

The final year of the Great War – 1918

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When the war began in August 1914 the cry had been 'Home by Christmas', but no-one thought to say which year! After the German advance that year was brought to a halt at the Battle of the Marne, 1915 and 1916 were to be years when the Front moved backwards and forwards but stalemate predominated. In other theatres of war than Europe, Africa, the Pacific and the Middle East, there had again been a mix of success and frustration for the Allies. 1917 though had been a year when things seemed to go better, and at Arras large advances were made quickly and relatively cheaply. The same happened at Messines and initially at Cambrai, but then the cost in lives and material increased with counterattacks at Arras, Cambrai and Passchendaele, while at Chemin des Dames some of the French army had mutinied; fortunately this news was kept from the enemy. The balance however was positive and with huge numbers of American troops beginning to arrive, rather like John Wayne and the 7th Cavalry in an old Western, at the very last minute, the potential for an end in 1918 seemed possible. However, the news then became darker with Zimmerman of the German Foreign Office's scheme to transport Lenin from Switzerland, where he was in hiding, back to Russia, to foment rebellion against the Tsar. The resulting successful Bolshevik Revolution led to the signing of a separate Russo-German peace treaty that was astonishingly advantageous to the Germans as they could now move over a million hardened troops from the Eastern to the Western Front. These would be much more useful to the enemy than the new Americans would be initially, for the latter had not fought a war against other than Mexican bandits and Native Americans since the War of 1812! They would have a lot to learn about an industrial war in the 20th century.

The Allies' worst fears were proven when in late March 1918 the enemy swept westwards towards Amiens in a Blitzkrieg led by Stormtroopers. The British forces, depleted after the losses the previous autumn at Passchendaele, could not hold them, and the Front began to buckle. Over the next few days there was real fear that the Germans could split apart the French and British armies and would reach the coast. However, their own success and the capture by famished troops of British food dumps containing much meat and alcohol would, together with the French and British counter-attacks, stem their rush, leaving Amiens in Allied hands but giving up the whole of the Somme Battlefield of 1916. The enemy then continued with a series of piecemeal attacks further north, and the 3rd and 4th Tyneside Scottish who had initially nearly been trapped near Croisilles took part in a fighting retreat from Armentieres through Steenwerck and almost as far west as Poperinghe. At this point, in late April, these German attacks also faltered and ground to a halt, as they had squandered vast numbers of men and much material and had no further reserves. There had been no decisive breakthrough, and the momentum returned to the Allies who first would have to regroup and resupply before, in August, beginning the rolling series of coordinated tank, artillery and infantry attacks supported from the air that would sweep the Germans back towards their own border and result in the November Armistice that ended the war.

These land battles might lead to the final victory in the war but they depended on the Allies maintaining free sea transport and naval supremacy, at least above the waves. A system of convoy protection across the Atlantic had cut shipping losses, and technology was beginning to improve U-boat destruction, but severe losses continued, particularly in the Mediterranean where Allied routes to the East ran through the Suez Canal and also supported an ongoing struggle against the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, and provided support to our Italian and Serbian Allies in their struggle with the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Three men were lost from Jesmon Presbyterian Church in the Mediterranean struggle in 1918. The first was seaman Robert Wood whose armed boarding steamer HMS Louvain was torpedoed on 20 January with the loss of all but 16 out of a complement of 220. Then on 25 August Chief Engineer George Cockburn on HM transport Willintonia was lost after his ship was also torpedoed. He initially escaped from the wreck but then returned to rescue missing

shipmates and was lost. The Admiralty were impressed by his zeal and a commendation was printed in the London Gazette. Finally, on 28th October, only two weeks before the Armistice, Lt. John Pittendrigh, who was a Royal Naval Reservist and who had served throughout the war, including acting as Beachmaster for the highly successful evacuation of troops from Suvla Bay in the Gallipoli campaign, died of the Spanish flu and was buried at Genoa in Italy. It should not be forgotten that the flu outbreak at the end of the war was to kill far more than the war itself, perhaps 100 million worldwide, but was indiscriminate as to age, gender and nationality.

