

CHAPTER THREE

Festubert 1915

Introduction

In May 1915 the 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment established one of the key tenets of its identity at the Battle of Festubert. It was this battle which held most significance in future years both for veterans and for the local community. The battle itself was a crucial one for the Battalion in establishing its combat credentials and for the community in seeing the first action and casualties in connection with their allegiance to the 7th King's. This chapter studies the battle and its aftermath and lays the foundation for the later investigation of the community's links and relationship with Festubert. Some important conclusions are also drawn about the role of the Territorial Force in the early months of the War.

After their training on the south coast of England, the 1/7th Battalion Kings Liverpool Regiment arrived in France on 8th March 1915 and spent some short time being assimilated into the 2nd Division. A period of minor action and trench duty was ended by the first major action for the Battalion as a Unit at the Battle of Festubert in May 1915. The existing literature regarding this engagement is sparse. An appraisal of the Battalion's early experience in France, and then of the events of the battle itself, through contrasting and complementary reports from individuals and officials is followed by an investigation of the repercussions within the Battalion and at home. The days from 7th March 1915 leading up to the battle demonstrate an increasing interest in the War by people at home, as 'their' Battalion became more directly engaged, while the story of those soldiers is one of growing anticipation and excitement.

When the battle came, it helped to consolidate the identity of the Battalion and it coloured the lives and experiences of those who survived it for the rest of their War and beyond. It was of similar importance and magnitude to the families and communities at home. The evidence will show that the Battalion's role in the battle was more as a bloody experience, designed to give experience to raw Territorials who were seen by the Generals of the BEF as relatively expendable, allowing more seasoned troops to attack the enemy in the second stage when they may have been rebuilding their defences. In reality, this battle was no more or less successful in

reaching its objectives than earlier attempts in 1915 and, as Sheffield noted, although some ground was made, Haig's breakthrough was never achieved.¹

Occurring before the rules on War reporting had been established, press reports provided more extensive and vivid descriptions from the actual participants than at any other time during the War. As will be seen, these often contrasted with contemporary and subsequent official reports. The wide coverage in home newspapers left no-one in any doubt about the nature of the War in which they were engaged, although long lists of casualties - which marked the start of the reduction in local men known as 'dilution' of the Battalion - were used to encourage recruitment rather than the opposite. The battle came as the home communities were beginning to get used to the commitment expected of a country at war.

The study of identity as shared experience and belonging is one of the fundamental themes of this thesis and much of it stems from Festubert, for both soldier and civilian. Festubert veterans were regarded with awe.² The ranks were so heavily thinned by casualties that dilution could well have set in early, but the fact that it did not and that local and regimental identity only grew, is an indication of a flaw in previous arguments among historians. What was to prove the longevity of Southport's identification with Festubert emphasizes the importance for the whole community of this battle.

This was also one of a series of important battles for Territorial Battalions throughout France and Flanders and further afield, at this time. Territorial Battalions were in action in late 1914, and in 1915 at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge, Ypres, Gallipoli and, later, Loos. After criticism and doubt about the Terriers' abilities and commitment, this series of engagements, including Festubert, served to prove their mettle. Confidence from GHQ would take time, but there was no doubt amongst the 'rankers' about what could be achieved. It is unlikely that they appreciated the extent to which some at GHQ saw the troops as bait.

The extent of newspaper coverage of the battle and especially the prominence of individual soldiers' experiences in that coverage, shows that the home community had extensive opportunity to read about what was going on in France. This coverage

¹ Sheffield *Forgotten Victory* p.124

² Tilsley *Other Ranks* p.65

appears to contradict the view that the Home Front did not appreciate the nature of the War, a point also made by Bourne particularly in relation to local newspapers.³

17th Kings in France: March - May 1915

The first ten weeks of the Battalion's time at the Front was a story of gradually building towards Festubert. The men were increasingly keen to become involved, although sanguine about their inexperience and the need to be properly respected as a fighting unit by the Regulars in the Brigade. The commanders allowed for bursts of involvement in the trenches, were grateful for carrying parties and were eventually ready to commit a full scale attack to their care. After a long lull in local press attention, when the Battalion was training in the south of England from September 1914, there was a sudden reawakening of interest once they were actually doing something newsworthy.

Seventh Battalion landed in two parties - officers and most of the men on the ship the **Golden Eagle** and the rest on the **Manchester Importer** - on 8th March 1915. Nothing but a small item in the local press heralded their arrival.⁴ The first letter to appear in the *Southport Guardian*, from Private Carl Purser, C Company, the son of a local Councillor, writing on 14th, described his crossing in the cattle boat, 200 men and 300 horses, followed by marching in snow and bitter cold, a train journey in cattle trucks, packed like herrings and not being settled in one place until the end of the following week.⁵

At home, local people remained linked to the War effort. Local councils were engaged in the recruiting campaign for Territorial volunteers, responding to Lord Derby's request for open air meeting facilities and speakers from the Council⁶ and in the establishment of a munitions factory in the Cunard properties in Bootle.⁷ The Battle of Neuve Chapelle, on 10th to 12th March 1915, was soon in the headlines,

³ Bourne *Britain and the Great War* p.206

⁴ *Southport Visiter* 9th March 1915 p.6

⁵ *Southport Guardian* 20th March 1915 p.7. Purser's commentaries developed into him being an unofficial 'war correspondent' for the newspaper

⁶ Bootle County Borough Minutes Volume XXXII 5th May 1915; LUD7 Litherland Urban District Council Minutes 3rd May 1915

