

## **CHARLES ARMAN**

**Lance Corporal  
G/539**

**7<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, East Kent Regiment (“The Buffs”)**

### **Service Record in the closing stages of the Battle of the Ancre, Somme sector, November 1916 during the First World War**

#### **Note on Research**

The information about Charles Arman’s death, gleaned from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) website, left me with a bit of a puzzle. According to this he was a member of the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion, East Kent Regiment (“The Buffs”). Unfortunately, further research on the Internet and at the Public Records Office (PRO) showed that only ten battalions were raised during the war meaning that the CWGC unit information was erroneous. The key to finding out more about the circumstances surrounding an individual soldier’s actions at any given point, is to identify the battalion number and then consult the original battalion war diary. A war diary is kept in the PRO for every major unit that fought in the First World War. Completed on a daily basis by the Commanding Officer or his Adjutant, it details what the battalion did that day, any fighting it was involved in and any casualties incurred.

Firstly, I decided to double-check the individual Service Records. However, whilst I did locate those of Henry Arthur Arman (Uncle Harry) who was a Private in the 10<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, Royal West Kent Regiment<sup>1</sup>, and those of a William Arman of Wincheap Canterbury<sup>2</sup>, the Service Records of Charles were missing. This is not too surprising as 60% of Service Records were destroyed in an air raid during the Second World War. Secondly, I checked the medal records. These are complete but unfortunately, whilst Charles’ records were there, they did not include the battalion number, merely giving his unit as “East Kent Regiment”. Lastly, as a final gamble I went to the reading room to search through some of the official histories and orders of battle to pin down the exact whereabouts of each of the East Kent Regiment battalions in November 1916.

The main British effort at this point of the war was the closing stages of the Battle of the Somme. This would tally with Charles Arman ending up at the hospital in Rouen as this was used as the main base hospital area during the Somme fighting. According to *British Battalions on the Somme* by Ray Westlake, altogether four battalions of the East Kent Regiment took part in the many phases of what is now collectively known as The Battle of the Somme with lasted from 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 to 19<sup>th</sup> November 1916. These were the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, which left the Somme for

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Arthur Arman resided at 59 Duncan Road, Ramsgate, when he joined up on 10<sup>th</sup> November 1915 aged 21. Embarking for France on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1916, he was admitted for “shell shock” on 5<sup>th</sup> November before rejoining his unit and being wounded in the arm in June 1917. He was demobilised at Shornecliffe Camp on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1919.

<sup>2</sup> William Arman joined the 7<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, East Kent Regiment and won the Military Medal on 30<sup>th</sup> June 1918 before being wounded in the elbow on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1918. The Military Medal was the “other ranks” equivalent of the Military Cross, which was only awarded to officers. It was awarded for “acts of gallantry and devotion to duty under fire”. Awardees were allowed to use the initials “MM” after their names.

Béthune on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, the 6<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, which was moved to the Arras sector on 22<sup>nd</sup> October and the 8<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, which transferred to the Vimy sector on 19<sup>th</sup> September. The only unit that was present in the Somme sector during the final phase of the Somme fighting in November 1916 was the 7<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion, ending their service in this sector with an attack on Desire Trench on 18<sup>th</sup> November. I concluded, therefore, that Charles Arman's battalion could reasonably be assumed to be the 7<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion of the East Kent Regiment ("The Buffs"), known in short as the 7/East Kents. This would, of course, also tie in with the erroneous battalion in the CWGC records being the 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

With this information in hand I could now consult the War Diary of the 7/East Kents for the period leading up to and including the attack on Desire Trench for a first hand and detailed account of what were the circumstances that surrounded Charles becoming a casualty.

### **The Attack on Desire Trench**

The Battle of the Somme was, quite simply, the largest of all the great allied offensives of the First World War. Originally envisaged as a joint offensive by the British and French north of the River Somme and their main effort in 1916, the plan was revised following the German attack on the French at Verdun in February. The burden of the initial assault would now fall on the shoulders of the inexperienced volunteers of Kitchener's new armies. Preceded by the largest artillery bombardment of the war up to that point, these young men went over the top on the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> July. On leaving their trenches they were faced with uncut barbed wire and resolute German defenders, emerging from their deep bunkers where they had been taking refuge from the shelling. Within a few hours nearly 60,000 British soldiers were casualties, a third of them dead – the greatest loss of life in a single day in British military history.

And yet the Somme offensive ground on. To relieve pressure on the French around Verdun and following Field Marshal Haig's belief that with only a little more pressure the enemy front would eventually crack, division after division was sent into the battle. By October the British had inched further forward and captured many of the strongpoints, which had caused such grievous injury on 1st July. Yet the German front still held.

