

The military service history of
Robert Blezard

A report from
fourteeneighteen/research
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Introduction

Report prepared for

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Our thanks

We are very pleased that you selected fourteeneighteen/research for the project. It has been a great pleasure to undertake the work and we sincerely hope that you enjoy reading the report.

The contents of the report

Our report contains the following sections:

1. Archival search results
2. A narrative of Robert's military career
3. Background information
4. Some next steps you might take.

Archival findings

Army service records

The primary and most comprehensive source of information concerning a soldier's military career is his service record. The various forms and other documents making up the record covered the entire process between enlistment and discharge. If they can be found they often provide personal, family and medical details, in addition to the facts of his training, postings to units, disciplinary record and so on. The service record is, for men who survived, the only source that is likely to mention the man's address and next of kin.

There are three collections of Great War army service records, all of which are held at the National Archives in Kew. These are the WO363 ("burnt"), WO364 and PIN26 ("pensions") collections, which originally included between them the service and pension records of all men other than the Guards and Household Regiments, who were discharged from the army prior to 1922. Only some 30% of soldiers papers now exist in these collections as the remainder were destroyed in the War Office warehouse where they were stored in London, from a fire resulting from an air raid in 1940.

We regret to say that there is no trace of Robert's record in any of these collections. It is likely to be that it was one of those destroyed in 1940.

Campaign medals records

The medal entitlement documents are a limited source of information, as they only give bare military details from the moment the man's qualification began – which is when he first landed overseas. However, they are intact and the details of virtually all soldiers who qualified can be found. The records consist of an entry for the individual in a "roll", which is essentially a list of men who qualified for the particular medal, plus an index card which provides a reference to the rolls in which the soldier is recorded.

We have attached Robert's entries in the index and in the rolls of the 1914-15 Star and the British War and Victory Medals. This is his complete entitlement to the medals.

Records of those who lost their lives

The records of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

The registers of the cemeteries and memorials under the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) were compiled during and

after the war, originally by the army's own Graves Registration Units and later by the then Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC).

The register states that Lance Corporal 14190 Robert Blezard of "A" Company of the 10th Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment died on 4 October 1917. Aged 27, he was the son of Robert and Jane Blezard, of Newton-in-Bowland, Clitheroe.

The inclusion of Robert's age and other personal details in this statement is proof that his next of kin completed and returned the "Final Verification Form" which was sent to them by the IWGC in 1921. This form required the next of kin to complete the soldier's age, relatives and address details. The information was used by the IWGC to compile the registers, in association with regimental records. It was also then used to complete the inscription on his grave headstone.

The register also tells us that Robert is buried in Oxford Road Cemetery at Wieltje, near Ypres, West Flanders, Belgium. He lies in plot II, row H, grave 2.

"Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919"

This work was compiled by His Majesty's Stationery Office from regimental records and published in a large number of volumes in 1921.

The entry adds that Robert was born in Staidburn, lived in Newton and enlisted in Clitheroe. It otherwise agrees with the CWGC information and adds that he was killed in action.

Death registration and certificate

Robert appears in the index of registered deaths for 1917. The full reference, from which a copy of his death certificate can be purchased online from the General Register Office (<http://www.gro.gov.uk>) is *Overseas Military Deaths 1917, volume I.34, page 423*. The information given by overseas military certificates is often uninformative and in Robert's case we would not expect it to say more than "killed in action".

Soldier's wills

A partial set of soldier's wills have been digitised in recent years, with some being accessed via the National Archives of Ireland and others by the United Kingdom's Probate Office. The indexes to these wills are searchable online.

We regret to say that Robert's will is not included in the lists.

War memorials in the United Kingdom

Robert is listed, sadly as R. Bleazard, on the war memorial at Dunsop Bridge, Newton in Bowland. He is also listed on a plaque memorial and roll of honour in the Parish Church of St Andrew in Slaidburn.

Newspaper archives

The official War Office casualty lists were reproduced in a number of newspapers, with the “Times”, “Irish Times” and “The Scotsman” having the most complete coverage.

Robert was listed in the “Times” of 12 November 1917. In the PDF version of the page which we have attached, he is in the centre column, first page.

Gallantry and other special awards

Gallantry and other unusual awards (including mentions in despatches) were invariably announced in the London Gazette, the official newspaper of British Parliament. This was usually followed a day or two later by a reprint in the “Times” and then the local press.

There is no evidence that Robert received any award.

National Roll of Honour and de Ruvigny’s Roll of Honour

Both of these contemporary works were compiled on a subscription basis (in other words, the soldier or his family paid for an entry), which means that they are far from comprehensive although they do list many tens of thousands of men. Listings were based on information given by the man or by family members who may not have given correct details at the time of compilation and in consequence neither publication is considered to be completely reliable. The National Roll went out of business before it produced any coverage of Lancashire outside Manchester and Salford or the West Riding outside Leeds and Bradford.