⁷ B4/44 Cunard Executive Board Minutes April-July 1915; *History of the Ministry of Munitions* Vols. I-XII Harvester Press Ltd. Hassocks 1976 Vol. VIII Part II p.108

although the heavy casualties sustained by 1st King's were not made public until over a week later.⁸ By early April, some of the newly established nursing facilities on Merseyside were taking in the wounded from Neuve Chapelle.⁹

The 1/7th Battalion's War Diary noted their progress in the first few days from Le Havre to Vendin lez Bethune.¹⁰ The Battalion spent the next few weeks assimilating, gaining experience and training, usually operating as companies, attached to different Regular units.¹¹ A sign of the lack of commitment of resources came in Marriott's letter of 12th March 1915 to his father, noting that the Battalion would not be used as a whole until they had all been issued with the short service rifle.¹² Rifle exercises, trench digging, inspections, drill and filling sandbags were the routines for the first ten days.

However, some of the Battalion did see action almost immediately. On the night of 17th March, while attached to the Guards, B Company were digging a communication trench and C Company filling sandbags in no man's land, when they were shelled by German artillery. One man was killed, and another died of wounds.¹³ Private Griffiths mentioned it in a letter home, published ten days later.¹⁴ Marriott, whose Company was involved, told his father they had been building a sandbag fort at the Brick stacks, Cuinchy, when a flare went up and noted that Private Webb was the first man in the Battalion to be killed.¹⁵ By the time the incident had reached the *Southport Guardian* however, it was a St. Patrick's Day baptism of fire!¹⁶ Rumours of it being a serious confrontation were quelled in subsequent reports.

⁸ *Southport Guardian* 20th March 1915 p.7

⁹ 356 WES 16/1(48) WLTAf Nursing Services Committee 24th March 1915

¹⁰ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion Kings Liverpool Regiment War Diary 8th – 12th March 1915

¹¹ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 12th – 30th March 1915; O95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 14th – 31st March 1915; *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 p.2; *Southport Visiter* 18th May 1915 p.4

¹² Marriott correspondence 12th March 1915

¹³ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 17th March 1915

¹⁴ *Southport Guardian* 3rd April 1915 p.9

¹⁵ Marriott correspondence 18th March 1915; Private R Webb, 2084, killed 17th March 1915, is buried in Bethune Town Cemetery. However, Private William Beveridge, 2087, was also recorded as killed on 17th March. His name appears on the Le Touret Memorial – Indices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

¹⁶ *Southport Guardian* 24th March 1915 p.5

Digging trenches at night still had its dangers and throughout the War men died in small but significant numbers. Nevertheless, each incident was examined, and the following day the Company Commanders of B and C Companies were interviewed by Generals Munro, Horne and Fanshawe.¹⁷ A few days later, on 23rd March, in a similar incident, Sergeant Schofield was killed and an unnamed man and Lieutenant Smythe, injured.¹⁸ According to Purser, it was simply misfortune that as the enemy were trying to find the British guns, a stray shell landed where they were digging out of the trenches.¹⁹ Griffiths, who was part of the Company and close by, said they were digging in the communication trench to make it deeper.²⁰ Private Brenchley reported that Schofield 'was unrecognisable. His face was blown clean off'.²¹

The nature of that revelation was inevitably in great contrast to the letter which Company Commander, Captain Marriott sent to the family of Private Beveridge: 'He was detailed with a party under my command to work outside the advanced trenches and was killed instantly, much to the regret of the whole company, as he was not only a good soldier, but a very straight man, and one in whom I placed great reliance.'²² Webb's date of death would seem to be slightly inaccurate as he seems to have died later of wounds while Beveridge was clearly killed by a shell and has no grave, and it is perhaps Beveridge who should be given the dubious honour of being the first man in the Battalion to die for his country. Notwithstanding this, Marriott's real views on the causes of most deaths during March - though presumably not these two - were clearer from his letter home on 28th March describing the occasional casualties as 'generally the man's own fault'.²³ Marriott pointed to new men who wanted to take a look over the parapet. This demonstrated the fascination and excitement which the War, sometimes tragically, engendered in the volunteers.

Although the next month's War Diary is missing, it is clear from letters and newspaper reports that the rest of April 1915 was spent in a similar routine. Private

¹⁷ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 18th March 1915; Marriott correspondence 18th March 1915: Major-General Horne was Divisional Commander and Brigadier-General Fanshawe commanded 6th Brigade.

¹⁸ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 23rd March 1915

¹⁹ *Southport Guardian* 3rd April 1915 p.9

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*; Note that Schofield's date of death was inaccurately recorded in *Soldiers Died* as being 22nd February, when in fact it was March, 1915 p.56

²² *Southport Guardian* 27th March 1915 p.9

Rymer wrote to his sister on 10th April about a mine blowing up one of the British trenches nearby - also reported by Private James Cook - though they were now getting used to the shells; Fred Aldred described the many dead Germans lying on the battlefield, 'some of them are in a fearful state - faces quite black'; Corporal Caswell of the Machine-Gun Section was badly injured by a shrapnel shell, while Sergeant Cotton described refugees being hit by shells in a village.²⁴

When Private Cook came out of the trenches after the latest four-day spell on 29th April, he called it 'the hardest yet.'²⁵ Other letters talk of billets, food, ruined villages and the awful weather, requiring the issue of goat and sheepskin coats - later withdrawn as being too cumbersome.²⁶ At the end of April what can be regarded as a starting figure for the Battalion's fighting strength was thirty Officers and 940 men.²⁷

One of the reasons for all this training and these details was the need to bring the Battalion up to scratch for action on its own. The War Diary reported that the Battalion was allowed a portion of the Front Line on its own on 31st March, although Marriott did not expect more until early April.²⁸ The tardiness in entrusting Line and action solely to the Territorials appears to have been due to some disappointment amongst BEF commanders in France with the relevance and standard of training given to the men while they were in England.

