



# frontline.

The newsletter of the MK WFA, July 2024.



## **Our next talk - Adam Prime - 19th July.**

Dr Adam Prime, lecturer in the Politics and Contemporary History at Salford University talks about his research into the Indian Army during the Great War. He will explain how the Indian Army came about, its origins in the defence of the East India Company from 1757, and a hundred years later, when the British Army needed to defend the Northwest Frontier against the Russians, a more professional army began to emerge. By the time of the outbreak of the First World War the army was made up of 240,000 Indian and 17,000 British soldiers. This talk looks at India's contribution to the First World War in every sense of the word. It takes in the huge recruitment boom, and how the diversity of religious and caste differences was met to maintain peace, order, and morale. It also looks at the experiences of Indian soldiers, and their British officers, on the Western Front, in Gallipoli, in Mesopotamia and in the Middle East.

Finally, it looks at India itself and the actions undertaken there to defend the Northwest Frontier. Of particular interest, and what is new research uncovered by Dr Prime, is Kitchener's willingness to risk Indian security entirely in order to defeat Germany.

Adam is a historian of the Indian Army with a PhD from the University of Leicester. Between 2016 and 2020 he lectured in Military and International History at the University of Salford. He has published book chapters on the Indian Army's defence of the Suez Canal in 1914 & 1915 and on the make up of the Indian Army Officer Corps in the late Victorian period. Adam has been on the WFA National Executive Committee since 2021.

Dates for your diary -

**September 14/15/16th** MK WFA at MK Museum Heritage event.

**October 19th** 'A Great War Miscellany', Our seminar, tickets on sale.



July



**Private Fred Johnson, Leicestershire Regiment killed in action 14<sup>th</sup> July 1916. Kevin's maternal Grandmother's first husband.**

Joined Leicestershire Regiment, 9th Battalion as a private in 1915, service number 15047.

Killed at the Somme, 14th July 1916. No known grave and is listed on the Thiepval Monument. His picture is shown in the locket above.

**Private Fred Barker, Leicestershire Regiment, killed in action 14th July 1916. Kevin's Great Uncle.**

Joined the Leicestershire Regiment, 9th Battalion as a Private in 1915, service number 15045. Killed at Trones Wood, 14th July 1916 and is buried in Serre Road No 2 Cemetery.

**Corporal Thomas Richard Fewell, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, Killed in action 28<sup>th</sup> July 1916. Sue Macfarlan's great uncle.**

Thomas had enlisted at Chelmsford and served in the 1st Battalion of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, a regular army infantry unit which was in Ireland at the outbreak of the war, and was

initially part of 14th Brigade, then the 95th Brigade, in the 5th Division. As part of the regular army Thomas landed in France on 21st August 1914, within three weeks of the outbreak of war.

He married Sarah Anne Rusk in Falmouth in 1915, presumably while home on leave.

His battalion participated in the Battle of the Somme in France - on 14th July 1916 it marched from Ivergry to Candas. The following day it moved to Toutencourte, then Bresle arriving to the south of Becordel-Becourt on 17th July 1916. Two days later the battalion was located at forward positions in a sunken road leading to High Wood near Longueval, having arrived via Fricourt, Mametz and Montauban. Six days later the battalion went on the offensive but was forced to retire to Pont Street by counter attacks. The battalion was relieved and moved to Happy Valley. On 28th July 1916 Thomas' battalion moved to Longueval and it was on that day that he was killed in action while serving as Corporal 8970. He was aged 25. Thomas has no known grave and is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.



**Private Fred Taylor (Border Regiment) Killed in Action 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 aged 21 (Anne McIntyre's grandfather's cousin)**

Fred enlisted with The Border Regiment in December 1915. He arrived at the Somme battlefield in March 1916 near to Beaumont Hamel. At 7:20 am on the first day of the Battle of the Somme an underground mine at Hawthorn Ridge, exploded. The force of 40,000 lbs. of explosives sent dirt and debris high into the air. Ten minutes later, at 7:30am the bombardment of German positions ceased. These alerted the Germans that an attack was soon to take place. The British had forfeited the advantage of surprise and the Germans immediately commenced their own artillery barrage over British lines and No Man's Land. Many of the British troops were cut down before they got

anywhere near the German Front Line. Over 19,000 men lost their lives that day - Fred Taylor was just one of them.