In early November, despite heavy rains, which turned much of the battlefield into a swamp, Haig planned a further phase. Known as the Battle of the Ancre, it was designed to shatter the German line astride the River Ancre, a tributary of the Somme, although Haig secretly hoped that a late advance would also create a more favorable impression at the upcoming Allied conference at Chantilly.

7/East Kents were to be part of this new attack. The battalion was not new to the Somme battlefield. They had been fighting almost continuously since 1<sup>st</sup> July. Brigaded in the 55<sup>th</sup> alongside the 7/Queen's, 8/East Surreys and 7/Royal West Kents, they formed part of the 18<sup>th</sup> (Eastern) Division under Major-General Ivor Maxse. Assaulting the southern part of the German line on 1<sup>st</sup> July opposite Montauban and assisted by the superior fire support of the French artillery, in contrast to the disaster developing to the north, the 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade captured all its initial objectives. Then in September and October they were in action again finally capturing the German trench system at Theipval where the Memorial to the Missing now stands and the Schwaben Redoubt beyond.



*The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing as seen looking west from Stump Road – in the centre of the 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade's assault area*



*Memorial to the 18<sup>th</sup> (Eastern) Division erected to commemorate their capture of Thiepval and the Schwaben Redoubt, which stood in the right background*

On 13<sup>th</sup> November when the Battle of the Ancre began, the battalion was behind the lines at Albert, moving up to Ovillers on 14<sup>th</sup>. Here they received orders that A and B Companies (Coys) would move up to the front line and take over Sixteen Street and Hessian Trench on 16<sup>th</sup> with C and D Coys remaining at Ovillers in reserve. Battalion Headquarters also moved into Hessian Trench where they would take over a stretch of the line, which included A and B Coys and two companies of 7/Queen's.

A and B Coys reached the front line at 1:50am on 17<sup>th</sup> November and the War Diary reports the situation as "quiet" up to 10:00am. At this point the Adjutant (and War Diary author), Major Mitford-Brice and the Commanding Officer of the Battalion left for a commander's conference at Brigade HQ, Mouquet Farm. At 2:30pm the plan of attack for the following day was explained to them. Just after 6:00am the following morning, 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade was to advance to and capture Desire Trench, the first of two trench lines (the second being Grandcourt Trench) south of the village of Grandcourt. To their right would be the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Division tasked with taking the right hand portion of Desire Trench and Desire Support Trench beyond. 7/Queen's would advance to the left of 7/East Kents and 7/Royal West Kents on their right were to maintain contact with the Canadians. The officers departed and returned to their respective units. Major Mitford-Brice reached the front line at 4:00pm and noted that for the remainder of the day, despite intermittent German shelling, all was quiet.

The weather on the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> was bitterly cold with snow flurries. At 5:30am A and B Coys of 7/East Kents moved out into the darkness of no man's land. As H-Hour approached the British artillery opened up a moving shrapnel barrage hoping to neutralise the German defenders. Then, at 6:10am, the assault companies moved forward behind it in two waves of two platoons each, although some shells fell short causing casualties amongst the British infantry. Soon they were out of sight – lost in the gloom and mist of a November morning.

Seconds later a German barrage broke on the attacker's "jump-off" trench (Regina Trench) becoming intense by 6:45am. 7/East Kents' Headquarters, sheltering as best they could from the German barrage, waited for news from the assaulting companies but no information came back. Two runners were sent out from Regina Trench but both were killed by German fire. By 7:00am wounded started to return but none with any concrete information on whether the attack had been successful. Unfortunately, even the light of morning failed to reveal the fate of A and B Companies – the ground fell away short of the objective, obscuring it and a heavy mist clung to the ground. Five more runners were sent out – one was wounded and three were not seen again. Only one got a view of Desire Trench and returned but could not give any details of who held it.



***Stump Road** – a shell-blasted track during the First World War, it is still used by farm vehicles. Just beyond the bushes on the skyline ran Regina Trench, the 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade's starting point. On 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916, this track was roughly the boundary between the Buffs' attack (on the left) and the 7/Queen's attack (on the right). The German-held Desire Trench would have bisected the road from left to right approximately where the leafless bush is in the middle foreground.*

By mid-morning the headquarters staff in Regina Trench, were becoming increasingly desperate for news and the Bombing Officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Howcroft volunteered to take a section forward to take a look. However, almost as soon as he left the trench he was shot by one of the German snipers who were making life even more dangerous for those in Regina Trench. Wounded continued to come back, some talking about the objective being "full of Germans".