The Regular Divisions in France had been well prepared for the arrival of large numbers of the Territorial Force and seemed to greet it with some trepidation. In early February 1915, Lieutenant-General Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff circulated a document highlighting the sorts of issues which divisional commanders needed to be aware of in advance of the Territorial Forces coming to France.²⁹ While based on the few Units who had arrived in France by that date,

²³ Marriott correspondence 28th March 1915

²⁴ *Southport Guardian* 21st April 1915 p.9; James Cook correspondence [12th April 1915]

²⁵ James Cook correspondence 1st May 1915

²⁶ *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 pp. 2,4,6

²⁷ WO95/1285 2nd Division War Diary Report of Fighting Strength 24th April 1915

²⁸ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 31st March 1915; Marriott correspondence 31st March 1915

²⁹ WO 95/590 I Corps War Diary Letter from Lieutenant-General Robertson Chief of the Imperial General Staff to First Army Divisions 4th February 1915

Robertson believed the advice was applicable to all newly-arriving Units.³⁰ Special attention had to be paid to rifle and machine gun training, march discipline, entrenching, communications and platoon leading. Robertson identified a lack of proper sense of discipline, not maintaining the proper chains of command, boots being ill-fitting, a lack of understanding of the supply and ordering system, and poor instruction in billeting requirements.³¹ General Horne, commanding 2nd Division, and a recipient of this circular, later made it clear to GHQ that the standards of training in England needed to be taken up with the appropriate authorities.³²

The Army tried to match up the Territorial Battalions with related Regular counterparts as far as possible, presumably to secure an understanding and support mechanism for them. Certainly, the relationship between the Territorials and the Regulars in the King's Regiment was highlighted by the mutually supportive references in letters home in relation to the Battle of Festubert itself.³³ The Terriers of the West Lancashire Division were assigned to Regular Divisions with direct links to the local Regiments. The 5th and 7th King's were in 2nd (Regular) Division, with 1st King's. The 8th Battalion joined 4th and 5th King's Own, and 5th Loyal North Lancashires in 51st Division. The 9th King's were in the 1st Division, with the 1st Loyals. The 10th (Scottish) had been out since the previous Autumn, fully integrated in 3rd Division, and were joined by 4th South Lancashires and 2nd Loyals, while in the 4th Division the 1st King's Own and 2nd Lancashire Fusiliers were joined by 5th South Lancashires. Although the Territorial Division was not reconstituted until 1916, the individual units were still in close touch with their neighbours from home, as part of the deliberate policy of support and training for these fresh units.³⁴

³⁰ WO162/7 Embarkation records

³¹ WO95/590 I Corps War Diary letter from Lieutenant-General Robertson Chief of the Imperial General Staff to First Army Divisions 4th February 1915

³² WO95/590 I Corps War Diary letter from Major-General Horne, 2nd Division, to GOC I Corps 23rd March 1915

³³ Additionally, the 24th April 1915 *Southport Guardian* p.6 included an anonymous letter: 'Our first line battalion are with us...Brave is not the word for it. They are a lot of dare-devils...The Germans know them as the 'cast-iron' regiment. In fact . brigade known as the cast iron brigade'. This is particularly interesting in the light of Tilsley's use of the epithet to describe 55th Division, which did not include 1st King's, but did include 5th and 7th King's – Tilsley *Other ranks* p.4

³⁴ WO162/7 Embarkation records; Becke, A.F. Major *Order of Battle of Divisions Part 1 Regular Divisions HMSO* (1936) repr. Ray Westlake London 1989 p.p. 36 - 63; Morris "The Leeds Rifles" p.494

The immediate impression of the Battalion had been given in the Brigade War Diary, 13th March 1915 - 'They look a very useful lot.'³⁵ After only a few days, however, the appraisal was less glowing and, despite the fact that the CO reported that on 17th March they 'had all done very well under trying circumstances',³⁶ Division was less impressed. Brigadier-General Fanshawe, at Brigade level, a lot closer to the troops than his superiors, felt that both 5th and 7th King's were 'satisfactory' but that the junior commanders needed greater confidence in themselves, and for them to improve discipline and training as a result. He also commented that the higher commanders were slow. Nevertheless, he did feel able to declare them fit for the Front Line.³⁷

However, this view was overruled by Major-General Horne's interpretation of the report for First Army Corps, which said that neither Battalion was immediately fit for the Front, though they were being introduced gradually. His response was based largely on their smartness and ability in drill, rather than their prospective abilities in combat.³⁸ Typically for the Regular Command, the lower standard of drill and the more casual approach to smartness from the Territorials, were significant factors. Nevertheless, Horne did find the Battalion CO, Lieutenant Colonel Stott, young and active with a good command of his officers and men. His most severe criticism was for the training methods in England, which are worth quoting at length as they demonstrate the inconsistency of approach within the Army Command to preparation for the Front:

bearing in mind that these two battalions have been embodied for seven months, the standard of training is very disappointing... the battalion has been employed for some months guarding railways, etc. duties entailing many detachments and leaving little room for drills and exercises... drill and manoeuvre leave much to be desired. Little attention appears to be devoted in England to cultivate a smart and soldierlike bearing and to enforce strict discipline and cleanliness. This is noticeable, not only in these territorial battalions, but in the case of drafts sent to regular battalions.³⁹