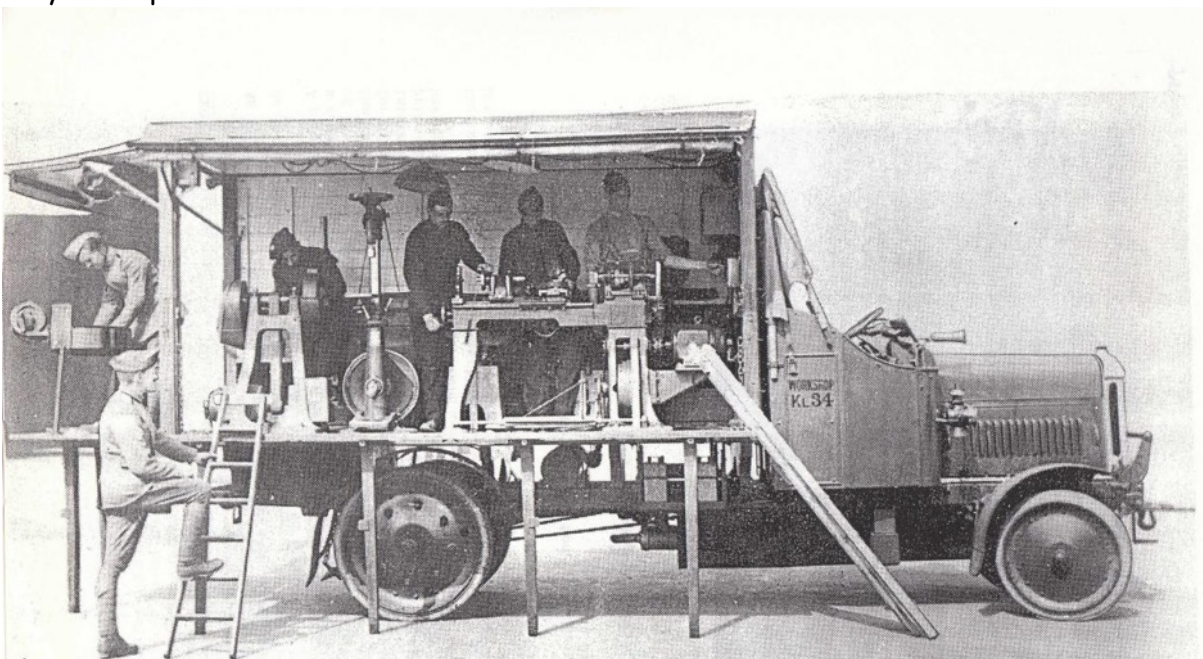
## Mentioned in Despatches



### 'Repairs and maintenance on the Western Front' - Roy Larkin

On Friday 21<sup>st</sup> June we welcomed back Roy Larkin who presented his latest talk, 'ASC Maintenance and Repairs'

This talk explained the logistics and problems faced by the British Army as they expanded from a virtually horse and mule-based transport and supply system in 1914 to an industrial scale industry by 1918. This vast expansion was clearly shown in Roy's opening - by 1918 the British employed thirty-four thousand lorries, fourteen thousand cars, ten thousand ambulances and buses, thirteen hundred tractors and nearly fifteen hundred motorcycles, the majority having sidecars. Therefore the logistics were massive in both supplying and maintaining this immense fleet. At any time at least twenty per cent of vehicles were off the road, far more than this after major battles such as the Somme offensive. Each ASC company hoped to operate a hundred lorries while keeping an extra twenty-five back for replacements, but these were always in use. Roy then explained about the maintenance schedules that were in place to keep as many vehicles as possible operational. There were four tiers. Firstly, the driver, who was responsible for fuel, water, minor tinkering, and washing. A driver went through a three-week training course by the London Omnibus Company, often at their bus garage in Hounslow, but later the army employed its own trainers. The bus company insisted on rigorous inspections and washing, despite the wretched state of the roads and the copious mud behind the lines. This was because small cracks, easily repaired, could rapidly turn into serious breaks that could immobilise a vehicle, necessitating lengthy and complicated repairs, or even rendering the vehicle beyond repair. The women drivers of the VAD also did their own maintenance.



The second tier was the travelling workshop. This was a fully equipped workshop, originally a wagon towed by a steam traction engine but soon based on a lorry chassis, the army copying the RFC who



built their workshops on the back of three-tonners. The sides folded out, the lower half hinged down to make a working platform, the top formed a roof. Inside were drills, milling machines, lathes and a forge, all the equipment requires for repairs, or to make new spares. The workshop took a day to set up, tarpaulins were often stretched between two workshops to create a garage. Each workshop had its own four-cylinder petrol engine, usually an Austin, mounted across the chassis to reduce vibration, for power. A large hole would be dug to house petrol cans (so if they did explode the force would be channelled upwards, not sideways.)

The third tier came from Mobile Repair Units, (as Roy pointed out, as mobile as any other brick warehouse!) These were well equipped workshops set up a distance behind the line in any suitable building. Their task was to recover broken down or damaged vehicles, of any kind, tow them back to the workshop and repair them. The term 'mobile' comes from their use of breakdown lorries. These were sturdy and well-equipped, including a mounted crane and towing axles. These were required to recover lorries which slid off the muddy roads into ditches, a frequent occurrence. All of these originally went to France as bus companies.

Finally were the Heavy Repair Shops. These were basically factories, the one at Rouen employed four thousand people and was bigger than the factories of Thornycroft or Leyland back in England. These could handle running repairs up to complete rebuilds. (As the War Office often did not see eye to eye with the Red Cross they weren't helpful with ambulances, doing only minimum repairs, but eventually they repaired anything. Originally the Army Ordnance Company handled all repairs, but as time went on the Army Service Corps repaired their own vehicles.

