The Historical Context of the First World War

This brief resumé of the war sets the context, historical and geographic, in which our Amersham men fought and died. The theatres of war in which they served and the main battles, including those in which they lost their lives, are briefly described. Therefore other theatres of war, such as the Eastern Front, Italy and the important war at sea are not considered.

1914 – "Not over by Christmas" The assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, on 28 June 1914 in Sarajevo triggered the start of the bloodiest war between the nations of Europe. After Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia a series of alliances and treaties brought other countries into conflict. The Germans and Austrians were on one side, with Russia and France in opposition, later joined by the United Kingdom. A complicated situation arose in the Balkans and Turkey joined the war on the side of Germany. Many Europeans thought the war would be a short one and over by Christmas.

The Western Front - 1914 was the line along which the Germans attacked France and its allies. The German Schlieffen Plan to attack France from the north via neutral Belgium brought the United Kingdom into the war. At the beginning of hostilities, the French were heavily defeated by the Germans in Alsace-Lorraine and the Ardennes and were thrown back across the Meuse. The first battle fought by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) was the **Battle of Mons (**23 – 24 August). Fearing that his troops could be cut off by advancing Germans, General Smith-Dorrien pulled back south of Mons and on 24 August the BEF began its long retreat to the Marne. On 25 August he decided to stand and administer a 'stopping blow' at **Le Cateau.** The ensuing battle was costly as the British lost 7,812 men killed or wounded. But the decision to stand and fight paid off as the Germans did not press their pursuit so vigorously afterwards. **The Battle of the Marne** followed on 10 to 14 September 1914. The battle did not go to plan and there was a failure in the Allied command structure. However, the Germans lost their nerve and withdrew from the Marne to make a stand on the Aisne.

The Battle of the Aisne (12 – 15 September 1914) The BEF attempted to force its way across the Aisne from south to north on 13 September. The Germans, who were dug in on spurs overlooking the river, enjoyed artillery superiority, while the British infantry bravely attacking repeatedly, made little head-way. The fighting settled down into trench warfare. Meanwhile both belligerents began to move troops to the north-west (**the race to the sea)** in the hope of turning the enemy flank. A move to the north-west flank would shorten the BEF's line of communication and in early October, the BEF left the Aisne for Flanders.

The First Battle of Ypres (19 – 22 October 1914) Ypres lies in the centre of a shallow saucer-like depression surrounded by higher ground on the north (Passchendaele Ridge), east (Menin Road Ridge) and south (Messines Ridge) although the heights are measured only in tens of metres (e.g. Hill 60 was only 60 m. above sea level). The collision of the Allied and German forces on the axis of the Menin Road at the First Battle of Ypres was the bloody climax of the opening mobile phase of

the war on the Western Front. The battle proved indecisive and the opposing armies settled into trench warfare**. Frank Rogers** of the 2nd Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) fought in and survived the Battle of Mons, the retreat from Mons and the First Battle of Ypres. Fighting died away at the end of November with losses amounting to more than 50,000 on each side, leaving a substantial Allied salient bulging out into the German lines.

Much has been made of what came to be known as the Christmas Truce which took place along the Western Front in 1914. Although it was not an official truce, and in some areas fighting continued, it is thought that up to 100,000 British and German troops took part. The fraternising did not last long.

Stalemate on the Western Front – 1915 In France and Belgium (Flanders) armies were immobilised in lines of trenches, which eventually merged to form an almost continuous line from Basle on the Swiss border to the Belgian coast (460 miles). Offensives consistently failed in the face of overwhelming defensive firepower. The failure of the British offensive at **Neuve Chapelle** in March was blamed on a shortage of shells.

The trench system The essentials of any trench were simple. It had to be deep enough for a man to stand without his head presenting a target for enemy snipers. It had to be narrow, so that it could not be an easy target for a mortar or shell, and 'kinks' or traverses were made into the trench line. In a straight trench, a blast of fire or shrapnel could sweep along the entire length. Lastly it needed a firestep, a raised platform at its front so that soldiers could step up and shoot over the parapet. Trenches became increasingly complex, with dug-outs and bunkers to protect troops against shellfire. Sandbags were built up along the walls of the trenches to prevent collapse and duck-boards were placed along the bottom of the trench in an attempt to keep feet dry. Large quantities of barbed wire were staked along No-Man's Land separating the combatants. Life in the trenches could vary from tolerable to unbearable. Problems of flooding (and the condition known as 'trench-foot' which resulted from men standing in water for long periods) were prevalent in the high water-table areas of Flanders, where shelling had destroyed the drainage system. Plagues of rats and infestations of lice made life unpleasant and sanitation was deemed a priority to prevent the spread of disease. Rotation systems were introduced whereby platoons spent several days in the forward trench and then were relieved to go back to the reserve trenches and soldiers also had periods of rest and the chance to bathe at a place behind the lines. Life in the trenches when there was a quiet period was still hazardous. On average there were 5,000 British casualties per month in the Ypres salient in 1916 when no major battle took place. **Edward James Crook** (3rd Btn Royal Fusiliers) was killed near Kruistaat, Flanders, on 14 February 1915.

