

Alfred Leeds Yelf, DCM, C.de G. 1888-1977

Alfred Yelf was born 24-Dec-1888 in Edmonton, North London, the 11th of 12 children. The 12th child, a brother - Norman Yelf, was born four years later. Both were to fight and survive the Battle of Loos.

In 1895, when Alfred was age 6 and Norman 2, they lost their father. Six years later the 1901 UK Census finds Alfred in an Orphan School, and Norman living with a family in Margate with his place of birth "not known".

At the outbreak of WWI Alfred Yelf, was a Carpet Salesman with Selfridges, London, and a member of the 6th Battalion London Rifles "*The Cast Iron Sixth*". Of the 7,820 members of the Battalion at the outbreak of war, Alfred was number 14 having joined in 1908, aged 20. (When the Territorial Army was re-numbered in 1917, and the 6th (City of London) were allocated numbers within the range 320001 to 350000, Alfred Yelf was the first number, 320001. Was this the result that he was the senior officer at Blackdown (see later), or more probable that he was the longest serving officer in the Battalion in 1917 - his 13 longer serving colleagues having probably perished.

Outbreak of War

Alfred and Norman were about to commence an August Bank Holiday weekend TA camp in Eastbourne when war was declared. Within two weeks the Battalion was marching from London to Aldershot. On 16 March 1915 Alfred and Norman sailed from Southampton to Le Havre, France.



The Company travelled to Berguette, Raimbert for Bethune. It was in the trench system opposite Cuinchy that the Battalion underwent their instruction - Alfred in A-Company and Norman in D-Company. A-Company's first tour lasted twenty-four hours and terminated on Good Friday. All four Companies, A, B, C, and D, had held the line at the "Brickfields" alone, and the Battalion was withdrawn to Raimbert, where it remained for ten days, practising attacks against entrenched positions, and digging lines of trenches by day and night.

Following the short stay at Raimbert, the battalion

returned to Bethune on 19-Apr, and ultimately entered the line at Givenchy. After a brief rest the battalion again entered the line on 4-May facing Festubert.

The Battle of Festubert

On 8 May preparation began for the French attack on the Lorette and Vimy Ridges, lying but a few miles to the south of La Bassee. An attack against the entrenched position to the north of Festubert had been decided upon, but the assault met with little success and the battle extended southwards. The 6th Battalion London Rifles occupied a position east of Gorre and Annequin.

C.S.M. Alfred Yelf was second in charge.

The Battalion held a sector of the front near the Canadian Orchard for ten days, taking an active if stationary part in the battle. Capt. Booth, was killed in the Battle and Alfred Yelf took over command. So effective was the infantry fire that the enemy was forced to retire, on two occasions waving white flags.

The Battle of Loos

A-Company was now under the Command of Capt. Ashby, with Alfred Yelf Second-in-Command. The 6th and 7th Battalion London Regiment were on the extreme right of the British Line, connecting with the French. Their task was to take the enemy's trench system extending northwards from the Double Grassier, to the Lens-Bethune Road. The general direction for the advance was eastwards, on a frontage of about one mile, but the line to be consolidated was to face south-east to form the defensive flank. Captured German trenches were to be made defensible from this new direction, by "double-blocking" against the enemy where other portions of them were held by hostile forces.

The operation was not an easy one, but the platoons, machine-gunners, and bombers, who then formed separate sections, had been well trained. The Battalion had previously practised the part they were to play in the attack. On September 15th, the exercise was performed in the presence of Gen. Rawlinson, who subsequently addressed the officers and emphasised the necessity of capturing and retaining all objectives assigned to them. That

evening the battalion moved by motor-bus to Les Brebis, but machine-gunners and bombers remained at Haillcourt for training. Forty-eight hours were spent in digging and improving support and communication trenches, and on completion of the work the battalion moved to Houchin, where a demonstration of a smoke barrage, memorable for its failure, was witnessed.

At 05.30 hrs on 25-Sep. gas and smoke were released, which had the immediate result of bringing an intense and accurate machine-gun, rifle, and artillery fire to bear on trenches occupied by the battalion. At 06.28 hrs. the gas was turned off, and precisely at 06.30 a.m. A Company, led by Capt. Ashby and C.S.M. Alfred Yelf climbed out of the trenches and advanced, to be followed by B Company, with C Company moving forward from the support trenches simultaneously. D Company followed C Company at a distance of about 200 yards. The battalion was "over" and well on the move. The sight was magnificent ; the lines were absolutely steady, moving forward in quick time as if the battalion was performing a drill movement. Owing to the density of the smoke it was difficult at first to maintain correct direction, even such distinctive landmarks as the Double Grassier being obscured.