³⁵ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 13th March 1915

³⁶ Marriott correspondence 19th March 1915

³⁷ WO95/590 I Corps War Diary Report of Brigadier-General Fanshawe 6th Brigade for GOC I Corps 22nd March 1915

³⁸ WO95/590 I Corps War Diary Report from Major-General Horne 2nd Division for GOC I Corps 23rd March 1915

³⁹ *ibid.*

Horne was obviously less interested in musketry ability than having smart soldiers in his Division. The difference between Regular and Territorial style and ethos stood out very plainly, and the comments later in this chapter and elsewhere, which appear to show an inferiority complex amongst some of the Territorials in relation to the Regulars, were clearly the result of this kind of damning criticism. One can only imagine the regime which meant that 'these two battalions have improved out of recognition during the short time they have been with the division'.⁴⁰

Private Purser gave his own appraisal of the Battalion in a letter at the end of April 1915:

So far I think the 7th Kings have come off very lucky, because they have been hard at it all the time. They have already gained a good name as 'real workers'. There isn't much of the 'swank' element in our battalion and we all try and act together, which accounts for the work getting done properly. Of course, I think there are many things which may be improved upon, but 'red tape' always has and always will exist, and it's no use saying more on the subject.⁴¹

Other Territorial Battalions fared much the same. By 6th April 1915, the Post Office Rifles had 'a great deal to learn' and were 'not trained in working at night'; 6th Battalion, City of London Rifles needed Regulars to left and right, but could hold the line with such assistance and supervision; while 7th Battalion London Regiment were however, quite competent to go into the line.⁴² A consistent complaint was made about officers - in 15th (Civil Service) Battalion, and the 17th, 18th, and 20th Battalions, London Division, they were inclined to 'sit around and wait for a job to be done, lacked command, and required further work with the Regulars'.⁴³ In this context, 7th King's were on a reasonable par with members of one of the crack Territorial divisions.⁴⁴ The general appraisal of needs of the Brigade kept this and other Battalions hard at it through April - as Cook testified - until adjudged able to provide support at Aubers Ridge on 9th May.

The Brigade War Diary made reference to the various aspects of training and movements of the Battalions in the early days of May 1915 including forming part of

⁴⁰ ibid.

⁴¹ *Southport Guardian* 28th April 1915 p.9

⁴² WO95/1285 2nd Division War Diary Report 6th April 1915

⁴³ WO95/1285 2nd Division War Diary Report 16th April 1915

⁴⁴ ie. the London Division, according to Griffith in *Battle tactics of the Western Front* p.80 and Morris "The Leeds Rifles" p.494

the Corps Reserve for the attack by 1st Division on 9th May.⁴⁵ One correspondent reported that 1/7th Battalion had 'been acting as a "Flying Unit", moving from place to place at a moment's notice ... attacking all along the line'.⁴⁶ The Diary reported the failure at Aubers Ridge of the first attack at 7am and also the second around 6.30pm, by which time the Brigade had moved up to support 1st Division at Richebourg St.Vaast. The Brigade was ordered into attack, but this was delayed by the blocking of trenches and approaches by wounded and returning troops from the 1st Division. 'This delay was just as well as the attack was cancelled. The orders to this effect barely reached the Brigade in time.'⁴⁷ The Diary gave a very clear indication of the confusion and error which could so easily have led to many more casualties, a situation replicated at many stages over the subsequent three and a half years. Orders were issued to attack on the 10th at 3pm, but this was cancelled at 10.30am and the troops returned to billets.⁴⁸

This incident also shows the different levels of information available to Brigade and Battalion commanders. While Brigade knew the details of the attack and the cause of its cancellation, as far as the Battalion was concerned they simply 'Stood by all day' on 10th and on 11th 'Moved off to fresh billets'.⁴⁹ For the men, there was a mixture of relief and disappointment not to be called on. Cook allayed his mother's anxiety, though, when he wrote the Battalion had not participated 'yet'.⁵⁰ Corporal Wainwright wrote at length of the day spent marching to reserve positions, eating dinner and tea, marching back and forth, leaving packs and donning capes, only to be returned to billets with unfulfilled excitement.⁵¹

Festubert – '7 days in hell'⁵²

Festubert needs to be seen in its context as the third in a series of attempts in the La Bassee area to break through the enemy lines in the Spring of 1915, in support of

⁴⁵ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 30th April – 9th May 1915

⁴⁶ *Southport Guardian* 22nd May 1915 p.7

⁴⁷ WO95/1285 2nd Division War Diary 9th May 1915

⁴⁸ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 10th May 1915

⁴⁹ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 11th May 1915

⁵⁰ James Cook correspondence 10th May 1915

⁵¹ *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 p.4

⁵² James Cook correspondence 21st May 1915

the attacks being made by the French Tenth Army to the south.⁵³ Griffith noted that the battles in the La Bassee area in early 1915 were part of a gradual adaptation and understanding of the tactics needed to secure a breakthrough.⁵⁴ These included the artillery's creeping barrage, Lewis guns, trench mortars, smoke, gas, signals and aircraft, although this understanding was patchy, and not until Loos did it begin to come to fruition. The barrage at Festubert was extensive, based on the supposition that Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge might just have been more successful if the enemy had been obliterated, before the infantry attacked.⁵⁵