Meanwhile, to the right of the 7/East Kents, the 7/Royal West Kents had been more fortunate. Assisted by the excellent progress of the Canadians on their right, they had taken their allotted portion of Desire Trench and were now trying to bomb their way along it to where the East Kents should have been. At 4:15pm two platoons of D Coy who had been moved up from Ovillers to act as a battalion reserve, were sent to establish contact with A and B Coys but were driven back by German fire. A further patrol met heavy resistance and only found its way back to Regina Trench early the following morning.

By then, with the battle already having lasted for 18 hours, the Commanding Officer of 7/East Kents ordered that Desire Trench must be taken and C Coy and the remainder of D Coy were brought up from reserve. With the news that 7/Royal West Kents were now only yards from the presumed location of A and B Coys at a position known as Point 66, D Coy under Capt Wood was sent to the right, through 7/Royal West Kents' positions and across their axis of advance into Desire Trench. Moving along Desire Trench, they reached A and B Coy's objective at 6:30pm. During the evening patrols reached Stump Road (a trench line running at right angles between Regina and Desire Trenches over to the left of the 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade attack). The War Diary states that "no enemy were encountered". At 7pm orders were received to evacuate Desire Trench up to 200 yards west of Point 66. The assault on Desire Trench was over. But what had happened to A and B Companies of 7/East Kents?

### **War Diary Examination of the Attack on Desire Trench**

In the hours immediately following the fighting, Major Mitford-Brice debriefed members of D Coy who had eventually reached the objective and recorded his own views on what had happened. It is worth recounting this part of the War Diary in full,

"Examination of the ground over which A and B Coys assaulted noted:

1. Shell holes (25-30 yards south of Desire Trench) used by the Germans across A Coy front to avoid the barrage/then as resistance posts with supplies of bombs – number of dead included Captain H. A. Dyson A Coy Commanding Officer found here.
2. B Coy front, fewer bodies and no shell holes.
3. Much British equipment found in the left-hand area of Desire Trench.
4. Dugouts for 80 men found in Desire Trench (inside were two dead Germans).

The following points should be noted:

1. There was only one unwounded survivor of A Coy. He followed 7/Royal West Kents into the attack when a gap opened up with 7/East Kents.
2. All officers of A/B Coys were dead, wounded or missing.
3. On the evening of 19<sup>th</sup>, Capt Wood discovered an officer and several men of A Coy and 2 men of 7/Royal West Kents all badly wounded in dugouts in Desire Trench. All hit in front of the objective and Germans brought them in late afternoon. The Germans, who had treated them well, had packed up at dawn on the 19<sup>th</sup> instant and left them. The Germans had also brought in other wounded men.
4. Germans fired heavily from Point 66, Sixteen Street and Stump Road during the attack.
5. Our shrapnel barrage inefficient and short (wounding a platoon commander and his sergeant).
6. Heavy German counter-barrage on Regina Trench.
7. Runners could not provide information and all but one killed or wounded.
8. D Coy suffered 30% casualties from rifle fire.
9. Possible some elements of Desire Trench were taken but overwhelmed by enemy reinforcements from Stump Road.
10. Very dark and snowing at zero-hour and touch must have been difficult to maintain.
11. Aircraft, prior to attack, reported no sign of the enemy in Grandcourt or Desire Trench, but post battle intelligence summary concludes there were three German companies present.

The men before going ‘over the top’ had been told to expect little opposition and I know they were confident.

Major Mitford-Brice  
On behalf of Lt-Col commanding Buffs”

## Casualties

Casualty returns for 7/East Kents for the period 18<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> November were 3 officers killed, 4 wounded and 1 missing with 23 other ranks killed, 76 wounded and 124 missing – 231 in total. 7/Queen’s their left suffered a similar fate with the two assault companies being decimated by German fire.



*Stump Road CWGC Cemetery, Grandcourt- Final resting place of 119 men of the 7/East Kents (“The Buffs”), 7/Queen’s and 7/Royal West Kents.*

It is almost certain that Charles Arman was one of the casualties arising from the disastrous attack on Desire Trench. He died of his wounds at the base hospital in Rouen four days later on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1916 and is buried in St. Sever Cemetery Extension, Rouen.

**By Mark Sluman** (great-great nephew of Charles Arman)

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **1. Books and publications**

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#### **Secondary Sources:**

“British Battalions on the Somme”, by Ray Westlake.

“Official History of the War – Military Operations, France and Belgium 1916”, by Brigadier-General Sir J.E. Edmonds.

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### **2. Other information sources**

Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website – [www.cwgc.org.com](http://www.cwgc.org.com).

*A Strange Coincidence... At Ancre British Cemetery, just 3km from the site of Desire Trench, the grave of one of only five “Arman’s” killed in the whole of the First and Second World Wars.*

