to pick off the approaching Tommies. Few of the planned objectives were achieved, and the casualty rate was appalling.

In contrast to most units, 10th KOYLI met most of their objectives on July 1.

The War Diary Entry reads:

"The British Offensive commenced this battalion leading the 64 Brigade assault. They left the trenches at 7:30 a.m. and took CRUCIFIX TRENCH that morning & held it till early the next when they were relieved by the 1st LINCOLNS. Battalion moved to Sausage Support

²⁷ Middelbrook, Martin. (1972).

²⁸ Ibid.

Trench where Major Laskie took command in place of LT. Col. H.J. King who had been wounded."

10th BATTALION K.O. YORKSHIRE L.I. 64/21		
WAR DIARY.		
DATE AND PLACE	DETAIL.	REMARKS AND APPENDICES.
TRENCHES	1. The British offensive commenced this battalion leading the 64 Brigade assault. They left the trenches at 7.30am. and took CRUCIFIX TRENCH that morning & held it till early the next when they were relieved by the 1st LINCOLNS. Operation Orders	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div> Officers 9 </div> <div> Wounded 16 </div> <div> Missing 50 </div> </div> <div style="text-align: right;">Appendix 1.</div>

Figure 7: 10 Bn KOYLI War Diary for July 1, 1916. (WO/95/2162 National Archives (UK))

However, they suffered heavy losses, particularly among the officers – the War Diary lists 9 officers killed, and 16 wounded, while other ranks casualties were 50 killed, 292 wounded and 135 missing – this from a strength of about 800 fighting men and 30 officers.

A glimpse of the situation when the battalion was relieved can be obtained from an account of the experience of the reserves that joined them in the captured trenches later that day.

Some battalions...sent for reinforcements from the men they had left behind in reserve. Near Fricourt, a tall, thin, lieutenant, shown in the battalion diary as B.H.L. Hart, led a party of the 9th K.O.Y.L.I. up into the captured trenches. Every officer in this battalion and its sister battalion nearby, 10th K.O.Y.L.I., had become a casualty and Lieut Hart²⁹ had to reorganize the remnants of both.³⁰

What had been the cost of this first hour? It is impossible to say exactly but probably half of the 66,000 British soldiers who had attacked were already casualties – 30,000 infantrymen killed or wounded in just sixty minutes!³¹

²⁹ The young Lieutenant was Basil Liddell Hart, who later became a leading military thinker and critic of the British military policy, as Military Correspondent of the Times and The Telegraph, and as a writer of several works of military strategy.

³⁰ Middelbrook, Martin. (1972).

³¹ Ibid.



Figure 8: A captured German Trench on the Somme, occupied by men of A Company, 11th Battalion, The Cheshire Regiment. The trench has been reversed; the soldier on the left is lying on the original fire-step (Imperial War Museum catalogue number Q 3990, Public Domain.)

Platoon officers like Jack Bamber were terribly exposed – leading their men and armed with a revolver rather than the rifles carried by their men, they presented conspicuous targets that attracted the fire of the German machine-guns and snipers, who were ordered to target the leaders.

Jack's Death, and the Aftermath

Ken Smith, who wrote a book about Jack Bamber, kindly shared some of his research from the War Records he was able to see in the British Archives. A report by a Private I.S. Barrett stated that “*in the front line to the left of a*

German machine gun post, Capt. Bamber was killed by a rifle bullet.”³² In a letter to the War Office Adele Anderson, mother of his fiancé, wrote “It appears after he fell about 26 yards from the German trenches he was seen by several men going forward. He was never seen again. His body was never found. It is suggested the place was shelled and all the poor boys bodies buried or blown to pieces.”³³

Earlier in September she had written to the Warden of St Augustine’s that *“We have had one of his fellow officers who was wounded on the 1st staying with us and it was nice to hear him speak of Jack. I had a letter from a private in C Company who knew him well said that when he was lying out badly wounded about 30 yards from out the trenches Mr Bamber passed him leading his men and fearing nothing. He spoke to him but he could not stop because he was leading his men but said he will never forget the way Mr Bamber looked at him as he passed. Then later he heard that he was killed.”³⁴*

The Battle of the Somme would continue until November, but no day resulted in more casualties than July 1, the worst single day casualty total the British Army has ever experienced. On that day 19,240 were killed, 35,493 wounded and 2,152 missing. The dead were buried, often where they lay, or collected in cemeteries. Within days, next of kin would be notified.