Militarily, three key aspects stand out in this action: firstly, it was reported as the first night attack of the War; secondly, it did not start out as a planned battle in its own right, but became that by default; and thirdly, the generals' decision to use relatively new troops in the assault was a calculated and somewhat cynical decision. Despite being seen as the first night attack of the War,⁵⁶ little critical attention seems to have been given to this fact.⁵⁷ Haig's strategic conference demonstrated that, originally, the renewed attack at Aubers Ridge on 10th May 1915 was planned to be either at night with bayonet and no artillery, or during the day with fresh troops.⁵⁸ In the event, there was no renewed attack at Aubers on 10th May. The dilemma for High Command was always that a huge barrage forfeited the element of surprise - a night attack would at least provide some protection to the infantry. Unfortunately, at Festubert, the dark hindered the attackers and led to confusion. Additionally, the barrage did not damage the defences or machine gun emplacements to the level expected.

References to the battle have drawn attention to its failure to advance very far and the high casualty list. Taylor stated that it further demonstrated the futility of this kind of attack on such a narrow front against a heavily fortified line.⁵⁹ Griffith has pointed

⁵³ Only one contemporary account from an eyewitness drew attention to the combined campaign: 'the best of all was that we cleared the way for further French advances on our right.' – Threlfall *The Story of the King's* p. 169

⁵⁴ Griffith *Battle Tactics of the Western Front* p.53

⁵⁵ Holmes *Fatal Avenue* pp. 112-3; Clark *The Donkeys* p.126

⁵⁶ Messenger *Terriers in the trenches* p.18

⁵⁷ *The Official History* did not draw any particular attention to the fact, although Festubert was only the third major attack by the BEF after the trench lines had been established at the end of 1914: Official History - 1915, Aubers, Festubert and Loos pp.40-77

⁵⁸ WO95/155 First Army War Diary Conference notes 9th May 1915

⁵⁹ Taylor *The First World War* p.83; others have referred to the high casualty

out that there were moments when they were close to success, implying that massed columns of men could breach the enemy defences.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, the culmination of the expenditure on shells, coupled with the failure to break through at Aubers Ridge or Festubert, was highlighted by Sir John French's contact with his friend, Lord Northcliffe, in *The Times*, when he began the campaign against Asquith on the basis of the 'Shell Scandal'.⁶¹

The failure of the assault on 9th May was blamed on inadequate preparation and so when the bombardment, which began on 13th May, did not, apparently, prepare the way for the infantry, it was continued and the attack postponed from the night of 14th to the night of 15th May.⁶² Reports referred firstly to the unpreparedness of the Indian Corps⁶³ and secondly to the failure of a number of shells to explode when hitting the German parapet.⁶⁴ However, it is clear from First Army War Diary that the attack at Festubert should really be seen as a continuation of the Aubers Ridge battle, after a series of delays from 11th May.⁶⁵

Haig later noted that Horne's plan of attack was straightforward. The assault would be by night across ground 'now so well known, in order to gain a footing in the first two lines of the German trenches before dawn.' After the first success, however, he proposed to await daylight as ... obstacles ... [would] dislocate further advance in the dark.'⁶⁶ The three brigades of the 2nd Division would attack employing 10,000 men, including 6th Brigade and 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment in the first assault. This attack would be over 1,000 yards of waterlogged fields, muddy trenches and barbed wire to the first objective of La Quinque Rue.⁶⁷

rate and lack of ground gained or breakthrough made: Brown, M *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Western Front* Sidgwick and Jackson London 1993 p.71; Holmes, R *The Western Front* BBC Books London 1999 p.p.65-66

⁶⁰ Griffith *Battle Tactics of the First World War* p.53

⁶¹ Gilbert, M *First World War* Weidenfeld and Nicolson London 1994 p.162

⁶² WO95/155 First Army War Diary 14th May 1915

⁶³ WO95/591 I Corps War Diary 14th May 1915

⁶⁴ WO95/591 I Corps War Diary 15th May 1915

⁶⁵ WO95/155 First Army War Diary 9th – 14th May 1915

⁶⁶ CAB44/20 Draft chapter on Festubert for the *Official History*

⁶⁷ Kearsley *1915 Campaign in France* pp. 10-11; WO95/1285 2nd Division War Diary Battle Instructions 13th May 1915

Originally, 6th Brigade were notified that the new attack would be at night on 14th May, and orders given, but then withdrawn, as stated, due to the wet and muddy ground over which the 7th Division would later have to advance in daylight.⁶⁸ The daylight attack subsequently proved to be less successful on that Front. The reinforcing attack by the 7th Division had to be by day as they were new to the area, but the success of the assault required both 2nd and 7th Divisions to carry out a more deliberate attack, rather than the failed 'rapid assault' at Aubers.⁶⁹ The Battalion Commander had a 'Conference with GOC Brigade' on 14th, but the troops were resting and there is no indication at Battalion level of the postponement from 14th to 15th May, unlike the entry in the Brigade Diary.⁷⁰ Kearsley placed the bombardment over the 60 hours of 13th, 14th and 15th May although this 'Official' implication that the event was originally planned to be a night assault on 15th following a prolonged bombardment is not supported by the evidence in the War Diary which clearly shows that the initial plan was for an attack twenty-four hours prior to that.⁷¹

