

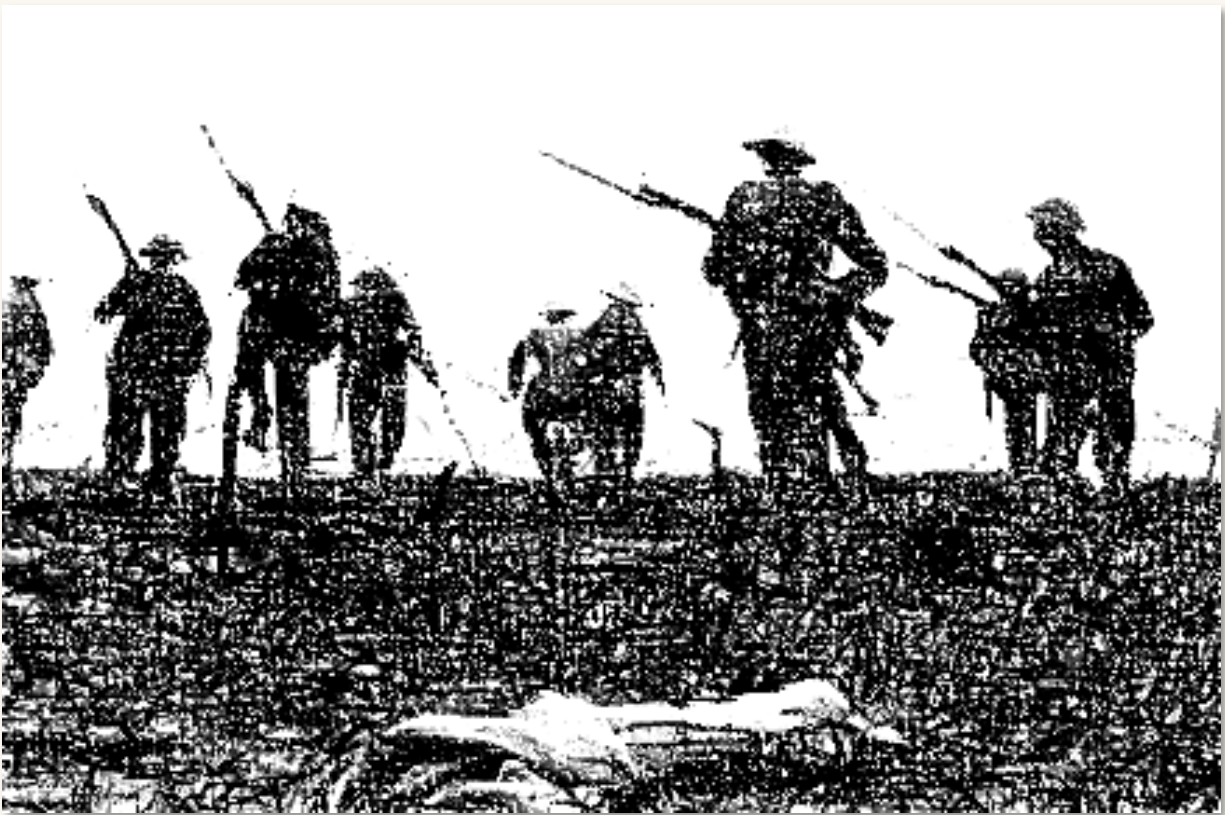
Commissionaire Stories – *The Somme*



ONE HUNDRED AND TEN YEARS AGO...

July 1st, 1916

As one, at 07:30 on this fateful day, the fifteen-hundred British artillery guns that had been firing continuously for a week, suddenly stopped. There was silence for a second or two, then the gun's thunderous cacophony was replaced by a different sound; the shrill call of thousands of whistles being blown...



THE FIRST DAY OF THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME

That preliminary bombardment had begun on the 24th of June and had seen over 1.5 million shells fired along a fifteen mile front. When the guns stopped, eager young Officers blew their whistles and urged their men to scramble up over the parapets of their trenches and out into No Mans Land.

Some poor souls didn't even manage to scale the ladders, as sixteen year old Frank Lindley later remembered:

"One bloke was climbing out, and he'd got hold of the top of the ladder and this shell must have chopped him right across the middle. It left his feet and his bottom half in the trench and all his insides were hanging down the blinking trench wall, It was a shocking sight, looking at that lot..."

Along the whole length of the line, within a few steps, those men who had managed to get out of the trenches were met by a wall of relentless machine gun fire and shrapnel from the enemy's counter barrage.

As the hunched Tommys lurched headlong into this maelstrom of searing shell-fragments and spinning bullets, many mumbled prayers.

They stepped over the disfigured bodies of their pals, they screamed out for 'stretcher-bearers', realising already that their pals were lost and that their own lives were hanging by threads.



As they trudged forward, they'd have seen pals, workmates and team-mates simply disappear, vapourised by shell strikes. One survivor told the tale of what he'd witnessed:

"...bits of limbs flew about in the air. A leg with a puttee streaming behind it, landed in the wire. Some men could go no further and sat down and wept..."

Many of the men were eviscerated within seconds, it had become very clear, very quickly, that the plan for 'The Big Push' was unravelling.

WHY WERE THE BRITISH ON THE SOMME?

By the time those whistles had blown, and the lads from a dozen county regiments and a host of Pals regiments had bravely gone over the top, Britain and her Commonwealth Allies had already been at war with Germany for nigh-on two years.

The reasons for the war having started, are many and varied, with opinions differing between the myriad of historians and authors who've analysed and written about the conflict for the past one hundred and ten years.

Despite the theories about political struggles and European bragging rights, the reality is that Britain went to war with Germany because of honour, because of a promise made...

