



Life at home in 1917: October to December

With continuing losses of merchant ships to U-boats, some supplies were very short. The district had its own Food Control Committee and Food Inspector, prices of meat and coal were fixed, sugar was restricted and people had to cut back as much as possible: drinking coffee, instead of tea, was viewed as a national service! Boy Scouts were helping collect paper for re-pulping and growing potatoes was encouraged as the best available substitute for corn.

The winter weather was very bad, with snow storms, sleet and heavy frosts making conditions extremely difficult for traffic. When the weather improved a little, however, the ice on the pond was thick enough for skaters!

There was a range of entertainments in Petersfield including concerts and visits from well-known performers to raise funds. Suffragist Maude Royden gave a lecture on 'One Moral Code For Men And Women' which was very well-attended. After the war, she championed the ordination of women and was the first woman to become a Doctor of Divinity.

On 12th December the local newspaper published a letter from a Buriton man held as a POW (potentially

William Fisher): "I still keep on smiling, and always smoke myself happy and cheerful. I always look on the bright side of things hoping to see you all again some day and I am receiving all your letters regularly ... I have been a prisoner one year today, how the time does fly! ... I am getting plenty of parcels and I am getting my tobacco regularly ... I am glad to hear all my brothers are safe. Don't you think yourselves proud having five sons in the Army? What a glad day it will be when we all return. Tell the dog to keep wagging his tail, and the cat to keep on purring, then all will be well. I will now close trusting in God to comfort us for He only rules."

Amongst other sad news from the front, it was learnt that Ernest Dennis, who had worked for Lothian Bonham Carter, had died a year after his capture at Kut.

With the parish preparing for its fourth Christmas at war, Francis Cave came back to Ditcham from the Turnberry RFC Gunnery School. On Christmas Day he visited the local Clayton Court Hospital and, in the afternoon, "went to Adhurst where many patients and nurses dressed up and had a fancy dress parade. They were all very good."

Front-line action: October to December 1917

Although Passchendaele dominated this period there were other significant events, and involvement of Buriton men, elsewhere.

In his diary RFC 2nd Lieut Francis Cave referred (in October) to “a mutiny in the German fleet at Wilhelmshaven”; “awful news from the Italian-Austrian border where 60,000 Italians have laid down their arms and the Huns are advancing fast.” (2nd November); “rumours that there has been a rebellion in Ireland” (4th November); “revolution in Petrograd with Kerensky in flight and Lenin in possession” (9th November); and “Good news comes from Palestine alone where we are moving on Gaza.” Probably unbeknown to Cave, some Buriton neighbours were around Gaza at that very time.

Action in Palestine and Mesopotamia

Frederick Powell and Edward Pretty with 2/4th Hampshires in Palestine, were ‘in reserve’ for the final attack on Gaza. Their Battalion had gone to India in December 1914, remaining there until April 1917 when they sailed to Suez.

On 7th November they marched through Gaza, deserted after the Ottoman Army had withdrawn. The retreating enemy was pursued towards Jerusalem with the men marching for a week despite shortages of food and water. On 20th November they attacked Kuryet-El-Enab in heavy rain. The Turks saw them and fired but, when fog descended, the attackers drove them out with bayonets.



The Battalion then bivouacked in olive groves but next morning the enemy shelled them, causing many casualties. It was on this day that Edward Pretty, 31, a lime worker, who had lived in South Lane with his widowed mother, died of his wounds.

Frederick Powell continued with the Battalion which captured the strategic hill of Nebi Samwil, key to taking Jerusalem which fell soon afterwards. For the rest of the year the Hampshires helped secure the coastal plain and push Turkish troops back from the port of Jaffa so that British forces could be supplied by sea. During this period Frederick Powell was wounded on 19th December.

William Browning, Harold Chitty, Albert Pennicott and Reginald Steadman (1/6th Hampshires) had been sent from India to Mesopotamia, arriving in Basra on 16th September. They travelled by barges and trains through Kut to Baghdad, staying for the rest of the year guarding Turkish prisoners, making roads and other duties.

On the Western Front

Meanwhile, the Third Battle of Ypres continued, creeping closer towards Passchendaele ridge, in a quagmire created by horrendous weather and unprecedented shelling.

