

Fighting conditions during the Third Battle of Ypres



## THE SHORT LIFE OF PRIVATE DAVID KING

The body of the brave, young boatman killed at the Third Battle of Ypres was never found. Yet his service and ultimate sacrifice will not be forgotten, writes Tim Coghlan

**D**avid King was a young boatman drafted into war service in 1916, aged 19. He was killed in action on 31st July, 1917 aged 20 on the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres. Having gone over the top, he probably survived less than an hour, before being mown down by fire from one of the German machine gun units that had survived the British bombardment, which had preceded the attack.

None of David King's fellow soldiers, who survived the slaughter, had any recollection of how he died or where he fell. His body was never recovered and he has therefore no known grave. His name is recorded on the Roll of Honour at the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres, along with 55,000 other British and Commonwealth soldiers who were killed in the Ypres Sector between 1914 and 1918, and likewise have no known grave.

Whereas little information survives



David King before going to the Western Front

about most other boatmen who were killed in WWI – for they were for the most part illiterate members of an itinerant community – in the case of David King, he and his siblings had received some education and could read and write. And thanks to a younger brother – too young to go to war – who collected them, postcards from the front and photographs survive relating to David and his brother Harry's war service. These are now in the hands of his great nephew Chris Jones, who continues the family's interest in canals. Chris has also carried out his own research, uncovering new material. He has kindly made all of this available to me, to allow me the honour of compiling this tribute to his great uncle David King, a canal boatman, and then a soldier in the 1st Battalion of the Herfordshire Regiment.

David was born on 21st March 1897 to

his parents, Harry and Mary Jane King, in the lock keeper's cottage at Denham Deep Lock on the Grand Union Canal just north of Uxbridge. The lock is 3.5 metres (11 feet) deep, making it the deepest lock on the Grand Union Canal. Today the lock and its cottage survive much as they would have been when David was born. They now stand in precious Green Belt that looks south towards that modern mode of transport the M40, and the urban sprawl of Uxbridge not far away. David's maternal grandfather was the lock keeper, a role he had previously performed at Cassio Park and Black Jacks, both locks a few miles further south. David was second son and third child, with an older brother Harry (junior) who was also to be called up in WWI. In time there were to be six sons and three daughters, all surviving a childhood on a pair of working narrowboats.

David's father Harry owned and worked a pair of wooden narrowboats, pulled by one horse. He carried for Coles, Shadbolt, and Co., a company based at a wharf on the canal at Harefield, near Uxbridge, and having other wharves at Kings Cross in central London and Reading. The business was mainly cement manufacturers, and in addition, lime, slate and tile merchants. It also brought coal down from Nuneaton and Tamworth to the then asbestos works at the Copper Mills near Harefield. Harry was paid £10 for a coal delivery of 55 to 60 tons per pair of boats from Nuneaton, but only £2 19s for a delivery of 59 tons of cement from Harefield into London. In the year David was born, Harry earned £248, on which after paying for the boat costs, including docking and the horse feed and stabling, there was only £122 to live on. In those early days, before the children had grown to an age to be able to help, Harry would have walked every mile of those trips, leading his horse, and guiding the boats through the locks.

Then from 1907, Harry obtained a contract to supply coal from the North Warwickshire coalfields to the three Dickinson paper mills at Apsley, Croxley and Nash, all on the Grand Union Canal generally in the Watford area. As one of the largest paper-manufacturers in the world, the mills devoured huge quantities of coal, delivered directly to their wharves by narrowboat, for their steam-turbine driven machinery. This practice was to continue on through WWII and into the 1960s.

To take on the Dickinson contract, Harry commissioned a new wooden horse-drawn narrowboat for £126 from



The Kings boys gathered for the wedding of their oldest sister Rose

boatbuilders Costins of Berkhamsted, who built boats at what is today Castlewharf, from 1802 until the business went bankrupt in 1912. Harry named the boat the *Forget Me Not* – after his wife's favourite flower. He also bought the Nautilus secondhand from Costins for £60. The boats were designed to carry up to 55 tons of coal in total, with special wooden 'side cloths' to take the extra load.

Harry did well from his Dickinson contract, and by 1910 he was able to rent a cottage at Apsley for his wife and younger children to live in, whilst he and his older children continued to work the boats. In that year Harry bought some land at Ebbens Road, Boxmoor and built a small house backing onto the canal which still stands, with its build-plaque of 1912. He named it Manor View. He was able to moor his pair of boats on the canal outside the house, when not



David with Harry (seated) before leaving for war

working them. In the 1911 census, the house was recorded as having four rooms, with Mary and all six sons living there. Harry and his two daughters were absent – no doubt as he worked the boats with them, and was doing this at the time of the census. Meanwhile his two older sons worked occasionally in the paper mills, joining their father on the boats when required.

