

Private Leonard Cecil Grimes

On 14th July 1916, the British 4th Army made a breakthrough in the Battle of the Somme and captured a 5000 yard salient on the Bazentine Ridge but 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 first attempt to breakthrough on 22nd /23rd July was a disaster. On 30th July a second attempt to breakthrough was made which also failed, costing the life of Leonard and hundreds of others.

Leonard's father, Charles, born c1847, was a carriage lamp manufacturer, employing 4 men, 4 girls and 5 boys.ⁱ His factory was in Lower Essex Street, Birmingham. In September 1894, he was fined 40 shillings and costs for:

Failing to keep the prescribed register of young persons employed at his factory and ordered to pay the costs of a summons for employing a boy under sixteen years of age, without having obtained the necessary certificate.ⁱⁱ

Charles and his wife, Sarah were originally from Gloucestershire, but by 1881 they had moved to Birmingham and were living at 29 Brighton Road, Balsall Heath (then Kings Norton) with their two sons and three daughters. The 1891 census records the family living at 'Stoneleigh', 21 Mayfield Road. By then the family had grown to nine children, five sons and four daughters, including Leonard Cecil Grimes, born in 1888.ⁱⁱⁱ The family continued to live there for many years. In 1906, Sarah died, aged 55 years, and Charles four years later in 1910.^{iv} As a consequence, Walter and Charles, the two eldest sons, took over the running of the business^v and Leonard together with his youngest sister, Florence, went to live with Walter, a widower, with a young son called Frederick (Walter's wife, Edith Emily died in 1908 at only 31 years old^{vi}). The 1911 census recorded the four of them living as 'boarders' at 62 Cannon Hill Road, a terraced house in Balsall Heath, Birmingham

Leonard Cecil was a pupil at Camp Hill Boys Grammar School.^{vii} After leaving school he became a wholesale drapery assistant.^{viii} At the outbreak of war on 4th August 1914, Leonard enlisted in the 14th (Service) Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1st Birmingham Pals). Private L C Grimes, No 609 was in Platoon X of the 'C' Company.^{ix}

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 the 21st November 1915 to march to Wylde Station. The 14th Royal Warwicks were the first to entrain at 2

am for Folkestone where they boarded the *SS Invicta*, arriving in Boulogne at 10 am the following day.^x Leonard was part of this contingent.^{xi}



Figure 1 : Private L C Grimes is recorded as being present in this photograph of 'C' Coy, Platoon X, 14th Royal Warwickshire Regiment

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 Birmingham Pals Battalions were assigned to the 13th Brigade, 5th Division.^{xii}

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.^{xiii}

For the first two weeks of July, the 5th Division was designated to remain in reserve undergoing a period of general training. The 14th Royal Warwicks were billeted around the village of Mognicourt at this time preparing for a proposed attack at Wailly Stunt. At short notice, however, on 13th July the orders were changed and the 5th Division was ordered to move south to the Somme as quickly as possible. This was in part to bring the 4th Army back up to strength after the devastating losses in the first two weeks of the Battle of the Somme but also in preparation for a new attack to capture a small salient in the German

front line on the Bazentine Ridge from Highwood to Wood Lane that had not been captured on the 14th July

The weather was hot and the roads dusty but the move southwards, in a series of night marches, made the going a little easier. The forty-five miles were covered in the same number of hours. On 16th July the 5th Division were deployed a few miles south-west of Albert.^{xiv}

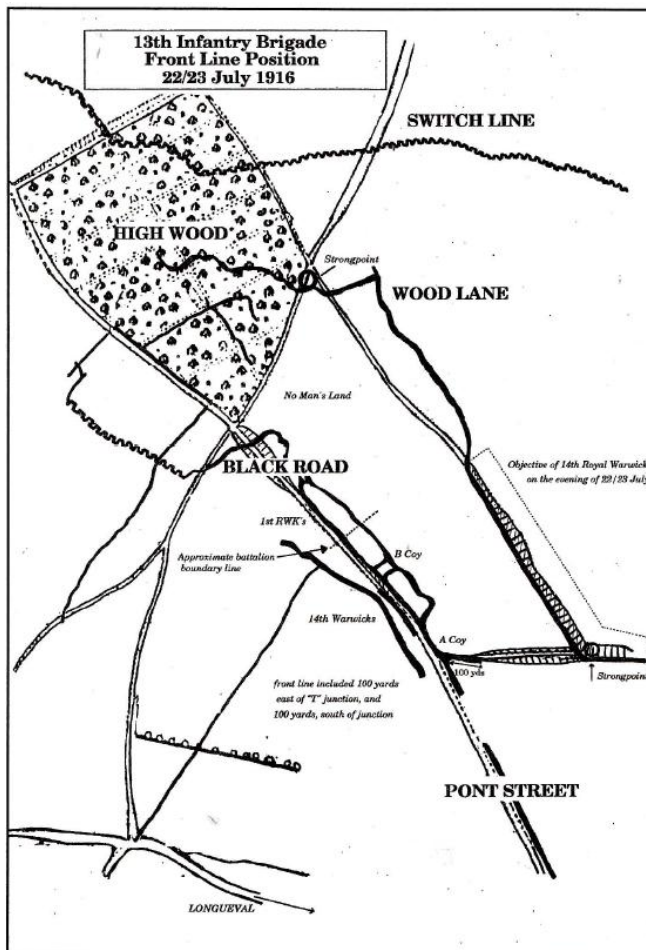


Figure 2: Map showing the positions of the companies (Coys) of the 14th Royal Warwickshire Regiment on Black Road, 21st July 1916

