Private Frank Harold Wheeler

Twenty-three days into the Battle of the Somme, there was a breakthrough along the High Wood to Wood Lane stretch of the Bazentine Ridge in 1916. It cost the lives of many men from the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. On 27th July there was to be a resumption of the offensive upon the village of Longueval and Deville Wood. The 16th Royal Warwicks, who had previously been in reserve, were to take part in this attack. For the first time a 'creeping barrage' was to be used.

Frank's family originated from Droitwich. His great grandfather, John Wheeler, born c1804, was a baker and maltster.[i] On the 2nd March 1829 he married Catherine Manton at St Peter's Church, Droitwich.[ii] Their first child, Joseph, was born in 1830.[iii] Joseph, like his father, started out as a 'baker and maltster' before becoming a 'farmer of 16 acres' and eventually a 'skinner' (a dealer in hides) before his death in 1903.[iv] Joseph's son John Francis, his eldest child, was, born in 1854.[v] By 1871, at the age of seventeen, John had moved to Birmingham and was living with his cousin, George Manton, at 33 Edmund Street having gained employment as an accountant's clerk while working towards a chartered accountant qualification (the Institute of Charted Accountants, was a new professional body established on 11th May 1881)[vi]

On 12th September 1889, aged 34 years, John married Henrietta Harris at St Nicholas' Church, Droitwich.[vii]

Figure 1 St Nicolas' Church, Droitwich

The couple moved to 20 St Pauls Road, Balsall Heath in Birmingham after their marriage, where their first child, Florence Muriel, was born in the winter months of 1890.[viii] By 1901 John had set up his own business and the family had moved to 32 Clarence Road, Kings Norton, now Moseley, with their three children, Florence, now 10 years old, and Frank Harold together with Mary Kathleen born in 1895 and 1897 respectively.[ix] In 1911 the family were still living in Clarence Road with an additional child Norah Gwendolyn born in 1902.

Little is known about Frank, excepting that, he attended King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys[x] and on the outbreak of the Great War on 4th August 1914 he joined the 'C' Coy of the 16th Royal Warwickshire Regiment (3rd Birmingham Pals) as Private F H Wheeler, No 1187.[xi] Frank's WW1 Army Medal Index records the date he served with the colours as 21st November 1915. This corresponds with the date the 16th Royal Warwicks embarked for Boulogne from Folkestone on the *SS Princess Victoria*, escorted by Royal Navy destroyers.[xii] On 26th December 1915 the 16th Royal Warwicks were transferred to the 15th Brigade, 5th Division part of the 4th Army.[xiii]

Figure 2: *SS Princess Victoria*

The first months of 1916 were spent in preparation for the 'Big Push', better known as the Battle of the Somme, commencing on 1st July. For the first two weeks of the battle the 16th Royal Warwicks remained part of the GHQ reserve, but on the 13th July the Battalion was ordered, with due haste, to march to the Somme.[xiv]

On 20th July the 14th and 15th Battalions of the Royal Warwicks took part in an attack to gain the high ground of the Bazentine Ridge by taking High Wood and the town of Longueval. The attack failed and hundreds of men from both battalions were killed or wounded.[xv] The 16th Royal Warwicks, at this time were in reserve on the eastern slopes of Caterpillar Valley.[xvi]

It was not long before they saw action, when, as part of the 15th Brigade, they relieved the 95th Brigade on 26th July taking over the front line positions on the southern outskirts of Longueval. The following day, 27th July, at 07.00 the attack on Longueval and High Wood resumed. The German army kept up a heavy barrage on the British positions as did the British artillery on the German lines. The attack was to take place within this area of incessant shellfire. For the first time a 'creeping barrage' was to be used. The artillery barrage was to leap forward at three 90 minute intervals during which time the infantry were to rush forward and consolidate the area until the village and wood were cleared. Unbeknown to the British, however, the German defenders had a honeycomb of interlinked cellars enabling the German to move among the ruined buildings. The first wave of attack by the 1st Norfolk Regiment, as a consequence, was held up by enemy machine gun fire. As a result the 16th Royal Warwicks were ordered up to support. Slowly throughout the course of the afternoon more and more of the village was secured. At 17.30, 'B' Coy formed a defensive flank on a line from Longueval Church and Trones Wood.

