

Albert Henry WEST – a tribute delivered at the Centenary service by Tom Elliott

Albert Henry West was the cousin of George Carter West (q.v.) who died fighting with the Australian Forces a few months previously, on 15th April 1917. Their joint grandparents were Edward and Fanny West. Edward West was born in Kenton and was a gardener. In 1861 Edward and Fanny lived at 9 Regent Street, with six children including Thomas Pike West who later became the father of Albert Henry. Thomas Pike West married Mary Ann Maria Warren in 1879. He was a builder's labourer and they lived at 9 Badlake Hill. They were to have five children, all of whom were living at the time of the 1911 census, including Albert Henry, the subject of today's service, and in 1911 he was aged 21 and a servant and baker to Rupert Charles Curtis, a confectioner shopkeeper in the High Street, Dawlish.

Albert enlisted at Newton Abbot, but it is not known exactly when. On 14th October 1916, he married Lizzie Dorcas Arnold in Lady St Mary's Church, Wareham, Dorset. Lizzie was born in Kingston, Surrey but had been living in Dawlish. Albert gave Wareham as his address, being a Private in the 44th Training Reserve Battalion. This unit was originally the 11th Devonshires Reserve Battalion which had formed in Exeter in November 1914. It moved to Wareham in May 1915 and became the 44th Training Reserve Brigade. At some point Albert was transferred to the 8th (Service) Battalion which had already been sent to France in 1915. He would have joined it some time after his wedding. In April 1917, during the Battle of Arras both 8th and 9th (Service) Battalions attacked Ecoust with great success and light casualties but, a month later, capturing part of Bullecourt cost them 382 killed and wounded. Early October found both Battalions near Passchendaele enduring the worst of the Third Battle of Ypres and it is here that Albert lost his life. Once again there is an even lengthier Extract from The Devonshire Regiment's history concerning the third battle of Ypres, which I have précised and will read some to you.

The 8th's move to the front had been a most unpleasant experience. Leaving their bivouacs at Chateau Sigard an hour before sunset on October 2nd, they had threaded their way to Hoge Crater, first along pave roads and then by corduroy tracks. The Hoge Crater, and it was "Huge", had been created in July 1915 after the British Tunnellers detonated 1700Kg of explosives under a German position. After passing Hoge it was, as one account says, " a question of sticking to the corduroy or duck-board tracks, or sticking in the pools of mud and water which otherwise monopolized the scene." The whole place was an ocean of mud, in which every other feature seemed to have been obliterated except the pill-boxes and the Butte in Polygon Wood, at which battalion headquarters were eventually established. As the battalion neared the Butte it had to go right through a German barrage which there was no avoiding. Luckily, the mud did at least minimize the effect of the shells, and the 8th reached their positions with about 25 casualties.

Early on October 4th, A and C Companies lined up on a tape corresponding approximately to Jubilee Trench. When they were ready, B and D fell back through them from the outpost line and took station, B in readiness to mop up behind A and C, and D in reserve. The battalion's frontage was about 400 yards. The two waves were 70 yards apart, the reserve the same distance in the rear; the Borders and Gordons followed 200 yards further back. The enemy were holding no well-defined position, but were scattered about in pill-boxes and small posts on slightly rising ground. Shortly before "Zero" a German barrage came down. Then, at 6 o'clock, the British guns opened fire, the barrage moving forward 100 yards every four minutes, and the attack started. A Company, under Captain Froot, encountered a pill-box whose garrison also manned a dug-out covered by a machine-gun in the rear. However, a Lewis gun engaged and neutralized the machine-gun, while bombers rushed and took the position. Twenty minutes after "Zero", A was on its objective, just West of Jay Barn. The Germans, though in great force, had not put up as good a fight as usual. This was also Cs experience: it met little serious opposition, the Germans surrendering quite freely, though when the company reached its objective, snipers about 150 yards to the front gave some trouble, as our protective barrage prevented men going forward to deal with them. Meanwhile B, under Captain Roper, had "mopped up" most effectively. Effective work was also done by the reserve company, which accounted for two pill-boxes which previous lines had missed. D, however, had the heaviest casualties, mainly through having caught the enemy's barrage before "Zero."

Altogether the attack had been a brilliant success, especially as the smoke and the total absence of landmarks made keeping direction most difficult. Indeed, casualties had been extremely light, far fewer than the prisoners, who numbered nearly 250. It came out from them that our barrage had caught the Germans forming up to attack, the overhead machine-gun fire which had supported our advance had been particularly deadly, and in consequence the defenders were found half demoralized and ready to surrender. It was now that the 8th's worst trials were to come. As the day wore on the German shell fire, observed and directed by aeroplanes, increased in intensity. "No sooner had we dug a fresh trench in what seemed a quiet spot," writes one officer, "than a hostile aeroplane would fly only a few yards over our heads, and we soon learnt what that foreboded." The almost incessant rain complicated matters, not merely by reason of the discomfort and additional fatigue, but because it interfered greatly with trench digging. Mud clogged rifles and Lewis guns; had the battalion been counter-attacked in force, half its rifles would have been out of action and casualties would have mounted up. Moreover, instead of being relieved, the 8th had to remain in the captured position until about midnight on October 7th-8th. The 8th Devons, exhausted with a long turn in the line, and "almost finished for want of sleep," got back to Chateau Sigard early on October 8th.

They had in the end quite a heavy casualty list, six officers and 57 men killed, 11 men missing, eight officers and 198 men wounded; at total of 280 of all ranks which was

nearly half those who had gone into action. Still, the battalion had achieved all that had been set before it, had taken almost as many prisoners as it had had casualties, apart from other losses inflicted on the enemy, and this despite adverse conditions of ground and weather.

Albert Henry West is recorded on the Devon Roll of Honour, and on the Dawlish Boys' School Roll of Honour.

Dawlish War memorial inscription: WEST A.H. PTE DEVON REGT.

The Dawlish Gazette report of October 20, 1917 (q.v.) records that "he was a baker by trade and an esteemed employee of R C Curtis".

Commonwealth War Graves entry: WEST, ALBERT HENRY Private 26971
04/10/1917 Devonshire Regiment, 8th Bn.
Panel 38 to 40. Tyne Cot Memorial, Flanders.

In September 2014, 30 members of the Dawlish Royal British Legion went on a WW1 Battle Fields and Cemetery Tour. We also visited Tyne Cot Cemetery and paraded at the Menin Gate. Given our Chairman's and others previous service, and links with the Devon and Dorset Regiment, a short Act of Remembrance was conducted at Panels 38 – 40 at Tyne Cot and wreaths were laid particularly in memory of William Frank TAPLEY and Albert Henry WEST. Photographs were taken of the ceremonies.