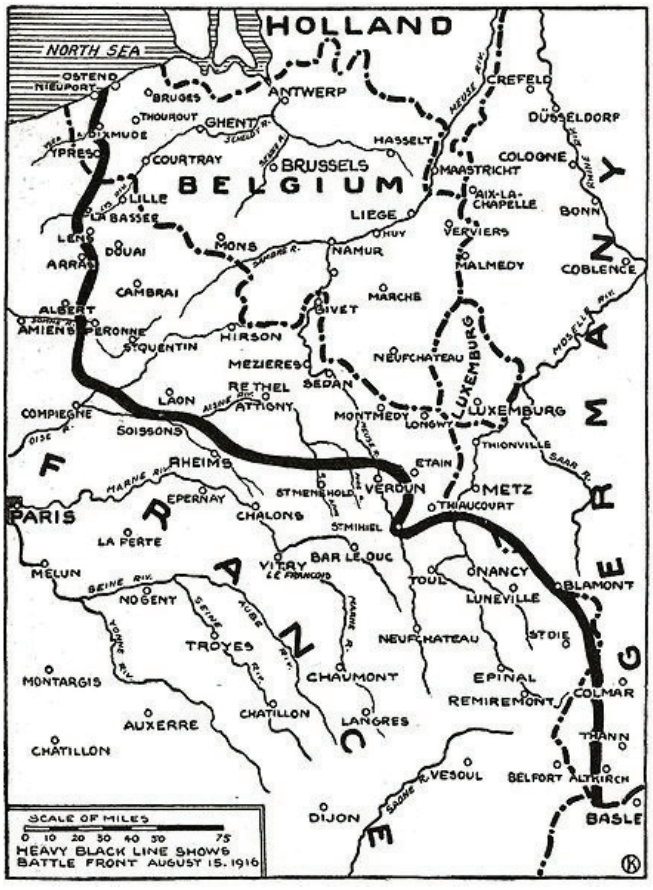
The Second Battle of Ypres (21 April to 25 May 1915) The Germans opened the attack on the northern flank of the salient around Poelcapelle on 22 April. The battle has a sinister place in the history of warfare as the first to feature the use of chlorine gas as a weapon. It caused initial shock and panic as the troops were ill-prepared, but Allied troops learned to cope with this new horror of war. More than 90,000 soldiers on both sides died terrible deaths from gas attacks which occurred sporadically throughout the war, including **William George Cox** who was gassed and died in Flanders in 1917. The Canadians played an important role in the battle which saw a series of attacks and counter-attacks. This resulted in the British withdrawal to a line closer to Ypres and the loss of Hill 60 south-east of Ypres. The Allies lost over 60,000 men. The Ypres salient was to remain one of the most active parts of the front. One of our soldiers, **Arthur Thomas Crawford Cree** (7th Btn Durham Light Infantry) was killed near Zillebeke, Ypres, on 12 May and **William James Barnes** (Royal Engineers) was killed by shellfire near Hooge, Ypres, on 3 May 1915.

The Spring Offensives (May 1915). The Allies were determined to launch another offensive against the Germans, who were by then well dug-in with superior defences, well-protected machine gun posts on higher ground and with thicker belts of barbed wire. The French assault on Vimy Ridge was supported by a BEF attack on Aubers Ridge (9-10 May). These proved inadequate to deal with the German defences and the infantry were mostly slaughtered in No-Man's Land. **Frank West** (1st Btn Royal Fusiliers) lost his life here on 9 May 1915. The British had failed to make a

significant contribution to the main Artois Battle being fought by the French further south. Pressure from the French forced another attempt with an attack at Festubert, launched on 15 May. It was a disaster. It was here that brothers **Frank** and **Sidney Rogers** (2nd Btn OBLI) were killed on 16 May 1915. **Bernard Lofts** (6th Btn Royal Scots) was killed in action on the same day. On 16 June 1915 **William George Hoare (**1st Btn Honourable Artillery Company) was killed at Y Wood, Bellewaarde, Flanders.

The Battle of Loos (23 September to 13 October 1915) signalled the first major British offensive of the war. In comparison to the British attacks in the spring, this was to be a set-piece battle on such a scale that, at the time, it was referred to as 'The Big Push'. In the summer of 1915 General Joffre (the French Commander-in-chief) planned an assault on the Great German salient that bulged out into the Western Front. The French army would attack in the Vimy area and the BEF under Sir John French would attack around Loos to the north. The depleted BEF was reinforced with troops of Kitchener's New Armies, but they were inexperienced. The ground over which they fought was part of the old coalfield, with mines, spoil heaps and factories. The attack was entrusted to the First Army under Sir Douglas Haig and began on 25 September. The assault was initially successful, until the British discovered the depth of the German defences, with a second line of trenches and concealed concrete machine-gun posts between the two. Attacking soldiers were mown down and many were trapped in mazes of uncut barbed wire. Haig called for reserves held by French, but these did not arrive in time. At last Haig had to abandon the attack but hostilities went on until November. The British casualties were heavy, amounting to about 50,500. General Sir John French was blamed for not sending up reserves and was sacked.