The third element in considering the preparations for the battle was the blooding of new troops. In the 2nd Division the explicit method of attack was to use the raw troops as live bait to draw the enemy, who could then be punished by rested, seasoned troops waiting in reserve. Fanshawe's policy was to employ the 'expendable' element of his Division to allow his more experienced men to launch a renewed attack on a tired enemy, or to resist a counter-attack. In a memo from General Whigham referring to new troops it was stated that: 'to encourage the enemy to attack it will be better for us to employ them and keep our seasoned troops in reserve.'⁷² This and other clear evidence related earlier, showed the view taken by Regular Generals of their new Territorial charges. It is doubtful that this deliberate policy was common knowledge within the lower levels of the brigade's command structure. It should, however be contrasted firstly with the reports after the Battle concerning the response by those same Generals, and secondly with the enthusiasm with which the men in 7th Kings took to their job.

⁶⁸ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 14th May 1915

⁶⁹ WO95/591 I Corps War Diary 10th May 1915

⁷⁰ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 15th May 1915

⁷¹ WO 95/591 I Corps War Diary 10th – 15th May 1915

⁷² WO95/590 I Corps War Diary Orders from Brig.Gen Whigham 8th April 1915

The long bombardment was clearly vital to Haig, as he made several notes to this effect on Edmonds' draft chapter,⁷³ but it transpires that it had only continued for so long because the initial date was put back twenty-four hours due to the failure to hit the target effectively and problems in preparation amongst the attack troops. Neither the *Official History* nor Haig's notes link the battles at Aubers and Festubert as closely as now appears to have been the case from evidence in the First Army War Diary.⁷⁴

Private Carl Purser showed that the significance of the barrage laid down by the British, and the German retaliation, was not lost on the troops, either in relation to the physical and mental effect on the soldiers, or to the need for more resources.

Artillery may win the war; infantry will certainly be sufferers throughout, [he wrote] if they can afford to bombard as they have done this last few days it does not show much shortage, and for us to keep up with them, or rather, to get the better of them, we shall have to buck up and have less talk about shells and actually get on to the making.⁷⁵

The *Southport Guardian* demonstrated part of the growing anxiety at the shortage of shells and guns, indicating an editorial line subtly against the Government.

Most other correspondents seemed simply anxious to let their families know what it was like and their accounts are graphic, hardly sparing those at home from the worry over the danger their menfolk were in. Finn's study referred to a call in the *Formby Times* seeking letters from the Front and the results were stark enough to demonstrate that, contrary to much historiography, people at Home can hardly have failed to see the reality of battle.⁷⁶ The accounts of the artillery barrage before the attack, for instance, demonstrated the sheer powerlessness of the infantry. Private Erlam Greaves' comments about the Germans would equally apply to the British, although he was not going to admit it: '...our guns commenced their task of destroying the barbed wire entanglements in front of the German lines and the cannonade continued all through the day. The noise was simply awful and I do not

⁷³ CAB44/20 Draft chapter on Festubert for the *Official History*

⁷⁴ WO95/155 First Army War Diary

⁷⁵ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9

⁷⁶ Finn, M "The realities of war"

know how the Germans stood it'.⁷⁷ The immediate success of the attack seemed to show that at least the battery was able to clear a path for the infantry, though there was no specific mention of it in the reports. What is also clear from the letters is that men of different Units talked to each other about the War. Private Dobson wrote about the bombardment that 'the Regulars who were alongside us say they've never been under such hot fire',⁷⁸ while Arthur Butterworth noted that 'The men in the artillery say that Neuve Chapelle was dangerous, but that beat it'.⁷⁹ Arthur's brother, Harold, wrote to tell his parents that 'it was murder in the fire zone'.⁸⁰

The nature of the attack carried out by A and B Companies can be detected from a variety of sources. The official reports focused on tactics and events, justifying the actions and encouraging recruitment. The accounts from individual soldiers concentrated on the emotions of the events, whether it was the bravery of their comrades or the pitiful appearance of their enemy. The Battalion War Diary stated simply that 'A & B Coys in attack, moved over parapet about 10.45pm & waited. Attack successful. German line carried'.⁸¹ Kearsy confirmed that the principles of Field Service Regulations in relation to night attacks were carried out, thus ensuring the initial success of the operation.⁸² The *Official History* said that 6th Brigade advanced 'at a silent walk with bayonets'.⁸³ Orders from Division were to render a surprise by advancing at a walk in total silence until the last minute. Lt.Col. Louis Vaughan made particular reference to synchronising watches, as one of the problems at Aubers had been mistrust of officers' watches.⁸⁴ Conan Doyle later described the attack when 'in three minutes they had swarmed across the open and poured into the trenches'.⁸⁵ In reaching the German support trenches, the objectives were apparently met before dawn. Two styles of soldiers' accounts are apparent from the newspapers – the description from afar by observers of this attack, and the

⁷⁷ *Formby Times* 5th June 1915 p.5; *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

⁷⁸ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9; *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Waterloo and Crosby Herald* and *Formby, Bootle and Seaforth Gazette* 29th May 1915 p.5 (hereafter *Crosby Herald*)

⁷⁹ *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

⁸⁰ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

⁸¹ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 15th May 1915

⁸² Kearsy *1915 Campaign in France* pp 32 - 32

⁸³ *Official History 1915* Vol. II p.58

⁸⁴ WO95/1285 2nd Division War Diary 13th May 1915

⁸⁵ Conan Doyle, A *The British Campaign in France and Flanders 1915* Hodder and

accounts given by men from A and B Companies who took part. The observers' stories depict heroism and sacrifice: the attackers' tales belie their shock and fear and do not attempt to hide the realities of war. Despite, or perhaps because of, the more unsuccessful follow-up by C and D Companies in the morning, the emphasis of the reporting was on the great bayonet charge rather than what had been referred to in the *Official History* as a silent walk.⁸⁶

