

ERNEST COLE

Lance-Serjeant 14511, 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards
Died of wounds 15th November 1914, Boulogne, France

Note

Ernest Cole, Private, is the only name on the War Memorial with no regiment. For many years, it had been impossible to trace him, but, in January 2022, thanks to the perseverance of British Legion member John Warden, a link to the village was discovered.....



The late Ernest Cole, second son of Mr. Stephen Cole, for the last 20 years residing at Blue Coat Lane, Goudhurst, was employed as ganger of platelayers on the South Eastern Railway. After working for a time on Crowbourne Farm, he enlisted in the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards five years ago last month. On the 11th of last August he set sail from England for the seat of war. The last post card received from him was dated 23rd October, and the news of his death reached his relatives on the 24th of November. On the first Sunday after this date the flag was hoisted half-mast high on the Goudhurst Church tower, and a special form of prayer was used at the evening service at the Parish Church with reference to the death of our fellow-parishioner's son. The late Lance-Sergt. Cole would have been 26 years of age next month. He was married, and he leaves behind him a widow and one little boy. The father, the mother, the widow and all the other members of the Cole family have the sympathy of all who know them, and they have the satisfaction of knowing that their relative fell in action while fighting bravely to keep old England free from invasion.

This newspaper cutting was taken from the Kent and Sussex Courier of December 11th 1914. The photo was taken five years before, shortly after Ernest had enlisted in the 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards on November 23rd 1909 in his birth town, Tonbridge. He was a 22-year-old labourer at the time, with four brothers and two sisters, children of Steven, a railway platelayer and Harriet, nee Beech.

In 1912 Ernest was at Victoria Barracks, Windsor, where he would have met and wooed 21-year-old Honor Mary Hardy. They were married on Monday, October 21st at Windsor Registry Office. Honor was one of ten surviving children, in 1911 living with three of them and her widowed mother, also Honor. Her occupation was unusual, a laundry gofferer, i.e. ironing ruffles. After their marriage, she would probably have followed her husband's postings, living in lodgings, and we do know from the birth certificate that, on April 11th 1914, she was living at Goal Road, Pirbright, where their son, Ernest junior, was born. This was the vital clue in discovering Ernest's connection with the village.

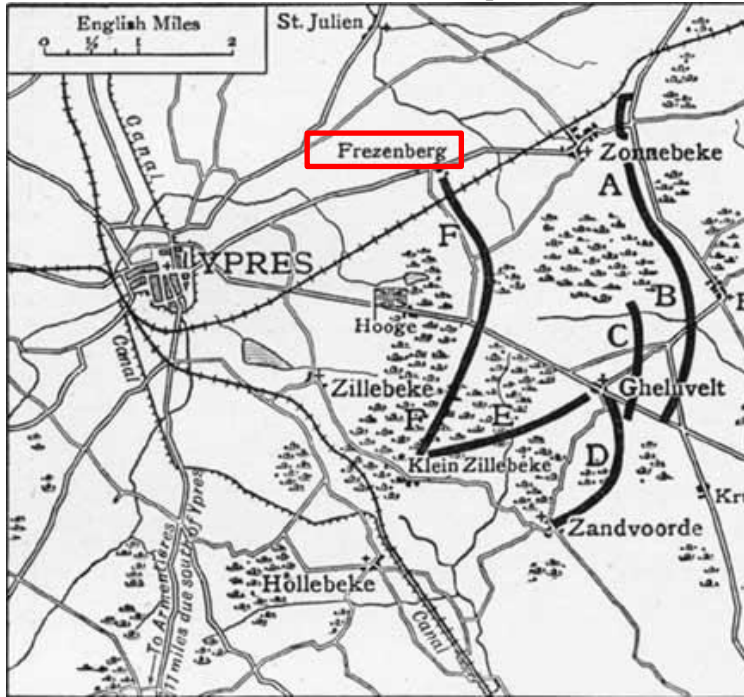
At the outbreak of war, the 2nd Grenadiers were at Wellington Barracks, Hyde Park. By coincidence, the first Pirbright casualty of the Great War, Robert Wood, was also serving in the same unit, so, to read about Ernest Cole's experiences up to Robert's death on the Aisne in mid-September, please read his biography. Possibly the two of them knew each other, and of the Pirbright connection, but, in a battalion of almost 1000 men, maybe unlikely.