The 5th Battalion of the OBLI was in action at Loos and witnessed the first use of gas by the British army, with unfortunate results. The air was very still and the gas cloud hung close to the ground. It did not have much effect on the enemy, but wafted back to do considerable harm to the British troops.



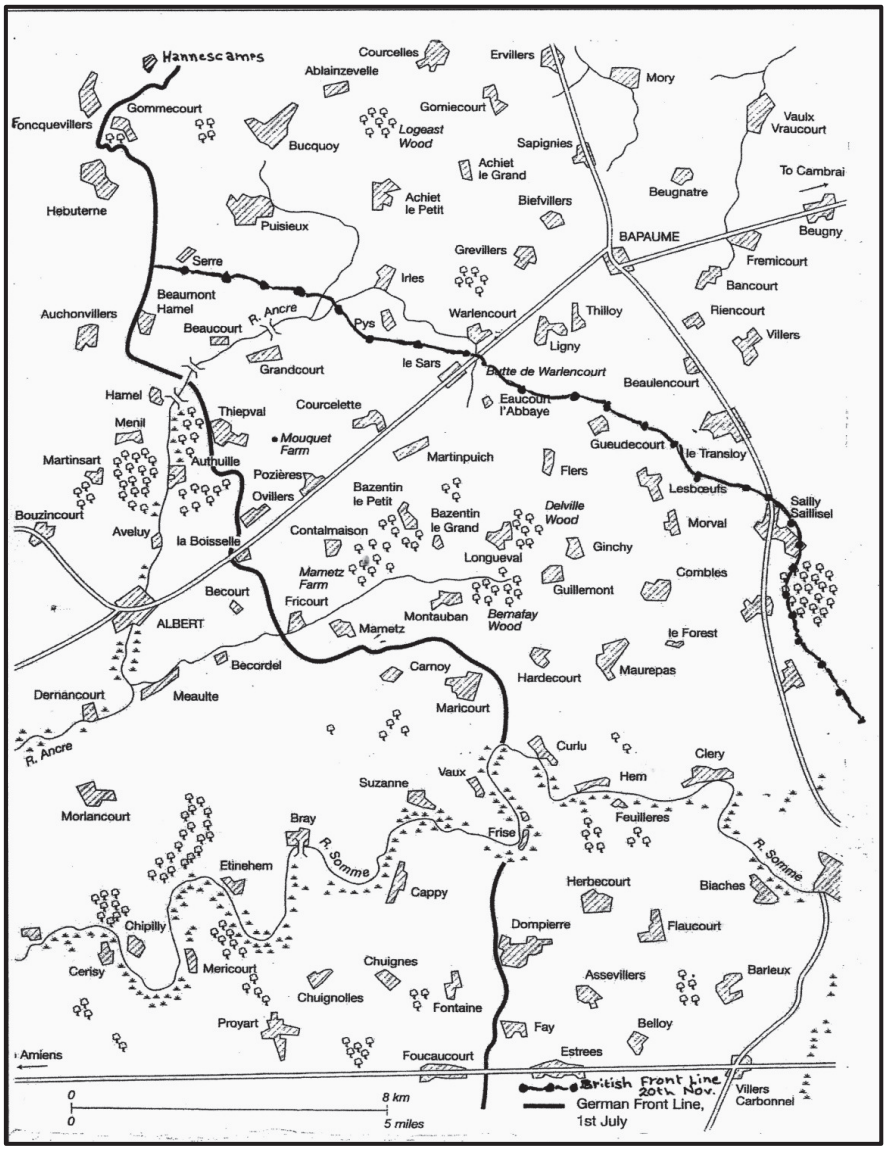
A map of the Western Front in August 1915
(From Wikipedia Commons)

The Year of Battles, 1916 – Verdun and the Somme

In terms of casualties and sheer suffering of the combatants, **Verdun** must go down as being one of the most terrible battles in history. The Germans attacked the fortified town of Verdun in February and from the spring to the winter of 1916 the Germans and French were locked in combat, expending hundreds of thousands of lives in a sustained battle. Eventually France could claim a defensive victory with the recapture of the fortress of Douaumont on 24 October. Verdun epitomised the dogged defence of French soil against the invader. Although no British troops were involved, the battle and huge loss of life sustained by the French affected the planned timing of the British Offensive on the Somme. That battle was brought forward to the end of June.

The Somme has a unique place in British social and military history. Battalions from every infantry regiment in the British army fought there at some time during the battle, and the enormous casualties affected the whole of British society.

A Map of the Somme Battlefield area 1916.
Most of the locations described in the text below are shown.



