

# **Charles John Holmes**

**Lance Corporal 265503**

**6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry**



Photograph Courtesy: The Beechey Family

John Holmes of Beaconsfield joined the Royal West Surrey Regiment in 1877 and served with the 2nd Battalion for a period of 12 years. On his release, he maintained his connection with the military by joining the Militia; the 3rd Battalion Oxfordshire Light Infantry. At that time, his “trade or calling” was recorded as gamekeeper and his service with the Militia, requiring only short periods of attendance for exercises and training, would have provided a useful source of additional income.

John Holmes married Mary Hilton in the St James Baptist Chapel, Amersham on 23 May 1891. John was 35 years of age and then employed as a general labourer, while she was somewhat younger at 22. The 1891 Census, taken on the night of 5/6 April and just pre-dating their marriage, shows Mary employed as a general domestic servant at the White Hart Hotel in Beaconsfield and this is probably where she and John met. They started a family almost immediately and were to have seven children, three boys and four girls.

In 1901 the family was living in a house in Wycombe Street, Beaconsfield and John continued in employment as a general labourer. However, by 1911, things were obviously rather tough for them and the Census shows John and Mary and four of the children resident in the Amersham Workhouse. The two oldest children, boys Charles and William, were boarding in the home of Thomas Muckley and family in Seer Green near Beaconsfield and were employed as farm labourers.

The next few years were to see increasing tensions among the Greater European Nations, Austria-Hungary, Serbia and Russia with a sequence of events leading inexorably to the Great War. Britain became committed with her declaration of war against Germany on 4 August 1914.

Charles and William Holmes were both to see service during the war. William enlisted in the Royal Navy on 5 October 1916 as a Stoker Second Class and was soon to join the Destroyer, HMS *Nessus*, fresh from her engagement earlier that year at the Battle of Jutland. He would have been on board on 7 September 1918 when the vessel was in collision with HMS *Amphitrite* and, despite efforts to tow her to safety, which were hampered by bad weather in the North Sea at the time, *Nessus* sank the following day. Fortunately there was no loss of life as a result of the accident. William was demobilized in early 1919 and would go on to marry and have a family of his own. For Charles the outcome was to be different.

**Charles John Holmes** enlisted in the 1/1st Buckinghamshire Battalion, raised in August 1914, at a recruiting centre in Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. Private Holmes, 2078, became a member of D Company, along with others joining in Aylesbury, and he was selected to be a “Bomber”. A long period of training followed, the major portion of which was undertaken in Chelmsford, Essex punctuated only by “a most bitterly cold fortnight in November spent under canvas at Great Totham, where the Battalion was employed digging defences for the East Coast”. Orders finally came for the Battalion to embark for France and on 30 March 1915 it paraded for the last time in Chelmsford and was given a “first-rate send-off” by the people of the town. Trains carried the men to Folkestone where they boarded the steamer “*Invicta*” for the crossing to Boulogne, arriving late that same evening.

The early months were spent in the area of Ploegsteert, Southern Belgium, known to any “Tommy” who served there as “Plugstreet”! It is situated at the very south of the Ypres Salient. There were no major set-piece battles in the area but the skirmishing over the war years took its toll and there are many cemeteries there, some bearing names with London connections such as the Strand Military Cemetery and Hyde Park Corner Cemetery.

By late July 1915 the Battalion had moved on to Hébuterne south-west of Gommecourt and they were to remain in the area for the next twelve months. During that time, Charles was granted a week’s leave to the UK from 20th to 27th October 1915. Enemy action was light in the early months but, as the German artillery became more active, dugouts were constructed sufficient for the entire garrison of Hébuterne.

“Our dugouts had the outward appearance of real luxury, owing to a large portion of the furniture of Hébuterne having been imported into them. Four-poster beds existed in quite a number, but owing to the quantities of small vermin and mice which had made their homes in them, they proved to be most undesirable, and were almost all scrapped before we had been a week in the line”.

(*The First Buckinghamshire Battalion 1914-1919*, Captain P L Wright, D.S.O., M.C.)

In some of their bombardments the Germans used a large number of gas shells, but the men, well trained in the use of their gas helmets, were little harmed by them. Rather surprisingly, another now long accepted item of the soldier’s equipment was not in regular use!

In this same bombardment, the use and importance of yet another protective appliance was brought out for the first time. This was the steel helmet, which had not as yet been made a general issue, but which had been sent to us in very small quantities to test and report on. Two men who were wearing these helmets had them struck by large fragments of shell. In one case the helmet was merely badly dented and, in the other, although the steel was ripped open, the shell fragment lost its sting and failed to penetrate the man’s head.

(*The First Buckinghamshire Battalion 1914-1919*, Captain P L Wright, D.S.O., M.C.)

On 15 March 1916, with the Battalion in the trenches at Hébuterne, the *War Diary* notes that the “artillery was rather active on both sides” and it seems that Charles was wounded slightly whilst “at duty”. The following month, on 17 April, he was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal.

In the period up to June 1916, the Battalion fought the enemy with regular patrols in an effort to prevent them from establishing a firm presence in "No Man's Land". When withdrawn from the line for "rest", the men were given strenuous training and practised all manner of attacks with a view to the coming British offensive on the **Somme**.