To quote H.G. Wells, when in 1914 he wrote:

"The cause of a war and the objects of a war are not necessarily the same, the cause of this war was the invasion of Luxembourg and Belgium (by Germany). We declared war because we were bound by treaty to declare war. We have been pledged to protect the integrity of Belgium since the kingdom of Belgium has existed. If the Germans had not broken the guarantee they shared with us to respect the neutrality of these little states, we should certainly not be at war at the present time. No power in the world would have respected our Flag or accepted our national word again if we had not fought."

So, it was honour and a deep rooted sense of duty that forced Britain and her Commonwealth Allies into war.

For the same reasons, the British army and the armies of her global dominions, colonies, and territories, found themselves looking on in awe as the artillerymen threw shell after shell into the German lines along the river Somme in the summer of 1916.



To understand why they ended up on the Somme, we need to travel 100 miles southeast the city of Verdun.

This city held massive symbolism amongst the French peoples; the Germans and the French had been contesting this land for over 1000 years. Now part of France, the Germans knew that the French would fight tooth and nail to hold the city and block the German's route into Paris. Consequently, the Germans threw everything they had at Verdun - aiming to "bleed France white."





And they so very nearly succeeded. Within four days over one hundred thousand French soldiers had been captured, and the Germans were within five miles of their target. But the battle to acquire those last five miles, would take another three hundred days...

In order to provide some relief to the Verdun garrison and to divert German troops away from the city, the French demanded a joint Allied offensive further north to ease the pressure on their forces.

The Somme River valley was specifically chosen because it was the exact point where the British and French sectors of the front line met.

The French army suffered terribly during their defence of Verdun, forcing the British to take the primary role in the Somme offensive, even though the British, on land, were the 'junior partner' in the coalition alliance. Britain held less length of front and had less troops deployed than the French, so had to dance to the French tune...

Out of honour, the British answered the French call and the biggest deployment of British troops thus far in the war, ensued.

From the offset, there was disagreement between the French and the British; the strategy favoured by the French was one of attrition, simply wearing the Germans down in a slow, daily grind. British high command told the French that this "*simply wasn't the British way.*" They favoured an approach which identified specific objective to be taken and held thus advancing the all-too static trench lines that had developed; the British were determined to break the German lines with a 'Big Push'...

WHY DID IT FAIL?

The decisive breakthrough that was expected on that first day, failed to materialise for a number of reasons, primarily: flawed tactics, ineffective artillery, and the resilience and strength of the German defences.

Firstly, the predominantly raw and untested British infantrymen were ordered to advance at a slow, steady walking pace, lugging far more gear than was necessary for an initial attack, making them easy targets for the German machine gunners. Furthermore, British command lacked the flair, flexibility or

foresight to exploit localised breakthroughs in the few instances when successes were actually achieved.

With regards to the massive week-long preliminary bombardment: the British had spread their guns too thinly over the eighteen-mile front, the shells that were expected to cut the German's barbed wire and create gaps - simply didn't, and the fall of the shells did not hit the German dug outs which were further back from their frontline trenches than British Intelligence had suggested (those dugouts were also far deeper and better built than was thought). Most telling however, was the fact that up to 30% of the shells expended, were defective and failed to explode (pressure exerted on the Ministry of Munitions for a massively increased volume output had led them to simply disregard their usual quality control checks, with disastrous consequences).

Because of these factors the British guns failed to cut the German barbed wire and had little effect on the German machine gunners hunkered down in their deep concrete dugouts.

In addition, the 'rolling-barrage' designed to fall just in front of the advancing Tommys and keep the heads of the German machine gunners down, moved forward at a pace that the over-loaded lads struggling across the boggy No Mans Land, climbing in and out of the craters created by the barrage, simply couldn't keep up with. As the barrage rolled over the German lines, the British were still struggling with the uncut German wire defences, stranded in clear view of the German machine gunners who'd rushed out of their dugouts and were now unleashing a wall of murderous fire.

The result was hell on earth.

THE COST

The first day of the Battle of the Somme was its most devastating. As night fell on the 1st of July 1916, the British alone had suffered 57,470 casualties, of whom 19,240 were killed; the biggest losses ever suffered by the nation's army in a single day. On days two, three and four, many of those wounded on the first day would succumb to their injuries, swelling the total losses to an even greater number.

On average, over the twenty-four hours of that first day, a British soldier was wounded every 1.5 seconds, and one died every 4.5 seconds. The tragic reality however, is that most of those killed fell within the first thirty-minutes of going over the top; thousands



had perished before the politicians back in London - those who'd sent them to war - had taken the tops off their breakfast boiled eggs.

Many battalions were decimated, some wiped-out almost completely. For this monumental sacrifice, the British gained just three square miles of territory. Throughout its course, the Battle of the Somme lasted 141 days; following its blood-sodden first day, it dragged on for a further five months.

Of course, casualty rates for the remainder of the campaign could never match those of July the 1st, but they remained consistently high as the battlefield slowly expanded. Both sides fought bitterly for every yard of ground; the German defence unwavering, the Tommy's attacks, unrelenting. Neither gave an inch.

In total, over a million men became casualties during the Battle of the Somme: British, Commonwealth, German and French.

THE AFTERMATH

Throughout the battle, the massive loss of life suffered by Britain's county regiments resulted in the decimation of many close-knit town and village communities all over the land. In addition, the proud 'Pals' battalions from cities like Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds and Sheffield also suffered terribly.



Later, it became apparent that a massive level of psychological trauma had also been suffered. Those who'd managed to crawl back to their own lines, or who'd been picked up by stretcher teams from No Man's Land, could neither unsee what they'd seen, nor forget what they'd endured. The awful concussion of the falling shells and the ripping and tearing of the German bullets had affected them terribly.

The sheer scale and intensity of the artillery barrages and slaughter in the field, led to an explosion of psychiatric casualties.