Sometime around July 10, Jack Bamber’s parents, William and Bessie Bamber of Pietermaritzburg, received a telegram with the news of Jack’s death. The family then notified other relatives – surviving is a telegram from Jack’s brother Cyril Bamber in Durban to his sister and brother-in-law Frederick and Bessie Macpherson in Ladysmith.³⁵

There were two households devastated by the news of his death – his parents in South Africa and his fiancé Doris and her family in Maidenhead. Ken Smith in his book has reproduced some of the letters which went back and forth. The chaplain of the 10th KOYLI wrote to St Augustine’s college on

³² Research by Ken Smith in the War Records of Jack Bamber.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Smith, Ken. (2018) *From Ladysmith to the Somme*. Self Published.

³⁵ Calvert Allen, Bessie. (1991). *The Swift Ships*. Unpublished manuscript.

July 12, *"It has been a great blow to me...He made his last communion two days before his death in the village school at Buire"* Adele Anderson wrote to the Sub-Warden on July 25 that of her daughter Doris *"I am hoping that the wound is not too deep to heal"* Mrs. Bamber wrote to the Sub Warden in August that *"I prayed daily he may not die in agony and my prayer was answered... My husband.. takes it very hard poor old man."*

POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.
POSTKANTOOR TELEGRAAFDIENST.
UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA. UNIE VAN ZUID-AFRIKA.

T. 27.

No. of Message

If the accuracy of this Telegram (being an Inland Telegram) is doubted, it will be repeated on payment of half the amount originally paid for its transmission; and, if found to be incorrect, the amount paid for repetition will be refunded. Special conditions are applicable to the repetition of telegrams.

Indien de juistheid van dit Telegram (zijnde een Binnenlands Telegram) betwijfeld wordt, zal het herhaald worden tegen betaling van de helft van het voor de overzending oorspronkelijk betaald bedrag. Indien het blijkt dat het oorspronkelijke telegram onjuist overgezonden was, wordt het of de herhaling betaald bedrag terugbetaald. Speciale bepalingen gelden voor de herhaling van Kabelgrammen.

N.B.—This Form should accompany any enquiry made respecting this Telegram.
N.B.—Deze vorm moet alle navragen met betrekking tot dit Telegram vergezellen.

Charges to Pay
Te Betalen } £ 10 10 0

Handed in at
Ingeleverd to

From
Van

To
Aan

Received here at
Ontvangen hier om

Delivering Office.
Bestelkantoor.

War office advise Jack killed in action 2nd

Figure 9: Telegram to Jack's sister Bessie, my Great-Grandmother, informing her of his death

Perhaps the most heartrending letter of all was received by Doris Anderson sometime in July. It had been written by Jack Bamber on June 28 on the eve of the battle and entrusted to the Quartermaster with the envelope marked *"to be forwarded only in the event of my decease."*³⁶

He wrote:

³⁶ A copy of the letter was provided to me by Nick Mayne, Doris' son. His mother had kept the letter until her death. The original has been donated to the Commonwealth War Grave Commissions headquarters in Maidenhead where it may be viewed on request.

June 28 1916

My dearest,

I am going into action tonight³⁷. The 10th leads the assault. God grant that it may be successful and will be the beginning of the end. It will be my privilege to have died in the cause. My quartermaster sergeant has undertaken to send you this letter.

Do not grieve my dearest. Though I die, my love will not. And GOD being reconciled to me for JESUS' sake, I shall wait for you in that Great Beyond – on the yon side as they say in Lincolnshire. Meet me in the Communion of Saints in our Blessed Lord. If the departed are permitted to visit the places they loved on earth, I shall be with you at the altar at All Saints and St. Paul's, and with you in your sweet home.

We both sought to serve our Master in the single life, but God led us together and we proposed to serve Him with equal sincerity and holiness of purpose in married life. Now we are sundered. We must not reason why. Perhaps it was that we should learn what love is before we enter into that Greater Love to come. I have learned, and I thank God for having experienced. God never allows his faithful children what is not to their soul's welfare, and He does all in love and goodness.