There is no entry for Robert in either work.

Operational records

All units were obliged to maintain a war diary while they were on active service. Although they generally used a standard format and were under instructions giving the sort of information to be recorded, they vary enormously in quality and content. It is unusual to see a man of non-commissioned rank mentioned by name.

We have attached a copy of the war diary of Robert's unit, covering the period of October 1917. The original diary is available to view at the National Archives (reference WO95/2156.2). It would be possible to obtain photocopies (which are currently £1 per sheet) from the National Archives reprographic department if you require paper prints. Please let us know if this would be of interest.

Civil records

We have attached Robert's entries in the censuses of 1901 and 1911.

Robert's military career

Enlistment and early service

Robert Blezard was serving as Private 14190 of the Alexandra, Princess of Wales's Own (Yorkshire Regiment) and went to France with the regiment's 10th (Service) Battalion on 9 September 1915.

The regiment is also often known as the "Green Howards" and for simplicity's sake we will call it the Yorkshire Regiment through the remainder of this report.

In order to determine anything that we could with regard to his enlistment and training, we searched for records of men numbered near to him. We found several of them, all indicating that he enlisting during the first week of September 1914. There is no direct correlation between the date and the number (for example, Pte 14185 Martin Miles joined on 2 September 1914 and 14163 Martin Bell on 8 September) and it appears that the numbers were issued when the men had arrived at the regimental depot at Richmond in North Yorkshire on 9 September.

The date of Robert's enlistment is significant. It confirms that he joined voluntarily, for conscription was not introduced until 1916. It was a peak time for recruiting: war had been declared just a month before on 4 August; Lord Kitchener's famous appeal for volunteers had been made public very soon afterwards; and stirring news of the British Army's first clashes with the enemy in France had recently been in the press. Men had had a chance to sort out their personal affairs before enlisting, and many had recently been laid off work as normal commercial trade ground to a halt. As volunteers the recruits had a choice of regiment, although they could of course have been influenced by friends, family or the recruiters.

It appears that Robert served with the same unit through to his death on 4 October 1917. Later in our report we have given an outline of its service, and it would be reasonable to assume that he moved with it and took part in its actions. Sadly there is insufficient information to determine whether he developed into a specialist role such as signaller or machine gunner, but we do know from the CWGC record that he served with the battalion's "A" Company.

Service in France and Flanders

The medal rolls show us that Robert had one single "continuous" period of service with his battalion once he was overseas. It is possible that during this service he had a few short breaks for treatment of minor illnesses or injuries, and he would have had one or two periods of home leave after going to France, but the implication is that nothing more serious happened to him until he was

killed. Given that his battalion went through some very serious fighting while he served with it, Robert would have become a very experienced soldier.

The medal rolls give his rank at the time of his death as Private and those related to his death say Lance Corporal. These statements are not necessarily in conflict: we suggest it may be because his appointment to Lance Corporal was on an Acting basis, and possibly not even paid as a Lance Corporal. In such circumstances his substantive rank remained as Private. Being appointed as a “Lance Corporal, Acting, Unpaid” was not uncommon and was kin to being on probation.

Robert appears in a list of men reported as having been killed, which was reproduced in the “Times” of 12 November 1917. In this period of the war the publication of the lists usually followed about a month after the date on which the man became a casualty, and with this information and the official records of his death giving 4 October we have no reason to doubt that this date is correct.

The action in which Robert lost his life was part of the long British offensive that is officially known as the Third Battle of Ypres, or more accurately the Third *Battles* of Ypres as it is for historical purposes defined as a number of separate battle phases. On 4 October 1917, the British Second Army undertook what was ironically one of the most successful of these phases: it is known as the *Battle of Broodseinde*. Broodseinde is a village, little more than a hamlet even in 1914 but by 1917 utterly destroyed by previous fighting in the Ypres sector. You will see from the war diary that the 10th Yorkshires moved into the battle area on 2 October, marching from a camp near Dickebusch Lake to bivouac near Zillebeke Lake. Both of these are man-made reservoirs that provide the water supply for the Belgian city of Ypres. The maps below begin to describe Robert’s final movements.

Although Zillebeke was now a few miles west of the front lines, the offensive having pushed eastwards from Ypres, it was well within the range of enemy artillery (even Dickebusch was within range of the largest guns) and two men of Robert’s “A” Company were killed soon after arrival in bivouac.

The plans and orders for the forthcoming attack were now passed down to the troops. The battalion would take part in the initial assault and would have as its objective a line defined by grid map references, between J.12.a.10.55 and J.11.b.95.15.