Throughout the Great War, what we now call PTSD, was most commonly referred to as "*shell shock*." This term was initially coined in 1915 by British medical officer Charles Myers; the term was originally used because doctors believed the psychological symptoms were the result of physical trauma to the brain and nervous system caused by exploding artillery shells.

Unbelievably to us today, military leaders back then neither understood nor acknowledged the condition, it was frequently stigmatised as cowardice or emotional weakness, and affected soldiers were often severely punished.



Back in Blighty, the vast numbers of damaged men returning from the front and the length of the endless casualty lists published in local newspapers, deeply shocked the public; so much so that the government stopped publishing casualty lists altogether in 1916. Their view clearly being: *“deny that it’s happening and please God, it might just stop.”*

Some weeks after that tragic first day of the Battle of the Somme, there would be another fatality added to the butcher’s bill; the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Middlesex, Lieutenant E.Y.F. Sandys, bitterly remorseful as to his failure to do more on behalf of his men, blew his brains out in a London hotel...

LOYALTY, INTEGRITY AND SERVICE

On the outbreak of the *“great war to end all wars,”* no less than 2,145 men, virtually half its roll, left the Corps of Commissionaires to join the two services. Although they were generally men of more mature years, they also included some of the younger and fitter men too. Quite a few of these men would have fought in the Battle of the Somme.

When numbers are as high as those listed for the casualties and fatalities suffered on the first day of the battle, it’s sometimes difficult to absorb them; the numbers lose their emotional and practical impact, they become difficult to relate to.

The fact is, that the British fatalities on that day, exceeded by a factor of four, those lost in the Korean War, the Irish troubles, the Falklands War, the Iraq War and the Afghanistan War, *combined* – all in a single day...

The Great War presented the Corps of Commissionaires with a host of problems, not just the loss of 2,145 of its most experienced men; recruitment was also an issue. During the four long years of the war, incoming Commissionaires were either men above military age or men who’d returned from the fray either wounded or physically downgraded. Of the 277 new additions in 1915, 127 were wounded Great War veterans. In 1916, 184 were wounded men and in 1917, over 60% of the total intake were wounded ex-soldiers.



During these years, the company simply couldn't undertake work for customers who required robust men, such was the physical state of the workforce. That said, in typical 'Corps' fashion, it didn't stop the Old Sweats trying...

One tale tells of a double amputee, having lost an arm and most of one leg, returning to duty in the first instance, complete with a crutch and an empty sleeve. Apparently, customers at the high-fashion retail establishment to which he was assigned, wouldn't stop complimenting him on his turnout and thanking him for his service. He received unparalleled courtesies from the public and had no difficulty in carrying out all of the duties required of him.

Such was the measure of a war time Commissionaire.

Quite a number of Commissionaires would have fought on that murderous first day of the Battle of the Somme and many of them would have been wounded. Tragically, four of them made the ultimate sacrifice...

Two of these brave men worked in London, one in Leeds and one in Newcastle; for three of these dutiful men, the Great War wasn't even their first war.

Nowhere more than within this small group, have the Corp's three major tenets of "*Loyalty, Integrity and Service*" been so nobly upheld.

On the 110th anniversary of the first day of the Battle of the Somme, we must - we *will* remember them.



THE COMMISSIONAIRES

Serjeant 18915

OSCAR EDWARD WRIGHT

11th (Service) Battalion, Suffolk Regiment

Oscar Edward Wright was born on the 2nd of January 1880, in Kingston Upon Thames in Surrey. His father, Charles, was a painter and his Shropshire-born mother, Charlotte, managed the family home at Bellone Cottage on Washington Road in Kingston.

Oscar was the second son of Charles and Charlotte; his elder brother Charles (Jnr.) having been born a year earlier than him, in 1879.

Even as a very young man, Oscar had clearly decided that a soldier's life was the life for him. As soon as he was old enough, he joined his local volunteer rifle corps – the 3rd Volunteer Battalion, East Surrey Regiment - who had a depot in Kingston Upon Thames. This was a part-time auxiliary military unit that had originally been established in 1887, and which could trace its roots back to the North East Surrey rifle volunteer corps which had been formed in 1859.

Oscar clearly enjoyed his time with the East Surrey's, because on the 10th of December 1897, Oscar (still aged just seventeen-years and eleven months) attested and joined the Suffolk Regiment; signing up for a twelve year term - seven with the colours and five in reserve.

At the time of his attestation, young Oscar stood five-feet five-inches in height, weighed 127lbs and had a 34" chest measurement, so he wasn't the biggest of lads by any means, but with medicals passed he was ready to serve - and serve he did!

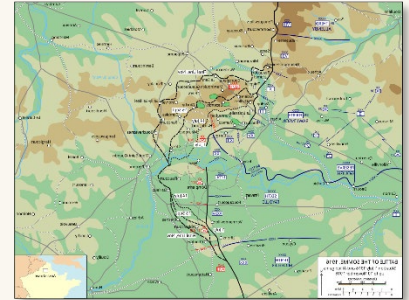
Assigned to the 1st Battalion, Oscar's first overseas deployment was Malta, where he was stationed from 1898 to 1899. He caught up with his new battalion mates who had been quartered at the Mtarfa Barracks for a couple of months before his arrival. They remained here for six and a half months before relocating to the Isola District (Senglea) for two months. By January 1899, a strength of roughly 678 men was based at Fort Manoel on Manoel Island.

On completion of this deployment, Oscar's battalion was brought back to England for a very short stay, garrisoned at Fort Burgoyne and the Heights in Dover.

Oscar was soon on the move again, embarking for South Africa - Oscar's first war.

Oscar and his 1st Battalion pals sailed from Southampton, arriving at the Cape on November 29, 1899. Whilst in transit, Oscar was promoted to Lance Corporal (on the 17th of November).

After landing at the Cape, Oscar and his 1st Battalion were sent to the Colesberg district. On January the 1st 1900, they were ordered to conduct a difficult night assault on a Boer position. The attack proved disastrous, with the battalion taking significant casualties and becoming pinned down for some time. The location was subsequently named 'Suffolk Hill'.