(The map is taken from an educational handout, the author and printer were not stated)

The British made the main attack on a front of 18 miles which stretched from Gommecourt in the north to Maricourt, which was sited just north of the River Somme. The French army attacked along the Somme valley itself. The German defences along the front chosen for the Allied Somme offensive were the strongest on the whole Western Front. They also had the advantage of being entrenched on the top of a chalk escarpment known as the Pozières and Thiepval ridges. Preparatory bombardment to destroy German wire, trenches and dug-outs began on 24 June 1916 and lasted for eight days. 1,700,000 shells were fired (of which about a third failed to detonate) and tunnelling companies dug shafts and galleries underneath the German positions and filled them with explosives. Seventeen large mines were exploded as the attack began. The heavy rainstorms of 29 June left the roads and tracks impassable. The first day of the Somme offensive, 1 July 1916, saw the heaviest loss of life in a single day's fighting in British military history. It resulted in nearly 58,000 casualties, including 19,249 dead. The Germans, in their deep trenches and bunkers, were largely unaffected by the bombardment and as the British went 'over the top' of their trenches and advanced, the German machine gunners emerged from their bunkers and opened fire. Believing the artillery bombardment had destroyed German lines, the infantry moved in long slow waves and were mown down. The inadequacy of the Allied artillery with insufficient guns and poor ammunition was partly responsible for the carnage. The only Amersham soldier to die on the first day of the Somme Battle was **James Anthony Horne** (16th Btn London Regiment, Queen's Westminster Rifles).

The OBLI, in which most of our Amersham soldiers fought, did not go 'over the top' that day, but were heavily involved in the rest of the Somme campaign that continued until mid-November. Two of the Bucks battalions were involved in taking the village of Pozières on 23 July. **Charles John Holmes** (6th Btn OBLI) was wounded on 20 July near Gommecourt and was sent home, only to be returned to the front later. **Robert Wall** (14th Btn Highland Light Infantry) was killed on 27 July, and **Bert Hazell** and **Alfred James Lee** (both of the 2nd Btn OBLI) on the 30 July. **Francis Bolton** (1st Btn Bedfordshires) died at Guillemont on 31 July. **Thomas Greenley** (13th Btn KRRC) was killed at Mametz Wood on 5 August and **Albert George Lane** (13th Btn KRRC) at the same location on the 6 August. Later on 18 August, **Frank Wingrove** (13th Btn Middlesex) was killed at Guillemont. On 18 August **Frederick Victor Rogers** (5th Btn OBLI) was killed somewhere in the Thiepval area and on 3 September **George Stephenson Podbury** (6th Btn OBLI) died at Guillemont. The deaths continued on 4 September, when **Thomas Lacey** (17th Btn KRRC) received a fatal gunshot wound at Beaumont Hamel, **Cecil Green** (16th Btn London Regiment) died on 8 September and **Charles Scutchings** (52nd Battery, Royal Field Artillery) died of his wounds on 10 September 1916.

As a result of the British failure to achieve a decisive breakthrough in July 1916, the Battle of the Somme deteriorated into a period of attrition on a vast scale. In November, British troops were still fighting to take some of the objectives set for the first day of fighting.

Flers-Gueudecourt or Flers-Courcelette (15 September 1916). The Somme also heralded the first use of 'tanks' in battle. On 15 September, 36 Mark 1 tanks arrived for the renewal of the Somme offensive. The 5th Battalion of the OBLI attacked east of Flers towards the village of Gueudecourt on 15 September. The assault through Delville Wood was supported by tanks, however, many quickly broke down or became stuck in the mud. Such was the secrecy of the new weapon that even those on the front line did not know that tanks were being deployed. Substantial gains of ground were made in the centre of the line, with an average advance of 1 ½ miles along the whole front. Casualties in this area were **Edgar Richard Chandler** (15th Btn London Regiment) killed in action at High Wood on 15 September and **Frederick Hubert Warren** (1st Btn Northamptonshire Regiment) killed in action at Flers on 27 September**. Percy Walter Peach** (Canadian Regiment) received gunshot wounds at Courcelette on 18 September, from which he later died.

The offensive was slowed by poor weather and the arrival of more German reinforcements. In October the weather worsened and the Somme became a "wilderness of mud". Haig pressed on with a series of limited attacks on the Transloy Ridges. It was here that **Charles Atkins** (2nd Btn

Hampshires) died on 12 October 1916**. Leonard Gibbs** (77th Field Coy, Royal Engineers) was killed in action on 13 October and **Robert William Toop** (12th Btn Middlesex) was killed in the Flers-Courcelette area on 27 October. Further north, Gough's Reserve army fought for the Ancre Heights on the left flank of the Somme battlefields. The Ancre Valley in November was flooded by excessive rain and the fighting dragged on in desperate conditions. It was here on 18 November 1916 that **Stanley Robert Cox** (10th Btn Royal Fusiliers) was killed and his brother William injured. **William Bryant** (4th Btn Bedfordshires) was also injured in the Ancre area and died of his wounds in a military hospital in England on 23 December. The human cost of the battle still has the power to shock. The British casualties amounted to almost 419,000 men. The French lost 194,451 and the Germans 650,000. The 'flower of Britain,' the volunteers of Kitchener's Army, had been sacrificed for what appeared to be very little. However, the Somme battles inflicted permanent damage on Germany.

Our Amersham soldiers are buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries which are scattered across the area. The bodies of some of our men were never identified and their names are commemorated on the enormous Monument to the Missing which stands proudly on the top of the Thiepval Ridge. (See the section on Memorials to the Missing).