All the children had an education at the local primary school, which gave them literacy – a rare thing and a distinct advantage amongst the working boatmen. The children also attended the local Two Waters Methodist Church Sunday schools, when they could. The family were strongly teetotal, and following the wartime 'great example of His Majesty The King', David signed a pledge card in 1915 of Total Abstinence from all intoxicating liquors during the period of the War. This survives, as also do his Bible, Salvation Army hymnbook and a French/English phrase book.

At the outbreak of WWI, Harry continued with carrying coal to the mills, but now under contract to Samuel Barlow Limited of Tamworth, with whom the family were building connections. The Barlows were also Methodists and there were family links. At Easter 1915, Harry's oldest daughter Rose married Joseph (Jo) Garrett, who worked for Barlows at Apsley Methodist Church, with the reception at his house, Manor View. A photograph survives of all six sons in their wedding best on the stern of the *Forget Me Not* moored on the canal outside the house. Harry (junior) and David, who look like boys here, were to look very different two years on, after seeing active service on the Western Front.

Following the outbreak of war, David continued working for Dickinson, as a result of which he was later included on

the company's employee war memorial, and following peace in 1919, his family received his war service award.

Just why David did not join up as a young man until late 1916 is open to guesswork. Boatmen were a reserved occupation until then, and working at Dickinson, with the importance of paper production, could well have been the same. All this was to end with the disastrous level of allied casualties in the Battle of the Somme in the summer of 1916. Unmarried boatmen under the age of 26 could now be called up, most of them joining the Royal Engineers working as sapper bargees on the French waterways in the British sector. Though an experienced boatman, and one that was literate as well, it is surprising that David did not become a boatman with the Royal Engineers. We know that he and his brother Harry joined their local territorial regiment, the 1st Battalion of the Hertfordshire Regiment instead – signing up at Hertford – as by the winter of 1916, they were in France. David sent his family a postcard to tell them so, and to say how cold he was. Brother-in-law Jo having married in 1915, never went to war, but two of his brothers who did, and went into the army, were later killed.

Over the period from the winter of 1916 to July 1917, the Hertfordshire Regiment saw action in the final large British attack in the Battle of the Somme, which was called the Battle of Ancre. Fought in November 1916, it was deemed a great success and a fitting conclusion to the bloody Somme Campaign. David and Harry must have participated in it.

The attack was the largest in the British sector since September 1916, and had a seven-day preliminary bombardment, which was twice as heavy

as that of 1st July – the first day of the Battle of the Somme – and included the use of new high-explosive shells capable of cutting a path through the German barbed wire defences, if successfully aimed. The British were improving on their weaponry – including more effective use of the new tank, and their battle tactics were improving likewise, ahead of the Germans, who never really even developed a tank.

On the morning of 13th November, the Hertfordshires began their advance, which was fortunately covered by mist and a heavy artillery barrage. This enabled the battalion to seize the whole of the German front line and advance 1,600 yards beyond it. All objectives were achieved, including capturing 250 prisoners and nine machine-guns. The position was successfully held until the regiment was relieved the following night. The cost in casualties was seven officers and 150 men.

The Battle of Ancre as a whole saw four German divisions needing to be relieved due to the number of casualties they suffered, and over 7,000 German troops taken prisoner. The war poet Edmund Blunden, who was present at the battle, called it, “a feat of arms vieing (sic) with any recorded. The enemy was surprised and beaten”.

The British Army of a mere 100,000 in 1914 that had formed the BEF (British Expeditionary Force), had been dismissed by the Kaiser in August 1914 as ‘General French’s contemptible little army.’ He had then called for ‘all the valour of my soldiers to exterminate it.’ But two years on, it was still very much there, and had grown in numbers over tenfold. It was now the attacking force, with the Germans very much on the

defensive. For the Germans, 1916 had been a year of no victories, and almost constant defeats on the Western Front – especially on the Somme and at Verdun – which was now wearing down morale on the home front. If the war was not lost, neither could it be won. Meanwhile the war casualties at the front and privations on the home front just got worse.

