

## Jesmond and the Battle of Arras 1917

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The city of Arras lies to the north of the Somme battlefield of 1916 and had itself been the site of a major battle in 1914. The town was in British hands but Lens, to the north of it, which was occupied by Germans, was the site of a strategic coalfield. The battle to be fought here in early 1917, as part of the Allies' Spring Offensive, was to be largely diversionary, as a way of drawing off German troops from 50 miles further south at Chemin de Dames, just outside Rheims, where French General Nivelle planned a massive attack to break the German line. This was to be supported on the eastern front by a Russian attack but, as they had suffered a million casualties in General Brusilov's successful attacks on the Austrian front in Galicia in 1916, they were unable to participate in 1917 as originally planned. It was clear to the Entente of Britain, France, Russia and Italy, that Germany and its allies were in trouble, not least due to the very effective British blockade of German ports which was leading to widespread food shortages, and also because the U-boat war was about to precipitate a reluctant American entry on the Entente's side. Once again, however, excessive optimism was going to result in disappointment, in large loss of life and a serious risk of the mutinies on the eastern front spreading widely in the west.

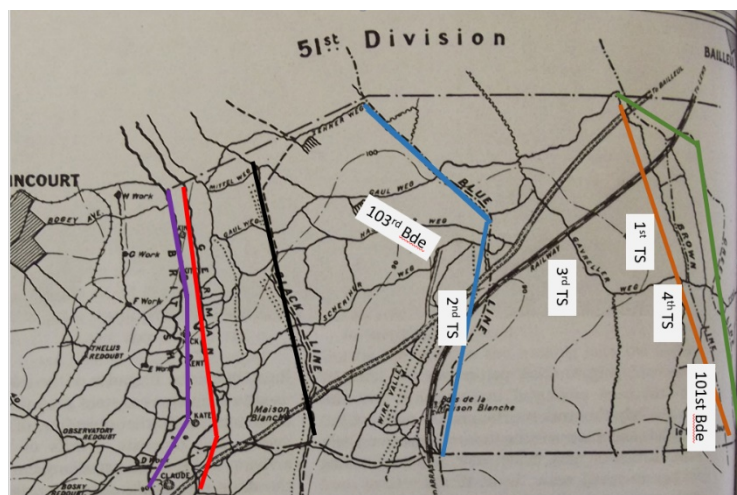
Although this battle is much less well known than the Battle of the Somme in the previous year, the total casualties at Arras were comparable and the background generally similar. It was an attack on Germans in well-constructed fortifications, frequently on ridges with a commanding view of the landscape, and was carried out in support of a major French operation. The only part of the British operation that is well known in the public estimation is the successful attack at the north edge of the operation at Vimy Ridge, which was carried out largely by Canadian troops, and the ridge there is now the site of the Canadian National Memorial. The highly successful operation to the south of Vimy on either side of the river Scarpe is much less well remembered, though it was initially one of the most advantageous of the year, but sadly petered out without the much sought after 'breakout'. After the initial success, the battle dragged on through May and into June with little further progress and many casualties. The Northumbrians were heavily involved in the successful attacks in the central area of the battlefield and for the Tyneside Scottish this was a high point of their war. Two men from the church paid the ultimate price, Lt Hugh Rose of the Seaforth Highlanders and Lt Robert Wilson of the DLI.

The Battles of 1916 had sapped the Germans of manpower and although the Russians were now a spent force as far as the Allies were concerned, the Germans were in trouble too. As a result, their commander in the west, Hindenburg, planned a withdrawal to a new, shorter, strongly defended line that we chose to call the Hindenburg line but which the Germans called the Siegfriedstellung which we interpret as Siegfried Line. This requires a pause in the story for the title 'Siegfried Line' was recycled by us in the Second World War for the Nazi defences opposite France's Maginot Line, which the Germans called the Westwall, and was immortalised in the song 'We're going to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line'. Furthermore, the naming of these features and the operations associated with them in the German psyche needs to be understood. Siegfried is the heroic but ultimately very mortal character who dominates the final two operas of Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*. If you are not into opera then think J R R Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. The Ring which is central to Wagner's operas is made by Alberich the evil dwarf who has stolen the gold from the Rhinemaidens to make it. It is then stolen from him by Wotan the chief God and is cursed by Alberich. The Ring ends in Siegfried's hands and he is murdered by Alberich's son Hagen, but the Ring returns to the Rhinemaidens from the fire which consumes Valhalla, the Gods, and Siegfried's remains, and Hagen is drowned in the Rhine. It is therefore hardly a story of victory that has been chosen to name both the defences of the new line or the operation (Alberich) in which the Germans