Following the debacle of Suffolk Hill, Oscar was posted to garrison and anti-guerrilla duties as part of a mounted infantry company designed to combat the highly mobile Boer forces. He and his battalion then joined Lord Roberts's main forces and pushed forward, passing through the Orange Free State capital of Bloemfontein as they advanced toward Pretoria in mid-1900. Oscar was wounded in the fighting around Bloemfontein.

Around November 1900, Oscar's 1st Suffolks arrived in Mpumalanga ('Belfast' in its Anglicised form), participating in heavy operations and skirmishes to prevent the enemy from entering Cape Colony under the direction of General Smith-Dorrien.

In early 1901, Oscar assisted in the building and garrisoning of blockhouses across the Western Transvaal. Later that year Oscar was promoted to full Corporal (on the 29th of November 1901).

Oscar eventually returned to England on September the 29th, 1902, shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Vereeniging.



For his sterling service in South Africa throughout the Boer War, Oscar was awarded the Queen's South Africa Medal with three clasps (Cape Colony, Orange Free State and Transvaal) plus the King's South Africa Medal with one clasp (South Africa 1901-02).

Once again, it was a quick turnaround for Oscar, who appears to have been transferred to the 2nd Battalion who were stationed in India. It's known that Oscar served here from late 1902 to 1905. Whilst in India, on the 24th of August 1905, Oscar was again promoted, to the rank of Serjeant, having voluntarily extended his time with the Colours a year previously.

Oscar returned home and was transferred to the Army Reserve on the 3rd of February 1906, and like many men in the same situation, he sought employment with an organisation where the discipline of army life still endured. He joined the Corps of Commissionaires.

Whilst still on Reserve, Oscar met and fell in love with Fanny Louise Williams; they married on the 13th of June 1909 in Norbiton. On the marriage papers, Oscar confirmed his position as a "*Commissionaire*." They moved to London and set up home at number 1, Gambole Road in Tooting. At this time Oscar was working as a bank porter for the Corps of Commissionaires.

Oscar was finally discharged on the 9th of December 1909.

In 1911, Oscar and Fanny had their only child, a baby boy named Edward.

When war came, although not obliged to, Oscar returned to the Colours with his old regiment; he served in his second war with the 11th (Service) Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment.

Having initially been ordered to prepare for potential deployment to Egypt, plans changed and Oscar's battalion left Cambridge and assembled at Rippon North Yorkshire, arriving at the Ripon assembly camp on June the 19th, 1915.

Whilst here, the battalion camped at nearby Fountains Abbey. While in Ripon, they formed part of the 101st Brigade within the 34th Division alongside other units, including the Grimsby Chums (10th Lincolnshire Regiment) and the Royal Scots.

The battalion trained on the North Yorkshire moors until late August 1915, at which point they relocated to Salisbury Plain for intensive final training before deploying to France in early 1916.



They embarked for France to join the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) fighting on the Western Front. Entrainment for the embarkation ports began on the 7th of January 1916, and Oscar's 11th Suffolks landed at Boulogne on the 9th of January. The division completed its concentration around La Crosse (east of Saint-Omer) on the 15th of January 1916.

On the 5th of May, Oscar's battalion entrained for the Somme sector where the BEF was preparing for that summer's 'Big Push' (the Battle of the Somme). The 11th Suffolks were in reserve, then in support, and on the 21st of May went into the line on the division's right, facing the fortified ruins of La Boisselle.



Oscar then oversaw his platoon throughout periods of six days in the line alternating with four days of rest. The battalion then went into camp behind Albert on the 23rd of June – the day before the great barrage started.

Oscar wrote his last letter home to wife Fanny and son Edward on June the 26th, 1916. The only clue of what was to come is in his closing sentence:

“Things are very warm near here at present so I will now close with heaps of love...”

Oscar's Part In The Big Push (101st Brigade, 34th Div.)

Oscar's 11th (Service) Battalion, Suffolk Regiment, suffered devastating losses on July the 1st 1916; within the first couple of hours, out of the 800 or so men who went into action, the battalion suffered around 700 casualties (approximately 200 killed and 500 wounded).

The British softening-up bombardment hadn't damaged the German deep-mined dugouts (*minierte Stollen*) and a German listening post actually overheard a British telephone conversation the day before, which had given away the plans for the attack.

It's known that Oscar was chosen to lead the platoon over the top and according to eyewitnesses: *“...he was the first man to fall.”*

Oscar's body was never recovered or positively identified.

An artillery officer who later walked the ground of the Suffolk's advance, told how he found: *“line after line of dead men lying where they had fallen, showing the discipline and steadiness with which they had advanced.”*

Company Serjeant Major S/1086

CHARLES PEARSON

7th Battalion, Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment)

Charles Pearson was born in 1867 in the tiny village of Kenardington in West Ashford, Kent. At the time of his birth, he was the fourth child of James and Maria Pearson (née Keeler).

All of Charles's elder siblings were boys: William (born in 1862), John (born in 1863), and Alfred (born in 1865). Charles's father was a flour-miller.

The 1881 Census, which was completed on April the 3rd of that year, shows the family living on the High Street in Tenterden, Kent. This census also confirms that Charles had gained a younger brother named Albert (born in 1871) and two younger sisters named Frances and Mercy (born in 1869 and 1873 respectively). At the time of this census, fourteen-year-old Charles was working as a baker.

Shortly after Charles's coming of age, he set out on a noble path in a most peculiar fashion; for reason's unknown, at the age of twenty-two, he joined the army under an assumed name – that of George Button.

Charles/George enlisted in Maidstone, Kent and although his attestation papers were partly destroyed, it can be seen that he joined the 1st Battalion of the Royal West Kents.

