

THE LONDON HIGHLANDERS

Peter Cole

It is well known that although Henry Williamson in the novels *How Dear Is Life* and *A Fox Under My Cloak* described the operations of the London Scottish Regiment in the winter of 1914-5, he actually served with the London Rifle Brigade during this period. The London Rifle Brigade did not arrive in France until 5th November, 1914, after the activities of the London Scottish in the battle of Ypres, described in the first novel, were over. However, comparison of the events in the novel with the actual history of the London Scottish during this period show how careful HW was to ensure historical accuracy. Furthermore, he incorporates activities of the London Rifle Brigade into the narrative in certain sections. The activities of the fictitious London Highlanders prior to their leaving for France parallel those of the London Rifle Brigade, and this also occurs when the narrative continues beyond the battle of Ypres, where the actions of the London Highlanders are again those of the London Rifle Brigade.

The London Highlanders are described in *How Dear Is Life* in camp at Eastbourne during the summer of 1914, billeted in a London school after mobilisation in August, and then marching via Clapham, Wimbledon and East Horsely to Camp Hill, Crowborough in Sussex. This was the experience of the London Rifle Brigade (1), the London Scottish having instead marched north after mobilisation to be billeted at Abbots Langley, near Watford (2). The Highlanders are then described as embarking at Southampton for France in mid-September. From here on the activities of the London Scottish are followed - they left for France on 15th September.

The description in the novel of the crossing and the battalion's early dispositions in France then follow closely the narrative of the regimental history of the London Scottish. For example, the novel describes the regiment sailing down Southampton Water as follows:

A last greeting came from the signal station on the hill above the East Foreland of the Isle of Wight. 'What ship is that' spots and dashes spelt out in Morse. The answer from the bridge was met with ... 'Good luck'. (3)

The following is from the London Scottish history:

The last greeting came from the signal station on the hill above the eastern headland of the Isle of Wight, 'What ship is that?' flickered out in Morse Code, and with the acknowledgement came the signal 'Good Luck'. (4)

Another example is as follows, first from the novel, where, soon after arrival in France, the London Highlanders are instructed:

... to make orderly piles of rusty shells which had been tipped out of trucks all anyhow. It was hard work for each shell weighed about 150 pounds (5).

And from the history, the London Scottish were employed:

... reorganising badly stacked piles of munitions originally dumped in a haphazard fashion beside the line. This included the handling of a great number of 150 pound shells (6).

In the novel the London Highlanders are soon ordered to the front - 'The London Highlanders were about to be flung into battle' (7), the history also notes that 'The London Scottish were about to be flung into the battle'. (8)

The Highlanders proceed to St. Omer, where they are transported by bus to Ypres to spend the night in the Cloth Hall, marching out the next morning to the White Chateau. This accurately follows the activities of the London Scottish. The Colonel of the Highlanders reports to Sir Douglas Haig at the chateau, as did the Colonel of the London Scottish. The events in the novel that follow may all be found in the London Scottish history. (9): the march to Sanctuary Wood, where the men are allowed to halt and take off their packs, the orders to take over the Coldstream Guards' front-line transport, and the return to the Cloth Hall via Hooze Chateau, where they are inspected by the Divisional General. The Highlanders are then transported by bus to the village of St. Eloi, where the men are billeted in cottages, only to be wakened at midnight and ordered to attack the Wytschaete-Messines ridge. The next morning as they approach Wytschaete a Taube flies overhead, and this also is mentioned in the London Scottish history. As they approach the ridge, the Highlanders are ordered to advance in columns of half-companies up through the wood. D company, in the centre, was to give direction. The objective was a windmill on the crest beside a farmhouse with a red-tiled roof (10). The London Scottish history confirms the layout of the battalion during the advance as follows:-

