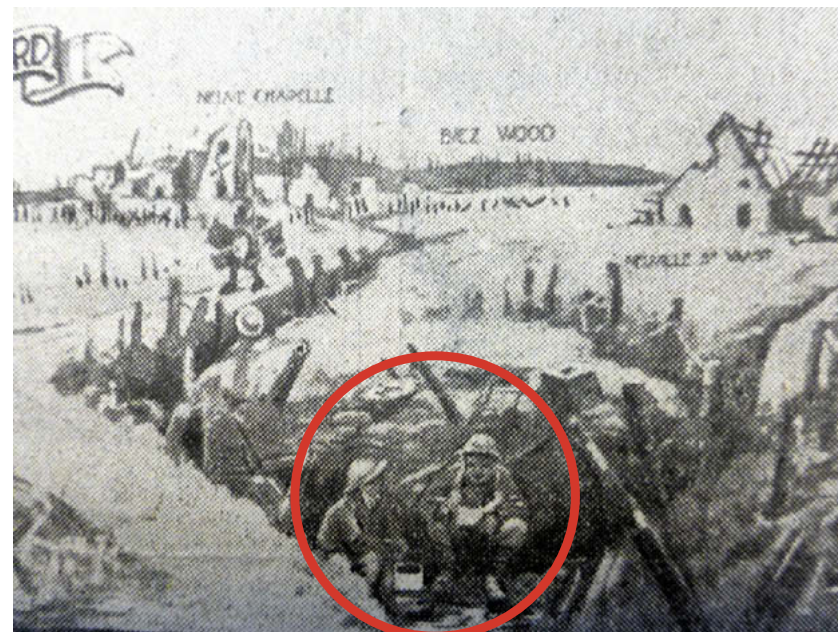


## NEWS

# AND TEA

## up amid slaughter of WWI



■ Panel 7 entitled 'Gommecourt' shows two Tommies brewing-up in a trench, circled



■ An view of the Gommecourt Wood battlefield with trenches and shell holes

commanded by Major-General Edward Montagu-Stuart-Wortley - were tasked with taking Gommecourt Wood.

The 56th (London) Division were to take Gommecourt Park, while the artillery dealt with the village itself.

The plan looked great on paper, but, in reality, was a blueprint for mass slaughter.

Before going over the top, Burton-on-Trent's Wilfred Arthur Lawrence, second-lieutenant of the 1/6th North Staffords, said optimistically: "Our artillery were splendid and wiped Gommecourt Wood from the face of the earth."

Lawrence, who took charge of the third wave after Captain Stack, also from Burton, was hit in the stomach and felled by molten shrapnel soon afterwards.

It was a bloodbath. All three waves were decimated once they emerged through the smoke, with men draped like mannequins on barbed wire.

The 1/6th North Staffords' commanding officer Major C.E Boote, from Blyth Bridge, was killed as was his adjutant Lieutenant Robert Ramsey Stuart-Shaw and Second Lieutenant William Marson, from Burton - married just five weeks earlier.

In a letter home, Lance Corporal R. Tivey described the terrible scene. "After having proceeded no more than 20 paces, the whole line fell as one man, leaving me running, whereupon I was struck for the first time and fell.

"I did not know what had happened, really, and surmised the line had been wiped out, since deliberate rifle fire and Maxim-fire was concentrated on us."

Tivey was one of 300 North Staffords casualties that day.

The killing went on and on.

The closeness of the South Staffords to the northern edge of Gommecourt village meant our artillery was unable to destroy a German machine gun position and that single weapon dropped man after man as if they were skittles.

Even worse, the maze of German razor-wire

remained virtually intact.

Second Lieutenant Richard Bartlett Mellard, of the 1/5th North Staffords, reported during a night-time recce that wire to the north of Gommecourt Road was "uncut".

Mellard, whose father had been mayor of Newcastle-under-Lyme, was killed on July 1 and his decaying body was not freed from the wire until March, 1917.

Thirty minutes before climbing trench ladders and facing a storm of machine gun fire, troops of the 1/6th North and South Staffords were given a tot of rum.

Burdened by kit weighing 66 pounds, simply walking slowly towards the German lines, as ordered, was strength-sapping.

Lieutenant George Norman Adams of 1/6th South Staffords' D Company had an escape that was more miraculous than lucky.

He was hit in the right knee, the bullet passing right through without hitting a bone, and snipers took pot-shots as he crawled to safety.

Adams was saved by his revolver magazine, a bullet ricocheting off the metal.

In hospital, he mumbled: "I am afraid we have lost heaps killed or wounded.

In all, the 1/5th North Staffords mounted eight waves. The second managed to reach the German frontline.

The third wave got into the German frontline, but the rest were thwarted by artillery, machine guns and barbed wire.

It had taken just five minutes after Zero Hour for the battle to become a massacre.



■ Stretcher bearer Harold Coltman



■ Lieut Richard Bartlett Mellard

Lichfield's Captain Eglington, with A Company 1/5th South Staffords in the seventh wave, was scythed down by machine gun fire just 20 yards from the German wire.

Sergeant Major E Martin, of the Hednesford Territorials, stayed with the mortally wounded officer for an hour until he died.

He said: "I went back further to a ditch about 20 yards in front of our advanced trench and found there at least 60 men of the 1/6th South Staffordshire regiment and officer. I stayed there till dusk and then got all the men back into the front-line trench."

One man's memories of that awful, bloody day were written down and published by his grandson.

In the book "Tommy at Gommecourt", Tommy Higgins said: "In the trench leading to the front line, the sights I saw are impossible to properly describe.

"The trenches were literally running with blood.

"The dead and dying lay in heaps at the bottom of the trench. We had to climb over them as we went on.

"The shells were bursting everywhere, overhead, in front, and behind us Fritz was blowing our trenches flat.

"At last we got to the jumping off place, with about half the number of men who started. In

the trench was the same scene of blood and death.

"I should think in about an hour over 600 men were killed and wounded in the trenches alone.

"The 6th North was practically wiped out when we got to them.

"We rested a few seconds or two, and then came the order, 'fix bayonets'.

"The bullets were zipping just over the top of the trench and in No Man's land, whiz bangs and shells were bursting in hundreds. No one expected to come back again."

Higgins made it back to the British lines as darkness fell. He recalled: "We made our way to the front line helping one another over the dead bodies that lay in the trenches.

"Some of them lay under water, in places it was so deep I think some of the poor chaps must have drowned where they were wounded."

Of the 1/6th South Staffords 523-strong fighting force, 239 had been killed, wounded or were missing.

Sister battalion the 1/6th North Staffords lost 170 - 126 of them were never found.

Thankfully, top brass, numbed by the disaster, cancelled a planned second attack, scheduled for 3.15pm.

Unfortunately, the order to "sit tight" came 15 minutes after our boys were supposed to leave their trenches - and 21 South Staffords still waded like lambs to the slaughter into the fray.

Eighteen were cut down after advancing no more than 20 yards.

The stomach-churning brutality was summed-up by Corporal George Scott who returned to scene of the slaughter a year later.

He said: "My first trip back into the front lines observation posts I will never forget, because all the North Staffords who had died still lay out in No Man's Land in heaps just as they had fallen on July 1 the previous year.

"What is more, upon looking through the glasses, we could see that the barbed wire was festooned with the bodies of the men of the North Staffs Battalions."