

From Norton to Thiepval - A Soldier's War

(2127) 265294 Private George Leonard Sherwood

1st/1st Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment



Early Days

George Leonard Sherwood was born on 26th September 1894 in Norton Village, Herts, the second son of John Leonard and Ellen Sherwood. As a boy he was a pupil at St Nicholas Church of England School in the village and also attended the Church. Being a member of a close-knit community, he was known to the vicar, The Rev Canon Bailey.



St Nicholas Church Norton

Enlistment

On 13th March 1913 he enlisted in the Territorial Army in Royston, Herts, together with some other young men from Norton Village. As a consequence he became a member of the Royston based, E Company of the 1st Battalion, Hertfordshire Regiment. At this time it was common for young men to join the Territorial Army, apart from patriotic reasons, it gave them the opportunity of a “summer holiday” when their unit attended its annual summer training camp.

According to his Attestation Document at the time of enlisting he was working as an Apprentice Turner at Ewatts Geysers Works in Works Road, Letchworth, Herts. He had his Army Medical Examination on 22nd March 1913 and was “*Considered fit for the Territorial Force*”. George Leonard was described as being 5ft 8 ½ in tall with a 35 ½ in chest measurement and having “Good” vision. He was given his Service Number 2127 which remained valid until 19th April 1916 when he received his new number 265294 .

Mobilization

In August 1914, George was at the 1st/1st Battalion’s Summer Camp in Ashridge Park, Herts when the Battalion was ordered to mobilize. Each soldier was given an Embodiment Document instructing them to report to Company Headquarters in Hertford by noon on the 5th August 1914. Presumably all were allowed to return home to settle their personal affairs, because on 4th August a photographer from the Royston Crow newspaper photographed E Company on the platform of Royston railway station awaiting the train to Hertford. George Leonard, in fact, joined the train at Letchworth Railway Station on that day, as he is shown on a similar press photograph of Letchworth soldiers surrounded by well wishers.



Territorial Soldiers at Letchworth Station, awaiting the train to Hertford. 4th August 1914

After assembling at Hertford, the Battalion moved to its war station at Bury St Edmunds, where on the 31st August 1914 each member of the Battalion signed a document agreeing to Overseas Service. It was expected that the Battalion would be training for the following six months before deployment. However, the German advance in Flanders had not been stopped and reinforcements were needed.

Off to War

On 1st November the Battalion received orders to prepare to embark on 5th November. The following days were engaged in preparations for deployment and new short rifles were issued although the Battalion had little chance to practice with them. The Battalion left Bury St Edmunds in two trains for Southampton and on arrival they embarked on the SS City of Chester. This steamer sailed about midnight for Le Havre arriving next morning. The Battalion disembarked and then marched to No 2 Rest Camp, which was 3 ½ miles from the port.

Two days later on the 8th November, the Battalion entrained for an overnight journey to St Omer. Trains used for this journey were made up of cattle trucks labelled HOMMES 40 CHEVAUX 8. It was not possible for 40 men with their equipment to get into a truck, it being more usual for each to hold 20 to 28 men. Each truck had double doors on each side and these were often left open as the train crept through the French countryside, taking about 19 hours for the journey. On arrival in St Omer the Battalion marched to barracks at nearby Tatinghem.



British soldiers look out from their French Railways cattle truck

Orders were received on the 11th November for the Battalion to move by motor bus to Vlammentinghe. This journey to the front was described by Private Clifford Lane, a fellow soldier in the Battalion. He recalled that *"thirty or forty open topped London omnibuses were waiting to take us to the Front. As we boarded these everybody wanted to sit on the top deck as it was nice fairly bright day for November. We had not been going for very long before it started to rain and everyone got thoroughly soaked. On arrival we were lined up and each given a generous drink of rum, so we were really quite happy"*.

Flanders

The Battalion was now destined to take part in the 1st Battle of Ypres. After arriving in Ypres, they marched through the town along the road to Menin and as they did so, came under shrapnel fire, with four soldiers receiving slight wounds. The march continued through the Menin Gate to Kilo 3, situated just west of Hooge where bivouacs were set up. Of this march, Private Lane recalled "We did not know where we were going but the moon broke through and it was quite a nice night. As we marched along we passed a Catholic priest who took off his hat and murmured his blessings"

For the next few days the Battalion was ordered into trenches in Railway Wood between Ypres and Zonnebeke. Then, in the evening of the 14th November the battalion moved to Nonne Bossen and took over trenches from The Oxfordshire Light Infantry which they manned for two days and

nights. After a day's respite the Battalion moved to Zillebeke for a further three days and nights in trenches. Throughout the whole of this period the soldiers were heavy shelled by German artillery and casualties occurred, with George's E Company losing 3 killed and 20 wounded by the 19th November. In addition the Company experienced the first fall of snow on that evening.

