



The eight men at Loos

The Battle of Loos was the largest British battle that took place on the Western Front in 1915. It was part of the combined attempt by the Allies to break through the German defences in Artois and Champagne.

British casualties at Loos were about twice as high as German casualties. Reinforced German defensive positions ensured that the Franco-British attacks were contained by the German armies.



Eight Dawlish men from Dawlish died on 25th September 1915. They were all from the Devonshire Regiment, 8th (Service) Battalion

Private John Gwyne Kerle Anning
Private Sidney Cornelius
Lance Sergeant Frank Charles Cotton
Private Ernest John Crideford
Private William John Dew
Private Albert John Hooper
Private Ernest George Martin
Private William Henry Stevens

This was the single largest loss of lives affecting the town during the entire war. As we remember these eight sons of Dawlish it may be a good time to remember how these men from a small Devon town came to give their lives on a battlefield far from home in North West France.

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Recruitment

Within days of the Great War starting Germany invaded Belgium as a route to France. Britain had not yet joined the war, but had long promised in a treaty to protect this small country, and on 4th August declared war on Germany.

The British Empire covered a quarter of the globe, and much of her regular army was spread across the world. A small British Expeditionary Force, BEF, was sent to France to engage with German forces whilst the country raised a new volunteer army

We learn from the Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, Friday 25 September 1914

“Dawlish is doing its best to assist Earl Fortescue in the matter of recruiting”.

*“In addition to a public meeting held early in the month, at which some nineteen recruits responded, a circular, headed **“The Country's Call”**, has been sent out to some 200 eligible young men in the town and district.”*

The circular contained the following appeal:-

“Will you volunteer to serve your country as a free man? Now is your time to prove to the world what has been our boast, - that Britain, alone in Europe, can safely rely in the hour of need on the voluntary service of her patriot sons. Do you realise the horrors that are happening to defenceless women and children no farther from London than we are in peaceful Devon? Can you as an Englishman refuse your help to stop these horrors? Never was it a greater honour and privilege to be called an Englishman than now, but, remember, that he only deserves that name who places his country's safety before aught else. Will you not answer the call of the land of your birth? You are wanted now.”

Recruitment drives in Dawlish brought many men to enlist in Exeter at Higher Barracks where Kitchener's Army began to form.

The new Battalion in Training

It was realised that a huge new army needed to be raised quickly. The government had not yet introduced conscription and Lord Kitchener realised that men would be more inclined to enlist as volunteers if they knew that they were going to serve alongside their friends. Local recruiting drives were organised, with the promise that men would be able to serve alongside their friends, neighbours and colleagues in new "pals battalions"

The Dawlish men became part of the Devonshire Regiment, 8th (Service) Battalion. This may have been encouraged by an appeal to the War Office to associate the name of the new battalion with General Buller, the Saviour of Ladysmith. Permission was granted in September 1914 and the 8th became fondly known as Buller's Own. In a letter from Earl Fortescue in the Western Times it was indicated that Miss Buller intended to give the Battalion a bulldog. Such was the success of the recruiting drive that a further 9th (Service) Battalion was formed.

The 8th Battalion comprised around 1,000 men and officers and they moved to Rushmoor Camp, Aldershot, for training as part of 14th (Light) Division. Initially without equipment or arms of any kind, the recruits were judged to be ready by May 1915, although its move to the fighting front was delayed by lack of rifle and artillery ammunition.

They finally embarked for Le Havre where they landed on 26 July 1915 as trained infantry.



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War in France

In September 1914 the German advance into France had been stopped on the Marne and they retreated to the river Aisne. Unfortunately the chance to bring the war to a swift end was lost due to delays and confusion amongst the Army's leadership.

According to some historians, the British and French command structure was in disarray with Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, distrusting his General Officer Commanding, Sir John French. General Haig judged French's Chief of Staff, Major General Sir Archibald Murray to be unfit for his post. Much lobbying was done in London to consolidate positions of power and command.

Meanwhile, in France and Flanders the autumn and winter were very wet and cold and troops settled in to consolidating shallow lines of trenches opposite German artillery and sniper fire. Counter-batteries of artillery were limited by weapon and ammunition shortages. The Germans sought defensive positions on higher and drier ground. Lower on the plain BEF trenches were part-filled with water.