On 22nd/23rd July, an attempt was made to capture this salient which involved the 14th Royal Warwicks. 'A' and 'B' Coys were deployed along Black Road ready to capture a section of Wood Lane at 10 pm on 22nd July (see Figure 2). Leonard's 'C' Coy was moved up to support and take over the vacated trenches when the attack was under way. Unfortunately, the earlier British barrage had missed Wood Lane and 'A' and 'B' Coys were met with a heavy counter-barrage and machine gun fire, leading to devastating losses. 'C' Coy were left in an impossible situation made worse by communication problems. They remained entrenched until dawn, before moving to the front line trench, but further attacks on Wood Lane were, by then, considered futile.^{xv}

At 2 am on 30th July 1916, another attempt was made to capture Wood Lane. This time it was the 'C' and 'D' Coys of the 14th Royal Warwicks who were to make the attack with 'A' and 'B' Coys in support (see Figure 3). Leonard's 'C' Coy took over the firing line along Black Road without sustaining any casualties. Running eastwards was a partly dug trench and orders were given for 'C' and 'D' Coys to dig themselves in as rapidly as possible and to improve, by all means possible, this line of trench. A preliminary bombardment began at 3.45 pm and

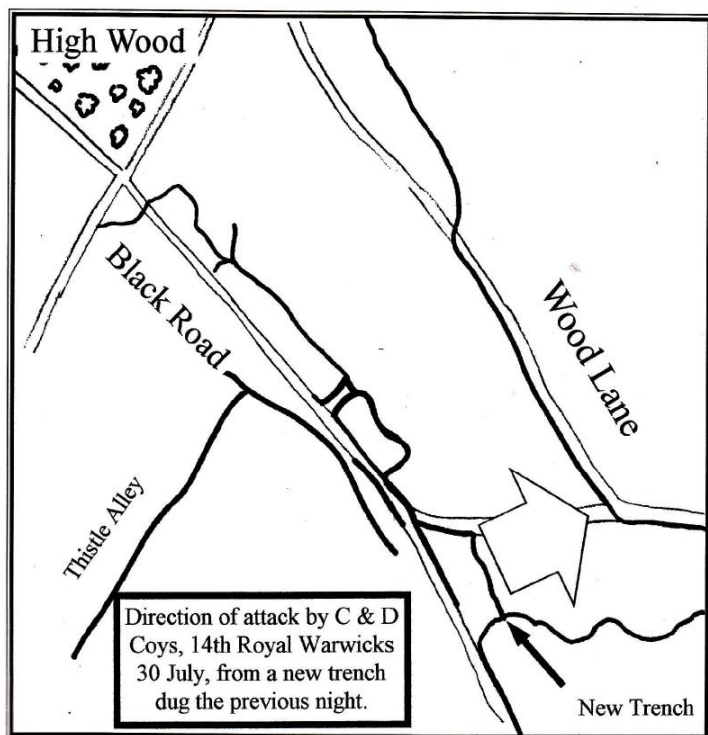


Figure 3: The positions of 'C' and 'D' Coys, 14th Royal Warwicks on 30 July 1916

the main bombardment an hour later. At 5.50 pm 'C' and 'D' Coys left their trenches and under cover of the corn advanced until they reached striking distance of the German lines. At zero hour, 6.10 pm, the attack began. The Battalion came under very heavy frontal and flank fire and both companies were cut to pieces. The attack ground to a halt. At 1 am on 31st July the remaining men of 'C' and 'D' Coys, 14th Royal Warwicks were ordered back to their original front line and were relieved by 15th Royal Warwicks at 3 am. In fourteen

days the 14th Royal Warwicks suffered 652 casualties, twenty-two officers and six hundred and thirty other ranks.^{xvi} Leonard was one of those killed on 30th July 1916. He was 27 years old.

Leonard's body was never found. He is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial, France and at St Mary's Church, Moseley, Birmingham



Figure 5: Thiepval memorial



Figure 4: St Mary's Church WW1 memorial

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Endnotes

- i 1881 census
- ii *Birmingham Post*, 1st September 1894
- iii England & Wales births 1827-2006, Kings Norton, 1888, 4/4, 6C, 403
The name Cecil and not Leonard Cecil appears on the transcription
- iv England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, Kings Norton, 1906 1/4, 6C, 272
England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, Kings Norton, . 1910, 1/4, 6C. 268
- v 1911 census
- vi 1901 census for Smethwick showing Walter and Edith Emily Grimes (born 1878) and son Frederick John Grimes
England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, Kings Norton, 1908
- vii Camp Hill Boys WW1 memorial list by Ruth Livermore
- viii 1911 census
- ix Birmingham City Battalions Roll of Honour, 1920
- x Carter, Terry. 1997. Birmingham pals: 14th.15th& 16th Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. Pen & Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley, pp 95-98
- xi British Army WW1 Medal Index
- xii See ix, pp 103-105
- xiii See ix, pp 124, 132
- xiv See ix, p 166
- xv See ix, pp 172-181
- xvi See ix, pp 194-196

Illustrations

- Figure 1 Birmingham City Battalions Book of Honour, 1920, p 59
- Figure 2 Map of Wood lane, Black Road in relation to High Wood for 22nd/23rd July 1916
See ix, p 176
- Figure 3 Map of Wood lane, Black Road in relation to High Wood for 30th July 1916
See ix, p 195