At 9pm on 3 October the battalion began its final move forward to the assembly position, ready for the assault next day. This was by no means straightforward, for the whole battle area was a continuous scene of devastation. Roads and tracks were cratered by shellfire; destroyed carts, limbers and guns lay all around; and the ground was littered with the dead of recent fighting. The lead company reached Clapham crossroads on the notorious Menin Road at midnight. At this point the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel T. G. Mathias DSO, led “B” and “D” Companies, which had been selected to lead the assault, forward to the assembly points. “A” and “C” Companies, the former under Captain J. C. Storey, would follow later on for

they would take up a support position. Their job would be to advance behind “B” and “D” Companies. All four companies came under enemy shellfire while they passed on through the shattered stumps known as Glencorse Wood and again on reaching Black Watch Corner. Casualties were heavy, and the battalion had not yet even reached its start point. To add to the dangerous situation, on reaching the assembly place the 10th Yorkshires found another battalion (1st Lincolnshires) already on the spot. A quick conference between commanding officers agreed that the Lincolns would not lead the assault in this position and the Yorkshires would go in behind them. “B” and “D” Companies took up a position just east of Polygon Wood (in squares J.10.a and c).



Figure 1: a general view of the area using a modern map. Note that place names are now given in Flemish, where British Army maps of the Great War tended to use French versions. (This is a Flemish-speaking area). Note the lakes at Dikkebus (Dickebusch, SW of Ieper) and at Zillebeke (SE of Ieper).

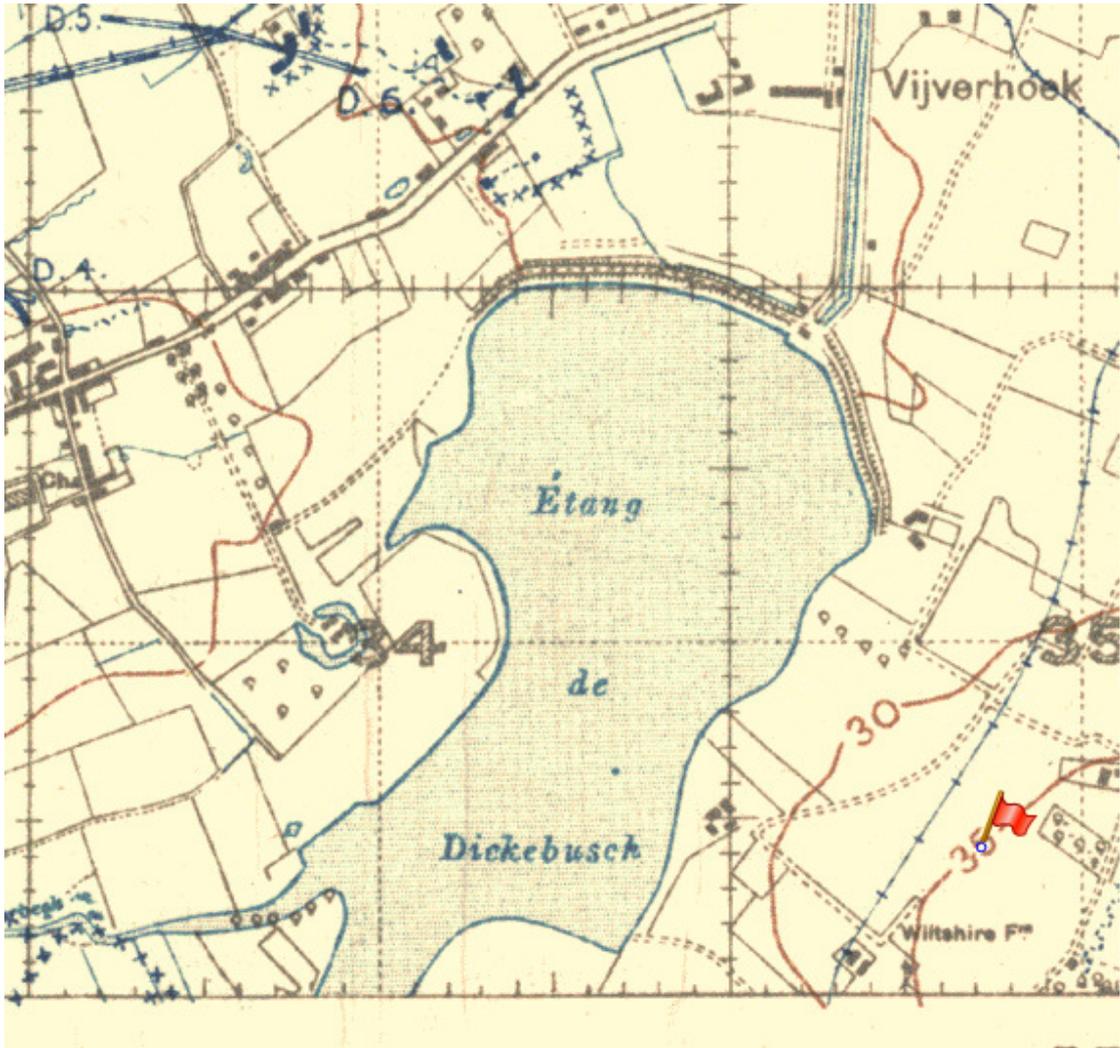


Figure 2: we have marked with a red flag H.35.c.70.40, the location of "H" Camp, from where the 10th Yorkshires moved to Zillebeke. Dickebusch village is on the left of this map. Inevitably, it was known as Dickybush.