Though the attack was hailed a success by the British, it was too late in the year to be taken further. Also for all the fighting and the loss of some 450,000 British casualties in the Battle of the Somme, the Germans had only been pushed back a maximum of 20 miles, with Berlin still over 600 miles away. Nothing of great strategic importance had been taken that would change the war, and looking eastward beyond, there was nothing strategic that was tangibly in view.

By contrast, the Germans were enjoying great success with their new U-boats, causing havoc to allied shipping from their Belgian bases at Zeebrugge and Ostend. Advancing into Belgium from its foothold in the Ypres Sector near Calais, was now the Allied objective for the Big Push in 1917. This would be attempted in what was to be termed the Third Battle of Ypres, to take place in the high summer on 1917, when the low-lying reclaimed coastal ground over which the battle would be fought, would be at its driest.

In preparation for this battle, the Hertfordshires were moved in early 1917 to holding the line near Ypres on the French-Belgian border.

Soldiers when writing home were not allowed to tell their families what they were doing, nor for the most part where



A clearing station during the battle, Harry would have been taken on a stretcher for treatment for a similar station



The sad state of Ypres after two years of war

they were. But the brothers seemed to have got around this by sending a postcard to their brother Jack, with a picture of the King of the Belgians and a selection of his officers.

At the beginning of July, the Hertfordshires came out of the line and went into training in earnest, learning to use the latest weaponry, and the new tactical skills for advancing across no man's land and taking the enemy's positions. Unlike the recruits untried in battle, who saw action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, and were mown down in Napoleonic mass infantry attacks, the Hertfordshire Regiment was now an experienced and well trained fighting force, ready for the next Big Push.

The Third Battle of Ypres began on the 31st July, with a three day action that was called the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. Here the 39th Division, which included the Hertfordshires began an advance towards it. The attack had mixed results. A substantial amount of ground was captured and a large number of casualties inflicted on the German defenders, except on the tactically vital Gheluveld plateau on the right flank. The German defenders also recaptured some ground in counterattacks.

But for the Hertfordshires it was a disaster from the outset. They were employed in the third-wave attack on the first day, advancing over the Steenbeek

stream towards what was left of the village of St Julien on what was termed the Langemarck Line. Here they suffered increasingly heavy casualties from enemy machine gun fire, where machine gunners remained active in pillboxes on the Pilckem Ridge to their left, that had survived the pre-attack bombardment. The German machine gunners had an esprit de corps that they would never surrender, and would continue firing at their posts, even though other soldiers had retreated. In return, they often met their end by being bayoneted.

On reaching the enemy wire on the Langemarck Line, it was found to have been undamaged by the artillery bombardment, with the first two waves lying dead and wounded all around it. The Hertfordshire battalion was forced to fall back under heavy fire and strong German counterattacks. Every officer was a casualty, 11 of whom including the commanding officer were killed, while other ranks suffered 459 casualties. Later that day, the regimental quartermaster when inquiring where to take the supplies to the men, was told that the battalion no longer existed. The regiment was to suffer amongst the worst casualties of the Third Battle of Ypres.

Among those other ranks killed was David. Just where he fell and how he died is not known, probably because everyone else around him was killed.

His body was never recovered. Harry had gone over the top with David, but lost touch with him, and was shot in the stomach. Somehow Harry managed to get back to the British lines. He wrote to his parents in early 1918, referring to David, 'I was the last one to see him alive, but what happened that day I can hardly remember for I was nearly out of my mind. If he is dead, I believe he has gone to heaven, for a better living lad I never knew.'

News of the disaster soon reached the home front. The Herts, Hemel Hempstead Gazette and West Herts Advertiser informed the local population of what occurred. On 1st December, 1917 a special page was devoted to 'Local heroes' including David King 'Missing' and Harry King 'Wounded'.

After the action, David was officially reported as missing, but it was not until 21st October, 1918 that the family received official notification from the Army Council that he was dead. "With reference to your enquiry concerning Private D. King, I am directed to inform you that no further news having been received relative to the soldier, who has been missing since 31st July 1917, the Army Council have been regretfully constrained to conclude that he is dead and that his death took place on or since 31st July, 1917. I am to express the sympathy of the Army Council with relatives of the soldier."

After Harry senior received this notification, he, like so many other bereaved parents with sons declared 'missing presumed dead' – including the authors Rudyard Kipling and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – began a painful and futile search to try and find out how and where he died. Harry wrote to the local newspapers. He spoke to other families of serving soldiers in the Hertfordshires. to ask if they knew anything. He even wrote to the Red Cross to check prisoner of war and burial records. But it produced nothing.