In the land war the Church also lost three members, all in the great German spring offensive. On 21st March, when the attack began, Lt. James Ashton Black who had enlisted in the 16th (Commercials) Northumberland Fusiliers but had been posted to the 3rd Durham Light Infantry was reported missing near Cambrai. He had served throughout the war and like so many in the chaos of that battle simply disappeared and has no known grave. Captain Ralph Bromfield Pritchard who had served with distinction in the 4th Tyneside Irish and been awarded both the DSO and MC was injured on 16th April in the second phase of the same battle and was taken to the field dressing station at Mendinghem near Poperinghe where he died on the 26th and is buried there. On that day his brother Lt. William Alwyn Pritchard of the 3rd DLI was killed at Mount Kemmel; both were old boys of the Royal Grammar School in Newcastle and are commemorated on its war memorial too. Lt. Pittendrigh had been a pupil at West Jesmond Junior School and is commemorated on its memorial. Mendinghem is today a beautifully maintained War Cemetery beside a minor road in Belgium with hardly any habitation nearby. Its name, like Tyne Cot, is an invention of the British Tommies who gave locations names that were memorable to them. The huge cemetery at Tyne Cot, based around captured German concrete bunkers, was a field dressing station and cemetery which was named by Tynesiders as an abbreviation of Tyne Cottage, while Mendinghem, based on names of local Flemish villages, is trench humour for a hospital! More details of all the six fatalities are contained in the document on all those who served from Jesmond Presbyterian Church ([link?](#)).

The Tyneside Scottish were having a very mixed year. After their successes in the battles of 1917 (qv), the first shock of 1918 must have come out of the blue. Due to the heavy losses to the British Army, particularly at Passchendaele in 1917, Whitehall bureaucrats decided that the remaining forces should be reorganised and that some of the 'Pals' battalions should be disbanded. There is no clear logic apparent in who was to be deleted but in late January 1918 the axe fell on the 1st and 2nd battalions of the Tyneside Scottish. Clearly the impact on morale was not good, for the War Diaries, in which the Duty Officer records the detailed daily activities of his battalion in the field, simply stop; there is no 'signing off'. Stewart and Sheen in their book on the Tyneside Scottish put it well, in paraphrase. 'The 1st and 2nd battalions paraded and were read the news that they were to be disbanded, and these two gallant units, undefeated by the enemy, were wiped out by a Whitehall pen-pusher and marched off into history.' The surviving 3rd and 4th continued as front-line battalions and were serving near Croisilles in March, where they had fought successfully in 1917, and became aware that 'something was up' when the night sky on the 21st was illuminated by lights dropped by a number of German aircraft. These were clearly to indicate to German ground troops where to attack and which direction to follow in the chaos that would quickly ensue once an attack began. The violent bombardment, including use of gas, troubled the 4th battalion but they were not attacked that day although others were. They could hear heavy firing but then they found they were at risk of being surrounded. After much manoeuvring they lost touch with the headquarters and when the roll was taken a couple of days later they had 57 Other Ranks wounded and 357 missing, and the Commanding Officer, Colonel Charlton and four other officers were presumed captured, 9 officers were missing believed wounded, three missing believed killed and one known to be wounded. These were losses comparable with the first day of the Somme! Those who evaded capture, rather than being routed, regrouped under the remaining officers who then organised new lines of defence and incorporated any soldiers retreating from other units into their own. The resulting hotchpotch of

troops were to work together successfully and by the 23rd, having been relieved by fresh troops, were ordered to march towards Frevent from where they were taken by train to Steenbeck, just south west of Armentieres, where they were to regroup, be reinforced and, on the 5th April, re-join the battle. This brief but bloody encounter had stymied the German advance and the importance of the achievement was recognised by General Nicolson, commanding 34th Division, who wrote complimenting them. The important point was that in late March and thereafter the line was not broken but they retreated, dug in, fought, retreated, and now they would continue to do so for the rest of the month. Somehow the higher levels of command kept the men fed and armed and provided the air and artillery cover that were to enable them to destroy many enemy divisions as they continued their fighting retreat nearly as far as Poperinghe. This action resulted again in letters being sent, after the German advances finally stopped, from the commanding generals to the Tyneside Scots complementing them on their tenacity and fighting spirit in the face of a rampant enemy.