A letter home

The Battalion War Diary recorded that on the 18th November whilst at Zillebeke, Cpl Boardman was killed and one man was missing. The missing man will have been Bill Johnson whom George referred to in the following letter to Canon Bailey. He wrote:

2127 Pte G L Sherwood

E Company, Herts Regt

British Expeditionary Force

Dear Sir,

Just a line to thank you for your kindness and parcel which I received quite safe. The belts and socks will be very handy as we have not had any yet. I have given a belt and a pair of socks to Jack, the others I gave to Pte H Noon another Norton lad. Sorry I could not give them to Bill Johnson as poor chap is missing we think he was buried alive. I was one of the party who when night fell had to go and get out all the dead and wounded but we could not find anything of Billy and one or two other fellows. It was not a very nice job walking about outside the trenches helping to lift dead mates while the Germans were firing and up to one's knees in mud. I can assure you we do not take any notice about ourselves glad to help others. All the time we have been in the trenches it has either rained or been snowing. We are having very rough weather and very cold. There is not much room in the trench as one has to keep low so we cannot move about much to keep ourselves warm, still we make the best of it.

Thank God I came out safe and sound. I think I have been lucky as I was right close where the shells were bursting. That is all we hear all day and night, shells bursting and bullets whistling about our heads, then perhaps one shell will drop and blowing up the trench kills or buries the chaps in it. Now I am able to tell you we have got out of the thick of it to have a rest. I think we need it as we are all about done up with one thing or another such as frost bitten feet. Now I think I must draw to a close now. Thank you again for all your kindness. Jack and Noon tell me to thank for them also. It seemed quite nice to hear from old folks at home and cheering as well. Now I will say goodbye for the present hoping for a safe return some day.

I remain your friend,

G L Sherwood

The style of his handwriting indicates the first part was most likely written whilst George was in bivouac at Kilo 3, the latter part whilst he is in billets at Metteren thus dating the letter as being written about 18th-22nd November 1914.

With the Guards

Following this action at Zillebeke, the battalion moved from the front line to a rest area at Meteren, south west of Ypres, for a month of refitting and training. There they joined with the 4th (Guards) Brigade for the first time on 20th November 1914.

Of the 20-mile march from Ypres to Meteren, Private Lane recalled that “when we came out of the line we marched along a road and it was getting frosty. The road was cobbled and it became slippery. We didn’t know where we were going but we were going out of the line. We marched quite happily but it was getting quite hard work. We had gone two or three weeks without any real sleep, we hadn’t had our boots off for three weeks and no proper food, nothing hot anyway. We marched a further few miles and men began to fall out. Our Regimental Sergeant Major came along with his stick and walloped them until they got up and started marching again, because we could not possibly leave them there, they would have frozen to death.

About midnight we saw some fires burning in the distance, it was a stopping place for us at Ouderdom. They had built up these fires and made huge dixies of tea. It was the middle of the night and we had tea and rum and we were off again.

When we got to Meteren we simply flopped down into the road and just lay there waiting to be told where we were to be billeted. Eventually about ten of us were billeted in a small cottage with an old gentleman and his family”.

Christmas 1914

On the 22nd December, the Brigade moved from Meteren to billets in Bethune for the night. The following day, the Brigade marched to Les Lacons Farm where they spent Christmas and New Year manning trenches at a crossroads. In some areas of the trenches there was a “Christmas Truce” with British and German soldiers fraternising. However there was no such truce for the Hertfordshire soldiers and unfortunately on Christmas Day Sgt Gregory and Pte Huggins were killed.

Private Lane’s recollection of that time was that “we’d all got these long thick woollen underpants and vest on and we were soaked right through. When we got back to the trench we tried to get round a little brazier fire but only two or three men could get near it so we didn’t really get dry. Then they brought us “Princess Mary’s gift box” (George Leonard had one of these). These boxes had cigarettes, tobacco and a bar of chocolate which was very much appreciated. The English newspapers then said the troops in the front line enjoyed Christmas Dinner. This consisted of cold bully beef and a cold lump of Christmas pudding”.