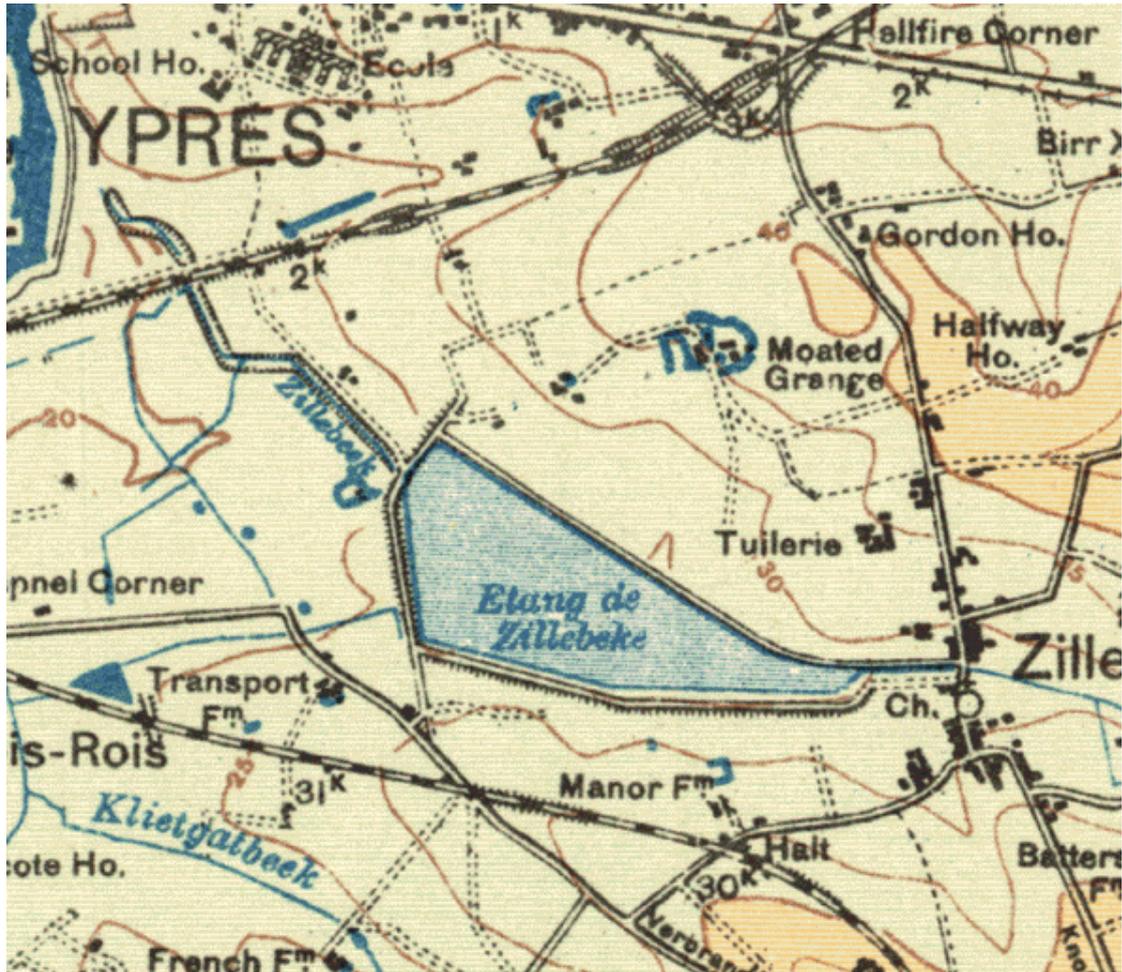


Figure 3: the war diary does not tell us exactly where at Zillebeke lake the battalion bivouacked for Robert's last night. Note the straight Menin Road, top right, passing through the notorious Hellfire Corner.