The new recruit stood five feet eleven inches in height and weighed 145lbs; he was of dark complexion, had grey eyes and dark brown hair. His papers show that he was born in Ashford in Kent and that before attestation, he worked as a baker.

Charles subsequently served under his alias of George Button at home in England between 1888 and 1889. He then completed several overseas deployments; firstly, in Malta in 1889, then India in 1892 before returning to Malta in 1902. He then returned to Blighty where he stayed until 1904. A



two year posting back in Malta followed in 1904, after which he finally returned home, where he served from 1906 to 1909.

Throughout this first term of service, Charles/George saw much action, taking part in the campaigns of Malakand in 1897 and Buner in 1898 and serving in India in 1895, where he won a Punjab Frontier clasp to his India campaign medal (the clasp being awarded to British and Indian military personnel who took part in the series of expeditions and border operations on the North-West Frontier between June 1897 and April 1898).

Despite his steady progression through the ranks under the name George Button, Charles also spent some time in the 'chokey' for an unknown misdemeanour (42 days imprisonment in 1891).

Charles's first promotion under his alias, was when serving in India, on the 13th of August 1894, when he was appointed Lance Corporal.

On the 23rd of March 1895, he attained his 2nd Class Certificate of Education and later that year he was permitted to extend his service to twelve years.



On the 15th of January 1897, whilst still in India, he was promoted to full Corporal and then, two years later, to Lance Serjeant.

On the 9th of July 1900, Charles/George was promoted to full Serjeant.

On the 19th of October 1900, Serjeant 'Button' re-engaged to complete twenty-one years' service; a fine achievement, with much action along the way.



On the 17th of February 1904, Charles/George was promoted to Colour Serjeant, the rank he held up to his discharge on the 28th of August 1909, at the termination of his engagement.

At the end of his service, Charles/George was granted a pension of two shillings and thruppence per week, for life; equivalent to around £18.00 today. His record shows a

"total service forfeited" term of fifty days - eight in prison whilst awaiting trial and forty-two in prison having been found guilty of the charges levelled.

Having served with the Colours for so long, like many ex-soldiers returning to civvy-street, Charles (who had now reverted to his birth name) headed for the Corps of Commissionaires; an organisation where he knew that his rank and service would be respected in an appropriate manner.

At the time of the 1911 Census, Charles was working as a Commissionaire/Clerk Messenger and was boarding at number 22 Maiden Lane in Covent Garden. In this census he is registered as being single, a status that would change less than three weeks after the census was completed.

On the 22nd of April 1911, at the Registry Office on the Strand, Charles married Emily Lilian Ball, a spinster of 19 Uplands Road, Hornsey in Essex.

When war came, without any obligation to do so, Charles attested again; aged forty-nine years, now standing six feet in height and weighing 155lbs with grey eyes and *"iron grey"* hair.

On the 6th of October 1914, he completed his attestation papers by confirming his previous occupation as *"Commissionaire."*

Strangely however, once again, Charles initially re-enlisted under his formerly used alias, George Button.

In recognition of his previous service, experience and rank, Charles/George was quickly confirmed as Acting Colour Serjeant and posted to the 7th Battalion of the Royal West Kent Regiment.

On the 19th of October 1914, he was promoted to the rank of Company Serjeant Major.

Having clearly reconsidered his decision to serve his second term under the alias used in his first, on the 6th of December 1914, Charles signed a declaration at Grays, before the Justice of the Peace for the County of Essex, it read:

"I, Charles Pearson do solemnly swear and sincerely declare that I was enlisted on the 6th of October 1914, under the name of George Button, which name I now declare to be incorrect. The name Charles Pearson, contained in the accompanying certificate of birth, I now declare to be my true name, and I make this solemn declaration conscientiously believing the same to be true, and by virtue of the provisions of an Act made and passed in the sixth year of the reign of King William the Fourth, chap. 62 entitled the "Statutory Declarations Act", 1835."

The truth was out...

Now serving under his birth name, on the 26th of July 1915, Charles embarked for France, posted to the British Expeditionary Force.



On the 25th of September 1915, he was appointed Acting Regimental Serjeant Major, a position he relinquished on the 14th of December 1915, reverting to Company Serjeant Major.

On the 3rd of June 1916, Charles was awarded the Distinguished Conduct

Medal (DCM). An award that was confirmed in the London Gazette on the 21st of June 1916, three weeks after he was killed in action:

"His Majesty The King has been graciously pleased to approve of the award of the Distinguished Conduct Medal to the under mentioned Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, and Men, for gallantry and distinguished service in the Field:

"Company Serjeant Major C Pearson, S/1086, 7th Battalion, Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment.

"For consistent devotion to duty at all times. He has shown great coolness and disregard of danger in the trenches"

The DCM was a highly prestigious medal. Exclusively awarded to non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel, it was the second-highest award for bravery in action for 'other ranks,' coming only just below the Victoria Cross in terms of seniority.



Charles's Part In The Big Push (55th Brigade, 18th E. Div.)

Unlike many of the battalions thrown into the maelstrom of shell and bullet on the 1st of July 1916, Charles's 7th Battalion of the Queens Own (Royal West Kent Regiment) fared well, achieving a major success by capturing their objective and occupying enemy trenches near Montauban.

It's not known exactly how Charles died, but sadly, his body was never recovered or positively identified.

Regimental Serjeant Major 15/1071

HENRY PRESTON

15th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment

Henry Preston didn't need to re-enlist in 1914; by anyone's reckoning he'd already done more than enough for King and Country.

Proudly wearing medal ribbons on his Commissionaires uniform that showed he'd already fought in two colonial wars; no one was about to thrust a white feather into this man's hands.

But like so many men of that special generation, Henry felt honour bound, so re-enlist he did...