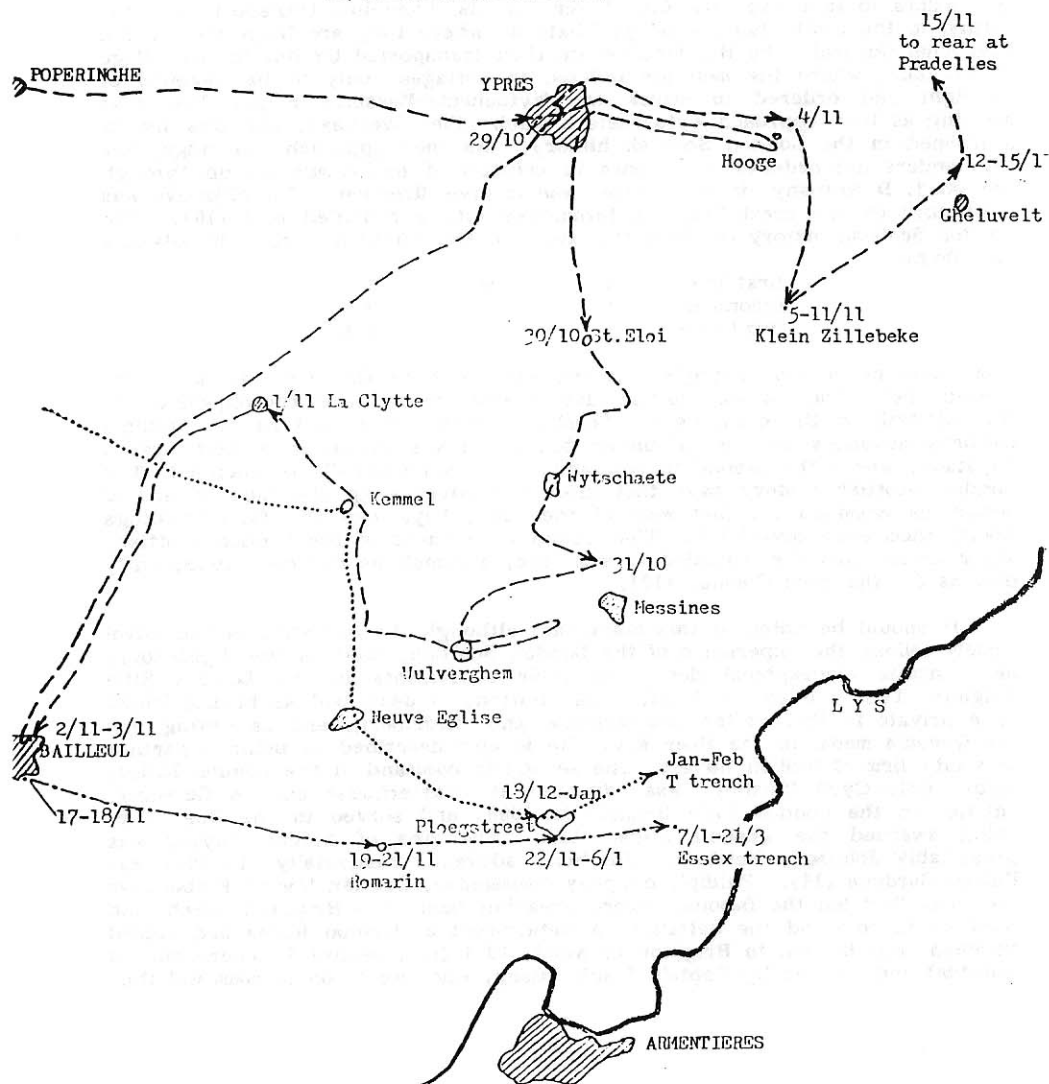
first line	H	D	A
second line	G		B
third line	C		F & E

The novel notes that Phillip's company (B) 'was on the right flank in the second line'. The London Scottish history also confirms that the objective was 'the windmill on the crest near a farmhouse with a red tiled roof'. Phillip's company advances up the hill under fire and takes shelter in a ditch near a haystack, where the second in command, 'the Iron Colonel', is wounded. The London Scottish history says that after the advance up the hill, 'B and C companies remained ... just west of the road, haystacks and farm buildings giving them some cover'. (11) The second in command of the London Scottish, Major Green, was also wounded at this time, although he did not subsequently die, as did the 'Iron Colonel' (12).

It should be noted at this point that although the narrative of the novel closely follows the experience of the London Scottish, many of the Highlanders have similar biographical details to their equivalents in the London Rifle Brigade. Thus the Iron Colonel, Oscar Hatton, is described as having joined as a private in 1879, after Charterhouse and Heidelberg, and as having won the Queen's medal in the Boer War. He is also described as being a partner in a city firm of bullion buyers. The second-in-command of the London Rifles, Lieut. Col. Cyril Matthey, was educated at Charterhouse and in Germany, enlisted in the London Rifle Brigade in 1880, and served in the Boer War, being awarded the Queen's medal (13). The firm of bullion buyers was presumably Johnson, Matthey. His home address, incidentally, in 1914 was Hatton Gardens (14). Phillip's company commander, Captain 'Fiery' Forbes, we are told, 'had led the famous, record-breaking London to Brighton march' and went on to command the battalion. A detachment of London Rifles had indeed marched from London to Brighton in April, 1914 (in a record 12 hours and 44 minutes) and was led by Captain Ralph Husey, who went on to command the