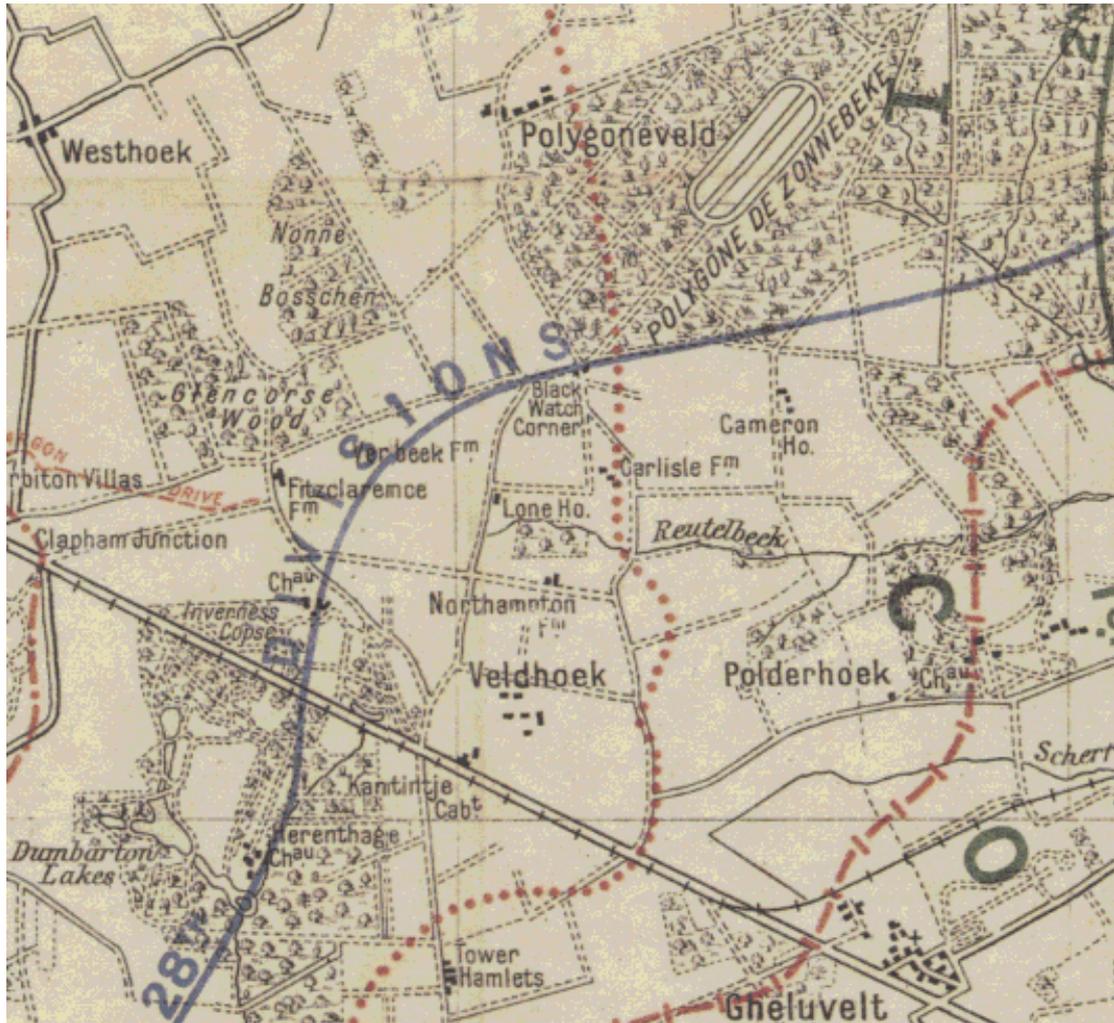


Figure 5: ... and on from Clapham Junction through Glencorse Wood to Black Watch Corner and Polygon Wood.

As things turned out, the battalion remained in position and under heavy fire until early evening when under cover of darkness the battalion moved to Juniper Trench, which had been captured that day (J.10.b) and further dug in.