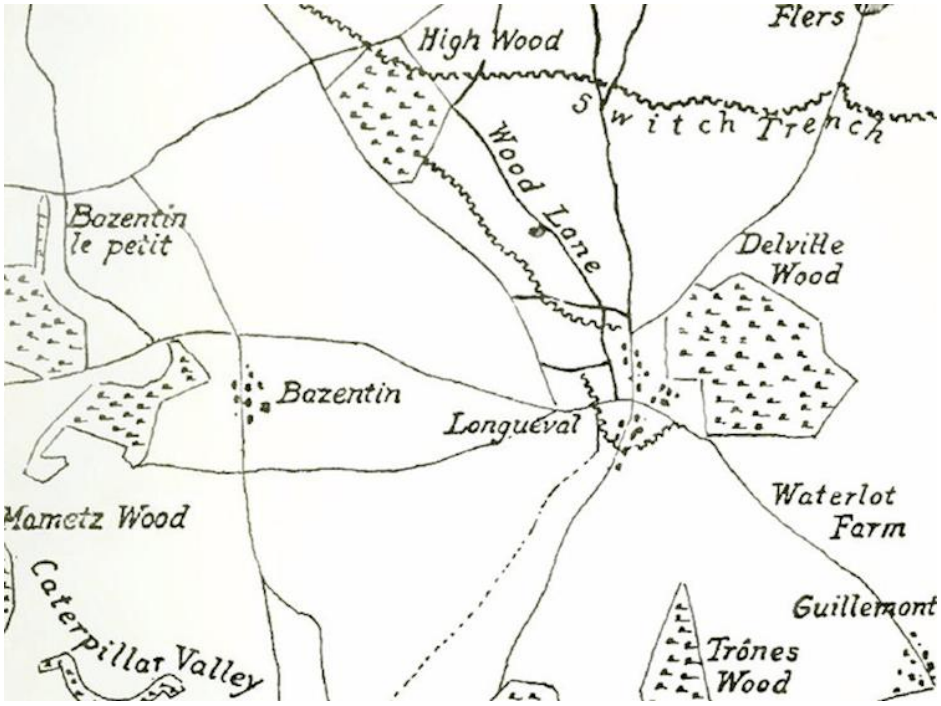

Figure 3: Map showing the position of the German front line at Longueval and the position of Trones Wood and Caterpillar Valley

Five messengers were sent to call up two platoons from 'C' Coy along with a Lewis Gun section to establish three strong points along the sunken road known as Piccadilly, near where the HQ was now operating. Due to the heavy shelling only the last messenger got through alive. As a result, it was not until 00.15 on 28th July that the two platoons started out. After losing their way initially, the two platoons managed to locate the British HQ eight hours after the original order was issued only to find that the 16th Royal Warwicks were about to be relieved and sent back to Pommiers Redoubt (just south of Marmetz Wood). During the two days that the 16th Royal Warwicks were in close support at Longueval, the battalion suffered 267 casualties, of which fifty-seven were killed. Forty-five of those killed were never recovered. One of the 'unrecovered' was Frank.[xvii] He was only 21 years old when he was killed on 27th July 1916.

Frank is commemorated on the Thiepval memorial, at King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys and at St Mary's Church, Moseley.

Figure 4.
(Above) King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys WW1 memorial.
(Bottom left) Thiepval memorial. (Bottom right) St Mary's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial

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Endnotes

i 1851 census

ii England Marriages 1538-1973

iii England Births and Baptisms 1538-1975

iv 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 census
England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, Droitwich, 1903, 4/4, 6C, 217
Worcestershire Monumental inscriptions

v Worcestershire Baptisms

vi 1871 census
What is Chartered Accountancy?
http://www.icaew.com/en/about-icaew/what-is-chartered-accountancy

vii Worcester Marriages

viii England & Wales births 1837-2006, 1890, Kings Norton, 4/4, 6C, 461

ix England & Wales births 1837-2006,, 1895, Kings Norton, 1/4, 6C , 461
England & Wales births 1837-2006,, 1897, Kings Norton, 3/4, 6C , 399

x King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys WW1 memorial, photographed and transcribed by Ruth Livermore

xi Commonwealth War Graves Commission
Birmingham City Battalions Book of Honour, 1920

xii Carter, Terry 1997. *Birmingham Pals: 14th, 15th & 16th Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment*. Pen & Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley, p 98

xiii The Long, Long Trail
http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-british-infantry-regiments-of-1914-1918/royal-warwickshire-regiment/

xiv See xii, p 166

xv See xii, pp 172-4

xvi See xii, p 175

xvii See xii, pp 188-193

Illustrations

Figure 1 St Nicolas' Church, Droitwich

http://www.worcesteranddudleyhistoricchurches.org.uk/index.php?page=droitwich

Figure 2 SS Princess Victoria
http://westhampals.blogspot.co.uk/

Figure 3 Map of the Longueval area in July 1916.
Memoir of a Tommy: Life on the Somme
http://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/memoir-of-a-tommy-life-on-the-somme/

Figure 4 Camp Hill Boys Memorial, see viii