

Private Joseph Nicholls - 2nd Btn Royal West Surrey Regiment ('Queens') – 1896-1962

Private Joseph Nicholls survived the Great War, despite being wounded and taken prisoner. One of the children from his 2nd marriage is John Nicholls with whom Brett Goodyear, the author of this article, went to School during the years 1954-1961.

My own interest in the Great War started in 2003 when I discovered that my wife's great uncle; Sapper Frederick Trebes, of the Royal Engineers was killed, aged 19, in July 1916 during 'The Battle of the Somme'. Having visited Sapper Trebes' grave in Quarry Cemetery, Montauban; I joined the Western Front Association to learn more about 'The Great War'. Finding my School website, led to a reunion with a number of my classmates; including John Nicholls. John told me about his father, Private Joseph Nicholls, being wounded and taken prisoner in WW1.

The following is Joseph's story which has an unexpected connection with Loos. John Nicholls and his one brother and five sisters, had memories of their father, on what was probably the anniversary of him being wounded, opening a leather case with memorabilia of the war, including his medals, coins and the shrapnel removed from his leg. Joseph would reminisce about the various pieces of memorabilia in a jolly way, even though he told his family that he could not walk and 'played dead' for some time, hearing the Germans shooting badly wounded British soldiers they did not want, or could not, look after. Joseph described his situation as being abandoned in 'No Man's Land' but drifting in and out of consciousness, could not be sure for how long. However, he was finally found by a Red Cross unit and remembered vividly being given coffee by a 'Sister of Mercy' (Nun). Joseph was subsequently operated on, to remove shrapnel from his left leg, without any anaesthetic, as he bit through a bandage placed in his mouth, by the Germans. One of Joseph's children, Enid, remembers her father telling her, that neat iodine was poured into his wounds to try to prevent gangrene and that "he had the German Doctors to thank for saving his leg".

John knew that his father had enlisted in 1915, at Purfleet - a town near Grays where Joseph lived (and I still live). At that time, one of the 'Kitchener Battalions', 7th Battalion Royal West Surrey Regiment (the 'Queens') was based at Purfleet Barracks. However, Joseph was not enlisted in the 7th (Service) Btn but rather in the regular '2nd Btn' of the Queens, which was already serving in France. Joseph's civilian occupation being a Barber (Male Hairdresser), it is thought likely that he was recruited to the 2nd Battalion, as a replacement for a Barber killed in a previous action.

Joseph's children believed that the SOMME was where their father had been wounded and assumed that it would have been on the first day of the battle, 01 July 1916.

I wanted to revisit the grave of Frederick Trebes, on 20 July 2006, being the 90th anniversary of his death. John Nicholls, one of his sons, Ben, and some friends of mine, accompanied me on the trip for which I rented a house in the Somme village of Flers. Flers is famous for being the site of a first, relatively successful, appearance of a Tank in September 1916.

The itinerary for the 3 day trip included visiting the Fricourt-Mametz area, where 2nd Btn Queens had fought on 1st July 1916 and well as Quarry cemetery at Montauban. However, on the way down from Calais, I also included a brief visit to the village of Loos (where I'd attended the 90th Anniversary in 2005) as I thought it might be of interest as 2nd Btn Queens, had also taken part in that famous battle..

The trip was a great success, and increased John's interest in finding out more. So I suggested he apply to the Swiss Red Cross to see if they had any record of his father.

When a copy of the Swiss Red Cross record was received, John was very surprised to find that Private Nicholls was recorded as being wounded and taken prisoner on 25 September 1915 near Vermelles. This date and place refers to the 1st day of the Battle of LOOS!

The record also showed that the operation, to remove shrapnel from his leg, was likely to have taken place in La Bassee before he was sent to 'Festunglazeret V1' prison in Cöln where it is thought he spent months in Hospital recovering.

Joseph subsequently was transferred to other prisons - the last probably being Wittenberg from 1917 until the end of the war. It is known that Joseph shaved and cut the hair of fellow prisoners as well as German soldiers. One German Officer gave Joseph a 5 mark piece for cutting his hair; this coin is still in the family

It is believed that Joseph did not reach home in Grays until February 1919 via North Germany and Scotland. He did not return to Hairdressing as his withered left leg made it difficult to stand for long periods. Instead, he was employed by a 'Water Company' as a Wages Clerk from which company he retired in 1959, due to ill health.

Joseph was married first to Elsie, with whom he had two children. After the death of Elsie he married Gladys and had a further 5 children.

Joseph died in 1962 at the age of 65 and is fondly remembered by his surviving children.

Since the receipt of the Swiss Red Cross information, John and I have visited Loos several times and have been very much assisted by Gilles of the Loos Museum with tours of the battlefield and access to the Museum.

With the aid of books like 'LOOS – Hohenzollern' (Author – Andrew Rawson) it is now possible to understand how Private Nicholls came to be wounded.

According to Andrew Rawson's book, on the 25th September 1915, the 2nd Battalion Queens (22nd Brigade, 7th Division) were initially in Brigade Reserve. However, 22nd Brigade formed part of the 2nd wave of attackers. Starting from Vermelles, they advanced on the North side of the Vermelles – Hullock Road., Having got through the German 1st trench line, they fought their way to the Hullock Quarries which were in front of the German's 2nd line which formed a barrier protecting Cite St Elie, a village astride the main Lens-La Bassee Highway.

The book says 'At 2 p.m. (14.00 hours) the Queens noticed that the Germans were beginning to evacuate Cite St Elie. Lieutenant-Colonel Maurice Heath and Captain Philpot led their men into the village in pursuit.....their chance to exploit the opportunity was, however cut short by artillery fire, most of it from British guns'.

Although John Nicholls does not like to believe that his father was wounded by 'friendly fire', nonetheless he admits that his father's wounds were in the back of his left leg, which agrees with shrapnel balls arriving from the direction of the British lines.

The book continues 'With his group in danger of being cut off, Heath withdrew his men and the majority retired to the safety of the Quarries'

I have simplified the events described and can't be certain that my following conclusion is correct, nonetheless, it seems to me that Pte Joseph Nicholls was wounded, along with other colleagues close to, if not in, Cite St Elie and lost contact with his unit when they withdrew to the Quarries.

The Quarries position was itself reclaimed by the Germans, by means of a counterattack, soon after 23.00 hours during which Lieutenant-Colonel Heath was killed.

John Nicholls and various other descendants, hope to be in Loos in September 2015 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Joseph Nicholls surviving the Battle of Loos.