1917 - Battles continue on the Western Front and America joins the War

The massive losses of soldiers on the Somme led to a rethink on both sides of the conflict. Taking over supreme command of the German forces in September 1916, Field Marshall von Hindenberg and General Ludendorff decided to construct a new fortified line that was shorter and easier to defend in February–March 1917. The Germans withdrew from the Somme to this '**Hindenberg Line'** (known as the 'Siegfried Line' to the Germans). The Germans laid waste the territory they vacated under a 'scorched earth' policy

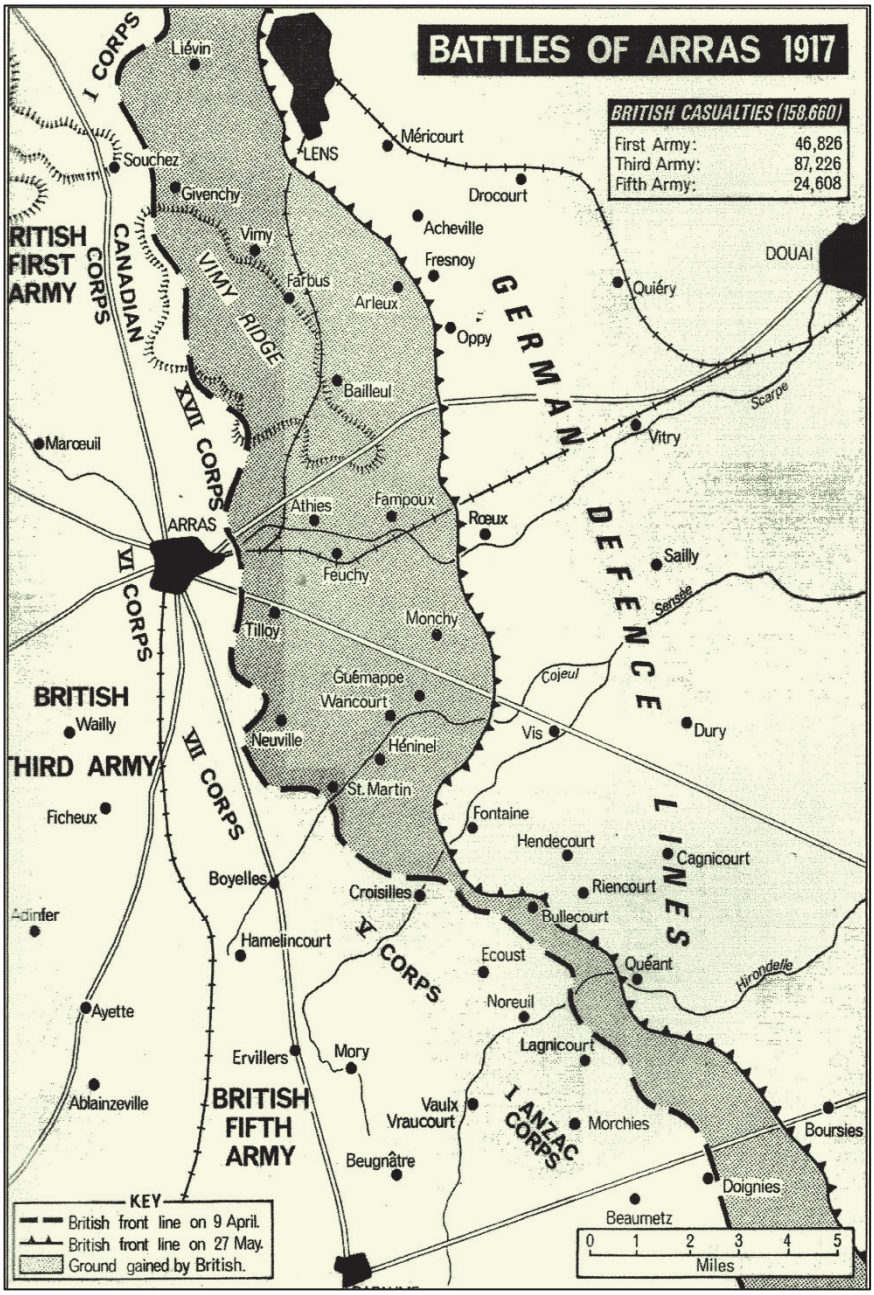
On 6 April 1917, the USA declared war on Germany as a result of the destruction of merchant shipping by unrestricted U-boat activity and other provocations. It took some time for the Americans to mobilise and train their troops.

