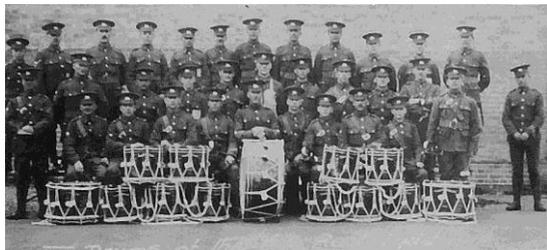


A soldier's story - Lt. Wilfrid R. Thompson 1st Kings Own 1900-1921



Corps of Drums of the 1st Battalion, King's Own at Dover, July 1914. Centre is Drum Major Wilfrid R. Thompson. It was a musical family as his two brothers were also in the Corps of Drums.

Within a month the Drums ceased to exist, many of the drummers being killed, wounded or captured on 26th August 1914, near Haucourt and Le Cateau, France. The dead included Drum Major Thompson's brother Reginald.



*Reginald A. Thompson.
(Drummer) Killed in Action.
August 1914*

The King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment was stationed in Saltash to guard the Royal Albert Bridge. The 3rd (Reserve) Battalion left on September 15th 1914 and the 1st Battalion survivors from France took over, after suffering 40% casualties at *Le Cateau*.

"What a contrast"

Sgt W.R Thompson, later wrote of the instant appeal of the town, very different from a depot. He was to sleep on the floor at St. Stephens School on Church Road. There was a tented camp at Wearde Farm for ranks and 40 young recruits awaiting instruction. It is said he could be heard, well down in the town, drilling the men.

The number of Kings Own troops in Saltash increased. On November 17th 1914, with fears of German raids on the east coast, 200 or so were rushed to Sunderland via the Saltash Ferry and Plymouth Millbay but billets in the town were soon needed again. They were readily offered, with much kindness as in Kimberley Terrace.

From a house vacated by Dr Meadows, Wilfrid R Thompson could hear the Saltash Ladies Choir at practice in the Church Institute opposite.

A small colony of 'Old Soldiers' grew in requisitioned pleasure boats at the quayside with access to the Union Inn and other pubs there. One of the two captains in charge organised links with country estates for respite care, recreational camps and expert rabbit-shooting. Goodwill in every quarter was abundant.



The troops have filled the ferry and are just about to depart. A crowd has gathered on the ferry beach to wish them well. After crossing the river, they marched to Millbay Docks

Wilfrid R Thompson married Elizabeth Jenkin, a school mistress at Longlands, after consulting Canon Diggins of St. Stephens on banns. They were married at St Petroc's Parish Church, Bodmin, in the summer of 1915 followed by a honeymoon at Carbis Bay. On the way he was challenged as a shirker for wearing civilian clothes. On the first day of the honeymoon a telegram called him back to the 1st Battalion near Ypres.



Following the banns called at St Stephens Church, Saltash. Wilfrid Richard Thompson wed Elizabeth Jane Jenkins at St Petroc's Parish Church, Bodmin.

In the spring of 1916 Wilfrid R. Thompson was commissioned in the field.

Soon after 2nd Lieutenant Thompson wrote:-

On June 30th, just behind the trenches, one member of Platoon No 10 was priming Mills bombs in an Old Windmill. As he sat at the foot of the spiral staircase, surrounded by bombs and detonators, he heard one of the bombs sizzling, and knew that it would explode within five seconds. He picked it up, threw it up round the bend of the stairs, then made for the door. The bomb bumped down the stairs in pursuit of him and exploded just before he could slam the door shut. The two pieces of bomb that embedded themselves in his arm probably saved his life, however, since he was not with the platoon when I took it over the top at 7.30 a.m. on 1st July.

After the attack my batman and I, both seriously wounded, lay where we fell for forty-two hours; there was an attempt to drag me back on a shovel as a make-shift sledge, during the first night, but this proved impossible. My would-be rescuer was wounded on his way back to fetch help. Sunday 2nd July, was sunny and hot. The only drink available was water squeezed out of the clay in a handkerchief. On the morning of 3rd July, we were carried to safety by Capt. Francis Homer of the West Yorks Regiment, who later returned with a stretcher party; he also wrote to our families.

The Battle of Albert is now old history, yet I still think that if the attack had been made without the protracted preliminary bombardment, and we had sprinted forward firing from the hip, our losses would have been lighter and our objective gained and consolidated. As it was, we warned the enemy of our intentions, then got out of our trenches into the open, ambled on at a leisurely pace until we could almost see the whites of the Germans' eyes. We were overwhelmed by a deluge of fire from both flanks and the centre. So passed many of my friends.



*2nd Lieutenant Wilfrid
Thompson and his wife
Elizabeth*

Christmas - and still far from home

After early optimism, absence and bereavement were now felt widely. Official gift boxes came and from Saltash townfolk a mountain of plum puddings "enough to last until Easter".

It took until the 5th Christmas

With Saltash not forgotten. Some who, like W R Thompson experienced the first disastrous day of the Somme, would see it as a kinder time between two terrible Battle Honours. At the 3rd Battalion, now at Dovercourt, the same Colonel took back the disabled and one of the same Captains helped to find new service appointments.

Lieutenant Thompson was attached to the Royal Flying Corp (RFC) organizing their transport and was later 'Mentioned in Dispatches'.



Lieutenant Thompson recovered from his wounds but always had trouble with his right leg, which he could never straighten.

When the Kings Own Colours were trooped again in peacetime the official slow march "Trelawney" had for some a new relevance, beyond an old coincidence.

Many thanks to Nancy Bower (Daughter of Wilfrid Richard Thompson)