Private Leslie Dettmar Jolliffe

On 14th July 1916, the British fourth Army made a breakthrough in the Battle of the Somme and captured a 5000 yard salient on the Bazentine Ridge but had failed to exploit the advantage to take a small sector of the German front line. One part of this front was from Highwood to Wood Lane (see Figure 2). The eventual breakthrough was to cost the lives of thousands of more men, including that of Leslie who died from his wounds on 22nd July 1916[i], aged 25 years.

The 1901 census records that Leslie Dettmar,[ii] born in 1891[iii], was the only son of five children born to Charles and Grace Jolliffe. His father, Charles, was a 'jeweller in gold', and was born in Coventry c1849[iv] and his mother,Grace, in the Ludgram district of Cornwall around 1863. The family were living at 'Chisholm', on the Alcester Road. By 1911, Grace has become widowed and has moved to 6 Cotton Lane, Moseley where she is letting out rooms to boarders. Leslie by now has left school and is working as a drapery warehouse assistant.

When war was declared, Leslie was one of the first to join the newly formed 1st Birmingham Pals Battalion in September 1914,[v] before it became the 14th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment (14th Royal Warwicks). Leslie became Private L D Jolliffe, No 14/176 in 'A' Coy.[vi] Training commenced in Sutton Park in October 1914 and was completed nine months later at Codford Camp on the Salisbury Plain. The first contingent of the Birmingham Pals Battalion to leave for France left Codford Camp at midnight, on a freezing cold pitch black night on 21st November, to march to Wylye Station. The 14th Royal Warwicks were the first to entrain at 2 am for Folkestone on 21st November 1915 where they boarded the *SS Invicta*, arriving in Boulogne at 10 am the following day.[vii] Leslie was part of this first contingent.[viii]

Figure 1: *SS Invecta*

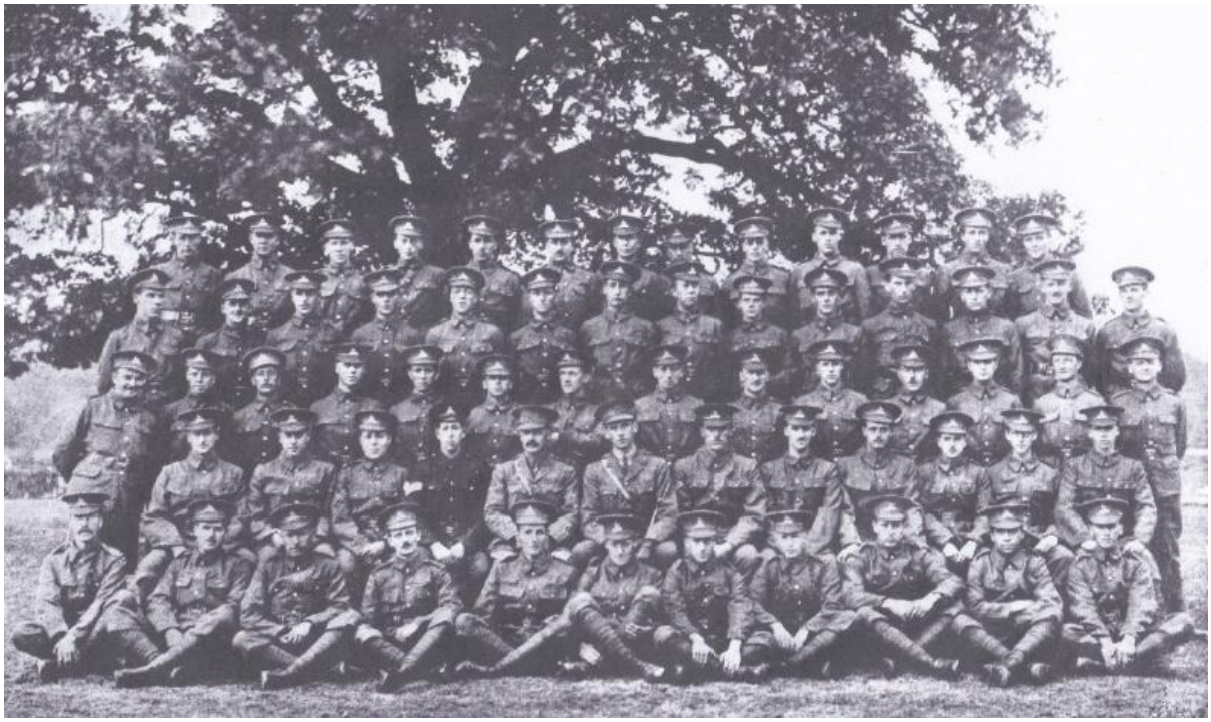

Figure 2: 14th (Service) Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Private L D Jolliffe is noted as being in this 'A' Coy photograph

As 1915 drew to a close the 14th Royal Warwicks became the first of the Birmingham Pals to experience trench warfare on the Bray front, which prior to their arrival had been fairly quiet. It was not the pleasantest of experiences as the cold, frosty weather gave way to rain and the trenches started to collapse and became half filled with mud. On 28 December 1915, the 14th Royal Warwicks were assigned to the 13th Brigade, 5th Division.[ix]