The main makes of lorries pressed into service were Commer, Halley, Halford, Napier, Swiss Berna and Wolseley. Cars were Austin, Napier, Siddely-Deasy, Talbot, Daimler and any French vehicles. Each HRS specialised in a single make (apart from those of French manufacture). As can be expected, there was a constant shortage of spares, the manufacturers were so busy building new vehicles, they had no time to produce spares, so there was often a twelve month wait. 899 Coy ASC used German POWs to manufacture spares. Originally it was not allowed to use prisoners for war work, but needs must, and eventually nearly a thousand were employed re-conditioning or manufacturing spares.

Repaired vehicles came out of HR shops as new.

Vehicles, some delivered by rail, were inspected, a list of repairs drawn up, then entered the workshop when spares were ready. The body was removed. After repair the vehicle underwent a forty mile road test before the body was replaced and the vehicle returned to service. Some vehicles were shipped back to England for repair. At anytime a huge number of vehicles were under repair or parked up. ASC started making its own spares when the manufacturers couldn't keep up, for example Daimler rear axles kept stripping their cogs so as well as repairing them the ASC designed and built their own improved version.

Roy also clarified some of the staggering logistics involved. In September 1916 the War Office ordered the next months batch of tyres - eighty thousand!

The end of the war brought about one of the great changes. In pre-war England road haulage consisted of railway (or canal), then horse and cart to the final destination. There were hardly any reliable lorries available, and if there were they cost at least four hundred pounds, a tidy sum. Now there were thousands of ex-military vehicles for disposal, backed up by fifteen million pounds worth of spares, and these vehicles cost about twenty pounds. Trained men bought their own lorries to make a living, and lots of ex-military personnel went into a fast growing transport industry. Village blacksmiths evolved into garages and roads were improved. Things would never be the same again. Our thanks to Roy for another fascinating presentation.

### **June 14<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> Twinning Trip to Belgium**

Itinerary - Friday - travel to the hotel, then the Service at the Menin Gate.

Saturday - Museum of Ribbon and Blockhouse Pioneer museum, reception at the Plugstreet 14-18 Experience, free time in Ypres, brewery visit and beer tasting, dinner and concert at Le Bizet.

Sunday - Civic ceremony for Albert French at Hyde Park Corner Cemetery, farewell lunch at the Restaurant Café de la Grand Place, then homeward bound Calais/Dover.

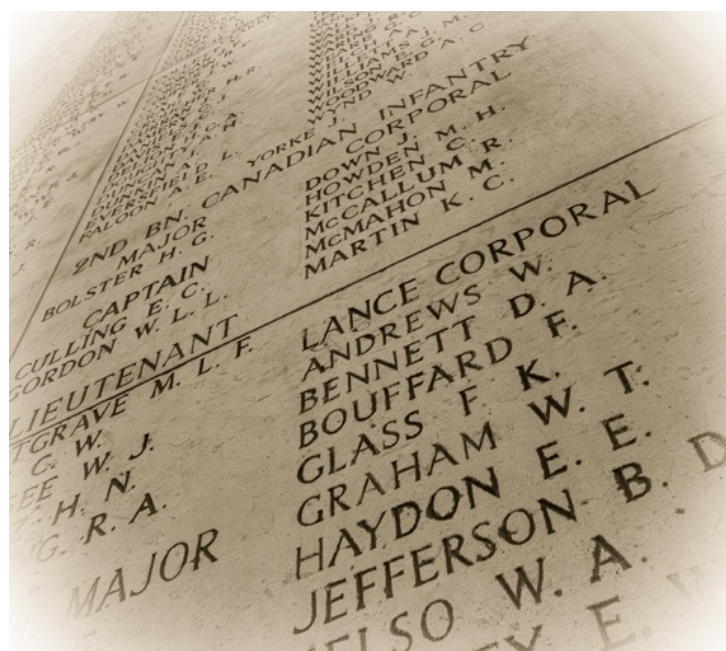
(From Eric)

It was quite a weekend wasn't it? Hilary & I enjoyed it a lot, although it took us a couple of days to recover! The 'formalities' more or less speak for themselves - all great fun. I was pleased to renew my acquaintance with the Musée de la Rubanerie but despite our host's enthusiastic descriptions I'm still far from clear how any of it works! Hilary & I made good use of 'time out' in Ypres to visit both St. George's Church and the Cathedral - where there was a posh wedding in progress when we first arrived outside, including horse-drawn transport for the wedding party, so we went in after the ceremony.

Hilary has developed a taste for Belgian white beer . . . .

See photos - probably none so good as Roy's, but there is one *of* Roy on the job . . . ! I think they are mostly self-explanatory; the flags are at St. George's, Old Bill is at the Plugstreet Experience - you probably saw him there - the names of course are on the Menin Gate.