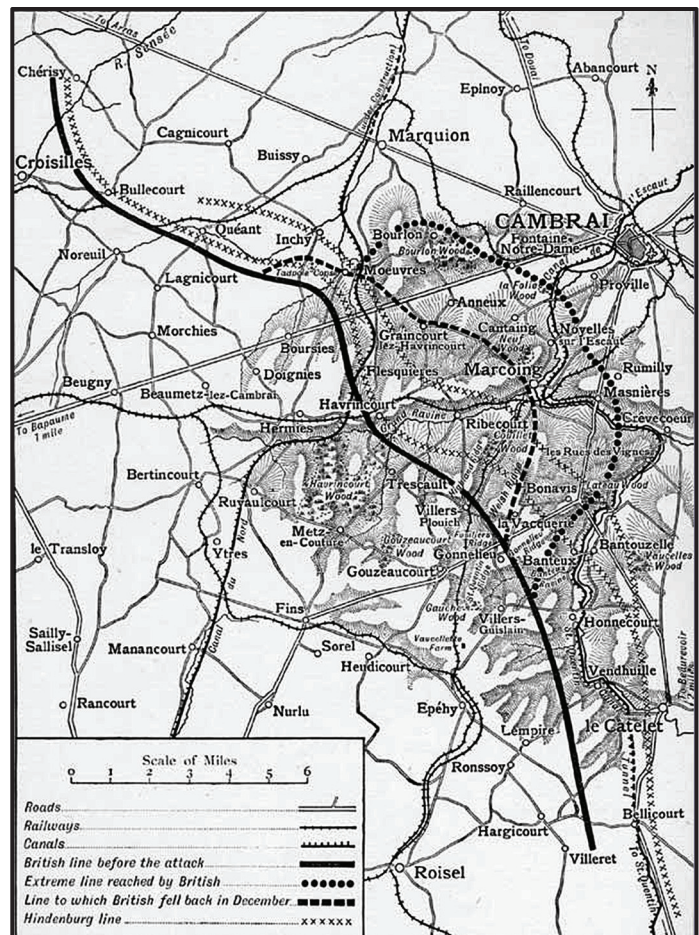
On 20 July 1916, Charles received an accidental gunshot wound to the forehead and he returned to England on 24 July on transfer to the 4th Reserve Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. He was given the Service Number 265503 and, at some point, he returned to France to join the 6th (Service) Battalion of the same Regiment. The 6th had been formed at Oxford in September 1914 and had landed at Boulogne on 22 July 1915 as part of the 60th Brigade, in the 20th (light) Division. The date when Charles completed his transfer to the 6th (Service) Battalion and their position in the field at that time is not available to us.

It is known that on 1 October 1917, following their action at the **Battle of Langemarck** where they had sustained considerable losses, the 6th entrained and moved south to Bapaume. They marched south-east via camps at Haplincourt and Heudicourt and, by 5th October were able to take up their position in the front line trenches in the Villers Plouich sector. This move was part of the build-up for what was to be the **Battle of Cambrai** and Charles would certainly have been with the 6th Battalion at that time.

Cambrai was an important railhead and a key supply point for a sector of the German Hindenburg Line. This was a formidable position with two trench systems protected by deep barbed-wire defences and dotted with concrete blockhouses containing machine-gun posts, signals stations and infantry shelters. Its occupation would give access to high ground that would facilitate an attack on the northern sector of the Line. It was also significant in that it was one of the earliest British campaigns in which numbers of tanks were to play a key role, over four hundred taking part.

Towards the middle of November the Battalion moved briefly to Loop, just beyond Bray-sur-Somme, where it was able to practise an attack in conjunction with tanks. On 20 November 1917, when the attack began in earnest, the *War Diary* records that B and D Companies, (at that moment situated close to Gouzeaucourt), had three tanks each that proceeded in a triangle formation. The troops "formed in two lines of sections in file" followed the rear tanks and thus gained some protection. The operation initially proved successful and the Army was indeed able to breach the Hindenburg Line and take considerable ground. However, tanks proved vulnerable to German artillery and infantry and many were put out of action on the first day. The battle largely resolved into an artillery-infantry engagement and the Germans, after quickly reinforcing their weak defences, were able to recover much of the lost ground.

It is not clear when Charles was wounded but most probably it was during the action at Cambrai. He



Cambrai and the Hindenburg Line



would have been taken to one of a number of hospitals situated on the southern outskirts of Rouen and cared for there. Charles John Holmes died of wounds on 4 December 1917, aged twenty-five. He is buried at St Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen, grave reference P.VI.C.9A, one of the many cemeteries tended and beautifully cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Charles was awarded The British War Medal, 1914-18, The Allied Victory Medal and The 1914-15 Star.



St Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen, France  
Courtesy: Commonwealth War Graves Commission

After the war things appear to have improved somewhat for the family. Another daughter, Edith, had been born to John and Mary in 1913 and in 1918 they were resident in Amersham at Norwood's Yard.



Mary Holmes at the door of the family home at Norwood's Yard, Amersham, Courtesy: Beechey Family

In the years to come, with the advent of another war, Charles's youngest brother Arthur was to see service with the Royal Air Force. His brother William's only son, David, was a Gunner with the Royal Artillery. As many men did, they married just as the conflict began, uncertain as to what the future might bring. Sadly, David was to die in France during the retreat to Dunkirk and he is buried in Merville Communal Cemetery Extension. Arthur, fortunately, returned safely and he and his wife Catherine were to raise a daughter and to continue a family line, members of which are still resident in the area today.

Sources:

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*The First Buckinghamshire Battalion 1914-1919*, Captain P L Wright, D.S.O., M.C.

The First Buckinghamshire Battalion, *War Diary* (WO 95/2763)

6th (Service) Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, *War Diary* (WO 95/2120)

Soldiers of Oxfordshire Museum (Record No. 24066)

Commonwealth War Graves Commission