retreated to the Hindenburg Line through the scorched earth of the intervening area. In the northern part of the Arras battlefield this withdrawal had little impact, but further south near Bullecourt the Germans withdrew further, and this compromised the original planning of the battle and probably contributed to the reduced success and greater casualties there. At Chemin de Dames the withdrawal was also substantial and resulted in a delay in the attack there, so that the two parts of the Offensive were not now at the same time. In fact, the date of the northern attack was also delayed by one day because of bad weather.

After the decimation of the Northumbrians at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the Tyneside Scottish had been sent north to join the 37<sup>th</sup> Division near Vimy, where they could regroup and 'lick their wounds'. They were brought up to strength, although contemporary reports suggest that the quality of the management of the battalions was not as good as it had been earlier and that the trenches and the men were scruffy and dirty. By this time, conscription was in effect in Britain and it is likely that not only was the quality of the men used to refill the ranks less good, but they were less 'willing' and the officers initially were less in tune with the men they commanded. From their new 'quiet' sector they were moved up to Armentières for the early part of the winter of 1916/17 and then pulled back for training and a period in the Hazebrouck and Aire region some miles west of the Front. This training was much more advanced than the 'walk forward in a line' that had been used at the Somme and involved the troops being split into infantry, sniper, grenade and Lewis gun crews, groups who were then trained to advance while giving each other covering fire. From Hazebrouck they marched in late February to Arras where they rejoined the 34<sup>th</sup> Division as part of the 18 divisions of General Allenby's 3<sup>rd</sup> Army. They were initially to hold an area to the north of Arras near the village of Roclincourt. To their north next to the Canadians, who were part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Army at Vimy, was the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division and on their right next to the river Scarpe was the 9<sup>th</sup> Division. Between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 34<sup>th</sup> and in reserve was the 4<sup>th</sup> Division. The 34<sup>th</sup> was arranged, with the Tyneside Irish on the left and the 101<sup>st</sup> brigade on the right, with the Tyneside Scottish central. They were to take part with many others, including the Canadians, in a mass attack on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917. In the meantime they were to spend their time improving the trenches they held, bringing supplies for the attack and carrying out trench raids on the enemy. All these activities resulted in losses, from a combination of enemy action, accidents and the appalling conditions due to the wet and cold weather. It was their opponents who were the less willing to respond and the initial attacks were highly successful and all their objectives were achieved.

The battle had been intended to begin on the 8<sup>th</sup> April with the Canadians' attack at Vimy, but the weather was so bad that it was delayed until the 9<sup>th</sup> and still occurred in a subsequent snowstorm where the whiteout blowing in the faces of the German defenders benefited the Allied attackers. The Canadians and the divisions to the south went forward and took their objectives with a few exceptions. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Scottish were in reserve for the attack and so they were held in Wednesday Trench behind the British front line, and only began their move forward when the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> battalions had captured the second German trench, called the Blue Line. The 4<sup>th</sup> were on the left, and their main problem in the advance towards the third German trench, or Brown Line, was from British artillery shells falling short.