ROUTES OF THE LONDON HIGHLANDERS, LONDON SCOTTISH
AND LONDON RIFLE BRIGADE OCT 1914 TO FEB 1915

'London Highlanders' and
London Scottish, 28/10-15/11 ————
'London Highlanders' 17/12-
Feb 1915.....
London Rifle Brigade 17/11-
21/3 ————



battalion in 1916. The character of 'Fiery' Forbes seems to have been based on Husey, who was described as 'absolutely fearless ... the spirit of fun would show itself for those who could see, but on occasion a different fire shone out, and then it was well to beware'. Husey was several times wounded, won the D.S.O. and M.C., and was killed in 1918, by which time he was a Brigadier-General (15). One of Phillip's platoon commanders, Lt. Thorverton, is described as having just come from the Cambridge University OTC, and in Autumn, 1915, we subsequently hear has been sent home sick to become a recruiting officer in the West Country. 2/Lt. G.E.S. Fursdon, under whom HW served in the London Rifles (16), came from Cambridge University OTC, and went home sick on 9th September 1915, to become Assistant Recruiting Officer at Plymouth (17). Although no biographical details are given of him, the commander of the London Highlanders, the Earl of Findhorn, would seem to be based on the C.O. of the London Rifles, Earl Cairns.

Some characters appear to have the same names as their counterparts in the London Rifle Brigade. Lance-Corporal Mortimore in the novel does not go abroad with the battalion since he receives a commission shortly before embarkation. HW's company in 1914 (P Company) contained a Clifford Mortimore who similarly did not go to France with the battalion but was commissioned on 24th November 1914 (18) (into the 11th Scottish Rifles, however, not the Roughriders as in the novel). Phillip's company contains a Sergeant 'Grannie' Henshaw, described as being a 'kindly, slightly fussy, elderly man, a bachelor who had been in the battalion for over twenty years'. In P Company there was a Sergeant S.T.W. Henshaw, who had been in the London Rifles since 1985. P Company in 1914 also contained soldiers by the name of Kirk, Blunden, Martin, Elliot, Atkins and Skeuse, all of whom will be recognised as characters in Phillip's company (19). The extent to which the personalities of these characters reflect those of their real-life namesakes is something we can only speculate on. The London Rifles also contained a Private named Norman Baldwin, who in the novel becomes Phillip's close friend and is killed at Messines. The real Norman Baldwin was commissioned in the London Rifles in 1915 and went missing in 1916. There was also a Colour-Sergeant Wallis, of O company, who is referred to in the novel as Downham's Colour-Sergeant. It is also interesting to note that HW's actual Colour-Sergeant in P company, Sgt. G.P. Vade, did not go to France with the battalion, presumably refusing foreign service as did his counterpart in the novel, who is not referred to by name but simply as 'Colours' (20).

Resuming the narrative of the novel, the Highlanders are re-organised on the ridge and late in the day sustain an attack from the Germans, who advance with their bands playing. Later in the night the Germans attack again, with a preliminary bombardment which sets the farm and windmill on fire, and this time overrun the Highlanders' position. These events are all related in the London Scottish history. The novel goes on to describe how Phillip's friend Peter Wallace is killed while going to the help of the medical officer, Capt. McTaggart, who had been bayoneted while attending a wounded man. The London Scottish history notes that 'Captain Macnab, the medical Officer, had been killed in the first rush, bayoneted while attending a wounded man' (21). The Highlanders then retire to Wulverghem, where only 150 of them are found to be left, although subsequently this rises as others come in, so that losses actually numbered 'less than 400'. The London Scottish history confirms that the initial roll-call was 150, whereas the final losses in the battalion were 394. The quotations from a telegram from Sir John French and letter from General Allenby which congratulate the regiment on their action and are read out to the men, are authentic. Also true is the issue of defective rifles to the Highlanders before the battle, so that as the battalion begins its advance, Phillip is unable to load his rifle. The London Scottish history includes the following:

The new rifles, served out on the day before leaving Abbots Langley, proved to be defective. There had been no opportunity for rifle practice after landing in France and not a man in the battalion had ever fired a shot from his new rifle until he used it in battle. The rifles were the Mark I converted to take Mark VII ammunition. Not till the battle was in action was it discovered that the magazine had too weak a spring ... This caused refusal of the cartridge to enter the chamber of the barrel ... The magazines were useless and the rifles had to be used as single loaders.
(22)