After joining the 4th (Guards) Brigade during the previous month, the 1st Battalion Hertfordshire Regiment adopted some of the Guards peculiarities. George’s Royston based E Company amalgamated with some further Companies, now to be known as 3 Company.

1915

In 1915 the Battalion was involved in four major actions. On 6th February it supported an attack by the 3rd Coldstream and 1st Irish Guards which resulted in the capture of Cuinchy Brickstacks. Four days after this operation, the Battalion received a Commendation from the General Officer Commanding for its "steady soldierlike bearing under heavy fire in support of the attack and again during the bombardment in the afternoon of the following day".

During 12th – 18th March, in preparation for an attack on Neuve Chapelle, The Battalion constructed new support trenches whilst under heavy enemy fire. Casualties during this period amounted to 2 killed and 19 wounded

At about this time, Private Lane described the soldiers' conditions. "Every man on the front line had lice after about two or three weeks as they were in the dugouts. They used to get into the seams of your underclothes and the only way to get rid of them was to get a lighted candle and go along the seams with it and you could hear the eggs cracking. There was no way of getting rid of them at all. We used to have sent out a chemical called Harrison's Pomade. We used it but it was not very effective."

At the battle for Festubert in mid-May 1915, the Battalion supported an attack by the Guards with George's Company reinforcing the Irish Guards and relieving them in the front line during the evening. This was the Battalions first experience of large scale casualties with 17 killed and 93 wounded.

On the 19th August the Battalion bid farewell to the 4th (Guards) Brigade and marched to billets at Bethune having been transferred to 6th (Infantry) Brigade.

In late August the Battalion moved into bivouac at Gorre to dig a new communication trench, with this task lasting until the end of the month. Early September found Companies spread at Cuinchy, Cambrin Support Point, Maison Rouge and Annequin.

The Battalion then moved into trenches in Z2 Section from 8th to 12th September relieving The King's Royal Rifles. During this time Casualties were one killed and four wounded. George was one of the wounded as his Casualty Report is dated 10th September 1915.

Wounded

George was passed through the casualty evacuation process and returned to England to recover from a leg wound. Whilst at home he visited a local photographer's studio and was photographed in his hospital blue uniform with red tie.



George Leonard Sherwood

We have no further information on George's whereabouts from September 1915 until April 1916 but presumably he was receiving treatment for his wound.

Return to France

Georges records show that on 21st April 1916 he sailed from Southampton arriving in Rouen the following day where he was sent to No1 Territorial Base Depot. From there he was immediately attached to No 6 Entrenching Battalion. Little is known of his time with this unit.

The Somme

In July 1916 George was seconded to 8th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment. This Battalion had been involved in an attack at La Boiselle earlier in the month, and had suffered 302 officers and men killed, wounded or missing. It was now at Millencourt for a period of reorganisation and refitting. George arrived at Millencourt with a draft of 67 other ranks on the 11th. Two days later they were joined by a second draft of 123 other ranks from the 1st Hertfordshire Regiment.

This Battalion was making preparations to attack the Germans Switch Line north of High Wood on 22nd July. In the build up to the attack, on the 21st July, George's Company was ordered into an old German trench near Bazentin le Petit. As the Company was being led into the trench, it exploded.

At Roll Call on the same day George was reported as “Missing”, although his Death Certificate states he died on 31st July 1916. He was aged 21years.

The attack was a failure and over the days of preparation and the actual attack this Battalion lost a further 200 men killed, wounded or missing

Remembrance

George Leonard Sherwood has no known grave. He is commemorated together with 21 other members of the Hertfordshire Regiment on Pier 12, Face C of the Thiepval Memorial, Somme, France. His name is also commemorated on the War Memorial in Letchworth Garden City and on the lychgate at St Nicholas Church, Norton.



Thiepval Memorial

The above has been compiled from:

- Family recollections
- Official documents including 1st Herts & 8th Gloucester War Diaries
- The History of the Hertfordshire Regiment by J D Sainsbury
- Forgotten Voices of the Great War by Max Arthur (Pte Lowe’s recollections)
- Local Press photographs

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