In early January 1916, the 14th Warwicks left the trenches at Bray, but following an outbreak of measles, spent the next two months in isolation at Vaux-sur-Somme. On 10th March, the Battalion rejoined the 5th Division in K1 sector on the Arras front.[x]

For the first two weeks of July, the 5th Division was designated to remain in undergoing a period of general training with many tactical exercises being carried out. On 2nd July, the 14th Royal Warwicks were in billets around the village of Mognicourt at this time preparing for a proposed attack at Wailly Stunt. At short notice on 13th July the orders were changed and the 5th Division, which included the 14th Royal Warwicks, was ordered to move south to the Somme as quickly as possible.

On 18th July, the 5th and 7th Division came under the command of XV Corps of the British 4th Army and given orders to take the high ground between High

Wood and Deville Wood and ultimately the German Switch Line. The 14th Royal Warwicks (as part of 13th Brigade) were ordered to take up positions on the Black Road, near High Wood, in order to strengthen and hold the position (see map on next page). In the evening the evening of the 18th July, Lieutenant Alan Furse (brother of William Henry Furse who was killed om the 1st day of the Battle of the Somme), the new transport officer of the 14th Royal Warwicks, based in the village of Meaulte, wrote:

We spent only one night here, but this was our first real insight into what a push means. Day and night the road was one long line of ambulances and walking wounded and occasionally a battalion which had been relieved would march through with a total strength of 150 instead of 600 or 700 men. Although we realised what losses these men had, it never seemed to occur to us that we might be the same, but then of course we had not been blooded then.

The following day the 14th Royal Warwicks marched up to the line, resting along a road south of the, recently captured, village of Montauban. Here they waited till darkness. Sergeant Arthur Cooper (14th Royal Warwicks) recalled:

At about 6 pm we march on again. We got a fairly thick shelling on the way too. A Coy was lucky and got through whole but the other companies lost quite a few. Of course the Huns knew the nooks and corners some. It was an awful march up to the trenches. The stink from the dead horses and the dead Tommies who lay about was chronic.

By nightfall on 20th July the 14th Royal Warwicks had moved into the second line along the Bazentine Ridge ready to take up their positions on the Black Road. A conference on 21st July attended by all the Corps Commanders of the 4th Army decided to resume the offensive for the Switch Line on the evening of 22nd July. The objective of the 14th Royal Warwicks, Wood Lane, lay on slightly lower ground than Black Road, approximately 320 yards away. This meant that British soldiers standing and coming over the slight crest would be silhouetted against the sky and an easy target for German snipers. The British plan was for the artillery barrage, starting at 4.30 pm, to eliminate this threat by concentrating the guns on the German Switch Line and High Wood. At 8 pm the range was adjusted to concentrate upon Wood Lane. A and B Coys were entrenched in Black Road ready to make the attack. In addition to the normal 120 rounds of ammunition, the men were issued with an extra bandolier of ammunition and two hand grenades, one in each pocket. They were also required to carry across with them all the spades the battalion had in their possession so that on taking the German line they could dig a thin skirmish line about 150 yards in front to give cover in case of a counter attack.

Unfortunately, unbeknown to them, the barrage that had appeared destructive had missed Wood Lane.