The Allied Spring Offensives - The Battles of Arras and Vimy Ridge (9 April -16 May 1917) As a result of Allied discussions at the beginning of 1917 the British army was placed under the direct control of the French Commander-in-chief, Nivelle. Haig was directed to attack at **Arras** on 9 April to draw in German reserves before the main French attack began at **Chemin des Dames** 100 miles further south. Much planning took place before the battle. Many tunnels were dug from the extensive underground chalk quarry system beneath Arras, leading to the front, so that soldiers could move to the front without being seen by the enemy. Artillery was better trained and more guns used than at the Somme. The Royal Flying Corps fulfilled an important role in observing and mapping enemy artillery, then sending the information to Allied artillery batteries enabling them to be more accurate. The outstanding achievement was the taking of Vimy Ridge by the Canadian Corps which allowed the Allies an uninterrupted view over the Douai Plain. When the Third Army launched its attack on 9 April towards Monchy-le-Preux, it was able to overwhelm the German front and, in some places, advanced three miles. Only to the south was progress limited. The British had made impressive progress but had not achieved a breakthrough on the first day. This allowed the Germans to bring in reinforcements and launch a series of counter-attacks which slowed the British advance. A renewed British attack at Bullecourt (11 April) failed to make any progress and the attack was suspended. The French offensive at Chemin des Dames quickly got bogged down. The British renewed their offensive around Arras on 23 April but even a well-planned battle around Bullecourt made little headway. Haig then cancelled the Arras offensive and turned his attention to the front in Flanders. The Allies had lost 150,000 men, a heavier daily loss rate than at either the Somme or Passchendaele.

Of our Amersham soldiers **Edward Bolton** and **George Percy Lane** (both of the 5th Btn OBLI) had sheltered in the caves and tunnels under Arras on the night of 8 April and then went into battle and were killed in action on the first day of fighting on 9 April. **Leonard Clark** (1st Btn Royal Berkshires)

A Map of the Arras Battlefields

Most of the places where our Amersham men died are shown.



(The map was taken from an educational handout. The author and/or publisher were not stated.)

was killed at Arleux, Oppy Wood, on 29 April; **George Cooper** (5th Btn OBLI) died on 3 May in the Arras area and **Mark Harris** was killed on 8 May 1917. The names of those whose bodies were never identified are commemorated on the Arras Memorial (see section on Memorials to the Missing). On 3 April **Harry Mitchell** (6th Btn OBLI) was killed near Barastre, Pas de Calais. Soldiers who were also killed in early 1917 included **Ernest William Olney** (7th Btn Royal West Kent Regiment) who was killed on 23 February 1917 in Grandcourt Trench. **Henry Thomas Bolton** (1st Btn East Surrey Regiment) died near Gorre, Pas de Calais, on 1 January 1917.

The Battle of Messines Ridge (7 June to 11 July 1917) The preliminary battle of the Third Ypres campaign was meticulously planned by General Sir Herbert Plumer whose Second Army had

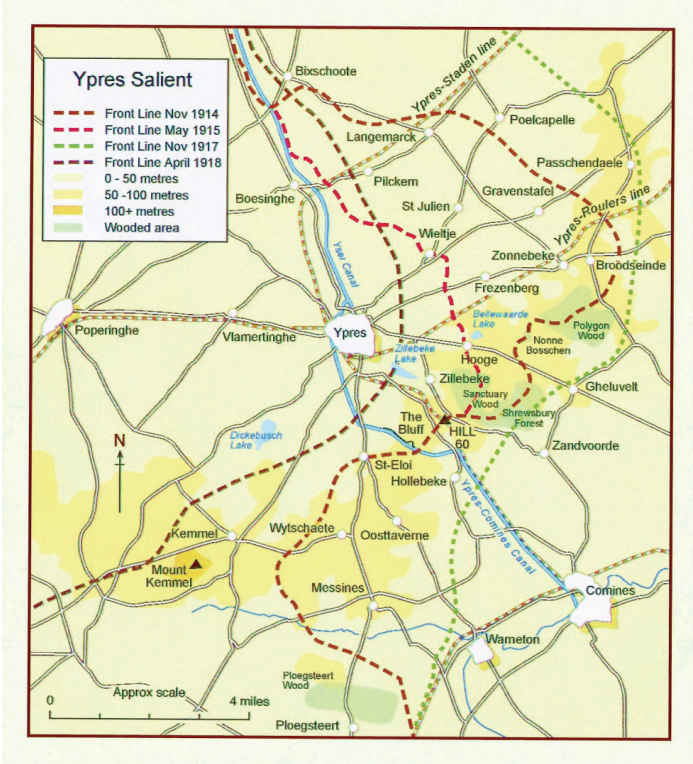
held the sector for two years. The aim was to dislodge the Germans from the Messines Ridge which overlooked the Ypres sector from the south. Planning began in early 1916 and 22 tunnels were dug under the German positions on the ridge by British and Empire tunnelling companies and 470 tonnes of explosives laid in them. At 03.10 on 7 June they were fired. 19 exploded on time, sending a shockwave felt as far as London 100 miles away. One mine failed to detonate and still lies somewhere under the fields of Flanders. As many as 10,000 German soldiers may have been killed in the eruption. The mine explosions had been preceded by a fierce bombardment, and, while the mine debris was still falling, troops attacked, supported by gas and tanks. The towns of Wyschaete and Messines were taken. The offensive was an outstanding success for the British Army and a rare example of German defenders suffering heavier casualties. **Henry William Sweetland** (103rd Coy Army Service Corps) died in the offensive on 2 July 1917 and **Fred Dover** (11th Div. Ammunition Column, Royal Field Artillery) was killed by a shell near Bailleul on 5 June with his horse-drawn General Service wagon as he brought up ammunition in preparation for the offensive.

A map of the Messines Ridge & Ypres Salient

Most of the locations mentioned in the text, and where our Amersham men died, are marked.