To break the stalemate a plan was drawn up by Sir John French to attack a weak spur in the German Line at Neuve Chapelle in late February 1915. On 10th March the assault began and a clean break was forced in the line and few German troops were found. There was an opportunity to follow the advance but concern about exposed flanks and considerable delays in communicating with command decisions at HQ allowed the Germans to recover and rebuild defensive positions which should have been captured in the assault. Stalemate resumed once again.

On 22nd April the Germans launched an assault against French and Canadian troop positions in what is now referred to as the Second Battle of Ypres. This was the first use of gas in the Western Front and the results were devastating.

The new Battalion moves to the War front

On their arrival in France the Devonshire Regiment was moved closer to the battle-front as part of the 20th Brigade, itself part of the larger 7th Division.

In addition to the 12,000 infantry, the Division comprised of artillery, engineers, transport, medical and veterinary companies making a combined strength of about 18,000 officers and men. The individual volunteer soldier from Dawlish was thus a very small cog in a very big wheel.

The arrival of new troops in France gave Sir John French an opportunity to respond to French Army requests for a new assault to be planned. This was for a major offensive of six Divisions in which gas would be used to incapacitate the enemy prior to the attack. This implies an involvement of around 108,000 men which includes the commander and staff officers, artillery, signals and medical personnel among others.

It was an open secret that there would be an attack in the near future, the vast preparations in progress made that abundantly clear, for there were three new lines to be dug in No Man's Land, new communications trenches to be made, old ones to be repaired and improved, bomb and ammunition stores, water dumps, advanced dressing-stations and other dug-outs to be excavated, and the work required was prodigious.

From the British trenches the ground sloped gently up to the German front line, here known as Breslau Trench and 200 yards away. The British guns had been pounding away for four days at the German wire and trenches, but when, on the evening of 24th September, Brigadier-General Trefusis of the 20th Brigade inspected the wire on his front, much of it was still uncut and parties had to be sent out after dark to cut it by hand.

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The Battle of Loos - 25 September to 18 October 1915

The British attack at Loos, led by Sir Douglas Haig, commander of the 1st Army of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), comprised half of a simultaneous Allied offensive in two separate regions.

The British engaged the enemy at Loos whilst the French attacked the German lines at Champagne and at Vimy Ridge. The French commander in chief, General Joseph Joffre, later calculated that 54 French and 13 British divisions went into action along a total front of 90 kilometres.

Following a four-day artillery bombardment British forces launched an attack on German positions at Loos. There had been some shelling during the night, but at 5.30a.m. on September 25th the intensive bombardment began and a deluge of shells descended on the German trenches. The Germans opened a heavy fire in reply, which caused some casualties in the closely-packed assembly trenches.

Next, gas and smoke were discharged by the British along the front, and at first it seemed to be working well; unfortunately, however, the wind was hardly strong enough and, despite their newly-issued gas helmets, many of our men were affected by the fumes which were lingering about. The smoke on the other hand proved more successful, and helped not a little to conceal the British advance.

The right-hand **7th Division** found that the gas cloud generally moved well in this sector, but local wind variations meant that not all cylinders were turned on here. Many men struggled to breathe in their gas helmets as they advanced into the cloud and removed them, consequently suffering from gas themselves.

At 6.30am the assault began and the Devons were met by terrible rifle and shell fire, gas and uncut barbed wire. In the delay to cut passage through the wire scores were cut down by enfilade of machine-gun fire. Once past this obstacle they rushed the front line but the Germans had retreated to the second line of trenches.

The following extract is from The Official Account of the part played by the Devonshire Regiment in the Loos sector, from a report by the Committee of Imperial Defence in Spring 1916:

“On the right, **the 20th Brigade** had carried the German front trenches within half-an-hour of the attack starting. Its leading battalions were the 2nd Gordons Highlanders **and the 8th Devons, one of the two service battalions** which had taken the place of the Guards' battalions formerly in the brigade.