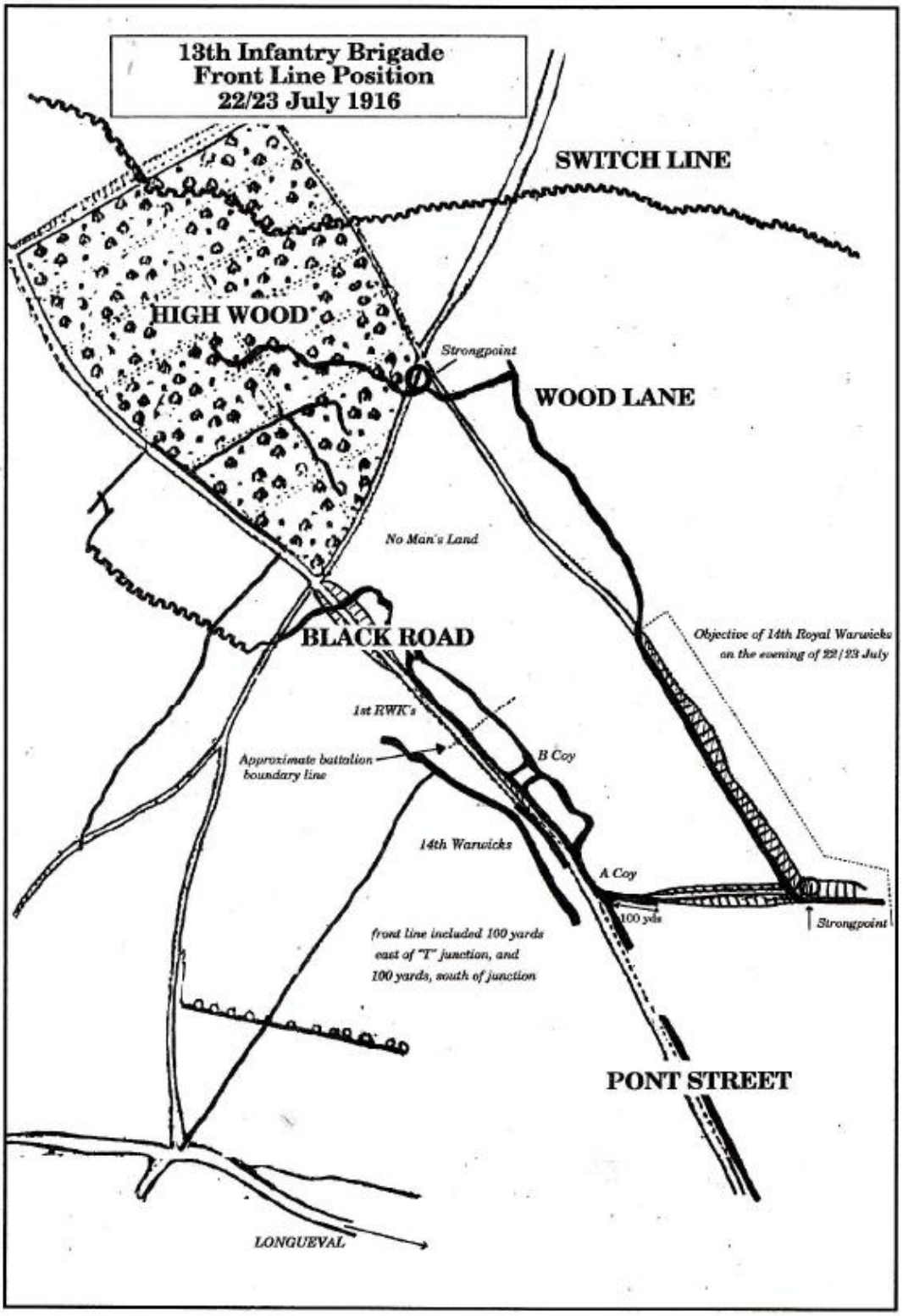

Figure 3: Map showing the position of 'A' Coy of the 14th Royal Warwicks on the 22/23 July 1916

At 9.50 pm A and B Coys made their way into No Man's Land unobserved by the Germans because of the lie of the land to that point, but as soon as soon as the whistle sounded at 10 pm and the men stood up to rush the German line they were met with a 'heavy counter-barrage and streams of lead from the numerous machine guns. After suffering severe casualties, they were forced to retire to their jumping off point'.[xi] On the 23rd July, Lieutenant Alan Furse wrote:

A little later poor Jolliffe was brought in on a stretcher wounded in the stomach and he only lived an hour or so.[xii]

The records from the 14th Field Ambulance held at the Kew Archives records that Leslie was taken to the 1/2nd London Field Ambulance at Mericourt with a gunshot wound to the chest.[xiii]

Figure 4: A typical Field Ambulance Station

The 14th Royal Warwicks suffered a total of 485 casualties during the attack; of these 194 were killed.[xiv]

Leslie is buried at Mericourt-l'Abbe Communal Cemetery extension, France

(Above) Mericourt-l'Abbe Communal Cemetery extension
(Right) WW1 memorial at St Mary's Church, Moseley

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Moseley Society History Group

Footnotes

i *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8th August 1916. Date of death is recorded as 22nd July which fits the diary record of Lieut A Furse (see xii) but not the CWGC date 23rd /24th July

ii The England & Wales births 1837-2006 transcription for 1891, Kings Norton records that Leslie was initially registered as Terrell Donald D Jolliffe, However, the 1911 census and the index for 'Soldiers who died in the Great War' records his name as Leslie Donald. In 1916 the name Leslie Dettmar Jolliffe appears in the *Birmingham Daily Post* in the Roll of Honour on 8th August 1916.

iii The England & Wales births 1837-2006, Kings Norton, 1891, 2/4, 6C, 449

iv Erratum, Charles is 52 years old in the 1901 census which will make his year of birth 1849 not 1869

v *Birmingham Daily Post*, 5th September 1914

vi a) Commonwealth war Graves Commission
http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/552527/ANDERTON,%20SYDNEY
b) Birmingham City Battalions Book of Honour

vii Carter, Terry. 1997. Birmingham pals: 14th.15th& 16th Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Pen & Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley, pp 95-98

viii British Army WW1 Medal Index

ix See vii, pp 103-105

x See vii, pp 124, 132

xi See vii, pp 170-178

xii See vii, p 185

xiii The National Archives in Kew, Ref MH106/26MH106/26

Illustrations

Figure 1 *SS Invecta*
https://www.delcampe.net/en_GB/collectables/postcards/ships-cargos/paquebot-ss-invicta-300865954.html

Figure 2 Birmingham City Battalions Book of Honour, 1920, p 42

Figure 3 See vi, p 176

Figure 4 http://www.ww1cemeteries.com/ww1frenchcemeteries/heillystation.htm