The brown shaded area represents land above 100 metres above sea level. This low ridge gave the occupying Germans an advantage as they could see the area around Ypres.

(From a publicity leaflet issued by a museum in Flanders).



The success of the Battle of Messines boosted British morale and encouraged Field Marshall Haig's plans for a full scale offensive in Flanders. Haig launched the **Third Battle of Ypres,** known also as **the Battle of Passchendaele,** on 31 July 1917. There were many pressures on Haig to launch this offensive, one being the need to capture ports in occupied Belgium that were sending U-boats to attack British merchant shipping. Secondly, Haig was convinced that the German resources were strained to breaking point, owing to the fighting commitments on other fronts. An objective was to capture the German railhead at Roulers. Thirdly, after the failure of the French Nivelle offensive, with the subsequent mutiny of troops, an attack in Flanders would relieve pressure on the French.

Three phases of the offensive were identified by academics: first the battles of Pilckem Ridge, Gheluveldt plateau and Langemarck where the Fifth Army (under Gough) pushed its way into the boggy conditions made worse by the destruction of the drainage system. Next the Second Army took over for the battles of Menin Road Ridge and Polygon Wood and made progress in this important central sector, despite the heavy rainfall. Finally in the Battles of Poelcappelle and Passchendaele, the exhausted attackers – British, Canadian and Australian – fought their way up onto the Passchendaele Ridge in the most appalling wintry conditions; the Canadians took the village of Passchendaele on 6 November at a cost of 16,000 casualties. A final assault on 10

November cleared the ridge of the remaining Germans and brought the Third Ypres battle to a close. The landscape had been reduced to a wasteland of mud and water-filled shell holes and the conditions were the worst experienced in the whole war and make 'Passchendaele' a byword for suffering and misery.

It is probable that between 31 July and 10 November 1917 about 70,000 British and Empire soldiers died and another 200,000 were wounded or taken prisoner. The battle in the mud was severely demoralising for the British troops and the army lost its spirit of optimism. Engraved on a tablet outside the Irish Peace Tower near Tyne Cot is this passage written by Captain Charles Miller of the 2nd Inniskilling Fusiliers who fought at Passchendaele:

"*As it was, the Ypres Battlefield just represented one gigantic slough of despond into which floundered battalions, brigades and divisions of infantry without end, to be shot to pieces or drowned, until at last and with immeasurable slaughter we had gained a few miles of liquid mud.*"

Of our Amersham soldiers **Sidney Howard Motion** of the 7th Btn Northamptonshire Regiment, who was Mentioned in Despatches for his bravery on Messines Ridge, was wounded during fighting in Shrewsbury Forest and died on 31 July. **George Joseph Castle** (2/1st OBLI) died near St Julien on 22 August 1917. **Ernest Wingrove** (London Regiment) died at the Wurst Farm ridge on 20 September; **George Thomas Matthews** (51st Btn Australian Imperial Force) was killed at Polygon Wood on 26 September; **Charles Dyer** (5th Btn OBLI) was killed near Messines on 2 October; **John Bates** (49th Btn Canadian Expeditionary Force) died at Passchendaele on 30 October and **Raymond Bowler** (16th Btn KRRC) was killed on 2 December 1917. Four of these soldiers have no known grave and are commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial (Castle and Bowler) and on the Menin Gate at Ypres (Wingrove and Matthews).

Tank F4 during training for the Cambrai Offensive.

Photograph by Lt J W Brooke
Imperial War Museum postcard

The Cambrai Operations (20 November to 30 December 1917). The British launched an offensive against the German Hindenberg Line in front of Cambrai in northern France. Led by tanks and making innovative use of artillery, the operation achieved a brief breakthrough.

The proposal for an operation at Cambrai came from the British Tank Corps. The chalk downland of the area around Cambrai was suitable for the deployment of tanks and the proposal was that tanks would be able to batter down barbed wire defences and roll over trenches, letting the following infantry reach the enemy positions. The 6th Battalion OBLI was involved in the initial successful breakthrough and the tanks were able to overcome the enemy strong-points such as pill-boxes and machine-gun posts and push through with comparative ease. However, the tanks proved to be inadequate for sustained fighting. In all, 179 of the 378 fighting tanks were lost, 68 destroyed by direct hits. For the next week there was a struggle for Bourlan Wood. The Germans counter-

attacked on 30 November and recovered about as much ground as they had earlier lost. Both sides lost about 45,000 men. **Charles John Holmes** of the 6th Btn OBLI was wounded at Cambrai and was sent to a hospital at Rouen, but died of his wounds on 4 December 1917.

1918 – Allies turn the tide - Victory and Armistice

At the beginning of 1918 the Allies were still reeling from the battles in Ypres, but fought on stoically. Furthermore, the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent collapse of Russia meant that the Germans were no longer tied down on their Eastern Front and could transfer troops to the Western Front. By the spring of 1918, the German High Command was able to deploy some 192 divisions opposing 156 Allied divisions. The Germans obviously had a numerical advantage and were determined to exploit the narrow window of opportunity before the American forces were ready to take up positions. The German High Command reasoned that they had six months to change the course of the war and this would be the incentive which drove events in 1918.

