

St Julien

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Some years ago, I accompanied my father on a Hertfordshire Regiment Association trip to the battle fields of Flanders and the Somme. We had an amazing guide who took us to a field outside the village of St Julien, N.E. of Ypres in Belgium and gave us maps of the area in 1917, with the wonderful English names the roads and landmarks were given, like 'Mousetrap Farm'. He proceeded to tell us the tale of the loss of the Hertfordshire Regiment in July 1917, pointing out landmarks – not that there were many in the gently rolling countryside. He read a passage about 31st July 1917 from Lyn Macdonald's book "They Called It Passchendaele" and Dad and I were moved to tears. There was total silence in the coach as we surveyed the scene where all those men died and were injured.

Richard and I returned this year, to visit the memorial for my late Great Uncle killed in the Battle of Loos in 1916, and to go to St Julien. I knew the anniversary was coming up and would be remembered at All Saints, and I wanted to show Richard what Dad and I had experienced. It was a beautiful spring day and we began visiting various cemeteries as we came across them, all with explanations as to why they were there. We visited one at 'Lijssenthoek' on the outskirts of Popperinge, next to what was the largest evacuation Hospital for the area. It fascinated me, as I am the Chair of the Physiotherapy Benevolent Fund which started in 1917 to assist the 'Trained Masseuses' – forerunners of Physiotherapists, who volunteered and were injured on the Western Front in hospitals such as this, and who subsequently had no income to support them.

We went to 'Essex Road Cemetery' and 'Advanced Dressing Station' where a Canadian Major (later to be Lt Col.) and doctor – John Macrae worked. He looked after those injured in earlier battles around St Julien, and the Canadians injured with the gas attack of April 1915. While there he wrote the famous poem '*In Flanders' Field*

the poppies blow, between the crosses, row on row...'

Around St Julien you can see for miles, with little cemeteries dotted around the fields – what hope did anyone have of not being seen that day on either side? It is a typical Belgium village with a brick built church, a few shops and farms and a small cemetery



close to what was a Dressing Station. It was quite peaceful and very moving to be around the area where so many of the men remembered in All Saints on the Regimental War Memorial lost their lives, especially in the lanes around the village. Reading the passage that we heard that day will explain the horrors of the day...

After we had seen my Great Uncle's memorial at 'Dud Corner' we went to 'Notre Dame de Lorette' - the French National Memorial. In 2014 they built a new 'Ring of Remembrance' to all those who died in WW1, regardless of nation, rank or honour.



The names are listed alphabetically on five hundred 10ft panels at 45° to each other in a huge circle. The effect is stunning, it was so moving to find Uncle Ollie's name and the total number of names is completely incomprehensible...

May they all Rest in Peace

**Extract from "They Called It Passchendaele"
Lyn Macdonald**

Less than two miles ahead in the inferno of shells exploding on the front around St Julien, the four Company Quartermaster Sergeants of the 1st Battalion, The Hertfordshire Regiment, were looking for their battalion. They were hours late, for the ground had been impassable in places, but they had kept on going with their small party because they were bringing the Herts supper – rations for 600 men.

'CQMS G. W. Fisher, 1st Btn. The Hertfordshire Regiment, 39th Division –

"I saw my company off, with extra bandoliers of ammunition and so on, and I remember shaking hands with the officer commanding the company, Captain Lowry MC. He shook hands with me, and I looked at him and he looked at me and I knew he wasn't coming back, and he knew that I knew that he wasn't coming back. He said *'I'll see you tonight up on the Green Line'* – that was their third objective. I said, *'I'll be there alright'*.

Normally the rations went up on limbers, but the mud was so bad that we had to take them up in panniers on pack mules. The conditions were so bad that we saw some of the artillery people, who were taking their ammunition up that way, actually having to shoot some of their mules, for they were up to their stomachs in mud. They just could not get them out. When we eventually got to what had been the first German line, the officer in charge of the transport said, *'Well, this is as far as I can take my mules. I am dumping the rations here. You must make contact with the companies and get carrying parties down to take the rations up.'* So, he about-turned with his mules and off he went. There were four Company Quartermaster Sergeants, myself and three others, and we decided between us that two of us should go forward to try and find the battalion, one would stay with the rations and the other would find Brigade Headquarters to get some indication as to where the battalion might be. We tossed up for the different jobs and it fell to my lot to

find Brigade Headquarters, so I set off. There was a most tremendous bombardment going on all the while. After a long time, I found Brigade Headquarters. They were in an underground German concrete pillbox just in front of St Julien. I went down the stairs, saluted the Brigadier, told him who I was, explained the position and said, *'Could you give me any instructions, sir, that would help me find the battalion?'*

He just stood and looked at me. We were both standing on the steps, and the pillbox was rocking like a boat in a rough sea because of all the explosions. After a while he said, *'I am sorry, Quarters, I'm afraid there isn't any Hertfordshire Regiment.'*

Of course I was flabbergasted but a Company Quartermaster Sergeant doesn't argue with a Brigadier, I said, *'Well, sir, my problem is we've got rations for 600 men, including four two-gallon petrol tins of rum, can you give me any instructions as to what to do with it?'* He thought for a moment or two then said, *'Well, Quarters, everyone's had a very hard day today so distribute it to anyone that happens to be about that you think could do with it – and then get back to your transport lines.'*

We got rid of the rations to all sorts of people who were coming by – pack mules and transport people, artillery men, engineers, anybody at all. But we kept one two-gallon can of rum for ourselves for the trek back. It was five or six miles to the transport lines, through all the mud and rain, and we needed something to get our courage up to tell them that the battalion had been wiped out. We were all that was left. The few of us who had been back at the transport lines. About 10 per cent of the strength."

A few of the Herts eventually got back – a very few of the 650 men who had attacked through St Julien to the Langemarck – Zonnebeke Road, 136 were killed and 400 wounded. The 1st Herts had temporarily ceased to exist.

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/15399/they-called-it-passchendaele/>