

## **12666 - Private George Henry Butcher of B Company, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Princess Charlotte of Wales' (Royal Berkshire Regiment)**

George was born at Ty'n-y-parc (Wern Ddu) in Rudry in 1889 to Henry, a Woodman from Cleavedon (born 1862) and Ann from Llanadeyrn [Llanedern] (born 1852). He had an older brother Albert (born 1887). By the time of the 1911 Census, the family had moved to 24 Van Terrace and George and his brother Albert were working as labourers and their Father Henry was a Coal Mine Hewer. They had a lodger, Edward Tuck (born 1867 from Gloucestershire) also a labourer.

We don't know exactly when, but George enlisted at Caerphilly, joined the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion and went to fight in France. Sadly, he was killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916.

The Royal Berkshires became the Princess Charlotte of Wales' (Royal Berkshire Regiment) after Princess Charlotte, granddaughter to King George III, was so impressed by the regiment during their spell guarding members of the Royal family, she begged for them to be 'her' regiment.

The 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Berkshires was formed in September 1914 and made up the 54<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 18<sup>th</sup> (Eastern) Division along with 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks, 10<sup>th</sup> Essex and 8<sup>th</sup> Suffolks.

The Battalion reached the Somme region in the summer of 1915 and, as with other units, spent time in and out of the lines, experiencing both the dull and unpleasant realities of trench warfare and occasional action in the form of raiding parties, etc.

In March 1916 training for the Somme offensive began in earnest and by 1<sup>st</sup> July the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion was as well prepared as any and considerably more so than others.

A barrage began on 24<sup>th</sup> June and more shells were fired at the German lines than in the entire preceding 12 months of war.

During daylight the German artillery was quiet but they opened up at night and their shelling was extremely accurate and effective. The British dugouts offered little protection against artillery and many men of the Berkshires were in the trenches on carrying party duties, taking ammunition and other supplies to the front. In the period 27<sup>th</sup> June to the night of 30<sup>th</sup> June the 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion lost 6 men killed and 27 wounded to shellfire.

On the eve of battle itself the Battalion made their final preparations. George and his fellow soldiers checked their equipment, packed their kit and waited. Most other units had to be moved forward to the assembly trenches and final positions for the off, which would at least have given them something to occupy their minds whereas the Berkshires were already in the front line.

The men were to go over without their full pack but with 170 rounds of ammunition, two Mills bombs (grenades), a waterproof sheet, two smoke helmets (the primitive gas masks of the day), two empty sandbags and a haversack containing food rations such as hard biscuits, basic groceries and two tins of meat. Specialist troops such as bombers and Lewis Gun parties would have a variation on this equipment, usually more rather than less to carry.

Nevertheless, the men of the 6<sup>th</sup> Berkshires had a much lighter load than those of other divisions, where much more emphasis had been placed on consolidation than attack - many men in the first waves further north went into action with 70lb packs and rolls of barbed wire or entrenching tools to add to their burden.

The attack by the 18<sup>th</sup> Division was to be spearheaded by the 6<sup>th</sup> Berkshires on the left and the 8<sup>th</sup> Norfolks on the right.



The masses of men, once in position for the off, now had little to do but hope that a shell would not burst amongst them, wait for their promised meal of hot tea or soup with a bully beef sandwich and wonder, along with 120,000 others up and down the line, what the coming hours held in store for them.



Shortly after 7.25am on the 1<sup>st</sup> July, the leading waves of the 6<sup>th</sup> Berkshires began calmly to climb up their trench ladders and file out into no mans' land in advance of the main attack. Those behind them in turn moved into the trenches vacated in preparation to follow.

The 6th Berkshires were positioned opposite the Casino Point machine gun nest, under which a 5,000lb mine had been placed through tunnelling. However, it had been too shallow and the Royal Engineers Officer responsible for detonating the mine was appalled to see at the appointed time of 7.28am that British troops, including the 6<sup>th</sup> Berkshires, were already out in no mans' land and were obviously vulnerable to its blast. After a moment's hesitation he realised that at least one machine gun in Casino Point was causing considerable casualties to the advancing men and so exploded the charge.

The result was the complete destruction of the position, sending earth, burning debris and dead Germans into the air. However, because of the shallowness of the charge, rather than erupting straight upwards this man-made volcano hurled its contents over a wide area, causing casualties among many surrounding British battalions, both those advancing and the troops assembling in preparation for following waves of the attack. Private Fred Henwood of 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion wrote in his diary, "One of our companies, being well in front, got to the German parapet and was just landing in [the Germans'] trench when the mine went up and blew most of that company up with it."

Crucially however, the crater was in the Berkshire's hands almost immediately, along with the first trench line around it.

At 7.30am the artillery fell silent and the whistles up and down the sixteen or so miles of British trenches blew and men started clambering out. The 6th Berks' leading wave, already far out into no man's land when the whistles blew, was upon the German front line of "Mine Trench" and the crater left by the exploding Casino Point mine within seconds of the barrage ceasing and the first prisoners were taken.

At 7.32am the leading wave of Berkshires moved off towards the second German line, "Bund Support", whilst the second wave began advancing across no mans' land and subsequent waves prepared to follow. The Germans were by now manning their weapons in the carefully positioned tiers of trenches ahead and firing downhill into the advancing British troops.

The battle raged on and casualties were mounting. Many officers had fallen and individual units were becoming badly depleted. The exhausted troops of the leading Berkshires were facing the stiffest resistance of the day in Montauban Alley and Loop Trench. The German artillery had been accurately shelling throughout the day, making the task of the carrying parties and consolidation troops hazardous as they brought ammunition and supplies to the forward units and worked to create new strongpoints in case of counterattack.



Montauban Alley shortly after its capture on 1st July.

By 6.00pm however, resistance was negligible and by 6.30pm any surviving Germans were fleeing across the open land in front whilst the British troops consolidated their final positions for the day, all objectives along the 18th Division's front having been or shortly to be taken.

Despite the gains to the South, no overall breakthrough was achieved. The lack of progress and full extent of the carnage on the front further north, where in places whole battalions had been virtually wiped out for no gain, had yet to filter through to the high command although they clearly realised that events had not gone according to plan.

Instead, the troops in the south looked out over the rolling landscape of the Somme beyond, dotted with the woods - Delville, High, Mametz and more - which were within easy walking distance, clearly unoccupied by enemy troops and yet which would soon become icons of the slaughter of the First World War, particularly Mametz for the Welsh.

We don't know at what point George Butcher fell that day but his 'B' Company are particularly noted in the Battalion's records as having "suffered severely." All officers having become casualties as the Company led the assault. Total casualties among the Battalion of 656 men was 7 officers killed and five wounded, 82 other ranks killed with 254 wounded. We don't know at what point George Butcher fell that day but his 'B' Company are particularly noted in the Battalion's records as having "suffered severely." All officers having become casualties as the Company led the assault. Total casualties among the Battalion of 656 men was 7 officers killed and five wounded, 82 other ranks killed with 254 wounded.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> July, the survivors of 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion were relieved to Carnoy.



**Carnoy Valley, July 2016 (now Carnoy Military Cemetery)**

In total 57,450 British soldiers were killed or wounded on that terrible day.

With no known grave, George Butcher's name was placed on the Thiepval Memorial to the missing.