Artilleryman Walter Pretty was wounded by gas and gun-shots on 3rd October and was shipped out to hospital in Norwich. He recovered fully and later returned to the front. Infantryman Leon Harfield was also soon hospitalised with a bad head injury. After an operation he recovered and served in the Labour Corp on farms near Winchester.

The 1st Hants (including James Hills, Arthur Watts and Basil Treagus) attacked Broodseinde on 4th October but were initially pushed back before advancing and capturing thirty prisoners.

The 2nd Hants fighting nearby included John Harfield, Albert Marriner and James Powell. Their one-day battle, deploying 'bite and hold' tactics, was hailed as a success.

On 9th October both battalions were involved in an advance at Poelcappelle, but heavy rain had returned and mud affected everything: movement was difficult, the accuracy of artillery was lost (with few stable positions for guns) and many shells simply disappeared into the mud.

Herbert Francis and Albert Strugnell (14th Hampshires) moved forward to help working parties on the Menin Road. Targeted by enemy guns, both were unhurt and returned to reserves safely.



The 15th Hants had fought hard in September and spent October in reserve, providing a break for Cyril Fullick, brothers Wilfred and Horace Gamblin, Joseph Hall and Frederick Rattley (although Wilfred Gamblin was listed as sick). On 11th November they set off, by train, for Italy, arriving in Mantua seven days later. They then marched 100 miles to positions above the River Piave, near Montebelluno. In wintry conditions they were targeted by Austrian artillery and machine guns. But snowfall and flu halted the Austrians and early in 1918 the battalion returned to France.

After years trying to enlist (previously considered too short and small chested), Harry Legg had eventually joined the 7th Royal Fusiliers as a 'Runner' (a highly dangerous occupation) and was now on active service. His battalion spent much of October moving between camps and undergoing training in preparation for an attack.

At 5.50am on 30th October tapes marked the 'jump off point' for Harry's first experience of 'going over the top'. The infantry set off but met impassable ground and could not keep up with the creeping barrage. Movement was hazardous and fighting remained fierce until, next morning, the attack was declared unsuccessful. The men were shelled again on their way out.



The Battle of Cambrai commenced on 20th November with about 400 tanks leading an attack at dawn: the first ever large-scale use of tanks. The 2nd Hampshires (including John Harfield, Albert Marriner and James Powell) advanced at 10.20am with four tanks assisting them. They cleared some enemy positions and leap-frogged the first wave to reach the St Quentin Canal at Les Rue Verts. They suffered casualties but helped to hold the village before moving back 'in reserve'.

Around the same time, 23rd November, Algernon Bonham Carter (now a Brigade-Major in 1st Kings Royal Rifles) travelled to billets at Barastre and occupied part of the Hindenburg Line, close to Harry Legg's 7th Royal Fusiliers. Their trenches gradually filled with sludge as snow fell heavily for days.

On 29th November the 1st KRRC 'jumped-off' at 6.25am to continue the Battle of Cambrai. They covered 300 yards with a dozen men wounded and four killed. The next day they lost many more due to shelling, strafing from an airplane and night-time attacks by Germans in white camouflage suits.

After a series of rotations into the front lines, they were out for Christmas: celebrated on 24th with fine food (roast

beef and pork & rabbit pie), rounds of port, band music and carol singing. On Christmas Day, they rose late and moved up the lines again. December 27th saw heavy shelling (with no subsequent German attack): a diversionary tactic for a move on Harry Legg's sector to their right.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Douglas Harfield, 1st Dorsets, had attacked Passchendaele ridge in bright moonlight on 2nd December but their part in the assault did not go well as they suffered a fierce bombardment. The ridge was, however, finally under Allied control.

On 10th December Harry Legg's battalion travelled south by train and marched through the night in trying weather. A few days later they moved to Metz and took their turns in the front line. On Christmas Day they came out of the lines, attended a church service and, despite an enemy aircraft dropping bombs, did their best with meagre supplies to enjoy the day.

They rotated into the lines again but on 30th December, after a furious German barrage, the enemy moved up, unseen, wearing white suits on the snowy ground and entered the British trenches. Harry Legg's Company suffered heavily with many men being either killed or captured but Harry escaped and conducted himself with great courage for which he was awarded the Military Medal.



Harry Legg