The heavy fighting on the Aisne that killed Robert Wood petered out into the soon-to-be familiar trench stalemate, so the decision by both Allied and German High Commands was

to use Territorials and Landwehr on the Aisne to replace regulars and move these to Ypres, where there was heavy fighting.

Imagine a half saucer some five miles across, centred on Ypres itself. The Germans had taken up positions on the rising ground of the rim, able to observe all activity on the plain below. This was known as the Salient. At this time the 'Old Contemptibles', after the casualties of the first two months, were desperately stretched to defend this long line, with only a trickle of reservists arriving as reinforcements.

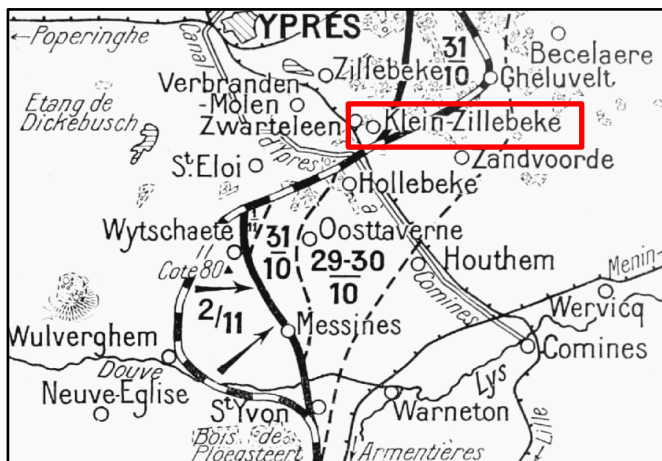
On October 14th, the 2nd Grenadiers spent a miserable twelve hours packed into cattle trucks



for the twelve-hour train journey north; on the 20th taking up a position in reserve trenches at St. Jean, about a mile north of Ypres, in pouring rain. On the 21st, they marched to near Frezenberg (F) to join the 14th Brigade in an advance over ploughed fields, digging in some 500 yards short of Zonnebeke (A), the next day improving the so-called trenches – mostly isolated holes holding just two to three men each. Here the Guardsmen had to endure two days of intermittent shellfire, suffering many casualties.

The next few days were similar – march to the next weak point,

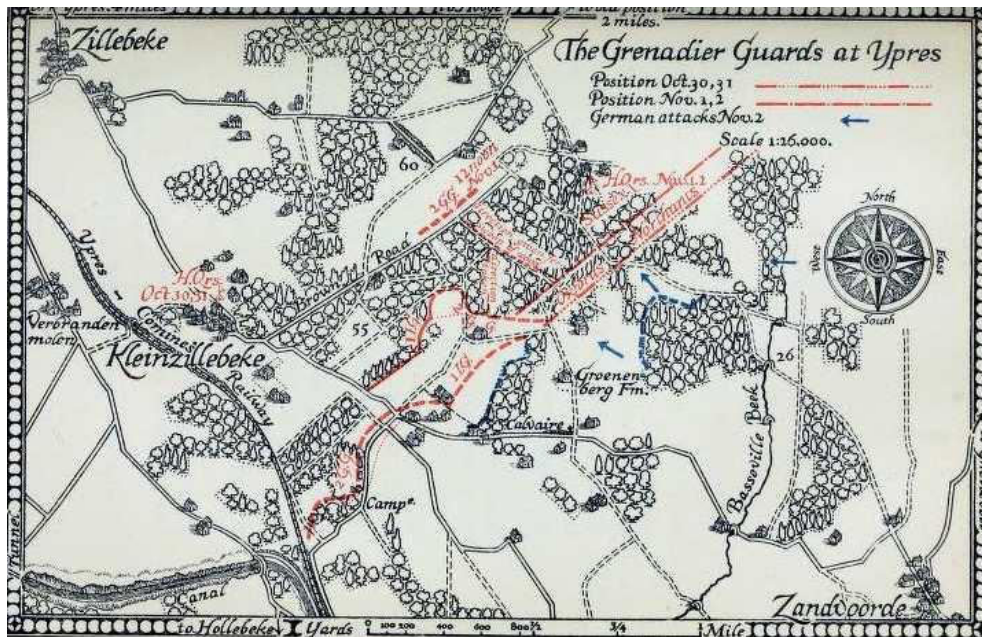
advance, be held up, dig in, counter-attack, fall back. On October 30th, Lord Cavan was ordered to despatch the Brigade two miles to the south, near Klein-Zillebeke, where there had been a serious break in the line. This map shows the front line at the end of October and beginning of November, with the Germans lower right and the heavily outnumbered Allies upper left. The long, wet night of the 30th was mostly spent in digging new