Despite the loss of most of their officers, these two units pressed on vigorously, capturing eight field guns and more prisoners; they were only checked when they reached the point where the Hulloch-Vermelles road crosses that from Lens to La Bassée. Here, well ahead of the troops on either flank and reduced to a mere handful, they came to a standstill.

Some of the battalions had been terribly reduced. The loss in officers had been especially heavy; all but three officers of the 8th Devons fell before the front line was taken, and several other units had been little less fortunate. Moreover, the different brigades which had reached the German second line were not effectually linked up. Advancing from a central position, they had diverged outwards as they advanced, and were all alike held up by formidable defences and lack of support. “

(bold emphasis is given to highlight our 8th Devon Battalion contribution - ed)

The general narrative that follows is based mainly on the account in “The Devonshire Regiment 1914-1918”, compiled by C.T. Atkinson and published in 1926. A copy is held in Dawlish Library reference collection.

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The 8th Devons went forward with the greatest dash, keeping pace with the veteran battalions on their flanks. The Germans had manned the parapet of Breslau trench and were firing away furiously But taken it was; within twelve minutes of the assault starting Gordons and Devons had forced their way through the wire and were on the enemy's parapet.

The German resistance was speedily overcome. Soon after 7 o'clock the support line was also taken, and the attackers were pushing on steadily towards the intermediate line, while the Borders and 6th Gordons were already across No Man's Land.

Somewhere close ahead German guns were firing, but in the smoke and dust it was hard to locate them accurately. However, led by Captain Gwynn, the 8th made for the flashes, and soon sighted a battery just ahead. Without the least hesitation Sergeant Northam headed a charge at the guns. The gunners were bayoneted or taken, and the four guns, overheated with rapid firing, claimed for the 8th Devons, who, pushing on still, did not stop till they had reached a cross-roads due South of Cite St. Elie and about 400 yards West of Hulloch. But only a fragment of the battalion had got thus far; Captain Gwynn and 2nd-Lieut. Trott, the only officers now left, could not collect more than 70, mostly from A and C Companies.

As the day wore on the advanced parties' casualties mounted up. Sergeant Northam, for example, who had taken the guns, was killed by a sniper.

In a ceremony on November 12th, 1915 in Exeter, the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Fortescue, formally handed over two of the captured guns to the Mayor for exhibition in the city. A report appeared in the *Western Evening News* of November 13, 1915.

Some fruitless efforts were made during the day to organise a fresh attack on Cite St. Elie – that place was bombarded about 4p.m., though without much effect.....

Later the Germans advanced in force against the cross-roads, which, until then, they had not seriously attacked. There was considerable confusion; one battalion in Gun Trench fired on the retiring British under the impression they were Germans. At another point the Germans effected a lodgement in the trench, but were counter-attacked and driven out by the Borders, with whom were many of the 9th Devons and a few of the 8th.

In the end Gun Trench was secured, the Germans falling right back and leaving many dead on the parapet.

That evening orders were received to hand over Gun Trench to the 21st Brigade and to withdrawbut only to the old British lines. Here the 8th were placed with their right on the Hulloch Road, while the 9th were behind them. A certain number of stragglers turned up from various quarters till the 8th could muster nearly 150, the 9th amounting to over 200.

Three days were spent here in support – it was not exactly a rest – while fierce fighting continued all along the front of attack, and then, on September 29th, the two Devon battalions moved back to billets in Beuvry. Even for battalions which had been as hard hit as the 8th and 9th Devons, there could be no relief or rest as yet – the tactical situation was too critical.

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The Reckoning

The 8th had 19 officers and 620 men in their casualty list, and it was even more in the quality than the quantity of their losses that they had suffered so much.

To lose so many of the officers and N.C.O.s who had borne the brunt of the work of raising and training the new battalion, was a shattering blow. Colonel Grant, Major Carden and Captain Kekewich had all done great work for the 8th and their loss was severely felt. The Colonel, himself a great worker, had expected the 8th to work hard and learn rapidly. With the keen raw material with which he had to deal, his exacting demands and his high standards had been a great incentive.