Best regards, Eric (& Hilary)





(From Jane)

Roy and I were delighted to be able to join in with this year's trip to Belgium.

It was wonderful to catch up with old pals, from both Wolverton and Plugstreet and to once again walk the ground.

It was also a pleasure to be a passenger and not responsible for any arrangements! Thank you to all involved in this year's trip.

In iconic heavy rain we walked around Ypres and spent a humbling time at the Menin Gate with some delightful SAS veterans. One was a bit shocked to be asked to 'read' the Kohima. He gave it with power and dignity and certainly without the card he was given to read from! Two of the party paid tribute afterwards to their relative who is named in the panel nearby.

We enjoyed the usual and superb hospitality from the Belgians - thankyou to them, and then 'M. Canon' and myself caught up with 'M. Nikon', our great friend their photographer Jon-Michel at the Ploegsteert Experience Centre and then we got to see Xavier and his family at breakfast. Jon-Michel was busy too with helping his daughter Chloe with revision and exams and Xavier was about to be married so we had extra special chats. And hugs of course! Oh, and one or two drinks...

Catching up with pals was the order of the day..... but... having decided to go to bed on Saturday night, and not join those in the bar. Then Simon rang us in our room after we'd actually got ready for bed. He said - 'I think Andy Robertshaw is here....'.

Yes you guessed. Of course we got dressed and had a very happy hour in the bar with him and a couple of other guides.

Andy was guiding with a group based in another hotel but they hadn't actually booked him a room there so we had his unique company for a while in ours!

I'd had a moment too, coming out of passport control on our way to Belgium there was a coach used by the recently late Teddy Noyes, our WFA founding member and friend, for her tour company. As you know, she was a patron and champion for the Old Comtemptibles and ran Flanders Tours.

All in all, great company, great comradeship, great remembrance and especially for Albert and his fellow fallen comrades, plus great hospitality and many laughs. Thank you to all concerned.

We look forward to seeing them next year in Wolverton.





(From Stuart) (Photos by Roy)

A really great trip this time! I enjoyed every bit. Roy and Jane, Eric and Hilary, Simon, Kevin and Amanda, and my pals Dave and Steve made up the MK WFA contingent, and we had a great time. There was a good bunch from the Twinning along too, and a very impressive group of sea cadets, who did an excellent job at the ceremonies.

My personal highlights were - Kevin and I laying a wreath for Albert French at the Menin Gate as the bugles rang out, made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, what a great honour; re-visiting the museum in the cloth hall, even more impressive than the last time I was there; chilling in the café by the Menin Gate before wandering down to the Ypres bookshop to look at all the trench art and memorabilia (never can afford anything, but so, so tempting!). The Belgian hospitality was amazing, and when we left the reception on the Sunday they all piled out to the centre of the little roundabout outside and our coach driver did a couple of circuits with everyone waving furiously. It was a long coach and a small roundabout so we pulled a lot of G. What a laugh (well I thought so.) Many thanks to Wolverton Town Council, and especially Chris, who really did a great job of making sure everything went smoothly.



**June 15<sup>th</sup>** Albert French Commemoration at MK Rose.

The commemoration for Albert French opened with a welcome from the Mayor of Milton Keynes - Councillor Marie Bradburn, followed by the introduction - Why we are here, the life of Albert French - Lt Col Michael Hrycak





Photo, Martin and Sally

A selection of the letters of Albert French were read out by members of the Bucks ACF cadets and the Whaddon Sea Cadets. The Chaplain's letter was read by the High Sherriff and the CO's letter by the Lord Lieutenant. These were followed by the Exhortation from a British Legion Representative, the bugler played the Last Post (Bugler), then the Two Minute Silence and Reveille. Wreaths for Albert French were then laid and the Thanks given by Lt Col Michael Hrycak (Buckinghamshire County Colonel for The Rifles), who organised the event this year. The MK WFA wreath was laid by Anne, many thanks to her and Martin and Sally who represented our branch at the event.

July 7<sup>th</sup> 10th Anniversary of MK Rose, including MK WFA commemorating Albert French.





Anne was back at the Rose on 10<sup>th</sup> July when she and I decorated Albert's pillar and set up our display. Fortunately, we had been lent a British Legion gazebo by Chris, because about five minutes after the speech of welcome, when the Ukrainian dancers had just started the heavens opened and there was a tremendous downpour. That was the only time our display tent was really packed! Luckily the rain didn't last long and the sun came out again. Sadly the centrepiece of our display, a life size cardboard cut-out photo of Albert French got caught in the downpour before we could rescue him, and being cardboard he began to delaminate. Some emergency first aid should see him back in action in time for the MK Museum weekend. Albert's pillar looked impressive with sandbags and a wreath at the base, and coils of barbed wire and a poppy for every year of his young life, entwined round the pillar. All in all a very colourful event.