'trenches'. At dawn, the Grenadiers were deluged by a rain of shells directed by a captive balloon. Two high-explosive shells landed in one trench, killing and burying a number of men. During the afternoon, the Germans broke through the line on their left, but, fortunately, instead of attacking this weak spot, concentrated their energy on the Grenadiers, who, in true Guards fashion, held firm and were relieved during the night of November 1st, hoping for a rest, but the following afternoon were sent forward again to hold on to a wood 'at all costs' to repel yet another German attack. On Monday, 2nd, there were four more attacks on the wood, the most serious at 5.45, again failing to break through. Nearby, the Oxford Light Infantry reported over 300 dead in front of their trenches.

For the next three days there followed a comparatively quiet time, confined to sniping and occasional artillery duels. By the 5th it began to be thought that the Germans had abandoned attempts to break the line, but in reality they were only awaiting reinforcements, and during

the morning of the 6th began the fiercest attack yet, repelled at a critical moment by dismounted Household Cavalry.
 Another two days of shelling followed in the trenches at Klein Zillebeke. Here is a map of this time –



On the 10th, shelling increased enormously, more lethally from the right flank, which had been overrun. At about midday the bombardment became terrific, seemingly impossible to survive. It was probably at this time that Ernest Cole was badly wounded, but it was



impossible to collect the injured by daylight and even at night, fallen trees hampered the stretcher-bearers. After first aid at the regimental aid post, he would have been carried northwest to the Red Cross station at Zillebeke (left).



In these desperate days, medical services were rudimentary. The wounded Ernest would probably have been taken by jolting horse-drawn ambulance via Ypres to No. 4 Casualty Clearing Station at Chateau d'Hondt, Poperinghe (right), thence by hospital train to No. 13 Stationary Hospital at Boulogne, hastily set up a few weeks before in the former Casino. Here he died from his wounds on November 15th, quite possibly from gas gangrene, which, imperfectly understood at this stage of the war, claimed the lives of nearly one in eight wounded.



Although the photo was taken later in the war, it may have been in this ward that Ernest died, nursed by one of these nurses; this taken outside as they arrived in October 1914.

There is no record where wife Honor was living with baby Ernest at this time; possibly with one of her six siblings, both parents having died. Money would have been tight. She received £8. 15s. 3d in February 1915 in back pay and, as the widow of a serving soldier, was entitled to receive 5s per week, but, this early in the war, the pension service was so disorganised, it was often paid late, causing great hardship.

On February 23rd 1916, at Southwark, widow Honor Mary Cole remarried 31-year-old William John Hope. Born in London's East End, he was also a career soldier, joining the 1st Middlesex in 1903 and serving abroad until 1912. Another Old Contemptible, he went to France in September 1914, was badly wounded in the arm a year later and spent almost the next two years back in the UK, when he would have met Honor. The first of their two sons, Cecil, was born in December 1916 and Geoffrey in late 1918 in Twickenham. Both had left home by 1939, but Ernest Cole junior, a labourer, was then still living with his mother and storekeeper stepfather in Twickenham. Ernest married Sarah Mary Marie Carter in Cleethorpes in 1949. The couple had no children. She died in 1974, he in 1983, both in Grimsby. Honor, his mother, had died at Maidstone in 1961.

Lance Serjeant Ernest Cole's body was taken the mile or so from the Boulogne hospital to be buried with military honours in part of the civilian Cimitiere-de-l'Est, one of the first of the 5799 WW1 dead to be buried there. The headstones, unusually for war graves, were laid flat because of the sandy soil. Here he rests in peace.

