

William Rowlett and the Battle of the Somme

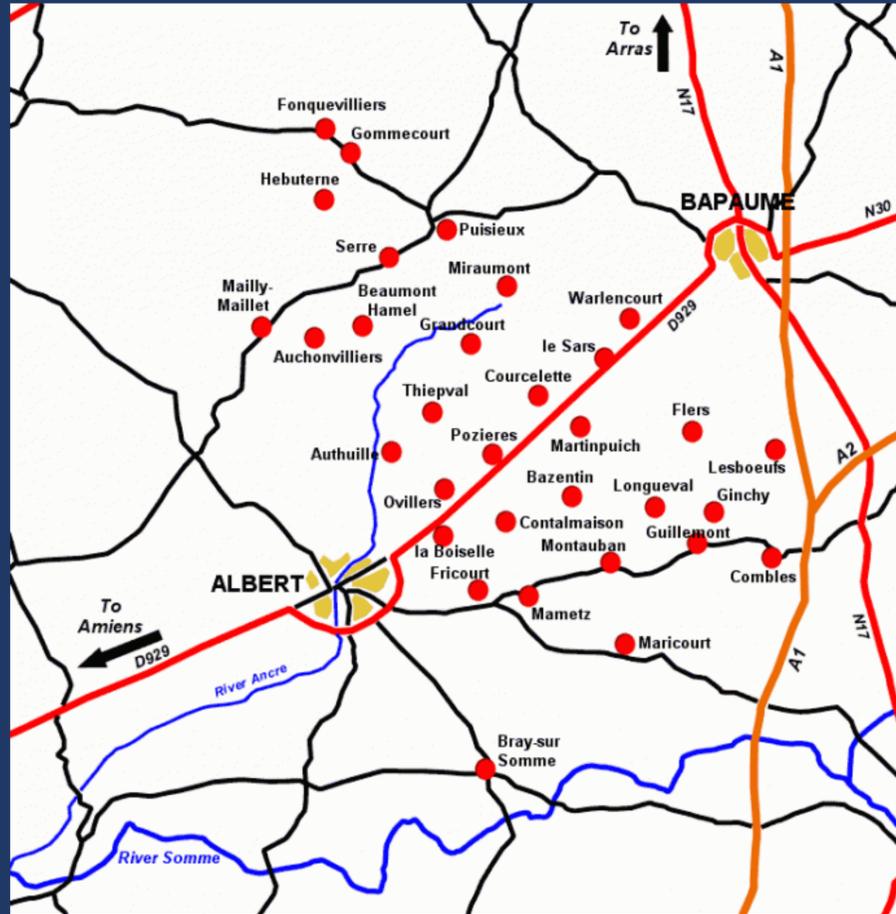
William Ernest Rowlett was the youngest of the Rowlett brothers to go to war. He was born in Tansor in February 1894. He attended Tansor school between 1899-1906, and his attendance record shows that as a boy, he was known as Willie. In 1911, William was a horseman, working on a farm. At this time, he lived with his parents and two younger brothers in a four-room house in Tansor.

William's medal roll outlines that he was initially in the 1/7th Battalion of the Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment), which was a territorial battalion. It is unclear when William enlisted, but the battalion was briefly based in Gibraltar in 1914, before returning to England. In March 1915, the battalion arrived in Le Havre, and was attached to 23rd Brigade in 8th Division. In July 1916 William was stationed at the 41st Infantry Base Depot in Étaples, just south of Boulogne in France, and in August that year, alongside his territorial colleagues, he was transferred to the 17th Battalion, at which point William was despatched to the front line.

The 17th Battalion was also known as the Footballers' or Football Battalion, and was formed in Fulham in December 1914 to encourage professional footballers to enlist. Many footballers signed up, including the whole of Clapton Orient, later to become Leyton Orient.

The 17th was an infantry unit, and would have been very different to the territorial unit that William had initially joined. On his arrival, the battalion was involved in intense fighting with enemy troops near Guillemont in the Somme département of France. The war diary for 8th August 1916 (right) gives some impression of what William encountered. The day he arrived at the front line, 29 men were killed, a further nine died of their wounds, 115 were wounded and several men were missing. William was one of 716 men that were drafted in to join the battalion during the same week.