The Highlanders are then withdrawn back into billets at Bailleul, where new rifles are issued, although the London Scottish history states that 'a certain number were obtained, but not enough'. After a short time the Highlanders are returned to the front to be attached to the 1st Guards Brigade at Gheluvelt. The London Scottish History confirms that after the fight at Ypres on 31st October, the London Scottish retired to Bailleul on the 2nd November, only to be ordered back to the front on 4th November, to join the 1st Guards Brigade at Gheluvelt. In the novel, the Highlanders then move in amongst the Grenadier Guards in the 'Brown Wood Line', where Phillip meets his old friend Cranmer. HW omits to mention at this stage, but does later, that although on the way to join the 1st Guards Brigade at Gheluvelt, the Highlanders were temporarily lent to another Guards Brigade. The London Scottish history tells us that the London Scottish were 'lent for the moment to the 4th Guards Brigade... in the woods near Klein Zillebeke (where) ... they took over the defence of a line in what was then known as the 'Brown Wood Road' on the front south of the Menin road' (23). The 4th Guards Brigade did indeed contain a battalion of Grenadier Guards.

The novel mentions that on 5th November, the Highlanders are reorganised into a four-company battalion from the old eight-company organisation. This actually happened around this time, although later in the month, for both the London Rifle Brigade and the London Scottish.

For the next few days the Highlanders withstand a series of German attacks on the Brown Wood Line. The London Scottish history briefly describes this as follows:

On November 6 the Germans began a series of furious attempts to break through near Klein Zillebeke ... At last, on the 11th, the German offensive culminated in the great attack along the whole front. In the Zillebeke woods the enemy poured across a clearing and nearly enveloped H company, the right of the position held by the Scottish. The rush was checked by a counter-attack led by Colonel Malcolm in person with the battalion headquarters ... (24)

Regarding the final attack, the novel includes the following:

(The Germans) had overrun No.3 company, on the right ... Fiery Forbes ... led the counter-attack with the acting-Adjutant and the Headquarters staff ...

During this attack HW mentions that the Highlanders possessed Vickers guns:

Why weren't the Vickers guns firing? Two, purchased privately before the war, had at last come up with the transport ... The only Vickers guns in the entire B.E.F. Yet they were not firing. (25)

This is also based on fact, as the London Scottish history confirms:

The London Scottish had two machine guns, the private property of the battalion, and they were proud of them as the most up-to-date guns with the army in France and Flanders, the only samples there of latest Vickers pattern. Both guns were knocked out by mortars on November 11th ... (26)

Following this attack, the novel goes on to state:

During the last few days and nights, the London Highlanders had been lent to the Brigade holding ... the Brown Wood line ... Now they were returning to their own Brigade, in the woods north-west of Gheluvelt. (27)

The London Scottish history confirms this:

After (the attack on the 11th) had been defeated the battalion went into support of the 1st Guards Brigade in a wood near Gheluvelt. (28)

HW then departs from reality slightly, when he describes Phillip as witnessing the attack of the Prussian Guards on the 4th Guards Brigade which was rallied by a general blowing his hunting-horn, General FitzClarence, who was subsequently killed during the action. This actually took place on 11th November, while the London Scottish were still with the 1st Guards Brigade repelling the attack on Klein Zillebeck. (29)

After this the Highlanders are relieved and go into billets in the rear. The history states that the London Scottish were withdrawn from the line on November 19th to Pradelles, where they remained for a month. The London Highlanders are described as being in a sorry condition:

Several of the Highlanders had lost shoes in the mud of the woods. They made the march unshod. (30)

The London Scottish history also mentions 'the hopelessly unsuitable footgear of shoes and spats. Many men had to make the long march unshod. (31)' The figures contained in the novel for the number of survivors of the Highlanders and the rest of the Brigade are quoted in the London Scottish history.

This completes the action in *How Dear Is Life*. The next novel, *Fox Under My Cloak* begins with the Highlanders being visited by the King 'in the first week of December'. The London Scottish history duly records that on 'December 3rd the King passed through Pradelles ... He inspected the battalion', and goes on to say that 'the London Scottish were looking forward to spending Christmas in billets'. The novel also notes that 'the London Highlanders were looking forward to spending Christmas in billets' when during a football match orders arrive for the battalion to return to the front immediately. This actually happened - 'on the afternoon of December 20th there came a sudden call for the 1st Brigade to return at all speed to the fighting line. The message reached the London Scottish while a football match was in progress. (32)

At this point the activities of the London Highlanders depart from those of the London Scottish. HW has the Highlanders passing through Westoutre, then past Wytschaete and Messines in the distance, into a wood. This is recognisable from subsequent description as Ploegstreet Wood, although it is not actually named as such by HW in the novel. The London Scottish, by

contrast, went at this time much further south with the 1st Guards Brigade into the line at la Bassee. The experiences of the London Highlanders are now based on those of the London Rifle Brigade who, with HW among them, had arrived in France on 5th November and moved up to the line at Ploegstreet on 22nd November. The Highlanders are described as going into billets 'in a village a mile behind the front line'. This would be Ploegstreet, which was approximately a mile back from the front line. The Highlanders are described as using a nearby brewery to bathe in:

Outside the Belgian brewer scowled beside the mayor wearing cocked hat and sash. The water had been heated, the tubs used, without his permission ... they needn't have worried, the brewery was rubble before long. (33)

The History of the London Rifle Brigade contains the following:

Early in December ... use was made of a brewery, which had been disused since the tide of war broke over it ... the boilers were got to work and the men tubbed in some of the brewing vessels ... The brewer raised objections to the place being used again; now it has been razed to the ground so he might just as well have allowed the men to have comfort from it ... (34)

The episode described in the novel where old jam tins are used to construct grenades with two short trees tied together to form a catapult is also mentioned in the Rifle Brigade history. HW tells us that the catapult was made from a sketch supplied from a third battalion colonel who had been an Oxford professor of Roman history, and the catapult was based on one used by them. The London Rifles history also notes that the catapult was constructed 'from data supplied by an Oxford Professor of Roman history. (35)

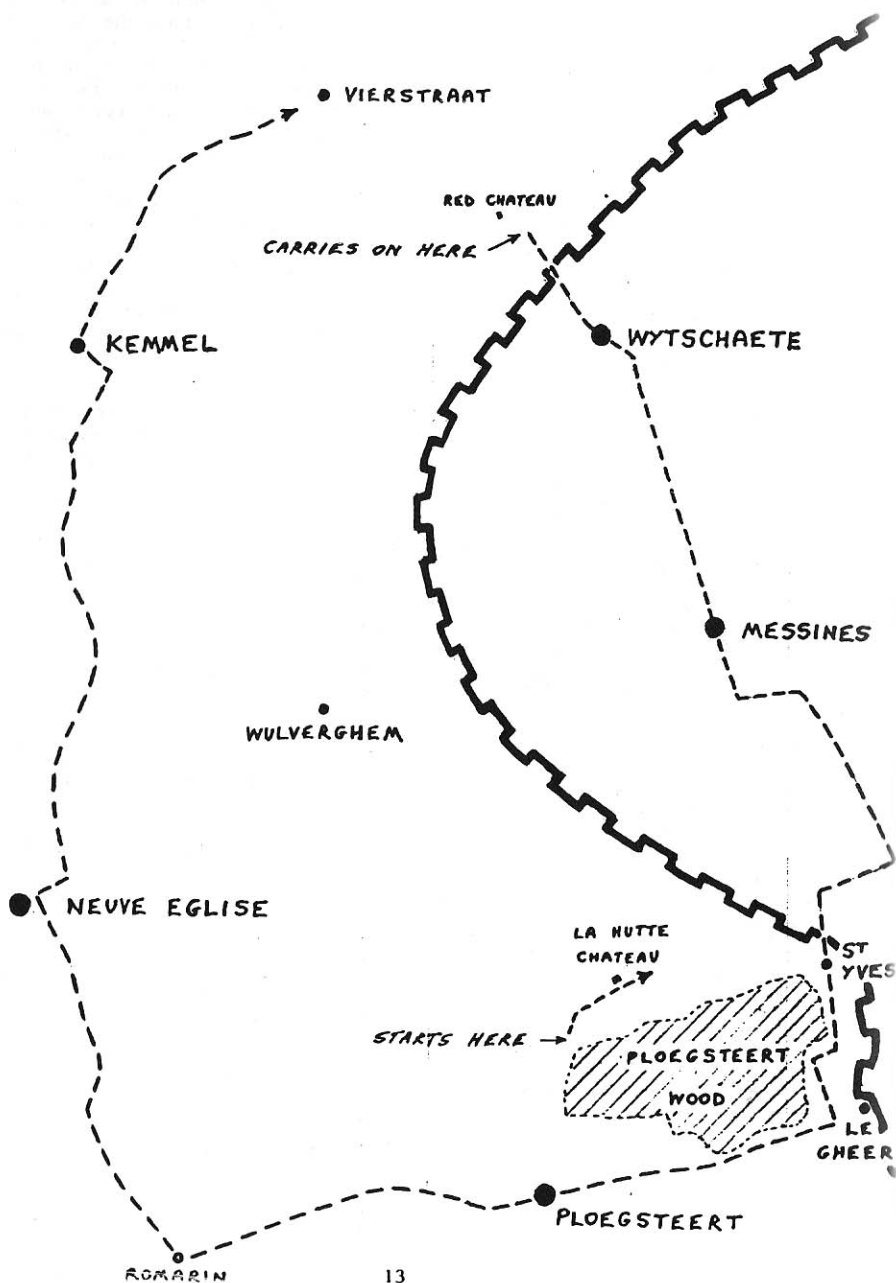
The Highlanders begin a cycle of two days in the front line, two days back in billets, and two days in the support line in the woods. The London Rifles had of course been in this area since 20 November, whereas the Highlanders are deemed to have arrived in December, after the end of their 'London Scottish' experiences. Also, the rotation period for the front line appears to have been three days rather than two. The London Rifle Brigade history notes, although HW does not mention it in his novel, that the battalion was split up and put in amongst the regulars, initially by half-companies and then by companies, since this was the London Rifle Brigade's first period in the line. (36) HW does not mention this, of course, since the Highlanders had already had some battle experience. The novel refers to a 'half-finished support line, called Princes St.'. This was probably a line called 'Bunhill Row' in Ploegstreet Wood, which the London Rifle Brigade were employed in building up into a proper line of defence during their periods in the support line.