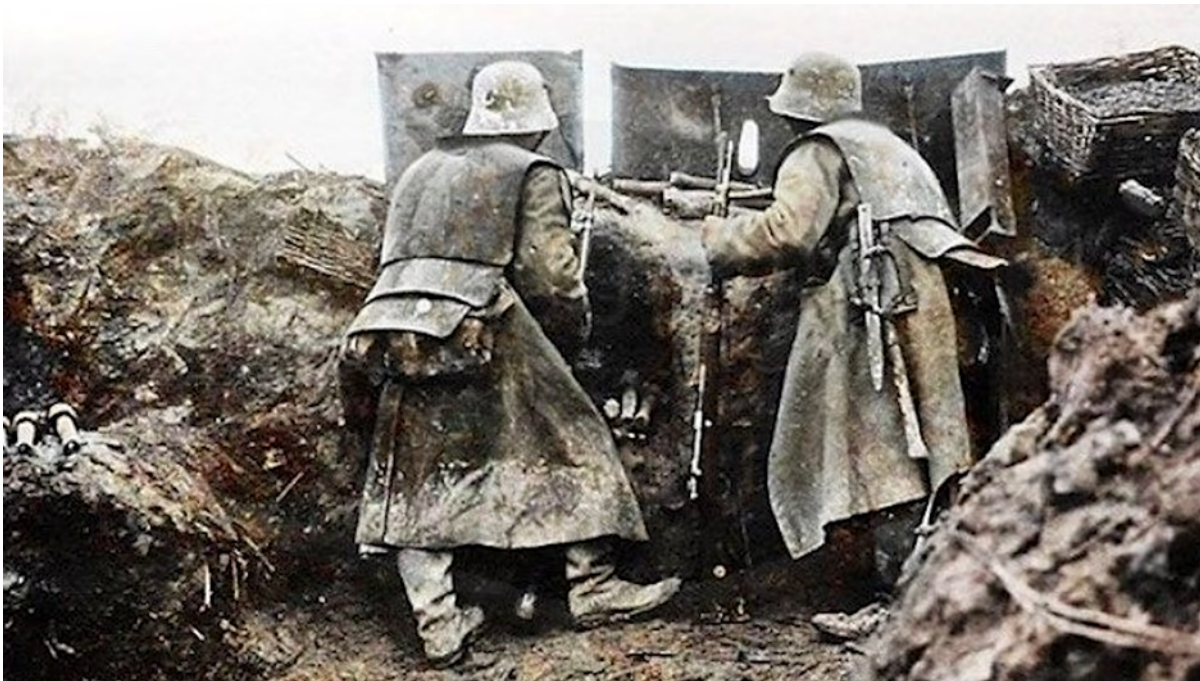




# Sudden Death - The development of combat sniping in the Trenches 1914 - 18 (Part two).

As well as the weaponry shown in last month's episode, the use of match-grade ammunition played a vital role in enhancing the effectiveness of snipers. This ammunition was designed for competitive shooting- but was ideal for sniper use as it allowed for more accurate long-range shots. This was due to several reasons - the rounds were designed with a more aerodynamic shape and weight uniformity which helped maintain trajectories and improve accuracy. This increased the likelihood of first-round hits, which was critical for snipers who often had only one chance to take a shot before relocating.

The development of specialist bullets for snipers was also an important innovation in trench warfare. Snipers needed rounds that could effectively penetrate trench fortifications and enemy cover. Armour piercing rounds [AP] with hardened steel or tungsten tips were designed to be effective against helmets, light armour and sniper loopholes. Steel plate loopholes were 2-3feet long and 2 feet high and became standard issue to snipers though after the introduction of AP rounds, they had to be hidden to cover a position.