Henry had been born in Scarborough in 1872. Records show that he was the illegitimate son of a lady named Sarah Preston. When Henry was seven years old, his mother Sarah married John Inchbold, a stonemason from Leeds. In the 1881 Census, Sarah was living at number 20, Castle Gate in Scarborough with her husband John Inchbold and their son John David (Henry's half-brother) who'd been born in 1880.

When he was just eighteen years and two months old, on the 21st of November 1889, Henry enlisted in Scarborough as 2579 Private Preston, in the 1st Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment.

At the time of this first attestation, Henry was working as a labourer, albeit a pretty wiry labourer, standing at five feet four inches in height and weighing 130lbs, with a 34" chest. Henry wasn't a physically big man, but his huge spirit would soon show through. Henry had a dark complexion, with grey eyes and brown hair.

2579 Private Preston's signing-on term was seven years with the Colours and five in Reserve. Quite a commitment for a young man, but Henry had already gained a feel for life in uniform, having joined the 3rd Battalion Yorkshire Regiment as soon as his age had allowed him. This was a local militia and reserve battalion that was primarily responsible for training recruits and providing reinforcements for the regiment's regular 1st and 2nd battalions which were serving overseas. Exactly the route that Henry was taking.

After a year based in England (during which he was posted to the 2nd Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment) Henry embarked on his first overseas posting; leaving England for the East Indies (India) on the 30th of September 1891. By this stage, Henry had already been promoted to Lance Corporal and by the time he was on his way to Gibraltar having completed fifty-five days in India, he'd been further promoted to full Corporal.

Henry remained in Gibraltar until December 1895, when he embarked for West Africa and his first war.

The Fourth Anglo-Ashanti War (also known as the Second Ashanti Expedition) was brief, lasting only a couple of months. The British show-of-strength was sufficient to persuade the Ashanti that actually, becoming a British Protectorate wasn't such a bad idea after all, and matters were sorted without a shot being fired (however, 50% of the troops fell sick, and Queen Victoria's son-in-law, Prince Henry of Battenberg died of a tropical disease).

As a result of the Ashanti's show of truculence, their king, Prempeh I, was arrested and sent to live in exile in the Seychelles; not the harshest sentence by any means...

On the 24th of February 1896, Henry returned to England, where he was promoted to Lance Serjeant just as his time with the Colours came to an end and his time in the Reserve started.

In 1897, Henry married his sweetheart, Annie Jefferson Horsley, in the All Saint's Church on Falsgrave Road in Scarborough. Annie was a Cloughton lass whose father was an agricultural labourer and whose mother was a dressmaker.



In 1898, just as Annie first fell pregnant, Henry re-engaged with his old battalion, reverting to the rank of Corporal (whether or not this move was made with Annie's blessing isn't recorded; Henry's timing however, speaks volumes).

By the time Henry and Annie's first child was born in 1899, Henry had been promoted to Lance Serjeant. Young Harry Horsley Preston was born in Scarborough, just as his dad had been.

When Annie gave birth to their second child in 1900, a daughter named Edith who was born in York, Henry had just been promoted again. He was now a full Serjeant.

Henry's second war came in 1900, when he joined the already deployed 2nd Battalion in South Africa on the 25th of November.

In February 1901, Henry was involved in the action when his battalion faced a massive, pre-dawn surprise attack by Boer General Louis Botha in the Eastern Transvaal: Henry's lads held their ground against overwhelming odds.

Following the occupation of Pretoria, Henry's battalion shifted focus to escorting convoys and garrison duties, enduring stiff skirmishes at locations such as Rustenburg and Willow Grange.

In 1902, at the war's end, Henry formally committed to extending his term to attain twenty-one years' service, and a year later, in recognition of his dedication, Henry was promoted to the rank of Colour Serjeant.

Henry remained in South Africa for some time after the war had been won; Annie, Harry and Edith joined him and in 1904, the couple's third child, Herbert, was born in Pietermaritzburg (today, the capital city of the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa).

Henry and his family returned to England on the 3rd of June 1904.

A Musketry course was attended in Hythe, Kent, in 1905 and in 1906, Henry and the family moved to Belfast for a year; whilst here Henry and Annie welcomed their fourth child into the world. Frederick William Preston was born in Hollywood, just outside of Belfast, in 1907.

Henry was then posted to the 3rd Volunteer Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment in 1907, serving on the Permanent Staff.



Henry then transferred to the 7th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment at Carlton Barracks in Leeds, as a Colour Serjeant in 1908. Whilst here, Annie presented him with his fifth child and fourth son, Walter.

In 1910, Henry was appointed Regimental Serjeant Major, and in 1911 he and Annie welcomed their second daughter, Marguerite.

Annie would surely have thought Henry's days of overseas service were far behind him; he'd remained on 'Home Service' from 1904 until his retirement to pension in 1912, having served twenty-three years. On discharge, his character was described as being:

"Exemplary... he led a thoroughly steady and sober life throughout his military career... in every way, trustworthy."

Leaving the barracks behind them, Henry, Annie and the children, set up their family home at number 5, Churchill Gardens, Blackman Lane in Leeds. Whilst living here, Henry followed the course taken by many time-served men; he joined the Corps of Commissionaires, working for a range of client's from the organisation's Leeds depot.

When German troops crossed the border and entered Belgium on the morning of August the 4th 1914, Annie may well have been a little concerned about the interest Henry was showing in developments. Even when the British Government issued an ultimatum to the Germans later that day, demanding that they withdraw their troops at once or a state of war would exist between the two countries, – she would surely not have foreseen forty-four year old Henry marching down to the recruitment office and re-joining.

As the months dragged on and news started filtering back from France about how the Tommys were faring, Henry was clearly getting more and more desperate to don the khaki once again and join them.

He was, after all, a soldier before anything else, and on the 7th of December 1914, he made that walk to the recruitment office. Whether he went with Annie's blessing is not known, but with him leaving her with six children to look after, the likelihood is that he did not.