Early in their stay in Ploegstreet, the Highlanders are described as being in support of an attack by the regulars on a German salient into the British lines on 19th December. This is confirmed in the London Rifle Brigade history and is also described by HW in one of his articles written for the Evening Standard on his return to the battlefields in 1964. (37) In the novel, as the survivors come back from the attack, one of them sings 'O for the wings of a dove'. This apparently actually occurred since it is mentioned by D.H.Bell of the London Rifle Brigade in his diary, which was edited by HW. (38)

Finally comes Christmas morning, and the truce which was to have such a lasting impression on HW. Phillip walks down a corduroy path in the wood, follows it out of the wood, crosses a road and visits a ruined red-brick Chateau. This is not mentioned by name, but its position would make it La

PHILLIP'S BICYCLE RIDE - - - -

FRONT LINE 25/12/14 

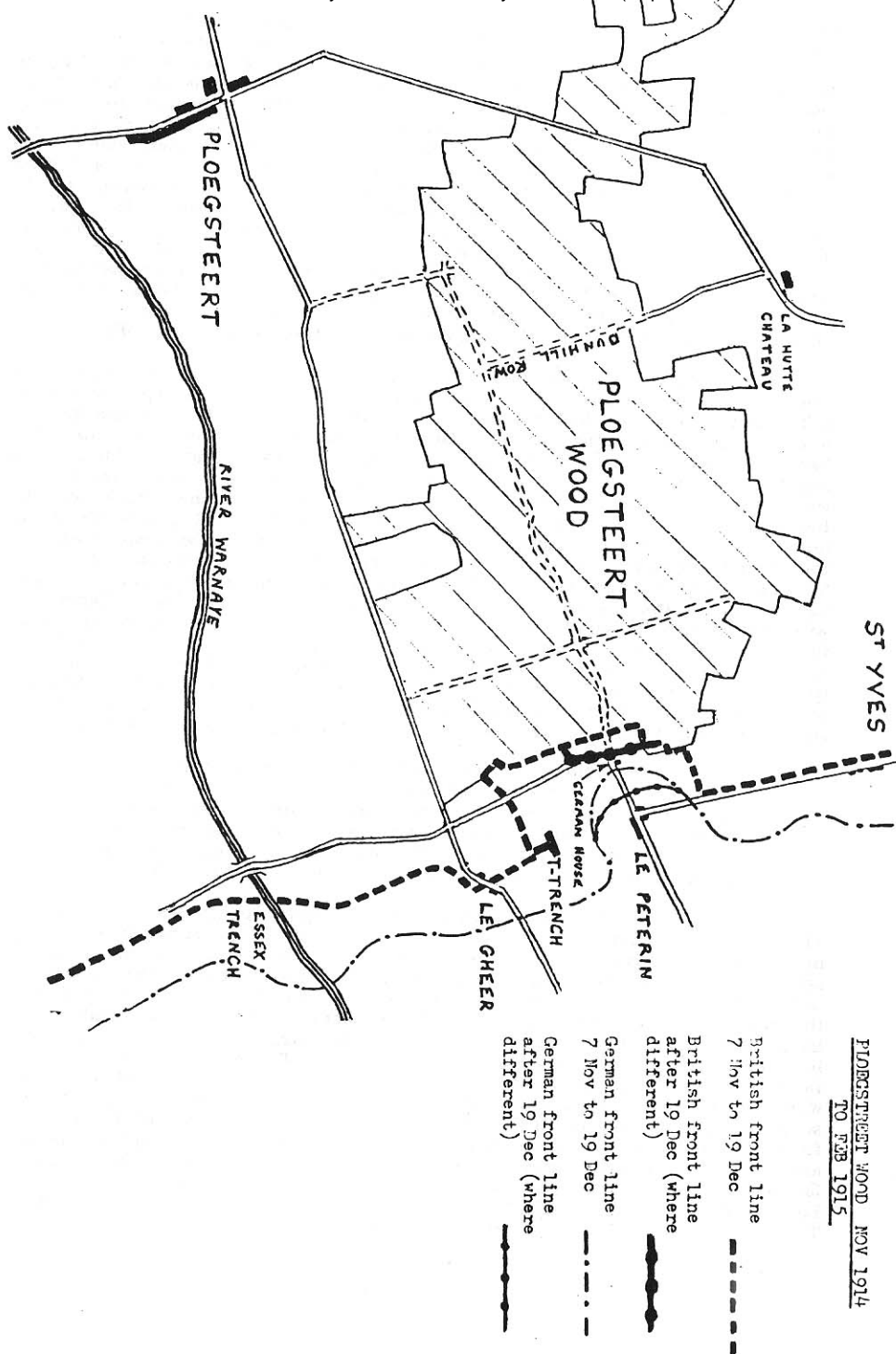


Hutte Chateau, north of Ploegstreet Wood. After looking at some dead German soldiers in the Chateau, Phillip finds a bicycle and rides down the road back to the village. Shortly afterwards he rides back past the Chateau and joins the troops fraternizing in No Man's Land. We now discover why HW is careful not to make specific references to the area in which the action is taking place. Phillip decides to take a bicycle ride to go and visit his cousin Willie, who is serving with the London Rifles. Clearly Phillip cannot take a bicycle ride to where he is in the first place, so the area in which the London Highlanders are situated is kept deliberately vague. The novel then suddenly makes an abrupt shift of place. Phillip is described as riding on past the 'Red Chateau' to the 'part-shelled Hospice' beyond which he sees 'the massed houses of Wytschaete'. There was no Hospice at Ploegstreet, but HW has at this point shifted the action to Wytschaete, just along the road from a building referred to on the maps as 'Red Chateau'. Phillip then rides through Wytschaete, along the Wytschaete-Messines ridge, scene of the fighting in the previous novel, through Messines and so to 'a fairly big wood, this must be the one south of Wulverghem, where the London Rifles were...' (39) Phillip has of course