

Westbury Remembers - Part 15

Arthur Wyatt and Frank Tombs

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Happy Valley Camp, a move which was finally completed on 8th February 1916. The next few months were spent building defences which would protect Salonika from invasion. With the enemy reluctant to attack these newly fortified positions, apart from the occasional air raid, there appears to have been little for the troops to do but training exercises. However, the heat and privation in the Macedonian hills sapped their energy and many fell sick. The nickname 'Muckydonia' that the troops used for the area, summed up how many of them felt about being there.

In August 1916, they took part in the



British Forces at the Doiran Front 1917

Battle of Horseshoe Hill, as well as several assaults on the Bulgarian positions at Lake Doiran, but they were repulsed and forced to retreat. In February 1917, the Allies attacked again, but found that the Bulgarian positions were even better fortified than before and their advance was again repulsed. Yet another attempt at a breakthrough began on 22nd April with a four-day artillery barrage fol-

lowed by an infantry attack, but the British had to retreat after a Bulgarian counter attack. Attacks over the next few days were defeated by constant

Bulgarian fire and counter-attacks and it was during this battle that Frank was killed in action on 28th April 1917.

The battle continued until 9th May 1917. Although by this

time the British had gained a considerable amount of ground, more than 12,000 men had been killed, wounded or captured, and they abandoned further attacks. Static trench warfare continued until Autumn 1918 when Allied forces again went on the offensive. British, French and Serbian troops broke through the Bulgarian defences and on 29th September, Bul-

garia signed an armistice and fighting ceased the next day. Frank Tombs is

buried in the Karasouli Military Cemetery in northern Greece.



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Arthur Clayton Wyatt was born in Westbury in 1882 to Joseph Wyatt, a farm labourer, and his wife, Mary, who lived at Pound Cottage in Rodley. Arthur was the fifth of their twelve chil-



The Wyatt family in 1900 with Arthur in his uniform

children, who were all born at Pound Cottage between 1875 and 1893. Sadly his little sister, Fanny, died of peritonitis at the age of six in January 1891. The census, taken later that year, shows eight of the children still living at home, but somehow they still managed to find room for a lodger.

Money and space must have been in short supply and, while Arthur's brothers remained at home as agricultural labourers, in 1900, Arthur, at the age of eighteen, enlisted as a private in the Gloucestershire Regiment. His service record for this period has survived and so we know that he was 5'6" tall and had brown eyes and hair and a scar on his head. He was stationed initially at the South Raglan

Barracks at Devonport but in 1902 he spent seven months in South Africa during the Second Boer War. By the end of that year he had been posted to India, where he remained for nearly six years.

From December 1908 until 1912 he served with the army reserve, during which time he returned home and, like his father and brothers, worked as a farm labourer.

It is unclear exactly when Arthur re-enlisted, as his military record for the period of the war has not survived. At the time of his death he was serving with the 11th Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, but in the photograph overleaf, which looks like a wartime photograph, he is wearing the Gloucestershire Battalion cap badge and has a Gloucestershire battalion service number. So it seems likely that he volunteered to rejoin the Gloucesters at the start of the war. His nephew, Colin Wyatt, who kindly supplied all these wonderful family photos, says that Arthur was definitely at home on 12th

October 1915, because he was best man at the wedding of his brother, George, at Abenhall Church, but he could have just been home on leave. If he was with the Gloucestershire Regiment at the start of the war, it is possible that he was transferred to the Warwickshire Regiment in October 1916 along with many others from the ranks of the 1/4th & 1/5th Territorial Battalions of the Glosters.

Whichever regiment he was with, he would have been in France by July 1915, the Glosters having landed in March and the 11th Battalion of the Warwickshires landing in July. Both regiments endured a winter of endless working parties in waterlogged trenches, interspersed with artillery bombardments, and in the summer of 1916 both moved to the area of the Somme. By the 15th July, 465 men from the 11th Battalion of the Warwickshire battalion had been killed or wounded, and by 16th August this number had risen to 759. Such heavy losses would explain why they needed to be reinforced with troops posted from other battalions.

In November 1916, they took part in the Battle of Ancre, which was the last large scale British attack of the Battle of the Somme and yet again sustained heavy casualties. After a winter largely spent training, in April 1917 they joined Canadian, South African, New Zealand, Newfoundland and Australian troops in a major offensive near the French city



Arthur Wyatt in the uniform of the Glosters

of Arras.

This battle was the British part of the Allied spring offensive of 1917. The original plan had been for a second offensive on the Somme but the French Commander-in-Chief preferred attacks northeast of the Somme, aimed at cutting off the German salient in France. The British attack was supported by 2,879 guns each of which had around 1,000 shells and when the battle began on 9th April,

the British were able to overwhelm the German front line, and in some places advanced more than three miles. However, on the second day, the Germans rushed reinforcements into the gap and launched a series of counter attacks.

It was on that day, 10th April 1917, that Arthur was killed in action. He was 35 years old. He is commemorated on the Arras Memorial to those who have no known grave.

He was mourned by his large family, including his youngest sister, Leah, who only two months previously had lost her fiancée, James Martin, in the fighting in Iraq.

I am very grateful to his nephew, Colin, and to Leah's daughter, Margaret (Nancy) Sollars for their help in remembering him.

Frank Tombs was born in Broadoak in 1897. His father Thomas, was a farm bailiff, and he and his wife, Emma, lived at Poplars Cottage in Broadoak with their eight children. Frank was their fifth child, having three older sisters and one older brother and, over the next six years, three younger brothers were born. When the youngest was only three, their father died at the age of 47 years leaving their mother and two older sisters, aged 17 and 15, to support the family. Times must have been really hard for them, but Emma worked as a housekeeper and by 1911, Frank's older brother William was working as a farm labourer.

By this time his older sister, also called Emma, was in service as a housemaid at Daisy Bank House at Leckhampton Hill and it is likely that his other sister Sarah was also in service, but she does not appear on the 1911 census.

In 1915, when he was 18, Frank enlisted as a private in the 9th Service Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment in Bristol. After training in Cheltenham and Longbridge Deverill, Frank's battalion mobilised for war and landed in France on 21st September 1915. Fresh and still inexperienced, after only a few

weeks in the line in France, they were sent by train to Marseilles. From there they embarked for Salonika in Greece, in order to strengthen Serbian resistance against Bulgarian forces.

Greece's attitude to the war had been uncertain, with King Constantine (who was Kaiser Wilhelm's brother-in-law) and his general staff favouring neutrality while the Prime

Minister Venizelos sided with the Allies. A treaty had been signed in 1913 which obliged Greece to come to Serbia's aid if Serbia was attacked by Bulgaria and when Bulgaria began to mobilise, Venizelos asked for Allied help.

The Salonika Front has been

largely forgotten as a theatre of the Great War, but thousands of British, French, Italian and Russian troops were deployed there against the Bulgarian Army, an ally of the Central Powers. Like the Western Front, there was an extensive trench system and while there were some major battles, the greatest danger was from disease, especially malaria.

As part of the 26th Division, Frank's battalion landed in northern Greece in November after a risky sea voyage following a course which would minimise the risk from enemy submarines. On 26th December 1915, they began to move from Lembet to



Typical British military camp of dugouts and bivouacs in Salonika April 1916

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