This would in fact be the Tynesiders' last action in the Great War, for both battalions were rested and then reduced to cadres of around 24 officers and 151 other ranks and were destined now to prepare the raw American troops for action in the new mix of trench and open warfare on the Western Front. This kept them occupied from May until August, during which they had worked with the 310th Regiment AEF, when they were withdrawn to camps where they continued to train, play sport and receive lectures on trades that might be useful to them when the war ended; for now the Allied leaders were clearly optimistic but many of the Tynesiders were clearly bored. This must have been a frustrating phase, hanging around in western France while the war moved away from them. It is intriguing that there is no entry in the War Diary of the 4th Tyneside Scots for the 11th November! There seems to have been some sort of anti-climax, perhaps disbelief that it really was over, or possibly no-one was in a state to write the diary up or remember what happened that day! One could scarcely blame them. Now, with six weeks to go, there was real hope of Home by Christmas 1918! For most though this was not to be. Much remained to be done; one cannot simply walk away from the unburied or unmarked bodies, the mountains of unused ordnance and weapons and the unexploded shells, grenades and poison gas. Also, order had to be kept and the enemy had to be supervised; one was not necessarily willing to trust the enemy to walk off back home and behave decently on the way! Also, in Britain the wartime economy now had to return to peacetime operation, and vast armaments factories such as the 7-mile-long one from Gretna in Scotland to Longtown in Cumbria would have no market for their cordite and no employment for those, mostly women, who had worked there. But most pressing was a shortage of coal to fuel the economy and keep people warm. And winter was already here. Our Tynesiders were by chance in Le Havre, the great port on the French coast, and here they were instructed to start demobilising OTHERS! This must have been frankly galling, to see the steamers sailing safely back to Blighty full of cheering ex-servicemen. However, the only soldiers who were being demobilised were those who had in civilian life been miners and, although in a reserved occupation, had volunteered to fight. There had been an ongoing problem even during the war with strikes in the mines, and in early 1918 the government had told the union that strikers would no longer be considered to be in a reserved occupation if they were not working and would be sent directly to the Front! The threat may have been an empty one but it seems to have been effective in the short term, though it would not work in peacetime at all. And so, some soldiers were home by Christmas, at the price of disappearing back underground. The only others likely to be home were those who had been captured, like Colonel Charlton and men of the 3rd and 4th Tynesiders, who would almost certainly have been sent directly home after they were released from prison camp. The Tynesiders worked on over the winter and through the first half of 1919 until 2nd May when General Uniacke arrived to present the rump of the battalion with their King's Colour. Clearly things were coming to a close and on 6th June they were disbanded, something they must have felt as an honourable treatment now that the war was concluded. They returned to Newcastle on the 12th, to a heroes' welcome and a parade through the City with pipe band playing to

a reception with the Lord Mayor at the Corn Exchange. With Colonel Charlton in attendance they paraded again outside Jesmond Presbyterian Church on the 28th June and laid up their Colour in the church, where it remains in its honourable position to this day. There would now be a pause while those at the church found more and more of the survivors returning to restart their civilian lives, and plans were made for a Roll of Honour book to be made on vellum and placed in the church. This records the names, pictures and biographies of those who did not return, and a complete list of all who served abroad. A bronze figurative War Memorial was also planned, showing all those of the church community who had been involved - soldier, seaman, nurse, mother and child - to be designed by Walter Gilbert of Birmingham, and these were dedicated at a service on 3rd July 1921.

The 4th Tyneside Scottish were to live on first in annual reunions of Old Comrades in the church, something that was to persist until their numbers dwindled in the 1950s. The battalion was revived in 1939, but under Black Watch colours rather than Northumberland Fusiliers, and was to serve in France, but that is another story. After the Second World War it was part of the Territorial Army associated with the Royal Artillery at Gosforth and finally in the 21st Century a cadet force at Heaton Manor School.

Reference: Stewart, G. & Sheen, J. 1999 *Tyneside Scottish*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd.

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