You will never forget me I know. As to what you will do in the future, make no sudden and stern resolve. Pray for Divine guidance and be sure that JESUS will lead you to do His Will. Your happiness will always be my wish and if I am permitted to intercede with the Saints I will remember you continually before the throne.

Love the church of your land. She has been hardly used and has many blemishes. Pray that they may be removed. Of the churches in Christendom, she

³⁷ In fact the assault which had been planned for June 29 was postponed for 48 hours until July 1 due to bad weather.

nevertheless is most true to the Catholic Faith and Hers is the mission to heal the sores and rebuild the walls of the City of God.

Give my love to your Mother and Father, and also to dear Babs. We shall all meet again, thanks be to God!

And so Farewell. Goodbye and God bless you always.

For ever and ever.

Your most loving, Jack.

Doris wrote of her engagement to Jack:

"I was still at school when I met my first love. Jack Bamber came to our house a captain in the Yorkshire Light Infantry waiting to go to France to die for – what? He was a S. African (from Durban) a student in Canterbury at the time.

My mother and father liked him very much. Indeed, I am not sure if my mother was not herself a little in love with him. The last time he came,³⁸ to say goodbye really, my mother interrupted our talk several times. She was making jam – how we remember the small things – and she left that too often to come and chat with us. I think, vaguely, but I do think our friendship, my mother's and mine, was perhaps weakened a little because of this. Anyhow, it was our last meeting for Jack was killed at Fricourt on the Somme. It was my father who cared, cared because of me whom he loved so dearly. All that ever happened to me he attributed to this sad death. My father, that indescribable father; what did he do? He went out and bought me a black frock and a mourning ring with little pearls.