Nevertheless, the creeping barrage had kept the Germans deep in their bunkers until the British were within 50 yards of the trenches, and so there had not been the slaughter seen on the Somme. There was uncut barbed wire just before the Brown Line but Captain T E Herron cut a path through it, winning a bar to his MC; the men then charged the Brown Line with fixed bayonets and carried it. For organising the overall attack of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Lt. Colonel Porch, their commanding officer, was awarded a bar to his DSO. After their success in taking their objective, they found that the Tyneside Irish on their left had been held up both by a German machine gun and by troops of the 51<sup>st</sup> division straying too far right into their area. This left the Tyneside Scottish's flank 'in the air' and they had to occupy Gavreller Weg between the Blue and Brown trenches as a temporary front against the Germans until the Irish were able to move forward the next day. The 1<sup>st</sup>, on the righthand side of the 4<sup>th</sup>, had some problems because of stiff German resistance and had the greatest casualties of that day, though they found that in some locations the Germans had left their breakfasts on the stoves and run for it. Now both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> moved slightly forward to occupy new positions along the Green Line on the ridge of the hill overlooking the remaining German positions below. It must have been very satisfying to have reached their objectives on the opening day, with only limited casualties, and to be in the position of having a good view of their beaten foe and of the next objective, the village of Bailleul. Some groups pushed even further forward and were to capture two batteries of German 77mm guns and some of the crews. Capturing the enemy artillery was a great pleasure to the men who had earlier been suffering from the shell fall of these very guns. The weather was so bad that in the night after the initial attack some men of the 34<sup>th</sup> Division, which included the Tyneside Scottish and Irish, are said to have died of cold as they had been ordered to leave behind their greatcoats for the advance. The appalling weather continued, and men were having to be evacuated on medical grounds due to exposure so that by the 14<sup>th</sup> the whole of the brigade was withdrawn first to Arras city, where they could rest in the house basements and additional tunnels dug by the resourceful defenders, safe from the German artillery. Today one can visit these tunnels which are accessible from the rebuilt Mairie (town hall). They then were moved east to Monchy Breton to reform, regroup and recover after the battle. At this point Brigadier Ternan, who had commanded the Tyneside Scottish Brigade since it went to France, retired; it was a much more positive time for him to leave than a few months earlier, and he must have felt that his efforts had at last been rewarded. The casualties (Table 1) show that, unlike at the Somme, fatalities were much smaller though many were injured and rather fewer were missing. The large number of missing reported in the War Diary for the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion is suspiciously similar to the number of wounded and may be a slip of the pen. Some of the Missing may simply have been lost in the chaos and bad weather and have returned to their units later. The smaller number of officer casualties meant that the battalions could still function and therefore remained in the line. On the whole the luck of the draw had led to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion not being involved in the early parts of the operation and their casualties were smaller.

Table 1. Casualties of the Tyneside Scottish at Arras from 9 to 12 April 1917

Battalion	Officers		Other Ranks		
	Killed	Wounded	Killed	Wounded	Missing
1 <sup>st</sup>	4	7	37	202	39
2 <sup>nd</sup>	14		261		
3 <sup>rd</sup>	3	7	36	167	60
4 <sup>th</sup>	1	2	21	130	130

The break from the battle was brief, and on the 14<sup>th</sup> the Brigade was on the move towards Fampoux and the chemical works at Roeux just to the south of their previous action. Fampoux had been taken

but Roeux lay outside the scope of the first day's attack, and it was known to be a 'fortified village', not unlike La Boisselle of unhappy memory. The plan had been to attack it on the 10<sup>th</sup> but the weather was so awful that it was delayed until the 11<sup>th</sup>. It was a very difficult target, due not only to German fortifications but also there was a railway to the north running in a variety of cuttings and on embankments while to the south was the marshy river Scarpe. In addition, it had been difficult moving the artillery forward in the wet conditions and it had not had the chance to range the guns adequately. The attack began with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Seaforth Highlanders and first Royal Irish Fusiliers attacking. The enemy spotted the Seaforths entering a sunken lane and when they emerged from it to attack, over nearly a mile of open ground, they were gunned down, and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Hugh Rose, a member of the church, was killed in this action; his body was never recovered. The attack failed. The following day (12 April), two brigades from the 9th (Scottish) Division attacked Roeux over the same ground with similar difficulties. Although some of the attackers got within 20 yards of the German line, they suffered heavy casualties and were forced to pull back. The Official History later concluded that the attack failed because of hurried preparation, inadequate reconnaissance, and ineffective artillery bombardment that was not sufficient to suppress the German defences. The old lessons had not been fully learned yet, and new attacks were rushed in spite of the appalling casualties.