As to what happened in the rest of the Third Battle of Ypres, after several weeks of changeable weather prior to the commencement of battle, heavy rainfall had begun on the very afternoon of the attack on the first day. This had a serious effect on operations in August, causing more problems for the British, who were advancing into an area already devastated by artillery fire, and which was partly flooded. The battlefield became a mud bath, with little achieved.

The battle continued until 10th November, with the Canadians capturing the high-lying village of Passchendaele – known to the British as 'Passiondale', with its sense of Christ's Passion. The Ypres Salient had been extended by five miles, but that was little more than the objective for Day One. The capture of the Belgian Channel ports to deny them to the Germans – a major objective of the campaign – had not been achieved. For that five mile advance, total Allied casualties have been variously quantified between 200,000 and 450,000, and conditions in which the men were expected to fight, and where they died, were something impossible to imagine. What the poet Siegfried Sassoon (1886 – 1967) wrote of the Battle of the Somme, could equally have been applied here:

*Pray that you'll never know*

*The hell where youth and laughter go.*

After Harry had somehow got back to the British lines, he was taken to a hospital somewhere in France. He then appears on 4th September in a hospital or convalescent home in Banbury, Oxfordshire, little more than a month after he was wounded. The British were extraordinarily effective in getting their wounded back to 'Blighty' for recovery, with large country houses, and even lunatic asylums taken over for this purpose. Here Harry sent a postcard to his brother Jack, with the message, 'I am longing to see Mother and Dad, hope all at home are quite well. Perhaps you will (unclear) this photo. Harry King.' The photograph was of his ward in Banbury,



A postcard from Harry's ward in a convalescent home near Banbury on which he marked his bed

with a hand written X to mark his bed.

Harry was then moved to a recuperation establishment in Crowborough, Sussex, where his family visited him. Towards the end of the year, only three months after being wounded in the stomach, and though no longer fit for the Western Front, he was passed fit for service with the Royal Defence Corps in Ireland, guarding the port of Cork. That country had been in turmoil since the Easter Rising of 1916, and large numbers of wounded soldiers – no longer fit for the Western Front – were sent there to keep order. (An officer of this type was the male-lead in the film *Ryan's Daughter*, who is constantly haunted by memories of being under fire on the Western Front.) Harry sent a postcard from the barracks at Kinsale, a seaport in County Cork, in an area which was notorious for its gun-running from German U-boats. The postcard is dated 14th November, 1918 – three days after the Armistice, that was to end the war, was signed. The postcard picture shows bayonet drill practice in progress. (A U-boat sank the RMS *Lusitania* off the coast of Kinsale in 1915, resulting the USA coming into the war in 1917).

On demob in 1919, Harry moved to Tamworth in Staffordshire and married a local war widow, who was not a boatwoman, and had three children. So he decided not to go back on the boats – only women who were born and brought up on the boats could take the gruelling hardship of a cramped life constantly on the move in all weathers. So Harry went to work in the local coal mines. The newlyweds had a son whom they called David. The boy was one of five who were named David across the King family, in memory of that tragic young man.

In 1920, following a docking of one of his boats, Harry senior renamed it *David* – by tradition and suspicion, the boatmen only changed boat names when the boats were in dry dock. But he soon found it too painful a reminder. Shortly after he renamed it *Euston*.

In 1923, Harry senior sold his boats to Barlows Limited and moved to Tamworth to work day boats for them. Most of his children moved with him. By educating his children he had intended them to leave the boats, but some continued into the 1960s. David's brother Thomas William (Will) later worked for Barlows in the 1920s. He then went to work for the Birmingham Canal Navigation (BCN) where he made a unique photographic record of the BCN which survives. By the end of the 1920s, all the brothers had left the canals, mainly moving into the mining industry.

Harry junior kept an interest in the canals and in old age, would often visit the working boats tied up at Glascote to meet up with friends from his working days on the boats. He died in 1964. His collection of David memorabilia is now kept by granddaughters Gillian and Jane, who kindly allowed their use in this article.

David is still very much remembered by the descendants of Harry senior's large family, who turned out in good numbers at the National Arboretum on 31st July, 2017 for the centenary Service of Remembrance of the commencement of the Third Battle of Ypres. Several of the males present were proudly called David – as their first or second name. All present remembered him with pride and honour – their great uncle and more, who had given his young life in the service of his country. 