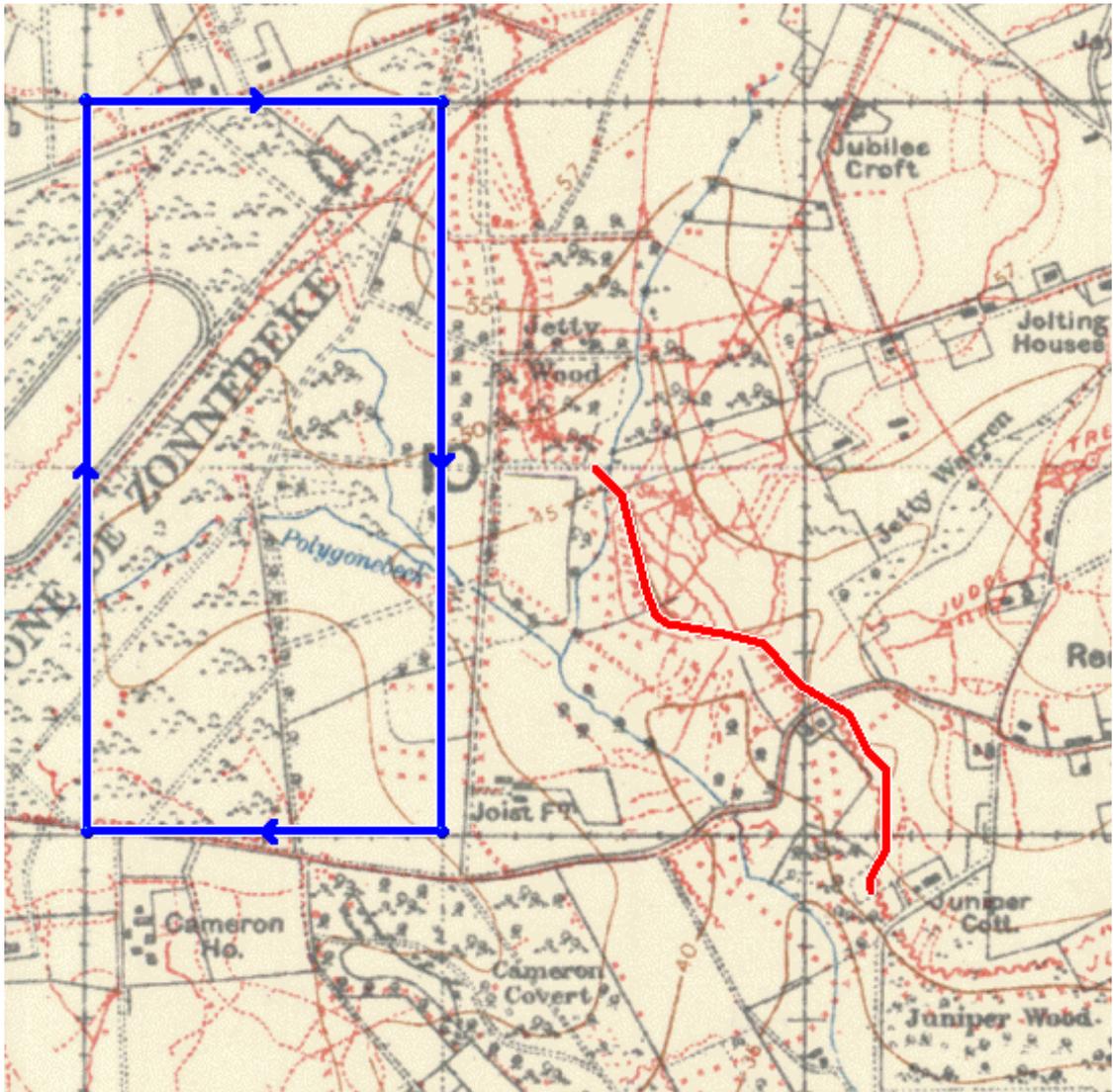


Figure 6: the battalion waited in the area bounded by our blue box, and later moved into Juniper Trench, which we have highlighted in red. The map shown was produced on 14 September 1917.



Figure 7: the position overlaid onto a modern map. The area is not quite as it was in 1914, for a motorway now cuts through Black Watch Corner and part of Polygon Wood. Note that a large military cemetery, mainly a post-war development as bodies were cleared from the battlefields, lies within the battalion's area. Below: a machine gun post near Polygon Wood just before 4 October 1917. Note the battlefield grave in the foreground.



It is apparent, given this description, that Robert Blezard was a victim of enemy shellfire.

From the CWGC description of Oxford Road Cemetery, we do not believe that this was his original place of burial: *“Oxford Road was the name given to a road running behind the support trenches, from a point west of the village of Wieltje south-eastwards to the Potijze-Zonnebeke road. Plot I is the original Oxford Road Cemetery and was used by the units fighting on this front from August 1917 to April 1918. In October 1917, another cemetery, known as Oxford Road Cemetery No.2, was started close by and now forms Plot V of the cemetery as it appears today. After the Armistice, Plots II, III and IV were added when scattered graves from the battlefields east and south-east of Ypres (now Ieper) were brought into the cemetery.”* Robert lies in Plot II.

After Robert’s death

Robert’s family would have been notified of his death very soon after the event. They may have been given a location of his burial but we suspect that this was only confirmed when his remains were moved to Oxford Road after the war.

The army’s administration now took over. Robert’s minor personal effects (at least, those left with his pack when the battalion went into the line and anything found on him when he arrived at the hospital) were sent home, together with any outstanding unissued pay. The normal legal procedures were also carried out at home.