When the Tyneside Scottish returned to the front they were asked to attack at Roeux. This would be the fourth battle here, for the 51<sup>st</sup> Division had lost men on the 23<sup>rd</sup> for little gain, and now on the 28<sup>th</sup> the Tyneside Scottish and Irish went in. This time there was a good supporting creeping barrage but the artillery were unable to deal with the blockhouses, bunkers and tunnels, from which resistance and counter-attacks drove the Tynesiders back with, once more, little gain. The 34<sup>th</sup> division had failed partly because of poor co-ordinations as not all the troops attacked together, but, finally, on the 11<sup>th</sup> May, the 4<sup>th</sup> and 51<sup>st</sup> divisions attacked yet again and this time took the village. The cost had been appalling for the three divisions, 4<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 51<sup>st</sup> which had been most involved; all suffered between 6000 and 7000 casualties. It can be argued convincingly that these later sacrificial attacks were in large part prompted by the need to harass the enemy in order to prevent a movement south of German troops to where large parts of the French army had mutinied at Chemin de Dames.

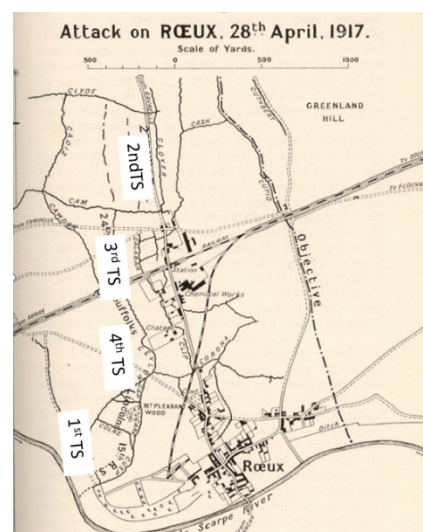


Table 2. Casualties of the Tyneside Scottish at Roeux from 20-29 April 1917

Battalion	Officers			Other Ranks		
	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Wounded	Missing
1 <sup>st</sup>		1		15	84	10
2 <sup>nd</sup>		1		1	14	
3 <sup>rd</sup>		1		1	21	19
4 <sup>th</sup>	2	3	4	14	67	70

The Tynesiders had again rather few killed though this time it was the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion which suffered worst. The 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion had had the easy operation and remained virtually intact (table 2). It is intriguing how after hard fighting against a well-positioned enemy the casualties remained relatively small.

Arras was not yet over for the Tynesiders. Having licked their wounds they moved a few kilometres north to Greenland Hill just north of Plouvain and to the east of Roeux. The name of the target is typical of military policy in that towns and rivers retained their French names, even if these were bowdlerized, for example Ypres became Wipers, but woods and other features were often given descriptive English names, though the origin of Greenland for the hill is not clear. From the hill the land fell away to the Scarpe and so was a considerable feature and, rather like house buyers seeking a site with a good prospect over their neighbours the military prefer a clear view over surroundings which the enemy held. The battle was substantial and hard fought with the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> being in the line and the 4<sup>th</sup> were in support. They had more than enough artillery and captured the objectives on the 31<sup>st</sup> May after a stiff fight. The Germans were not going to give up this site easily and there were repeated counter attacks and the positions swung back and forwards over the next week. Casualties were considerable (Table 3) and even Lieutenant Colonel Porch was injured and had to be temporarily replaced.