been riding behind the German lines, thanks to the Christmas truce, and when he crosses back over to the British lines is told that he is at St. Yves, which is the hamlet just in front of Ploegstreet Wood. Phillip then passes other regiments - East Lancs., Somerset, Hampshires (who were in fact occupying this part of the line at that time) and is told that Willie may be 'down in front of the convent'. This is the convent on the British front line south of Le Gheer. After meeting Willie they talk together 'under the broken crucifix at the crossroads of Le Gheer'. The same crucifix is mentioned in D.H. Bell's diary. (40)

When asked by a soldier where the London Highlanders are, Phillip says they are up north near Wytschaete. In actual fact this area was at that time occupied by French troops. (41) After leaving Willie, Phillip goes into Ploegstreet village, then returns to the regiment via Romarin and Kemmel to Vierstraat, near the Highlanders supposed position at Wytschaete.

After returning to the Highlanders, the location becomes visibly that of Ploegstreet Wood again. Then follows one of the most vivid sequences of the novels, the occupation of the 'Die-Hard T-Trench', which was named after the Middlesex regiment (nick-named 'the Die-Hards') who supposedly built it. The trench 'projected into a salient in the German lines, and was enfiladed both down the stem and along the cross of the T. Everywhere it could be shot straight down from various points in the opposing trench (42). In the novel, the attack on the 19th December, mentioned earlier, was an assault on 'a cottage in No Man's Land called Sniper's House and a section of trench that enfiladed the dreaded and dangerous Die-Hard T-Trench'. The assault generally failed but took 'Sniper's House'. After the Christmas truce, Phillip's platoon has to occupy this trench. The communication trench is flooded so that the T-Trench can only be entered or left at night. The T-Trench itself is constantly flooding, and the water has to be controlled by a pump situated at the cross of the T. Private Church is killed by a sniper's bullet while passing along the trench. When finally the platoon is relieved from the trench, Phillip is sent back ill to hospital, which ends his involvement with the Highlanders in the novels.