The family should have received the illuminated scroll and bronze plaque (the “death penny”) given for those men who had died on active service during the war. The plaque and scroll were released once the War Office had received a completed Army Form 5080 which was rather similar to the Final Verification Form.

His service qualified Robert for the 1914-15 Star and the British War and Victory Medals: the basic criteria were that if a man left his native shore he got the British War Medal; if he also entered a theatre of war he got the Victory Medal, and if he did so in 1915 he got the Star. The next of kin did not have to apply and in most cases these medals were despatched in 1919 (the Star) and 1921 or 1922.

Background

The 10th (Service) Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment

On 5 August 1914, the day that he took over as Minister for War, Field Marshal Earl Kitchener of Khartoum issued orders for the expansion of the British army. He was among those men who recognised that by making a commitment to a continental war, British would need to greatly scale up its military capability. Kitchener however also recognised the limitations of the existing army structure in terms of its ability to be expanded along normal peacetime lines. His answer to this was to raise a series new army, composed of volunteers who would sign up for three years or the “duration”, whichever proved to be longer, and would agree to being sent to serve anywhere they were needed. Next day, Parliament accordingly sanctioned an increase of 500,000 men of all ranks in the regular army.

“Your King and Country need you. A call to arms”, was published on 11 August 1914, explaining the new conditions of service and calling for 100,000 men to enlist. This figure was achieved within two weeks. Further orders were given to raise subsequent New Armies, known as K2, K3, K4, etc.

The infantry battalions created under these arrangements were known as “Service Battalions”, simply to distinguish them from the existing and permanent battalions of the regular army or Territorial Force. Other than that there was no distinction: they were to have the same organisation, size and role as a regular battalion.

The Yorkshire Regiment formed several new units under these orders. The 10th (Service) Battalion was established at Richmond in September 1914. It was placed under orders of the 62nd Infantry Brigade, which came under the 21st Division. This was one of six Divisions (each of some 20,000 men) formed for K3. All of the units of this formation were composed of men who had volunteered for war and most units were from the North of England. They moved south to Tring, Maidenhead and Witley before the Division was judged ready to move to France.

The Division had an appalling baptism of fire on the Western Front, when they were rushed into the height of the Allied offensive in Artois, later called the Battle of Loos. They had had no opportunity for a gentle introduction to trench warfare, as happened to many of the New Army units, but were pushed in on the second day – 26 September 1915, after a matter of only a few days in France. The battalion suffered very heavy casualties as it tried to advance towards the strongly held second enemy trench line at Chalet Wood. Overall, 3,800 men of the Division were lost within the first week of their time in France.

The 21st Division was next heavily engaged in the Battles of the Somme in the summer of 1916. It attacked on the first day (1 July) near Fricourt, and was also involved as the weeks went by at Bazentin, Flers, and Morval and – as the

weather became wet and wintry – Le Transloy, where conditions were possibly the worst experienced during the entire war.

During 1917, the 10th Battalion saw action during the retreat of the enemy to the prepared positions of the Hindenburg Line, further back on the Somme (March); at Arras (April and May); at the Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde, during the Third Battle of Ypres (better known as Passchendaele) (September-October) and Cambrai (November).

The structure of the infantry battalion

The battalion was the basic tactical unit of the infantry of the British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918. At full establishment it consisted of 1,007 men, of whom 30 were officers. It comprised a Battalion Headquarters and four Companies.

Battalion Headquarters

The Battalion was usually commanded by an officer with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. A Major was Second-in-Command. Battalion HQ also had three other officers: a Captain or Lieutenant filled the role of Adjutant (in charge of Battalion administration); similarly a Captain or Lieutenant was the Quartermaster (responsible for stores and transport); an officer of the Royal Army Medical Corps was also attached.

Battalion HQ also included the Regimental Sergeant-Major (RSM, the most senior Non-Commissioned Officer) plus a number of specialist roles filled by NCO's with the rank of Sergeant: Quartermaster, Drummer, Cook, Pioneer, Shoemaker, Transport, Signaller, Armourer (often attached from the Army Ordnance Corps) and Orderly Room Clerk.

A Corporal and 4 Privates of the Royal Army Medical Corps were attached for sanitary and clean water duties; a Corporal and 15 Privates were employed as Signallers; 10 Privates were employed as pioneers (on construction, repair and general engineering duties); 11 Privates acted as drivers for the horse-drawn transport; 16 acted as stretcher-bearers (these often being the musicians of the battalion band); 6 Privates acted as officers' batmen (personal servants) and 2 as orderlies for the Medical Officer.