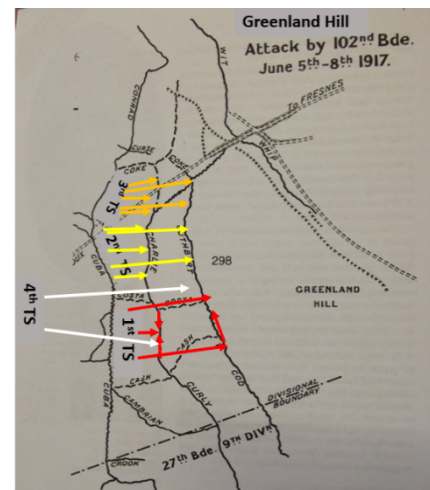


Table 3. Casualties of the Tyneside Scottish at Greenland Hill from June 1917

Battalion	Officers			Other Ranks		
	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Killed	Wounded	Missing
1 <sup>st</sup>						
2 <sup>nd</sup>	7	5		21	147	39
3 <sup>rd</sup>	2	1	1	14	174	80
4 <sup>th</sup>		2		2	34	

As usual it was machine guns which had not been suppressed by the creeping barrage that were the main problem. Once again the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion had the lowest casualties as it had been in reserve for much of the action. The War Diary gives no figures for the casualties of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion but they were considerable. The Tynesiders went in and out of the Front over the next few days and were finally relieved by the 17<sup>th</sup> division in the middle of June. For them it was the end of the Battle of Arras.

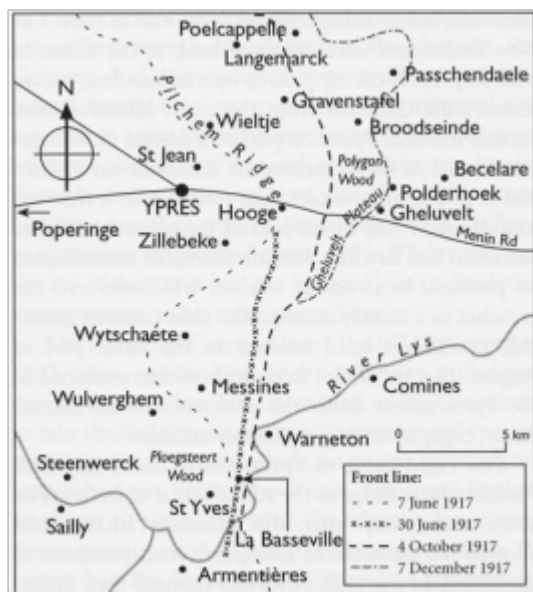
However the battle itself was not yet finished, and at the end of April an attack was planned further south mostly around the village of Bullecourt where the Australians and others suffered very badly and the old policy of repeatedly sending men in over the same ground with the same disastrous results was repeated with no successful outcome in the form of a breakout, though Bullecourt was eventually captured. Just to the north of Bullecourt at Croisilles it seems that the 19<sup>th</sup> battalion DLI were in the line and at some point on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May church member Lieutenant Robert Alexander Wilson was killed near Fontaine les Croisilles, though it has not yet been possible to ascertain the nature of the action. His body was not recovered and he is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial. John Halifax Feggetter of the church was with the 13<sup>th</sup> NF at Croisilles and his work was so excellent and his courage and gallantry so inspiring, particularly at the capture of Croisilles, that he was recommended for the Military Cross which he later received. “For conspicuous good service between the period March 21<sup>st</sup> – September 21<sup>st</sup> 1917 especially for gallantry and devotion to duty on April 2<sup>nd</sup> near Croisilles, when by his skill and fearlessness he established telephonic communication between the front line and Battalion Headquarters within a few minutes of the capture of an important objective”.

This costly victory at Bullecourt, which further caused the Australians to believe that they were sacrificed in lost causes, brought to an end a battle which had started so well and achieved on the first day the greatest Allied advance made in the trench fighting so far, and this was made by troops including the Tyneside Scottish. The German strategy of defence in depth with strongpoints and mobile groups of defenders had proved very effective and would be used again successfully at the Battle of Passchendaele in a few weeks. Tanks had been used but had been bogged down in the mud or trapped in the ubiquitous craters. Only one mine had been used and it had been exploded when British troops had been too close and they had been stunned and some had been buried temporarily. Lessons were being learned by both sides and would result in a British success at Messines Ridge in a few weeks and the protracted bloodbath of Passchendaele shortly after.

