

half the tanks were still operational, owing to the German artillery and their own mechanical unreliability, and the Germans had rapidly reinforced and defended Bourlon Wood.

On 23rd November, George's battalion, as part of the 40th Division, attacked the woods of the Bourlon Ridge. Initially, his company only encountered a few snipers and after clearing an enemy dug out and taking 30 prisoners, they gained their set objective.

However, they then had to fight hard to maintain the ground that they had won. After close fighting in the wood for three hours, the Welsh units were occupying the northern and eastern ridges at the edge of the undergrowth, but on the 24th November, the enemy launched a heavy counter attack and B company sustained heavy losses including all their remaining officers.

George died on 25th November during this attack. The 40th Division eventually reached the crest of the ridge but they were held there and suffered more than 4,000 casualties in three days.

A Royal Army Medical Corps report describes the *"almost impassable condition of the ground, the length of*

the carry, the total inability to bring the Motor Ambulance cars into the village, the exhaustion of the bearers owing to the prolonged marching which preceded the operations" and states that *"it is impossible for anyone who was not present to imagine the difficulties encountered."* By the time they were evacuated, some seriously injured men had been waiting for over 24 hours in open barns in bad weather.

George's last letter home, which is still cherished by his family, is particularly poignant, with its opening lines letting them know that he is "in the best of health and still within the land of the living."

There are no grumbles about what he is having to endure and just a cheerful ending that "Xmas

will soon be here, so you see there is a good time coming for some of us" and to "excuse so short a letter, will write more next time." He died, aged 25, and is commemorated on the Cambrai Memorial to the Missing at Louverval.

For further copies of this leaflet or if you have any information to add, please contact Di Landon on 01452 760531



H E whom this scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom. Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.

Pte. Edwin George Woodman, M.M.
"Welsh Regt."

Westbury Remembers

Part 18 - Edwin George Woodman

Written by Di Landon
and sponsored by

Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council



Edwin George Woodman (known to his family as George) was born in July 1892 and baptised in Westbury Church. The Woodman family are still strongly represented in the parish, and I am very grateful to them, especially George's niece, Jill Martin, for providing much of this information and for the photographs.

George's grandfather, Philip Woodman, had moved to Westbury from Frocester while working on the railways. He became the innkeeper of the original

Junction Inn, which is now Frocester House. He was clearly a successful entrepreneur, becoming a fruit dealer as well as building the new Junction Inn and several houses in Northwood Green. He and his wife Elizabeth had nine children, including William (George's father).

William followed his father and became the innkeeper of the Red Hart at Blaisdon with his wife Annie. They had 10 children, of whom Edwin George was the fifth, but one daughter died tragically while still a toddler

when her nightdress caught fire. By 1911, the family had moved to a farm in Upper Ley and George and his brother Sydney were working on the farm with their father.

It must have been around this time that George moved to the mining village of Resolven near Neath as, when

he enlisted in the Welsh Regiment on 2nd September 1914, he gave his trade as 'Checker' and stated that he had been living away from home for three years. 'Checkers' were employed by mine owners

to check a collier's 'drams' or trucks for 'small coal' which was unsaleable, and deduct its value from the collier's wages. The coal checkers were expected to more than cover their wages by means of these deductions.

George's enlistment forms show that he was 5'6½" tall, weighed 12 stone and had light brown hair and hazel eyes. Posted to the 9th Service Battalion of the Welsh Regiment, he was soon training on Salisbury Plain and this continued until he embarked for



George's parents, William and Annie Woodman



Boulogne in July 1915 as part of the 19th Western Division. Their first battle was at Pietre, in a diversionary action supporting the Battle of Loos on 25th September.

In this action, a release of gas by the British did not reach the enemy and only served to bring a hail of shells down on them.

The British artillery bombardment that followed did little damage to the German front line and when the 25 officers and 781 other ranks of the 9th Battalion went 'over the top', 13 officers and 221 men were mown down before they had gone 100 yards. George was seriously injured that day with a bullet in his back and shrapnel in his knee. In a private letter to their Commanding Officer, one of the

Battery Commanders said that "they knew what they were in for, and went forward without demur" and "if all are imbued with the same spirit as your command, the ultimate issue of the war cannot be in doubt". There were many conspicuous individual acts of gallantry that day, as the seriously wounded were sheltered in hollows in No Man's Land, protected by walls of sand-

bags, constructed by men crawling about under fire.

In spite of George's injuries, he appears to have rejoined his regiment in the field on 21st October, but the cold of that winter brought him back to the casualty clearing station again in December with "chilled feet".



Edwin George Woodman

In trench warfare the long hours of inactivity crouched in cramped positions, with feet immersed in mud or cold water at near-freezing temperatures, often caused "chilled feet" or "trench foot", a condition clinically indistinguishable from frostbite. Men diagnosed with trench foot had often worn their boots and puttees for up to 14 days without taking them off. Dur-

ing the first year of the war, one battalion lost 400 men in two days to trench foot, and many of these men suffered subsequent amputations. Eventually, officers across the Western Front developed arrangements to ensure fresh supplies of socks, prohibited the wearing of puttees in the trenches and encouraged the men to move about as much as possible. Some even instituted a regular removal

of boots, followed by foot rubbing drills and massage.

George recovered but was probably unfit to return to the trenches and so was instead transferred to the 12th Reserve Battalion which was stationed at Kinmel Park near Rhyl. In January 1917, George was transferred back to the 3rd Battalion of the Welsh Regiment and returned to France in March. By April, he had transferred to the 17th Battalion (the First Glamorgan Bantams) and was in northern France near Cambrai. The Battalion's war diary gives a stark picture of life on the front line – an endless round of raids, patrols, working parties, bombardment, gas attacks and rifle and machine gun fire. On the day George joined them, 28 men had been killed and 61 wounded as they fought to gain control of high ground overlooking the Hindenburg Line. The diary tells how, on the night of the 18th May, George displayed "great dash and courage during a raid on an enemy trench at La Vacquerie for which he was awarded the Military Medal. This

was awarded for bravery in battle and was the 'other ranks' equivalent of the Military Cross.

The next few

months seem to have consisted of an exhausting regime of repairing roads and trenches and making 'gooseberries' (barbed wire entanglements) during the day, and going out on patrols and occasional raids at night, all interspersed with the enemy's bombardments and gas attacks. George was appointed Lance Corporal in June but was disciplined and demoted back to Private in August 1917 for neglecting to post a sentry while on the front line. Mercy was recommended on account of the long hours he had been without sleep.

In November, the British attacked German-held Cambrai which was an important supply point for their forces on the Hindenburg Line. Capture of the town and the nearby high ground of Bourlon Ridge would threaten the rear of the German line to the north. On the first day the British attack broke through apparently impregnable defences with few casualties. Aircraft had flown up and down to mask the sound of 476 approaching British tanks and the attack was



George's medals

widely regarded as a great and spectacular achievement - the Daily Mail headlining with "Haig through the Hindenburg Line". But by the second day, only