³⁸ Probably in February 1916 when he had leave

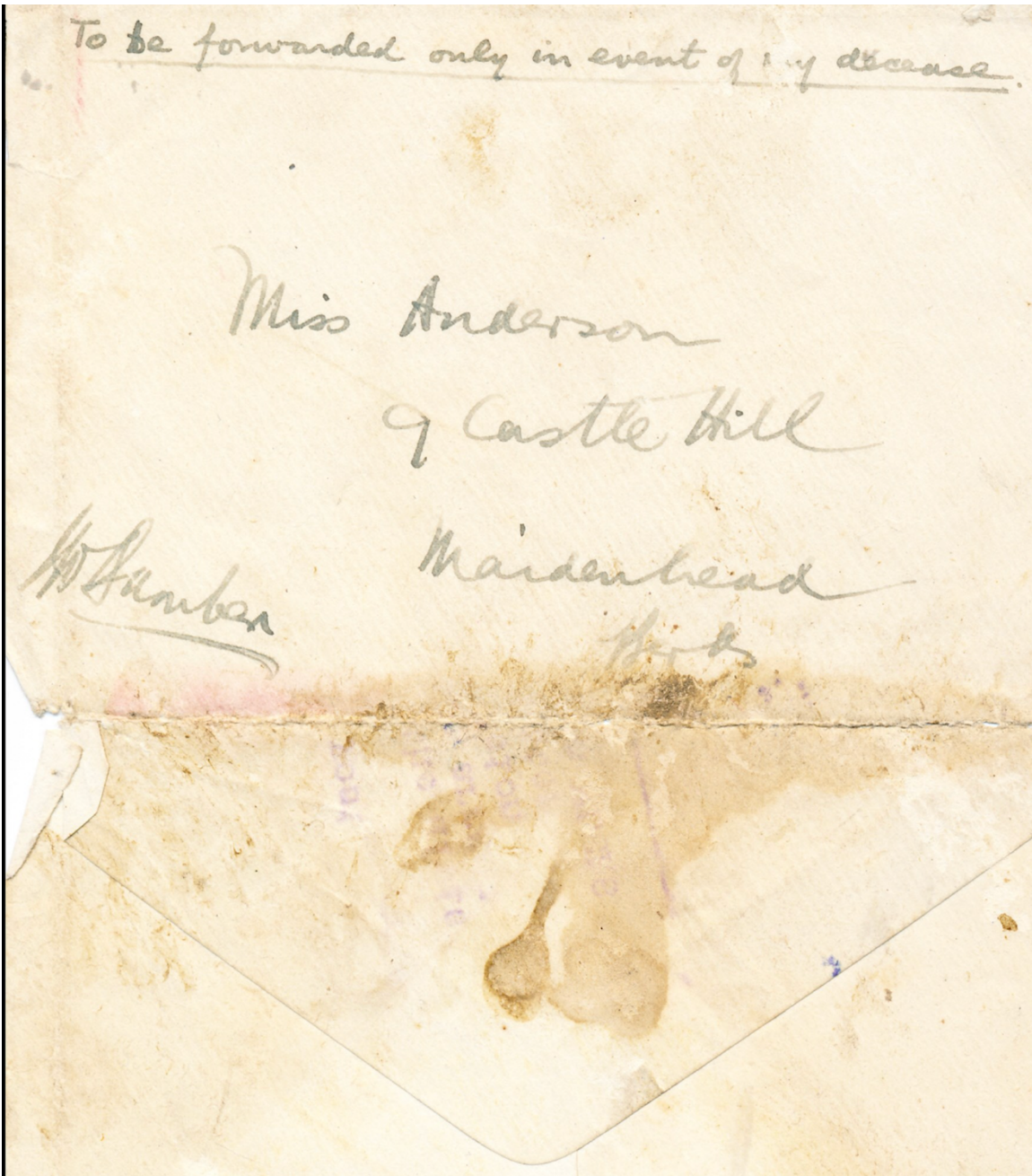


Figure 10: Envelope of Jack's last letter to his fiancée, Doris Anderson.

Well, after that I did not know what to do. I tried a convent, but I found them cruel to their orphans, unkind to each other, very, very sure of their own correctness. The matter of the butter versus margarine, written about elsewhere in my story sent me running away – for ever.

I went to Dorset to teach in a wonderful village – Hinton Martel. There was a small private orphanage of 12 young happy boys.

Between these two events I had measles. Had them badly and went to Worthing with my mother to recover. There there lived as a young curate, the brother of our dear art mistress, Olive Mayne.”

She would marry the young clergyman Reverend Kenneth Mayne.

Jack Bamber is commemorated in All Saint’s Church in Maidenhead where he and Doris met, in All Saint’s church in Ladysmith, kwaZulu-Natal where he worshipped as a boy, on the War Memorial in St Peter’s Cathedral in Pietermaritzburg where he was a server, and on the War Memorial at Maritzburg College, Pietermaritzburg, his school.

The battles of 1916, 1917 and 1918 would continue to rage back and forth over the ground where Jack fell. After the war the Commonwealth War Graves Commission was tasked with establishing and maintaining the graves of the fallen. The 1916 battlefields were searched for bodies of the fallen, and they were collected into some fifty cemeteries surrounding the battlefield.

At the head of Sausage Valley³⁹ the British established a supply depot, because Sausage Valley was a natural communication path and supply route. The supply depot was known as Gordon’s Dump, and a small cemetery was established there in 1916.

After the armistice, Gordon’s Dump Cemetery was enlarged. Remains of soldiers buried in the surrounding 1916 battlefields were collected and interred there. It is probable that Jack Bamber’s remains were not identified when the cemetery was established, because his memorial stone states, “Believed to be buried in this cemetery”. We will probably never be certain of his final resting place.

³⁹ So called because the Germans liked to position an observation balloon at the head of this long valley. The Tommies called these balloons “sausages” because of their shape. The parallel valley to the north naturally was known as “Mash Valley”



Figure 11: Scene in Sausage Valley near Contalmaison, 28 August 1916, during the Battle of the Somme. Note the field kitchens behind the vehicle. Australian War Memorial catalogue number EZ0113. Public Domain.

Lieut. John Walton Bamber, 10 Bn King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

16.10.1887 – 1.7.1916

*"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them."*

Laurence Binyon: "For the Fallen"



Figure 12: Memorial stone, J.W. Bamber. The inscription reads "Believed to be buried in this cemetery. Lieutenant J.W. Bamber. King's Own Yorkshire L.I. 1st July 1916. Age 29." The crest is the regimental emblem of the KOYLI. (The War Graves Photographic Project www.twgpp.org)



Figure 13: Gordon Dump Cemetery, Ovillers-La Boisselle, France. (The War Graves Photographic Project www.twgpp.org)



Figure 14: Jack Bamber's War medal, purchased by Alan Riches at an Antiques market in the UK.