The Tynesiders now moved to Hargicourt where they held a section of the front line through the summer and were involved in attritional warfare where there were regular raids and sometimes larger attacks at battalion strength but no great plan to break the enemy lines. During this period they improved the poorly constructed trenches which had been taken over from the French and moved the front forward. Numbers of those wounded at Arras returned to their battalions to continue the struggle.

After this 'break' from the horror of large scale attacks the Brigade moved at the end of September north to the Passchendaele battlefield where they began with a period in camps where they could prepare themselves and new recruits who had been drafted in as replacements for a battle in the mud and with hardly any discernible trenches from where they had to attack strongly defended concrete pillboxes usually given British names ending in 'farm'! Their baptism began even before they reached the front line for the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion having marched from Elverdinghe near Poperinghe to Redan camp suffered over 90 casualties from a raid by 108 Gotha bombers, this was indeed a

different war. The Brigade moved forward to near Pilkem and had the support of a light railway to bring up supplies. From here they moved up to relieve troops on the front line near Poelcapelle. Here men were in shell holes where they shared the space with water, or captured in pill boxes, and movement in daytime was impossible, for even in the shell holes aircraft watched for any movement. Getting there at night was a problem as guides could get lost in the dark, particularly when the duckboard paths ran out, imagine hell on earth! In front of them to their right was Passchendaele where the battle would peter out, still miles short of the original objective of the railway centre at Roulers (Roselare). There followed heavy shelling with mustard gas, which caused little more than the severe inconvenience of wearing masks, but the next day high explosive shelling stirred up the gas in the soil leading to numerous casualties. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>



October a large-scale attack took place, which for the Tynesiders was successful, but some of the captured ground was subsequently lost to counter-attacks. The effect of 9 days at the front was that the effective strength of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion fell from 1049 to 688 men! The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion by contrast had an easier time, they saw the raid by the Gotha bombers but were unaffected, but their camp was partly under water, welcome to Flanders! They also moved in and out of the Front Line between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 26<sup>th</sup> and although they suffered a depressing daily toll from enemy fire, gassing and sickness, their losses were less than half of those of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion. From here they all moved to Courcelles le Comte south east of Arras, which must have been like a holiday camp in contrast to

the mud and gas of Passchendaele. Although there was the ongoing drudgery of life in the trenches, raids, shelling and working parties when they were relieved they could exploit the captured tunnels of the Hindenburg Line, have a bath, clean up and rest, and so their year came to a close in a relatively warm, safe and dry billet.

For those from the church serving in other regiments though, the second half of the year was not kind. At Messines Ridge, General Plumer orchestrated one of the most successful attacks of the war, taking all of his objectives, but even here there were serious losses. Lt James Allan Ballantyne of the 20<sup>th</sup> DLI was injured in the head and although he recovered it was only to be killed near Ypres on 1<sup>st</sup> August. On the same day Lt Frederick Dobell Young of the Royal Garrison Artillery died as a result of wounds at Elverdinghe, having only arrived in Belgium on 24<sup>th</sup> July! The 4<sup>th</sup> October marked the next fatality when Lt John Halifax Feggetter MC, the battalion Intelligence Officer, was killed alongside the colonel. This was at Broodseinde Ridge, a sub-battle of Passchendaele, which although a victory was bought at heavy cost. He was buried where he fell and the location subsequently lost. He had been injured at Mametz Wood in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and won his MC in the success at Croisilles as part of the Battle of Arras earlier in 1917. Three weeks later on 26<sup>th</sup> October Lt David Lindsay Young of the 4<sup>th</sup> battalion Northumberland Fusiliers and a cousin of FB Young referred to above, was killed before dawn in an attack at Houthulst Forest, also part of the Battle of Passchendaele. He had previously taken part in attacks at Arras, Wancourt and Passchendaele Ridge. The final fatality of 1917 was after the Battle of Passchendaele had ground to a halt when the village of that name had been captured, but splinters from an artillery shell seriously injured Lt Fred Herries of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion DLI on 19<sup>th</sup> December where he was holding the Front Line north of Passchendaele at Spree Farm; he had only been in the trenches since 9<sup>th</sup> December. He was taken across the whole appalling battlefield to a field hospital near Poperinghe but died there the next day.