

This is the Forty Third of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

The Death of James Lewton-Brain

I have recently come across a most useful book "The Saddening List" by C.J.Dixon, which lists all the names on the memorial plaque at the King Edward VII School, Kings Lynn, and gives considerable detail about the careers and deaths of many of those listed, including James Lewton-Brain. I have drawn on this book for some of the details in my two articles, in particular for the details that it gives about James's death.

Introduction

At the end of my last article the 8th Battalion, the Norfolk Regiment had just moved to Flanders. Here they took part in the Battle of Pilkem Ridge (31st July – 2nd August, 1917), which was the opening attack of the main part of in the Third Battle of Ypres (better known as the Battle of Paschendaele). This ridge is located about 3 miles due north of Ypres. The attack had mixed results, although a substantial amount of ground was captured, and a large number of casualties were inflicted on the German defenders. But heavy rainfall began in the afternoon of 31st July causing great problems for the British who were trying to advance into an area already devastated by artillery fire and which had turned into a sea of mud.

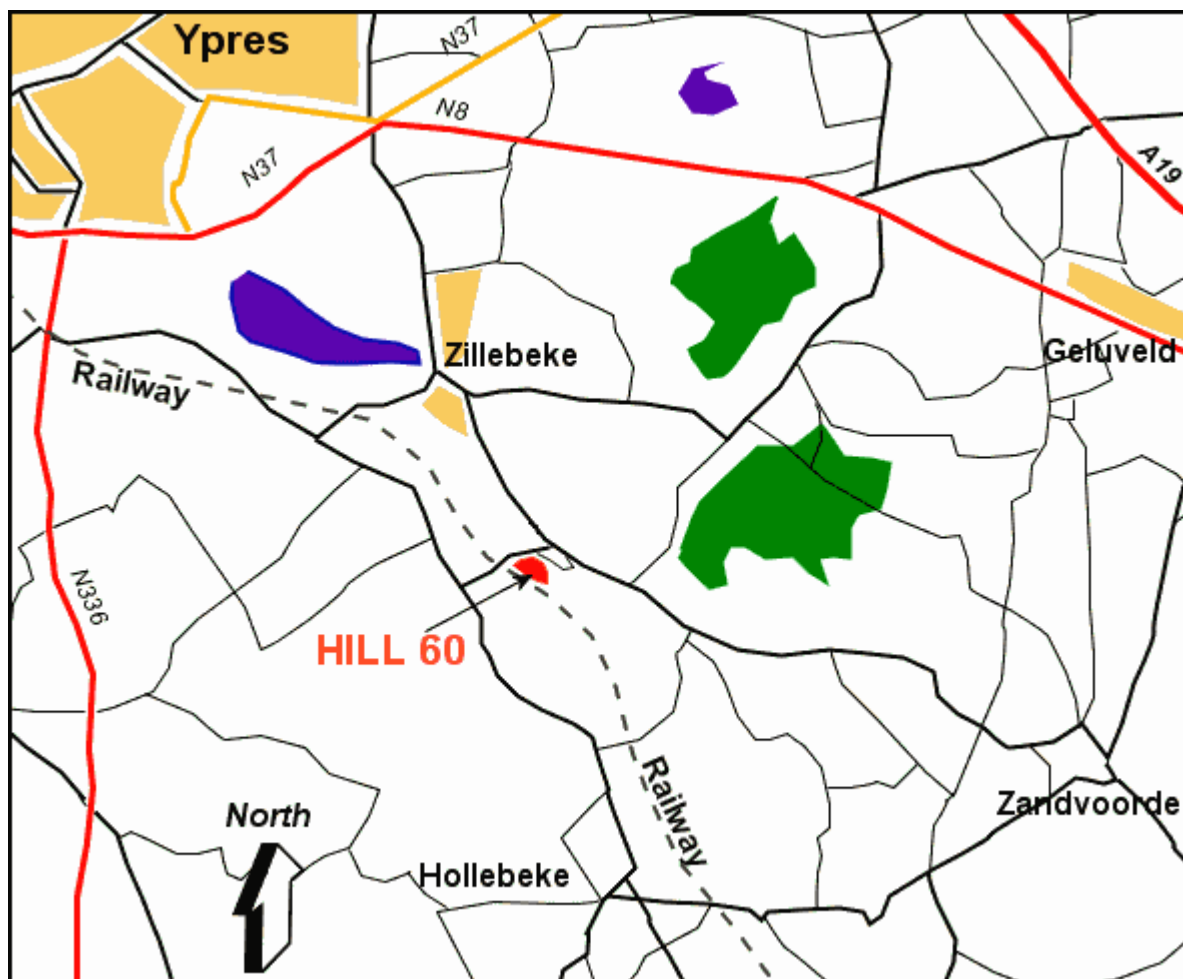
After this, the battalion was given a short period (4th to 10th August) at a rest camp, the Canal Reserve Camp at Dickebusch, but on 11th August they took their place in the front line near Glencourse Wood, in the Ypres Salient.

The death of James Lewton-Brain

It was common practice to site dug-outs in railway cuttings. Siting them on the side away from the Germans gave them some protection from artillery fire. However, Dixon's book gives a graphic description of how this was of no avail on 14 August 1917.

"James, with six other officers from 'C' Company and Headquarters staff, was in a dug-out in the railway cutting near Hill 60. At 12.30 a.m. a 5.9 phosgene gas shell penetrated the roof and exploded inside, blocking the entrance. Due to the falling debris and general confusion the officers were unable to get out, or to put on their respirators. Eventually, 2nd Lieut. Chapman managed to escape through the hole in the roof, he then returned several times to rescue the others. James, suffering from wounds and gas poisoning, died nearly twelve hours later at No.17 Casualty Clearing Station."

Now, Hill 60, located around three miles south-east of Ypres, was not a natural feature, but was made from the spoil removed during the construction of the railway line nearby. The Ypres–Comines railway ran roughly parallel to the roads from Ypres and 600 yards from Zillebeke it went through a cutting 15–20 feet deep, which extended beyond the crest of the ridge. Earth excavated when the railway was built, had been dumped on either side to form small hillocks. On the west side of the cutting on the highest point of the ridge, was a mound known as "Hill 60", from which observers had excellent observation of the ground around Zillebeke and Ypres. Because it was a small area of elevated land in a flat landscape, it had great strategic importance in the battles in the Ypres Salient, and it was fiercely fought over.



You will see from the first part of this article that the little brass memorial to James says “Poperinge” because this was the nearest sizeable town to Zillebeke. It is situated about 8 miles due west of Ypres and throughout the war Poperinge (or ‘Pops’ as the soldiers called it) was used by the British Army as a gateway to the battlefields of the northern Ypres Salient. It was an important rail centre behind the front line and was used for a variety of purposes including providing a site for CCSs (Casualty Clearing Stations).

James was buried in Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery, which is located a short distance to the south-west of Poperinge. Close to the front, but out of range of most German field artillery, Lijssenthoek became a natural place to establish CCSs, and there was a concentration of them at Remy Farm, which had a dedicated railway siding. So far as I can tell, No.17 CCS, where James was taken, was one of this group.

A surviving member of his family

I was very pleased to find that there is a member of his family still living in Norfolk. Diana, the daughter of James’s younger brother, Charles, is living in a retirement home in Hunstanton and I recently had a chat with her over the phone. I hope to be able to visit her before too long.