The difference between a walk and a charge is partly explained by the natural enthusiasm for exaggeration and partly by the restrained and sober reflection typical of the *Official History*. When the *Official History* was written around 1927, Festubert did not hold much significance in the context of the whole War, whereas the immediacy of the battle for these young men, writing only one or two days afterwards, was completely different. The different reports suggest that there was a silent walk until they were seen and then they charged on to the trenches.⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the experience was a defining one, as Private Farrington reported: 'Our company was the first over the parapet and led the way onto the battlefield. To be more correct, I should say "slaughter house"'.⁸⁸

Private Greaves, A Company, wrote that:

no sooner had we got over the parapet than the Germans commenced rapid fire on us...I can tell you it was not very palatable waiting there with thousands of little pills whizzing over your head...we were encouraged by one of our sergeants who kept shouting, "Come on the King's, avenge the Lusitania"...The Germans do not like the bayonet...they came running out of their trench crying "Mercy, mercy, Comrade boon"...It was a horrible sight the next morning, looking across to our lines, the ground strewn with dead and wounded. It is a sight I do not want to see again. If I have to witness such a spectacle I pray to God He will bring me safely through.⁸⁹

Stoughton London 1917 p.128

⁸⁶ *Official History*. *ibid*

⁸⁷ Also in the attack was Private JH Ross: 'The platoon I am in was the very first...over the parapet. We had 300 to 400 yards to go and at first we walked; soon, too soon, they saw us, star shells went up all round, rifles cracked, and machine guns went zip,zip,zip..All this time we had been advancing, and men had been falling; it was like going through a hailstorm, but the hailstones were hard bullets...' *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7; Richard Tyrer, a private from A Company, wrote 'We made a bayonet charge...and captured two lines of trenches by 1am. It was an awful thing charging amid bullets from left and right, so many of our brave lads fell, and I am exceedingly sorry to tell you young Bobby Mercer was accidentally shot. Arthur Band is very badly wounded. Dean's boys, Erlam Greaves and Sandy Bourhill are all safe and well..': *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.5

⁸⁸ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

⁸⁹ *Formby Times* 5th June 1915 p.5; *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

James Cook, a Private who later received a commission described it as 'a dream...there must have been divine help on our side'.⁹⁰

Private George Kerr wrote from his hospital bed:

We had at least 500 yards to go before we reached their trench. Well we started advancing on our stomachs for about half-way when the Germans spotted us with their star-lights. Well, that did it. They set their Maxim guns on us; also rifle fire, shells and bombs. My word, I thought we would never get through it...We dashed into the trench with a loud cheer. There was moaning and groaning, and clatter of bayonets. It was awful, the blood was flying all over; the Germans were crying for mercy. Of course there was heavy loss on our side as well.⁹¹

In contrast, Private Thomas Murray, Lieutenant Adams' servant and well out of the fighting, was typical of the other strand of writing when he wrote to his mother:

The night was pitch dark except from the fire from bursting shells...Over our trench crept No.4 platoon, under Lieut. Adams, with the platoons of the other regiments (from KRR, 1st King's, Staffords, Berks, 5th King's)... Our men had crept within 100 yards of the Germans, who were 600 yards from our trenches...Alas! they were spotted. Out from dozens of Maxims came the terrible bullets, and shell began bursting round them. It was hell on earth but on they went through the murderous fire. Our men were cut down like grass...It was here poor Bob Balshaw was killed. He died fighting like a lion. Poor Lieut.Adams was shot on the trench, urging his platoon on, who mostly follow him..."Don't forget the Lusitania"...Our men drove the Germans out. The 1st King's got at them. They would not have the bayonet, and started coming into us in hundreds under the white flag.⁹²

Murray's story was similar to the others, but lacked the passion of the combatant, substituting it for something more Kiplingesque.

The letters contained tactical information which these days may not have been made so public. Private Norman Heaps, 13 Platoon, D Company, watched A and B Companies prepare to attack: 'each man being as lightly equipped as possible and with white cloths attached to their hats in order to distinguish each other in the darkness', although the *Official History* referred to patches on the front and back of

⁹⁰ James Cook correspondence 21st May 1915

⁹¹ *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

⁹² *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5

tunics, not hats.⁹³ Heaps' matter-of-fact description of preparations immediately prior to an attack seemed tinged with regret at not being involved and respect for those who were.

The *Crosby Herald* relied almost entirely on letters for its reporting of the action, under a headline of '7th King's in Action'.⁹⁴ However, it did carry the 'Eyewitness' account, from the British Headquarters three miles to the rear and this makes for interesting comparisons with the foregoing letters:

May 16th...The landscape stretching before me was typical of this part of France. Through innumerable thickets and plantations of trees peeped out red roofs of houses and cottages, while further away on the skyline the chimneys of coal mines in the Lille district reared their heads up against the blue sky...over Festubert hung a dark pall of smoke that seemed to grow in intensity. As I watched the shells were bursting the whole time - a dazzling flash, a cloud of smoke, and then a dull boom. Green fumes of lyddite mingled with a black cloud produced by 'Jack Johnsons' and over all screamed shrapnel, leaving a little speck of white as it burst. It seemed impossible that anything could live in such a storm.