A-Company formed the extended first wave under Capt. Ashby, and encountered their first difficulties when passing over the rent-up ground caused by the British preliminary bombardment. Now the gunners were directing their fire ahead; but shells were falling short. The enemy, too, were shelling the

intervening ground, and as Capt. Ashby led his men towards the barbed-wire, he fell, and the battalion had lost its first officer in this engagement. As soon as the barrage on the German trenches lifted, rifle and machine-gun fire burst from the enemy lines, and with it came showers of stick-bombs. A-Company were now close targets, as they hacked their way through the wire - in places destroyed, but elsewhere very much intact. Where the progress of the attackers was impeded on account of the wire, there the enemy wrought most havoc, and inflicted heavy losses. When Capt. Ashby had fallen, C.S.Maj. Alfred Yelf had gone forward and now he led the company towards the first German line. The air was still thick with gas and smoke, and splinters, shrapnel, shells, and bullets were flying everywhere, and the hand-to-hand fighting in and above the German trenches provided a terrifying spectacle. Loos lies in a hollow, and the advance towards it was downhill; there was practically no natural cover for the advancing troops, and enemy machine-guns wrought havoc in the ranks of A-Company. The German machine-gunners indeed worked their guns to the last minute, at least one being bayoneted at his gun; but numbers of enemy infantry, although maintaining the fight until A-Company was upon them, retreated through their communication trench and across the open country.

A-Company had lost half of its men in front of the barbed wire. It was then that an outstanding act of individual heroism on the part of a member of A Company took place. Rifleman F. Challoner,

charged along the communication trench after the fleeing enemy, and across the open stretch. He shot and bayoneted no less than nine of the enemy single-handed, and for this remarkable act was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. C.S.Maj. Alfred Yelf received a similar decoration and the French Croix de Guerre for his prompt initiative on the death of his gallant officer, Capt. Ashby.

Both the first and second German lines were included in the battalion's objectives, and as a result of good timing and disciplined movement, not to mention personal bravery, all had been gained by 08.00hrs. Three other battalions of the 47th Division, operating on the left of the 6th Battalion London Regiment (City of London Rifles) were successful in their attacks, the 18th Bn. ultimately linking up with the 6th Battalion London Regiment (City of London Rifles) near the Loos cemetery.

As the morning wore on a continual flow of refugees, prisoners, and walking wounded straggled through to the nearby and inhabited villages of Les Brebis, Mazingarbe and Noeux-les-Mines, where advanced hospitals had been established on the eve of the battle. The number of unwounded German officers and men taken prisoner approached two hundred, and the German officer commanding the enemy sector attacked by the 6th Battalion London Regiment (City of London Rifles), being wounded.

Throughout the three days following Loos, fighting continued on the left of the Battalion. Loos had been taken from the Germans, who continued to put on a stubborn

resistance between that village and Lens, both on the rise known as Hill 70, and by the quarries. The Guards Division was ultimately called upon to crush the enemy resistance, and their attack on the morning of the 27th will be forever remembered by those who witnessed their magnificent demonstration of disciplined movement.

In the three days of fighting that followed the Battle of Loos Norman Yelf was wounded when he receives a bullet to the right lung caused by a German Sniper. This resulted in him returning to England. He died in Bognor Regis aged 87.

Alfred Yelf is Decorated for his Bravery at Loos

The LONDON GAZETTE of 16th November 1915 reported:

"14 Company Sergeant-Major A.L. Yelf, 6th (City of London) Battalion The London Regiment (Rifles) (1), Territorial Force. For conspicuous gallantry on the 25th September(2), 1915 at Loos. After all his company officers had been killed or wounded he led, with great gallantry, his company to the assault on the German second line trenches, which he captured and consolidated."

The medal recognises gallantry within non-commissioned personnel. It is equivalent to the Distinguished Service Order for bravery to commissioned officers. Although considered to be the army's second ranking gallantry award, the DCM was almost always seen as a "near miss for the VC".

Croix de Guerre

Alfred Yelf was also awarded the French Croix de Guerre, instituted to recognise acts of bravery in the face of the enemy and specifically mentioned in despatches.

What followed after Loos for Alfred Leeds Yelf.

The 6th Battalion London Regiment was part of the Territorial Army and had not been expected to see front-line duty. Following the Battle of Loos Alfred Yelf returned to Blackdown Camp, Aldershot, where he prepared soldiers to go of to the front-line - and CS Maj. Alfred Yelf is mentioned several times as a senior officer at the base.

In his book *"The Cast Iron Sixth"*, Captain Godfrey quotes that *"The term lead-swingers¹ might perhaps have been appropriately used designate some of the officers, warrant-officers, and N.C.O.'s who formed staff at the base camps, but it was certainly not a fair description to apply all. Most of them were men who earlier had seen much service in the ot line—men like C.S.M. A. Yelf, of the Sixth"*.

¹ Lead-Swinger - A British term for an easy job - originating from the easiest job on an old sailing ship of swinging a lead weight on the end of a rope over the side of a ship to check the level of the sea bed

Alfred's later years....

In 1917 Alfred Yelf and his wife Gertrude had a son whom they named Alfred John Loos Yelf, which bears testament to the impact of that battle.

Alfred remarried after the death of his first wife and died in Yetholm, Scotland, aged 89, having ran the Melrose YMCA Hostel in his retirement years.