The T-Trench did exist, although it was associated with the Hampshire regiment, not the Middlesex. HW mentions the 'notoriously enfiladed Hampshire T-Trench' in his introduction to Bell's diary (43), and it is also described in one of his Evening Standard articles (44). It is interesting to look at the history of the T-Trench. Until November 7th, the British front line ran south along the road from St. Yves to Le Peterin, and then extended in a straight line to pass through Picket House (see map). On November 7th the Germans attacked between St. Yves and Le Gheer and drove back the Worcester regiment, who held this portion of the line at that time. The British counter-



PLOEGSTEERT WOOD NOV 1914
TO FEB 1915

attacked and recovered all of the lost ground except a salient between St. Yves and Le Gheer 'about 500 yards from north to south and 250 yards from east to west'. After several attempts to retake the salient 'the Brigade Commander gave orders for the construction of a line from the left of the trenches held by the East Lancashire north of Le Gheer through the eastern fringe of the wood to the right of the 1st Somerset Light Infantry near St. Yves, thus enclosing the German salient' (45). The German salient was afterwards known as the 'Birdcage', a name HW was to use for a British strongpoint in 1918 in *A Test To Destruction*. The re-arrangement of the British line, which effectively pulled a section of it backwards, left a part of the original line sticking out towards the German salient, and this was the T-Trench. The Hampshire regimental history notes that 'the Birdcage was a thorn in our flesh, its occupants could enfilade the left of the Hampshire line, which here formed a T, from 150 yards away' (46). The house which HW refers to as Sniper's House, that enfiladed the trench, was German House just on the edge of the wood at the farthest point of the new German salient.

The Hampshires continued to occupy this sector in November and December, with two companies in the line at a time. The Hampshire history notes that 'heavy rain had reduced the line to dreadful state'. In the last two weeks of December alone, snipers caused 20 casualties, 9 of them fatal, and 'with the enemy so near nearly half the trench garrisons had to "stand to" all night in hourly reliefs so few got any rest'. Accordingly, one more attempt was made to reduce the German salient, and this was the attack on 19th December, when minor offensives were ordered at different points along our line to assist a French attack at Arras. The French action was cancelled, but the British assault went ahead anyway. The attack was carried out by the Somerset Light Infantry and the Rifle Brigade (the regular regiment, not to be confused with the London Rifle Brigade, which was a territorial Regiment), with 'the Hampshire co-operating with fire and having a platoon ready to dig in on the Rifle Brigade's right and connect the position captured with our main trench' (47). The attack failed. The Rifle Brigade history notes that the battalion took German House and the next house, but could get no farther, partly due to an inadequate artillery barrage, some of which fell on our own men (48). HW described the attack in his 1964 Evening Standard article:

Men ran into the open, and into the slippery field of roots, and past the dead cow and black pig and a number of three to four week old Germans in feld grau. The attackers yelled hoarsely, it cannot be called cheering. No one got anywhere near the German wire (49). The attack cost 73 killed in the three battalions. No more attacks were made on the salient.

Despite the removal of German House, snipers continued to be active. The Hampshire's history says that 'of the battalion's 50 casualties in December, in addition to those of the attack on the 19th, the majority were caused by snipers (50). We have seen that the London Highlanders were in support during the attack of the 19th., as were the London Rifles. In the New Year the Highlanders go into the T-Trench, as noted above. The London Rifle Brigade history tells us that on 7th January the Brigade took over a sector of line for itself. This, however, was not the T-Trench sector but a sector farther south which stretched from a point 250 yards south of the River Warnave to 'the Estaminet'. The experience of this as regards flooding sounds similar to that of the T-Trench, since 'it was not possible to enter the front trench by day owing to the communication trench being entirely flooded and unsafe'. The line was known as Essex trench, and was 'shaped like a lacrosse stick with almost all the northern curved portion flooded (51)'. The London Rifle brigade remained there until March. HW may have occupied the T-Trench earlier, however, since his company, No. 3 company of the London

Rifle Brigade, had been temporarily attached to the Hampshire regiment for a period in December. (52)

We have seen how the events in the novels are almost all based on actuality, whether or not from HW's actual experience. It is remarkable the way HW builds his narrative around and breathes life into the bare details of a regimental history. The last words, perhaps, should be his, from the article on his return to the T-Trench in 1964 (53):

Nearly 50 years ago ... I am lost. Where was the T-Trench? Is this the root field where the big black sow laid near the dead cow? Plugstreet Wood's the same. The oaks not so thick, perhaps. Where was Essex Farm? Bunhill Row? Picadilly? These rides may be new. This shoot belongs to a French General. M'sieur, you will find the Rifle Brigade cemetery down there. How peaceful. How quiet is the sunshine. We tread softly. We do not speak.

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24. *ibid.* p 47.
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51. *The History of the London Rifle Brigade* (1921) p 79-80.
52. *ibid.* p 75.
53. *Evening Standard*, July 2nd, 1964.