The battalion spent the next few weeks marching between billets - where they were resting and on fatigue duty - and the frontline, where they were engaged



Principal Battlefields of the Somme, July-November 1916

8.8.16
 "At 4.30 a.m. a...raid was organised. A strong bombing party with Lewis guns made a determined demonstration ...the enemy immediately retaliated and put over a very heavy artillery barrage."

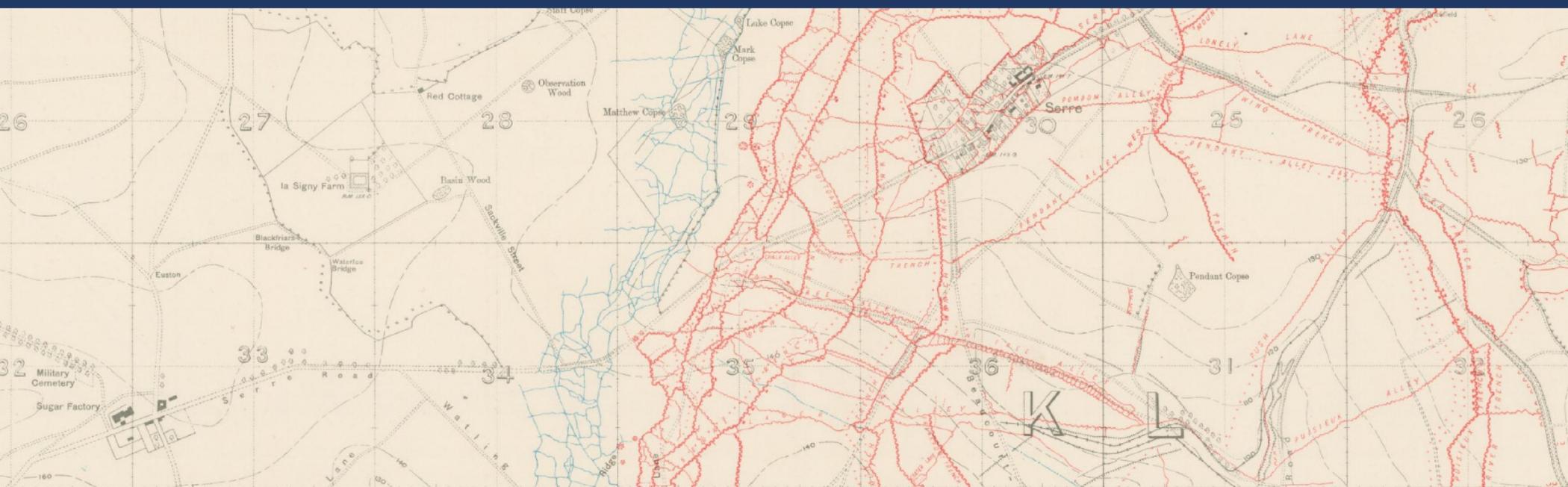
in trench warfare. For most of October 1916, the battalion trained for 'the expected large "push" on our front', whilst billeted near Mailly-Maillet. The war diary records that notice had been received that a major operation was to be launched on 13th November. The battalion marched to the line, arriving on the 12th at 12.20 a.m. The diary provides a detailed account of the day's events: 'At zero hour, namely 5.45 a.m. the British artillery began its preliminary bombardment of the German lines, and at 5.51 a.m. the battalion went over in waves...the morning was very misty, and Pendant Copse, our objective was invisible. All ranks were extremely cheerful and

6.11.16
 "Football match between the Middlesex and 2nd S. Staffs resulting in a win for us 5-0."

success seemed inevitable. Two of the companies, viz. B + D went over playing mouth organs.'

The foggy conditions inevitably caused problems, with many units finding themselves at some distance from their intended targets, and this caused much disarray. In the fog, the wire stretching across the German front line also caused serious issues, hindering and entangling the advancing forces. Enemy machine gun fire exacerbated the problems, and it is clear that men were dying as the operation continued. Sometime before 9.00 a.m., officers began to order a retreat to Legend Trench, which was then heavily shelled by the Germans. The 17th reported 18 men killed, 141 missing and 147 wounded. William Rowlett was amongst those killed. He was 22 years old.

William had joined a territorial battalion, but after the Military Service Act came into effect in March 1916 the army could move men around freely, and many territorials were transferred to infantry units. Following his transfer to a regular battalion in August 1916, William survived for just three months.



Trench Map showing the objective of the 17th Battalion on 13th November 1916 - Pendant Copse