



Life at home: January to March 1917

German submarine attacks and poor harvests in 1916 brought food shortages and price rises early in 1917 and the Government took drastic action. People were urged to keep pigs, poultry or rabbits, and grow as much of their own food as they possibly could. Beer-brewing was also cut by more than 50%, which is perhaps why Percy and Charles Seward grubbed up over a third of their hop acreage at Weston.

Other local farms were also suffering from the labour shortage; Mr. Bray at Nursted Farm gave this as the reason why he put his excellent milking herd up for auction. In fact, when Petersfield Council debated action on the Government's 'National Service' plan to discover how many men could still be enrolled for service, the Chairman cited Buriton as a place that has already sent just about every man it could - out of a population of 845, 170 men were already serving, 90 of them from farming. The Local Tribunal certainly was sympathetic to Kathleen Strugnell's brave plea that, with two sons already killed, two serving in France, and four sons-in-law also serving, her last son of serviceable age might be exempted from military service.

Buriton men were certainly paying

the price: Leon Harfield was in hospital, wounded in the head, and Walter Pretty found a newspaper on the battlefield containing a photograph of his brother-in-law, Caleb Chitty, missing in action since last September. The Daily Mirror published photographs of missing men, in the hope that other soldiers on the battlefield might have seen them; Caleb's sister, Walter Pretty's wife had sent a photograph of her brother.

It was a hard winter, with Heath Pond and Buriton Pond frozen over heavily enough to take skaters. Fun for some, but cruel to the elderly, and Buriton saw the funerals of Margaret Bone, Sarah Harfield and Harriet Pink. Lothian Bonham Carter's step-sister, Mary Bonham Carter, 49, was also buried at Buriton; she had been in poor health, and her death was said to have been hastened by grief for her brother, Arthur, killed in the war and memorialised in St Mary's.

There were happier events too - Buriton welcomed little Ronald Richards, from Weston, into the community, and the Primitive Methodist Chapel saw the wedding of Harriet Legg and Cyril Harfield. Both were members of large families of long-standing in the village, so there were many there to wish them 'Good luck!'

Action during January, February and March 1917

This was a relatively quiet period on the Western Front but, in other ways and places, it was a significant time:

Germany, recognising the difficulty of defeating the Allies on land or in Naval battles, resumed unrestricted submarine warfare: hoping their U-boats could sink enough merchant ships to starve Britain into defeat. However, after the sinking of several American vessels, USA entered the war on 6th April.

There was growing unrest in Russia because of their disastrous involvement in the war. Unrest and chronic food shortages erupted into open revolt and forced the abdication of the Czar. A second revolution, in October, brought a new government and Russia would soon signal her withdrawal from the war.

On the Western Front

The wet autumn was followed by a hard winter making life in trenches miserably uncomfortable. Occasional spells of mild weather meant deep mud returned quickly. Some British men were involved in holding these lines, whilst others were preparing for a spring attack, further north.

Amongst those moving north towards Arras were Fred Rattle (15th Hampshire), Lindsay Harfield (12th Battery, RGA), George Silver (70th Brigade, RFA) and Wilfred Aldred (72nd Brigade, RFA).

Percy Case, James Hill, Fred Legg, Basil Treagus and Arthur Watts (all 1st Hampshire) spent time in the front line and periods training before moving north, marching almost 50 miles, to prepare for the Spring 'push'.

The 2nd Hampshire, including James Powell, Albert Marriner, Godfrey Hughes and Albert Bunce, also spent time training between spells in the front line. They then marched in bitter weather to Mondicourt, close to Arras.

Algernon Bonham Carter (1st Kings Royal Rifle Corps) was one of the few British men to attack in this period, in action around Miraumont. As the troops gathered for zero hour (5.45am), German artillery opened fire: perhaps a result of information from a prisoner or deserter. Algernon's men advanced satisfactorily but others met uncut wire and the operation to take Hill 130 failed.

Unbeknown to the allies, the Germans had been building a formidable new defensive system (the Hindenburg Line) since October 1916: over 30 miles behind the front line in places. This was shorter and more easily defended so the Germans could save manpower and shorten communication lines.

From February the Germans began a strategic withdrawal to these new positions, giving up ground but making it unusable: digging up railways and roads, felling trees, polluting water supplies,



“Overcoming obstacles left by the German withdrawal”

destroying villages and planting booby-traps.