In Britain, political and military decisions led to a shake-up of the BEF. The number of battalions in a brigade was reduced and spare battalions were effectively cannibalised to restock the depleted numbers of others. The relationships between regimental officers and brigade staff officers, who had established ways of working together in crises, were all disrupted, causing a great deal of stress. The timing of the reorganisation was unfortunate. Meanwhile, thousands of British soldiers were still engaged in the Mesopotamia, Salonika and Palestine campaigns, which seemed to be becoming increasingly futile.

On 20 January1918 **George Thomas Hance** of the Royal Garrison Artillery, who was gassed and suffered a gunshot wound in 1916, died of tuberculosis at home in Chestnut Lane, Amersham.

'The Kaiserschlacht' or Ludendorff Spring Offensives on the Western Front (21 March to 15 July 1918). The first phase of Germany's bid for victory was divided into a series of operations: an assault on the Scarpe River (which flows through Arras) codenamed MARS; the push towards Bapaume (MICHAEL 1); the advance south-west from Cambrai (MICHAEL 2); and the drive forward along both sides of the St Quentin canal (MICHAEL 3). Ludendorff decided 'to deliver an annihilating blow to the British before American aid can be effective'. The MICHAEL offensive began with a massive and intense bombardment at 4.20 a.m on 21 March 1918, when 6,608 guns and 3,534 trench mortars were fired. The British were taken by surprise. At around 9.00 a.m. the German infantry led by elite stormtroopers advanced, aided by swirling fog, to attack the British. The Germans succeeded in their aim to punch a hole through the British lines and they made rapid progress. Entire battalions were lost as front-line positions were overrun by the Germans. A fifty-mile gap was opened up in the British lines between Arras and La Fère. Gough's Fifth Army was driven back across the Somme battlefields. During the next three days the Germans advanced another 20 miles. 21,000 British soldiers were taken prisoner on 21 March 1918. On that day **Frederick Joseph Hearn** (East Lancashire Regiment) died near Bullecourt. On 23 March **Albert Victor Clarke** (Grenadier Guards) was killed in the Arras area and **Arthur Darvell MM** (5th Btn OBLI) died in the attack near Montescourt. On 28 March **William Stronnell** (18th Btn KRRC) was killed in the Somme area.

The German advance quickly began to run out of steam, partly because their supply lines were overstretched but also because the German troops were underfed and discipline broke down when they gorged themselves on British supplies of food and drink as they overran depots. By 5 April the Germans had been stopped by the British and Australians before they reached Amiens.

Ludendorff had planned subsidiary offensives in support of the MICHAEL offensive and on 9 April 1918 the Germans launched the Lys Offensive on the France/Flanders border. **Reginald John H. Fortnam** (3rd Worcestershire Regiment) was killed in action near La Clytte during the battle of the Lys on 30 April and **Edward Douglas Percy Featherstone** (14th London) was killed in the same area on 28 May. Fighting continued on the old Somme battlefield and **Geoffrey Clarke** (4th Bedfordshire) was killed on 25 May 1918. His body and that of Arthur Darvell were never identified

and they are commemorated on the Pozières Memorial (See Memorials to the Missing).

Battles of Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood The Germans successfully crossed the river Aisne and reached the Marne. The German advance was checked on 30 May by American and French troops. The Americans first entered combat in late May. The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) took Belleau Wood (in which they lost 9,000 casualties) and on 28-29 May they took Cantigny, south of the Somme. These victories together helped to boost morale on the Allies' side and helped to turn the tide against the Germans.

The Second Battle of the Marne fought in July 1918 was a key turning-point in the last phases of the war. A German offensive at Reims was halted and the French counter-attacked, to seize the initiative for the Allies. The Germans were forced back.

The British and Empire troops led an Allied offensive and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Germans at Amiens on 8 August. The German High Command began to realise that it could not win the war. The British mounted an attack on 21 August and took the town of Albert and then captured Bapaume on 26 August. It was during these offensives in France that **Harold John Robert Whike** (12th London) was wounded on 3 August and died two days later. **William Lofts** of the Royal Air Force was shot down on 9 August 1918.

In September 1918 the Americans launched attacks in the Argonne and the British and Australians attacked along the Hindenberg Line between Cambrai and St Quentin. The Allies crossed the St Quentin Canal (a major part of the German defensive system) on 29 September. During this **Advance to Victory** some of our Amersham soldiers were killed. These included **Charles William Lane** and **Frederick Clark,** both of the Royal Garrison Artillery, who died on 5 October 1918. **James Emmens Mead** (6th Dorsetshire Regiment) fought in the attack at Cambrai (8–9 October) and the pursuit to the Selle (9 -10 Oct) where he was killed on 11 Oct. **Frank Percy Caudery** (8th Btn Royal Berkshires) died of his wounds in France on 7 November 1918.

John Brill (Royal Berkshires and Labour Corps) died of influenza and pneumonia at his home in Amersham on 7 November, four days before the Armistice came into effect at 11.00 a.m. on 11 November1918. He was buried in Amersham on Armistice Day.

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