In the 8th Battalion no less than 277 men were killed or missing, and 343 wounded or gassed. The 9th, with Lieut. Tracey and 2nd-Lieuts. Allan and Davies, and 135 killed or missing, and 326 wounded, were almost as much in need of reconstruction.

Still the 8th and 9th could look with pride on their first battle. At that period in the war but few other battalions could boast of having captured German guns.

One survivor wrote: "The men were simply splendid, as steady as veterans; they neither flinched nor grumbled the whole time, though they were cold, hungry and tired to death, as well as wet to the skin."

For the failure to exploit to the full the success of the first attack the 8th and 9th could not be held responsible. In capturing their objectives, and in retaining all but the most advanced positions reached, they had done all that could be asked of them."

The news reaches Dawlish

The first published news reached Dawlish on the 2nd October, just a week after the first assault

The Dawlish Gazette
SATURDAY, October, 2nd, 1915

Some of the gallant men who joined the Devons from Dawlish have been in the thick of the recent fighting. We regret to hear that the following have been wounded:— Ptes W Warner* (seriously), F Criddle** and F Jeffries. The former is a married man with a family who formerly worked for Mr Jacob Ley, of the Rise. The two other young men are sons of Mr and Mrs Criddle, of Old Town St., and Mr and Mrs Jeffries, of 6 Hatcher St., respectively.

*Private William WARNER was the husband of Mary Ann Warner, both of whom had been born in Suffolk but moved to Devon. He had been a gardener working for Mr Jacob Ley of the Rise, Dawlish.

**Private Frank CRIDDLE, son of Frank and Charlotte Criddle of Red Lion Court, Old Town Street. His oldest brother, William John Criddle had been lost in the sinking of H.M.S. AMPHION in the North Sea two days after the War began.

Only on the 9th October was the first death, that of Private Crideford, reported, On the 20th came news of Sergeant Cotton and three days later two more, and eventually on the 25th the full list of eight Dawlish men was known.

The Dawlish Gazette SATURDAY, October, 23rd, 1915:
We have been handed a copy of the "Farnham Herald," which prints a graphic letter from a Private descriptive of the part played by the 8th Devons.
The writer says:—

“You will no doubt have heard about our battalion being in the latest attempt to break through the German line. We, and all the other regiments who took part, paid the price in precious human lives. It is necessary—no-one will question that; but the bloodshed, the horror, and all the pain will remain with us forever. . . . The weather was dreadful all the time—rain & mud up to our eyes. The Germans evidently guessed we were coming, for the fire they directed on us as we mounted the parapet was awful. To the battalions concerned undying credit is due, for every man fought and died like a hero, and never a man faltered, or even looked back, but all went on, some to their deaths, others right through the German lines of trenches, scattering them like ninepins the while. By this time the battalion was getting just a little scattered, but the Sergt.-Major rallied the men again. Now the Germans were bringing up fresh soldiers, and things began to look ugly. We were ordered to retire a little to collect ourselves, but it was only a temporary check, as, when we had dug ourselves into the ground, we held all the German onslaughts, and held on to the gained ground until we were reinforced. All this fighting cost us dearly in men, but everyone was still full of fight. It was here we met the famous—or, I should say, infamous—Prussian Guard, but they didn’t stop very long to have anything like a talk with us, in fact, a little idea of how they run. We lay all night long in those trenches, with very little to eat or drink, wet through, and in awful state of mud. You wouldn’t recognise us when we lay there—we did look sights, some with hats, some with smoke helmets, others with hardly anything at all, not even a rifle. It was a piteous, but glorious, scene of old England’s pluck and bravery.

“We are still in the trenches, but further along the line. We are all waiting for a good bath and a change of clothes, and a rest. I’ve lost all my spare clothes, and have got just what I stand up in; but still I am thankful to be alive. England may well be proud of her sons, who lie far away on the fields of France. Those who still live have the awful memory of that ghastly week-end, but look forward to a time when all the pain, death, and suffering will be justified by the final crushing of the enemy, and the dawn of an everlasting peace.”

(Account compiled by Robert Vickery and Michael Clayson, with extracts from the Dawlish Gazette by Keith Gibson - Dawlish World War One Project)