It was a good day for the Recruiting Officer, having someone attest with the experience that Henry possessed; unsurprisingly, on the very day of his attestation, Henry was appointed as Regimental Quartermaster Serjeant for the 15th (Service) Battalion, The Prince of Wales's Own (West Yorkshire Regiment) – more commonly known as the 1st Leeds Pals.



In recognition of his invaluable experience, Henry was appointed Regimental Serjeant Major of the 15th Battalion in January 1915. Later that year, the family suffered a tragedy when Henry and Annie's youngest child, Marguerite, passed away.

During his two years with the 1st Leeds Pals, Henry served at Colsterdale and Ripon (both in Yorkshire) and Fovant (near Salisbury) before completing an overseas deployment to Egypt. This deployment lasted from December 1915 to March 1916, with the battalion tasked with defending the Suez Canal from the threat of attack by troops of the Ottoman Empire

In March 1916, Henry and his Leeds Pals received the order to redeploy to the Western Front, in preparation for the Battle of the Somme...

Henry's Part In The Big Push (93rd Brigade, 31st Div.)

On the first day of the battle, the 1st of July 1916, the 31st Division was directed to attack towards the village of Serre, with Henry's 1st Leeds Pals advancing from a line of copses that had been nicknamed after the Gospels by the Tommys.

Before Zero Hour (07:30), the battalion came under heavy shellfire in its trenches. Those Pals who managed to climb out and advance, were met by intense machine-gun fire. A small number reached the undamaged German barbed wire, but got no further.



Frank Lindlay, a survivor of the Pals attack later recalled:

"We had to dodge from shell hole to shell hole to get through. All their wire was piled up in great coils, tremendous, and there was just the odd gap... bullets were like a swarm of bees all around you, you could almost feel them plucking at your clothes. Them that had made for the gaps in their wire were all piled up where the machine guns had laid them out, some were hanging on the wire... it was pure murder..."

(Frank Lindlay was just sixteen years of age when he made that slow advance over the hell of No Mans Land. One of many 'boy soldiers' to endure the horrors of the Somme.)

Later in the morning, the German defenders came out to clear the bodies off their wire, bayoneting or shooting any of the Pals that were still alive.

Battalion Commanders watched on in horror as the carnage unfolded. Thirty minutes into the attack over 2,000 men were down, either dead or wounded. By 10:00 hours an officer sent forward to the Nairn Trench on the left of the

Division's attack could find nothing. The trench didn't exist anymore, and no trace of any survivors could be found either. On the steepest slope of the Divisional front, the British men had been wiped off the map.

The 1st Leeds Pals casualties, sustained in the few minutes just after Zero, were 24 officers and 504 other ranks, of which 15 officers and 233 other ranks were killed.

One of the NCOs killed in that suicidal attack, was father of five, ex-Commissionaire, RSM Henry Preston. Henry's body was never found or positively identified.

Reflecting on that terrible day, one of the surviving Pals (Private A.V. Pearson), summed the massacre up perfectly, saying:

"The name of Serre and the date of 1st July is engraved deep in our hearts, along with the faces of our 'Pals', a grand crowd of chaps. We were two years in the making and ten minutes in the destroying."



Serjeant 9374

WILLIAM LANDERS

1st Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers

William Landers was born in Pallion, Sunderland, on the 30th of September 1884.

At the time of William's birth, Pallion was an industrial suburb which stretched along the banks of the River Wear, where shipbuilding and rope-making industries were booming. The Pallion landscape was defined by bustling shipyards and traditional worker cottages.

William's father Anthony, a shipyard labourer, had married his mother Mary Jane in 1880; Mary Jane was a Welsh girl, how they met isn't known. William was their first child.

As a young lad William attended the Bishopwearmouth Church of England School for Boys.

In the 1901 Census, it's reported that William, now aged sixteen, had gained employment as a forge labourer; he'd also gained two brothers (Thomas and John) and two sisters (Sarah and Isabella). The family lived at Watsons Lane in Sunderland.

Although he'd found work in a foundry, William was obviously keen to do more with his life; so he joined the army.

Unfortunately, William's service papers were destroyed in the Second World War when a Luftwaffe incendiary bomb fell on the War Office Record Store on Arnside Street in Bermondsey (along with around two thirds of the six and a half million records of the men who had served in the British army between the 1890s and 1920).

However, from the service number issued to William, it's clear that he signed up aged twenty, in October 1905 (service numbers were issued sequentially and soldiers whose records *are* available and whose service numbers bracket that issued to William, all joined in this month/year).

The Regiment to which William was assigned, was the King's Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB).

William's first overseas posting was Egypt in 1906, when his 1st Battalion KOSB was stationed as part of the British Garrison, being based in Cairo and Abassia. William remained in Northeast Africa for five years—including one deployment to Khartoum in 1909—before moving on to India in 1911

As confirmed within the 1911 Census, William was then stationed in Ranikhet, India, as part of the battalion's overseas peacetime service. Ranikhet was a cantonment town in the Almora district of Uttarakhand (formerly part of the United Provinces), which served as an important hill station and training depot for the British Indian Army.

The battalion is also known to have spent some time in Bareilly, around 120 miles southwest of Ranikhet. They subsequently relocated to Lucknow in 1912. Service in the Himalayan foothills would have provided William with a reprieve from the heat of the Indian plains and allowed the men of his platoon to acclimatise, train, and conduct routine garrison duties before being redeployed



Although William would have signed up originally on a 9/3 basis (nine years with the Colours and three with the Reserve) it appears that he was offered, and accepted, the opportunity to make that transfer a year earlier than initially agreed on his attestation papers; a not uncommon occurrence at that time. This would suggest that India was most probably his last overseas posting before returning to England and in 1913, starting life as a reservist, working as a civilian but remaining on call should the War Department require his services.