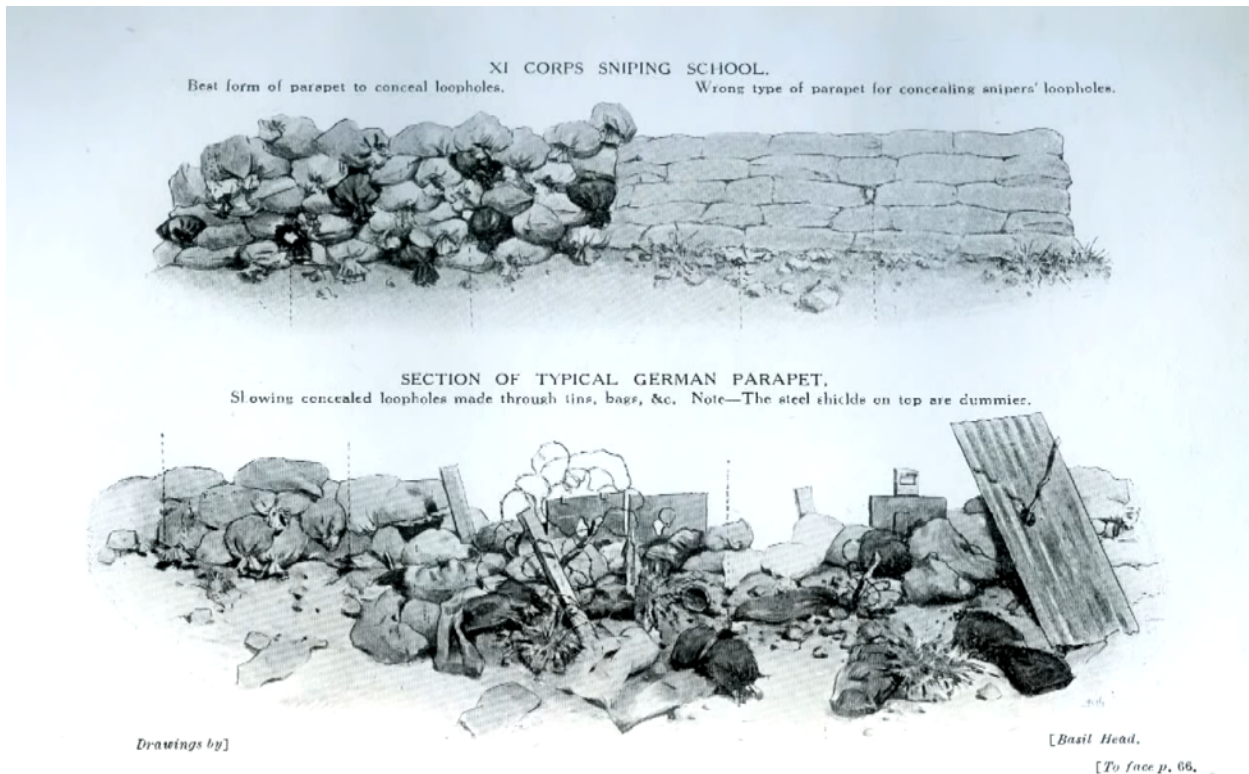


Source<sup>30</sup> AP rounds designed to penetrate armour, helmets and loopholes[ Histoire des SNIPERS: des origines à 1918 Le Feu aux Poudres You tube documentary]

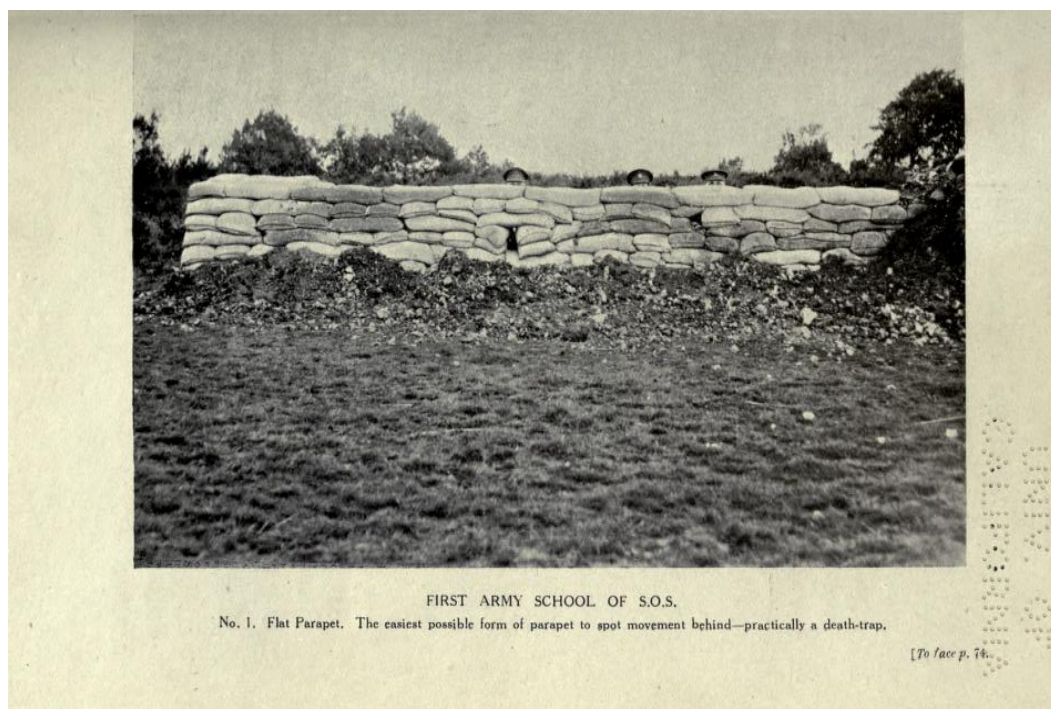
In addition, tracer and incendiary cartridges were introduced during 1915 -16. The development and use of these specialist rounds represented significant advancements in military sniping technology and sniping became an integral part of operations on the Western Front and other theatres of war. According to Adrian Gilbert was part of a process in which 'the old divisions of 1914.... were being transformed into a modern army of specialists. The sniper was just part of the industrialization of war' Source 31[Sniper One on One - Gilbert page 49 1994]

Protecting and concealing sniper positions was also important in the Frontline. From experience Hesketh Pritchard realised the Germans had adapted the trenches to hide positions ore effectively. In Sniping in France, he wrote: "the German trenches were deeper with more wire in front and from our point of view looked like the course of a gigantic mole which had flung up uneven heaps of earth. Here and there a huge piece of corrugated iron would be flung on the parapet and pinned there with a

stake..... Here and there were the steel boxes from which set rifles fired all night..... Here and there la great piles of sandbags, black, Red. green, striped, blue dazzling our eyes.' Source 32 [Sniping in France <https://archive.org>] This arrangement was perfectly suited to conceal sniper positions making them very difficult to spot. He complained that the British trenches were 'sandbags beaten down...until they made a clear line like a breakwater' Source 33 IBID which made movement much easier to spot from the enemy side.