All who served in the Great War, included the fallen, were awarded the medals. According to his service records, Jack's posthumous medals were forwarded to his father in 1922.⁴⁰ I was astonished in 2021 to hear that Alan Riches, a medal collector in the UK, had purchased one of Jack's

medals at a local antiques market. How the medal found its way there remains a mystery.

Army, Corps, Division, Brigade, Battalion

The 1916 infantry battalion was nominally composed of thirty-six officers and 1,000 men, and commanded by a Lieutenant-Colonel as C.O.

The majority of men in the battalion were in the four rifle companies, which were each nominally commanded by a Major or Captain, though due to a shortage of Officers this was not always the case. Jack Bamber was a company commander while his rank was Lieutenant.

The company comprised 240 men formed into four platoons of sixty men each, each commanded by a Lieutenant or 2nd-Lieutenant. The platoon was divided into four sections each under a junior N.C.O.

The platoon rarely saw some of its members, for these were the specialists whose work kept them elsewhere: signallers; bandsmen; cooks, sanitary men, transport men, clerks, pioneers. The actual fighting strength of a platoon was fifty men and of the battalion about 800.

The battalion formed part of a division. The divisional commander was a major-general and the division consisted of three infantry brigades of four battalions each, under brigadier-generals. Also within the brigade were the brigade Machine Gun Companies and light Trench Mortar Batteries.

Also within the division were the divisional artillery, and the Royal Engineers responsible for communications as well as construction and maintenance of trenches and dugouts, and the storage of ammunition.

The division could produce fire from 10,000 rifles, 204 machine-guns, forty trench-mortars and sixty-four guns. Compared to the almost 20,000 men in

⁴⁰ Ken Smith. Personal correspondence with the author.

the division, there were over 5,000 horses but only sixty-one motor vehicles, of which three only were lorries.

Between the Commander-in-chief at General Headquarters and the divisions were two intermediate formations – ‘army’ and ‘corps’. They operated the specialist units, which supported the infantry but did not fit into their divisions.⁴¹

Order of Battle, 21 Division, July 1, 1916

Fourth Army (General Sir Henry Rawlinson)
|
XV Corps (Lieutenant-General. H.S. Horne)
|
21st Division (New Army) (Major General D.G.M. Campbell)
|
64th Brigade (Brigadier-General H R Headlam)
9th K.O.Y.L.I.
10th K.O.Y.L.I. (Lt. Col. H.J. King)
1st East Yorks.
15th Durham L.I.

Battle of the Somme – overview

In 1916, the French Army was engaged in heavy fighting with the Germans who had attacked them at Verdun. To relieve the pressure on this sector, the British planned a major assault on the German trenches to the North. The assault was to be preceded by several days of heavy bombardment of the German trenches, accompanied when the weather permitted by gas attacks. Tunnels were dug beneath the German lines, and high explosive placed. Immediately preceding zero hour, the bombardment would reach its peak,

⁴¹ Middlebrook, Martin (1972)

and the mines under the German trenches were to be detonated. The bombardment would then slowly lift, allowing the attackers to advance towards the German trenches, which, it was hoped, would have been largely destroyed by the previous several days of heavy bombardment. In the event, this did not happen – in most sectors the Germans emerged from their deep shelters when the shelling stopped “...*to scythe the advancing men down like so much corn.*”⁴² The battle would drag on for 142 days, often taking and retaking the same ground again and again. At the end of the battle, the British lines had advanced seven miles at the cost of a million casualties from both sides. The first day of the battle, July 1, 1916 was “...*the bloodiest twenty-four hours in the entire history of the British Army.... The modest first-day gains cost 57,470 casualties, including 19,240 killed and 35,493 wounded. The scale of the collective tragedy and family grief represented by this appalling total is still mind-numbing (today).*”⁴³

⁴² McCarthy, Chris. (1993). *The Somme: The Day-by-Day account*. London: Arms and Armour Press.

⁴³ Ibid.