Companies

Usually lettered A to D, each of the four companies of the battalion numbered 227 heads when at full establishment. Each was commanded by a Major or Captain, with a Captain as Second-in-Command. Company HQ included a Company Sergeant-Major (CSM), a Company Quartermaster Sergeant (CQMS), 2 Privates acting as batmen and 3 as drivers. The body of the company was divided into 4 Platoons, each of which was commanded by a subaltern (a Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant). In total, the 4 Platoons consisted of 8 Sergeants, 10 Corporals, 4 Drummers, 4 batmen and 188 Privates. Each Platoon was subdivided into 4 Sections, each of 12 men under an NCO.

If asked, after his name, rank and number, a man might refer to himself as being in Number 3 Section, 1 Platoon, A Company, the 10th Yorkshires. He would receive orders from his Section Corporal, would know his Platoon Sergeant and would come into probably daily contact with the Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant commanding his platoon. He would also be familiar, at least by frequent sight, with the Captain commanding his company. In some units the relationship from this level to the men was rather closer than it

would have been in the Guards, for example, although as a regular battalion things would still be fairly formal. Robert would have known the names of the Lieutenant-Colonel and Major in first and second command of the battalion, but may not have come into direct contact with them other than at inspections.

Also in the battalion

Each battalion had, in 1914, a machine-gun section consisting of a Lieutenant, a Sergeant, a Corporal, 2 drivers, a batman and 12 Privates trained in the maintenance, transport, loading and firing of the Vickers heavy machine gun. These men made up two six-man gun teams.

Each battalion had a detachment at its Base Depot which did not take the field when the battalion was on active service. The base detachment consisted - in theory - of a subaltern, 2 Sergeants and 91 Privates to form a first reinforcement (to make good battalion casualties or other losses); 4 storemen, the Band Sergeant and the Sergeant Master Tailor. When the battalion went on active service, it left behind the Bandmaster and the Sergeant-Instructor of Musketry for service with the Reserve Battalion.

Equipment

Battalion transport consisted of 13 riding and 43 draught and packhorses. The provided the power for drawing the six ammunition carts, two water carts, three General Service Wagons (for tools and machine guns), and the MO's Maltese Cart. The Signallers had 9 bicycles.

All ranks carried the Short Magazine Lee-Enfield (SMLE) .303 inch rifle. The only exceptions were officers, Pipers, Drummers, Buglers and the five men in each battalion who carried range-finding instruments. All those carrying a rifle, except the RSM and other Staff Sergeants, were also armed with the 15 inch sword-bayonet.

Other battalion equipment, over and above that carried by the man, included 120 shovels, 73 pickaxes, 20 felling axes, 8 hand axes, 46 billhooks, 20 reaping hooks, a hand saw, 32 folding saws and 8 crowbars. There was also a plethora of minor stores and spares.

The battalion also carried a certain amount of ammunition, although this was backed up by the echelons of Transport at Brigade, Divisional and Lines of Communication levels. When added together, the supply per rifle came to 550 rounds per man. The transport carried 32 boxes of 1,000 rounds, and each man could carry up to 120 rounds. The machine guns were each supplied with a total of 41,500 rounds of which 3,500 was carried with the gun, and 8,000 in regimental reserve.

Changes during the Great War

There were significant changes to the tactical organisation of the battalion during the war. In 1914 the soldiers in a Platoon were essentially all riflemen

(and their battalion had a specialist heavy machine gun section as noted above. By 1918 the Platoon had a rifle section; plus a rifle grenade section; plus a bombing (hand grenade) section; and a Lewis gun section. They worked in concert, so for example when attacking an enemy pillbox the Lewis guns and rifle grenadiers keep it under fire while the riflemen and bombers work around the flanks and get behind it. These tactics were largely forged as a result of the rapid learning based on the experience of the Loos in 1915 and the Somme in 1916.

Next steps

CWGC

We recommend an enquiry is made of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. They retain all manner of records concerning burials and in most cases can determine where a man was found before he was reinterred; it might offer a clue to where Robert was found before being taken to Oxford Road. The CWGC are invariably helpful, in our experience. They may give you a trench map grid reference: we shall be happy to help pinpoint the location.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission
2 Marlow Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
SL6 7DX
Telephone: (casualty enquiries) 01628 507200

Local press

Now that you know a few more details of Robert's service it might be worth looking at the local newspapers covering his home area. The papers carried many snippets when the men enlisted, became casualties, went overseas, returned on leave, were given special awards or died. They also carry a surprising number of letters to the editor sent from the men and their relatives. This could be an arduous search but may be the only way to determine more regarding the detail of his service.

Regimental archives

The archive of the Yorkshire Regiment may include something of interest. They will not hold any more parts of Robert's service record but may have lists, reports, maps, clippings or photographs of interest. The regimental journal "Green Howards Gazette" may also have articles and news on the doings of 10th Battalion during his service.

The archive can be found at:
The Green Howards Regimental Museum
Trinity Church Square
Richmond
North Yorkshire
DL10 4QN
Telephone: 01748 826561

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