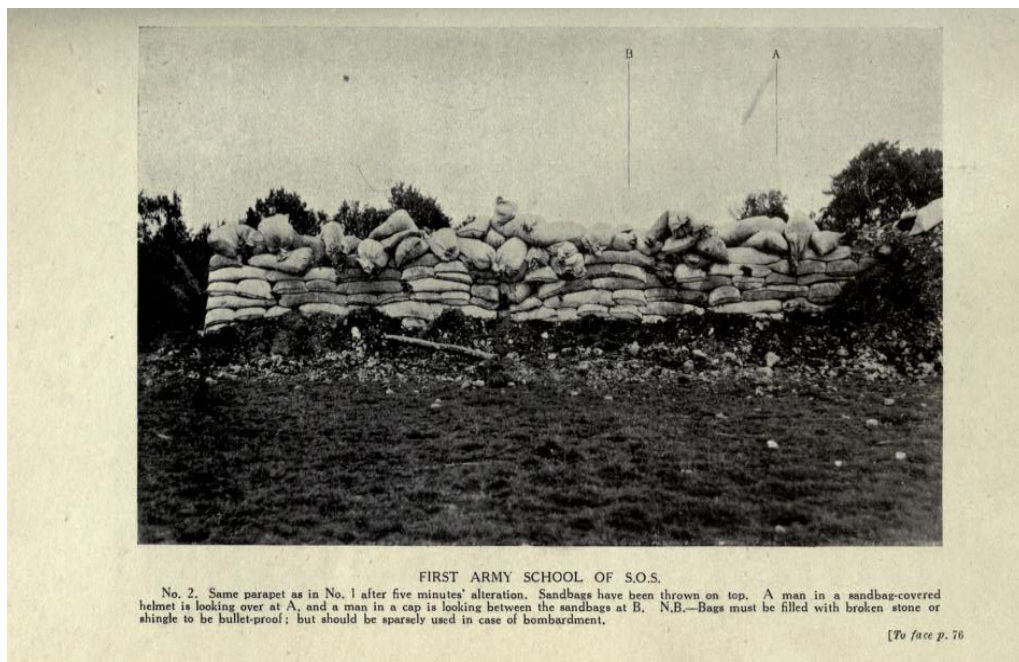


Source 34 Diagram to illustrate the difference between British and German frontline defences IBID



Source 35 'Tidy'; trench lines made soldiers vulnerable [ IBID]





Source 36 'Untidy' 'trench line made soldiers less visible to snipers. [IBID]

Hesketh Prichard pressured military authorities to accept the idea of an 'untidy' trench line. He held trials of both types in the training schools using dummy heads as targets. The number of hits in a ratio of 3 for a tidy trench to 1 for an untidy trench.





Source 37 Dummy heads used in sniper spotting includes a tube system running through it to mimic a soldier smoking a cigarette. [ IBID]

Dummy heads were also used to determine the positions of enemy snipers at the Front. Hesketh-Prichard stated 'The first work to be done in the trenches was the organised annihilation of these skilled German snipers' Source 38 [IBID] Dummy heads were made from various materials, such as papier-mâché, wood, or even stuffed sacks covered with a helmet, placed on sticks or other supports, and raised above the trench parapet. The aim was to provoke enemy snipers into firing at it. This helped to reveal the positions of the snipers, as the sound and muzzle flash from the shot would give away their location. By examining the entry and the exit hole Hesketh -Prichard explained how that could ascertain the sniper's location.' The head, immediately on the shot, was pulled down....in a natural as way as possible. The stick on which it was mounted was then replaced... but exactly between the height of the two glasses of a periscope lower than the position it was when it was shot through. Now all that remained to do was to place the lower glass of the periscope opposite the front hole of the head and apply the eye to the rear hole and look into the periscope the upper glass of which was above the parapet. In this way we found ourselves looking along the path of the bullet...and in the optical centre of the two holes would be seen the German sniper who had fired the shot or the post which concealed him. Once found he was soon dealt with.' Source39 [IBID]



Source 40 Papier-mâché sniper decoy head [ York Museums Trust]

Hesketh - Prichard explains the success of the decoy heads 'in trials at the First Army Sniping school we were able by this invention to locate 67 snipers out of 71'.