Like many soldiers working through the Reserve element of their term, William joined the Corps of Commissionaires, working for a range of customers from their Newcastle depot.

When war came, William was immediately called back to the Colours, being assigned in the first instance to the 2nd Battalion of his old regiment, the KOSB, mobilising on or around the 5th of August 1914.

The 2nd Battalion KOSB served with the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in 1914 and was involved in several of the war's crucial early battles.

Indeed, it's known that William fought in the Battle of Mons (August the 23rd, 1914), the first major engagement fought by the BEF. His battalion was stationed in the Mons salient, taking up defensive positions around the Pont des Herbieres and Lock No. 4, along the Mons Canal, a natural defensive line.

Outnumbered two-to-one, the British halted the German advance by displaying unmatched levels of rapid rifle fire; despite their excellent musketry skills however, they were pushed back by a sheer weight of numbers, ultimately being forced into a gruelling two-week retreat toward Paris.

William however was wounded at Mons, so he wouldn't have been involved in that fighting retreat.



Having recovered from his wounds, in 1915 William fought at Hill 60 in the Ypres salient. Created in the 1850s from the dirt excavated to build the Ypres–Comines railway, this low hillock stood only 60 meters above sea level (hence its name) and it was the scene of horrific fighting and underground ‘mine’ warfare. Because of its strategic value, offering excellent views over swathes of the Ypres Salient, it was much coveted by the British and Germans alike. Initially German-held, after much tunnelling and fighting, the British took the hill on the 18th of April, however, the Germans re-took it following a series of gas attacks from the 1st to the 5th of May.

William was then transferred to the Somme sector and assigned to the 1st Battalion which had just arrived on the Western Front. This battalion had suffered devastating losses in the Gallipoli campaign and on arrival, was in desperate need of reinforcements (especially reinforcements with William’s experience).

William’s Part In The Big Push (87th Brigade, 29th Div.)

As part of the opening attack on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, William’s 1st Battalion KOSB assaulted a feature known as ‘Y’ Ravine and then later rotated through the Hamel sector to attack the heavily fortified Beaumont-Hamel.

The battalion went into reserve behind the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers to launch their attack at 07:30 hours. The primary assault was held up by uncut barbed wire, resulting in devastating casualties from German machine-gun fire.

The battalion lost more than 570 men, including 11 officers, killed - and 406 men wounded.

Serjeant William Landers from Sunderland was one of those lost. His body was never recovered or positively identified.

William never married, his sole dependant on his Pension Ledger Index Card was his mother, Mary Jane, who at the time of William’s death was living at number 16 Carter Street in Sunderland; a handwritten note next to her name coldly states: *“Wholly impaired.”*

COMMEMORATION

In confirmation of just how horrendous the conditions were on that first day of the Battle of the Somme, the remains of three of the four brave Commissionaires who fell in the massacre, could not be recovered or positively identified. Serjeant Oscar Edward Wright, Company Serjeant Major Charles Pearson and Serjeant William Landers, are all commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial, the memorial for the missing of the Somme.



This memorial, often referred to as “a *Cathedral without walls*,” bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before the 20th of March 1918 and have no known grave.

Over 90% of those commemorated here, died between July and November 1916.

The memorial also serves as an Anglo-

French Battle Memorial in recognition of the joint nature of the 1916 offensive and a small cemetery containing equal numbers of Commonwealth and French graves lies at the foot of the memorial.

The remains of Regimental Sergeant Major Henry Preston were recovered, and today he rests under a Commonwealth War Graves headstone in the Euston Road Cemetery in Colincamps, a short distance from the frontline trenches at Serre.

Colincamps and “*Euston*” (the name given by British troops to a road junction a little east of the village) were both within the Allied lines before the Somme offensive of July 1916. The cemetery was started as a front line burial ground during and after the unsuccessful attack on Serre on the 1st of July, but after the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line in March 1917, it was scarcely used.



REMEMBRANCE

At precisely 07:28 hours on the 1st of July every year at La Boisselle, an explosion simulates the blowing of the mine at the site which became known as Lochnagar Crater. To the throng of whistles blown by the pilgrims lining the crater’s edge, a



lone piper emerges from the smoke traces of the explosion and heralds the beginning of a moving service to the memory of the men that fell during the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

Back in Blighty, for decades the 1st of July was commemorated every year, in some parts of Britain it was referred to as *“Thiepval Day.”*

But in today’s modern world, remembrance services are becoming ever rarer; recent generations wouldn’t recognise that date, more worryingly, many of them wouldn’t care. Stop 100 people on the streets of London or Birmingham today and ask them what happened on the 1st of July 1916, and the likelihood is that very few could tell you; even though the losses were so huge that nearly every village, town and city in the UK was affected.



Those who still care, must ensure that the memories of those who made the ultimate sacrifice are never allowed to fade away...

In his book entitled *“The Big Push”* written in 1961 (when there were some survivors of that terrible day still living) author Brian Gardner sums up how we should perhaps best view the events of 110 years ago...



“And gradually the grass sprouted, the trees grew, the farmers toiled in the filthy waste, discovering as many as half a dozen corpses a day ten years later, and the birds returned, and the woods lived again, and men fished on the banks of the sleepy Somme, and lovers walked hand in hand through the orchards of Bazentin. And sometimes, quiet Englishmen would visit this balmy countryside, in the summer, and still do, singly and in small groups. They do not speak much; but wander down the lanes and across the gentle hills, as if they are looking for

something. As they gaze across the now peaceful scene, only they are able to hear the screaming of shells overhead, the thunder of explosions, and the groans of the wounded; to smell the fumes and the stench and the mist; and to feel the damp and the misery in their bones.”

Oscar, Charles Henry and William never had the chance to revisit the Somme battlefield because they’d never left it. Today, they remain part of it. We must never forget them.