RFC pilot Francis Cave saw this from above. His diary notes: “Most of the villages behind the Hun lines were on fire and several of them appeared to be on fire all over the village. It was a curious sight to see all these villages burning.”

John Harfield (11th Hampshires) and Algernon Bonham Carter were amongst the troops pursuing the Germans as they withdrew, hampered by the devastation left behind.

Most of Cave’s flying was helping RGA Batteries direct fire onto enemy targets, but there were some night-bombing raids which he notes were eerie, flying in the dark “quite by myself.” Flights will have taken him over several Buriton men in the Hampshire Battalions below, around Morval. As the Germans withdrew, Cave also helped locate new battery positions.

But this was a period of sadness and stress for Cave (still aged only 19) with yet more colleagues killed in action or accidents. He notes in his diary in March: “I have now been in the Squadron longer



than any other pilot or observer.”

Cave was promoted but soon posted for ‘Home Establishment’, to help train air crews. He left on 27th March, returning to Petersfield and, despite lots of snow, making it home up the hill to Ditcham.

He had probably left France at a good time as April saw significant German air superiority and the worst casualty rate in British aviation history: losses of 50% of the force. The average life expectancy of a British flyer was just 93 hours of flight time: 21 days of active service.

Action in Mesopotamia

On 12th March Francis Cave noted: “Baghdad has fallen. I am very pleased about it.” He was probably unsure whether any Buriton men were involved there, and it still unclear today.

The British had learnt lessons after their surrender at Kut in 1916 and were ready for new attacks against the Turks and an advance on Baghdad.

The 4th Hampshires (potentially including Frederick Powell, Edward Pretty and Reginald Holloway) joined

attacks in January and February, carrying ammunition to others and advancing through a maze of trenches.

General Maude then decided to cut off some Turks by crossing the River Tigris and the 4th Hampshires had to find rowers for pontoon boats. They provided about a third of the 700 rowers and spent two days practicing in the clumsy vessels. Great courage was required as they would be unprotected.

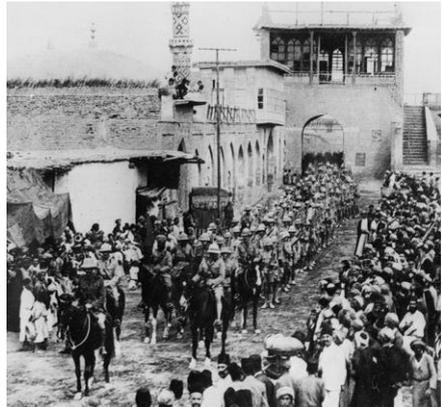
Crossing started just before dawn on 23rd February and some boats got halfway across before Turkish troops realised.

Deadly fire then stopped some landings but Gurkhas established a bridgehead. By 5pm a bridge was built and the Brigades could cross; 200 rowers had been hit.

The Brigades continued forward with the 4th Hampshires advancing alongside the Tigris despite extreme heat, enemy fire and 180 casualties. The enemy was soon on the run and the Hampshires saw little more action: just strenuous marching on short rations.

British troops occupied Baghdad on 12th March with the 4th Hampshires arriving the next day. They settled into garrison duties and rested, preparing to resume the offensive after the hot weather.

Sadly, Reginald Holloway died of disease on 23rd March. Buried at Amara some 200 miles south east of Baghdad, it would appear that he never reached the city with his colleagues. Reg was the son of Charles and Bertha Holloway of North



"Entry of Hampshire troops into Baghdad: March 1917"

Lane and was engaged to a local girl called Maud.

Conditions for troops in Mesopotamia were terrible with extremes of temperature, regular flooding, and diseases from vermin, flies and mosquitoes spreading rapidly and causing high casualties.

Reg had written home to his sister, Polly, on 3rd January, thanking her for a parcel: "it could not have come at a better time for we have been on the move and not been able to get much. I hope we shall be able to get things all right again now as we are got into a camp."

He hoped that Polly had had a happy Christmas and explained that: "We had a very good time in so far it was a nice fine day and we had a pause for pudding and cake each, but the drink was not much."

He finished by saying "I think this year will see an end to the war, by what I hear the Germans have had very nearly enough of it and I don't care much how soon it is all over." Sadly, within a matter of weeks, Reg Holloway had died.