Source 41[Sniping in France <https://archive.org>]

A periscope rifle was also developed. The rifle was housed in a wooden frame with a periscope attached. A rod was attached to the trigger which enabled the rifle to be aimed and fired from within the trench. This, however, was a basic non precision weapon which could be fired by any frontline soldier. The range was limited to 100yards or less. Therefore, this was not the weapon of skilled, trained snipers on the Western Front. However, during the Gallipoli campaign, the reduced effective range was not a significant problem as in many sectors, the Turkish and Allied trenches

were close together for example - Quinn's post was extremely hazardous as the enemy line was less than 50 metres away.



Source 42 The periscope rifle in Gallipoli 1915. An observer checks the results with a trench periscope. [<https://historicalphotosdaily.blogspot.com/2011/02/gallipoli-campaign-1915.html>]





Source 43 Hand painted Sniper suit camouflage [ <https://www.iwm.org.uk>]

Snipers were trained in variety of methods to conceal themselves and remain undetected by merging into the environment. Snipers wore specially designed camouflage robes and suits to blend into their surroundings. These were often made to mimic the colours and textures of the land, such as grass, leaves, and soil. They would customise their own camouflage by overpainting their suits to their own design which they would change to fit in with the terrain.



Source 44 Random overpaint camouflage [ Museum secrets You tube]



Source 45 Eye and mouth slit cut into the hood [IBID]





Source 46 Sniper canvas robe painted with random camouflage with dry tufts of vegetation attached to break up the outline [IBID]



Source 47 Metal gauze sewn over eye hole in a canvas hood- which allows the sniper to see but at the same time hides his eyes. [IBID]

To be continued.....

Paul Salver.

## World War One in Objects, 18. Trench Art letter openers.



A selection of Kevin's letter openers, made from scraps of copper or brass.  
(One of the above is a fake - look very carefully at the bullet handles!)

The practice of making 'Art' from military material can be traced back to the Napoleonic era. It grew in popularity during the First World War as soldiers in the trenches began to make a wide variety of decorative and functional items, used to trade, sell or as keep-sakes. Some of the common items they produced were ashtrays, matchbox holders, letter knives, model tanks and planes, usually from re-purposed bullets, brass recovered from spent charge cases, and copper from shell driving bands, although carved wooden and bone pieces, and embroideries are also seen. Badges, buttons and coins could be added, and diagrams and writing inscribed. However, few examples were fashioned literally in the trenches. Nor were all made by soldiers. French and Belgian civilians would have found making these a way to eke a living, an 'industry that continued long after the war as 'battlefield tourism' increased. Behind the front lines were countless tool sheds and machine shops where anything broken was fixed or fabricated. When the tool shop was not in use 'officially' the troops could have turned their hands to producing trench art with this equipment. The objects produced could have been traded for cigarettes etc. sold, given as gifts or kept as mementos, just like these openers.







**Twinning trip - St Georges Chapel, Ypres - (photo by Eric)**

**July 7<sup>th</sup>** 10th Anniversary of MK Rose, including MK WFA commemorating Albert French.

**July 19<sup>th</sup>** India's Great War - Adam Prime.

**August** - no meeting. Summer Break. (Branch Outing - tba)

**September 14/15/16<sup>th</sup>** MK WFA at MK Museum Heritage event.

**September 20<sup>th</sup>** TBA

**October 19<sup>th</sup>** SEMINAR 'A Great War Miscellany' at the Old Bathhouse, Wolverton

**November 15<sup>th</sup>** 'The Lost Battalion' - Jim Nicolson (with fish and chip supper!)

**Meetings are 7.30 - 9.30 at Wolverton Working Men's Social Club, 49 - 50, Stratford Road MK12 5LS**

**Committee members are...**

Stuart Macfarlan - Chairman (macfarlan87@gmail.com)

Anne McIntyre - Secretary/historical events co-ordinator (annefmmcintyre@gmail.com)

Ian Wright - Talks organiser

Caroline Wright - Treasurer

Jim Barrett - Seminar and visits co-ordinator

George Maby - Wolverton Town Council liaison (Twinning and Albert French commemoration)

Gary Short - Social Media co-ordinator.



# The Western Front Association

## Milton Keynes Branch

### Milton Keynes WFA Seminar 2024. 'A Great War Miscellany'



**Don't Miss It!**



**October 19th (9.30am - 4.30pm)**

Expert speakers presenting fascinating aspects of the Great War, including -

Nigel Crompton: 'The Women's Police Service in the Great War.'

Helen Frost: 'When the Landships Came to Town.'

And more, including talks and demonstrations by the Great War Society;

Buffet lunch included, plus tea, coffee and biscuits throughout the day.

Militaria and branch displays, plus second-hand book stall (cash please).

Venue: The Old Bath House, Wolverton 205 Stratford Rd, MK12 5RL (Free car park, 4min from station.)

Tickets (£30) available by emailing [wfa.miltonkeynes@gmail.com](mailto:wfa.miltonkeynes@gmail.com)