On the contrary, it sounded positively idyllic! The communique went on

Along the roads leading up to the trenches, lorries of all descriptions carrying stores, and above all ammunition, could be seen, while the severe nature of the fighting was testified by the Red Cross wagons that occasionally passed along to the casualty stations in the rear of the firing line...Back in the town, only a few miles from the firing line, everything was going on as usual, only the passing of a few Red Cross cars laden with wounded showed that an engagement was proceeding so near. [The reporter described the convoy of prisoners from the 57th Westphalian Regiment]: Their uniforms, it is true, were new and good, but the men themselves were almost without exception of the poorest physique, and marched along with downcast heads...Besides the keen, well-cut⁹⁵ faces of their bronzed guard they showed up in very poor contrast.

This last description of the British and German appearance is interesting, given the wintry weather which had been experienced on the Front up until this point.

Problems grew as light came on 16th May, when 7th Battalion Diary reported reinforcements 'were wiped out by machine gun fire'.⁹⁶ After describing the charge

⁹³ *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Crosby Herald* 22nd May 1915 p.2

⁹⁶ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 16th May 1915

by A and B Companies, while he was in Reserve, Purser (C Company) wrote that D Company had to reinforce the attack at 5am and half the company had to cross about 360 yards in broad daylight and under a hail of machine gun fire as trenches to the right flank had not been taken. As the dead and wounded piled up in the communication sap, the Major stopped any further attempts. A new move was made at 11am by C Company, again a platoon at a time in broad daylight. 'It was a brave attempt, and every man who went over knew it was almost a certainty of death or being wounded.' After four platoons - 180 men - had tried, Purser's platoon was next, but again the machine guns cut terrible losses into C and D Companies.⁹⁷

Purser's account was complemented by Marriott, writing to his father:

C and D were ordered to charge in broad daylight - it was a mad idea and I knew the result before we started...The first platoon went over under McClelland...They were mown down. Then the 2nd platoon was mown down. I was just going with the 3rd when the order came to stop us.⁹⁸

Marriott's independent and unpublished account corresponds with Purser and lends weight to the accuracy of the rest of his account. It is interesting to note that the Lieutenant called the idea mad, while the Private thought it brave. Clearly Purser knew his letters were being published while Marriott wrote purely to his family. This disparity may also reflect the differences between the informed and experienced view of an Officer who, while not dispassionate, was perhaps more objective and that of the enthusiastic volunteer seeing his first taste of real action.⁹⁹ As a cub journalist, Purser's account is strong on the bravery and tenacity in the face of the enemy, tinged with humour when reporting his involvement in carrying ammunition and

⁹⁷ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9

⁹⁸ Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915

⁹⁹ Another account came from Private Heap, D Company: 'We were moved along the line, relieved of our packs, the heaviest and unessential part of our equipment and each two men took hold of a box of ammunition, with a third man behind them. We then moved out through an opening in the barricade. We then quickly learnt what the third men had been sent with us for, as a Maxim gun was trained on us and a number of men were hit... Just before daybreak word was passed along to "dig yourselves in" as the trench had been practically demolished by our artillery during the day. We had with us our entrenching tools, the blades of which are only about four inches square - not very promising implements with which to make a hole big enough to conceal yourself. However, we set to, and I assure you I never worked harder in my life than I did in that half-hour. At any rate, by daybreak, I was well below the level of the ground': *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.12

rations up to the front, across shell holes, mud and dead bodies - 'I was covered from head to foot with mud, and had a huge biscuit tin to carry. Swear! I am afraid I cursed frightfully'.¹⁰⁰

Early on 17th May a number of Germans attempted to surrender, but were shelled by artillery. Several letters refer to these events, noted in the *Official History*: [At 7am on the 17th] Germans retired with white flags and ran unarmed towards the trench of 1/7th King's Liverpool, east of Chocolat Meunier Corner'.¹⁰¹ The *Official History* notes that Germans fired shells on them, probably thinking they were British as they thought their own trenches had by now been evacuated. The British artillery also shelled them, and none made it to the trench. Shortly afterwards, another 450 tried to surrender, and despite further fire were more successful.

The correspondents had mixed feelings about these men, ranging from Arthur Butterworth, C Company, who wrote to his father of 'The cowards, after turning machine guns on our wounded, hoisted the white flag. Germans came running towards our trench...and one of our shells burst right in the midst of them and that was the last of them';¹⁰² to the rather more sympathetic line of Richard Tyrer:

We got about 500 prisoners. It was a great sight to see them waving white flags and running to our trenches...Some of them were wounded and we helped them to the dressing station. They would not do that for us, but that is where the Britisher shows humanity, a thing in which the Germans lack.¹⁰³

For others, the event seemed to catch the imagination with increasing excitement and exaggeration.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps Private Sharrocks summed up the views of the men, keen to get at the enemy, but overruled not just by an Officer but by an apparent

¹⁰⁰ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9

¹⁰¹ *Official History* 1915 Vol.II p.66

¹⁰² *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

¹⁰³ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5

¹⁰⁴ Private WH Wright was in the captured trench 'while Monday night... but a whole group of them [Germans] surrendered...They came running across the field like rabbits, with their hands up and waving white flags.' - *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11; An officer whose letter was printed in the Bootle paper wrote: 'we suddenly saw a forest of white flags go up over their trenches to our right, and they came streaming in hundreds over the parapet and made a bolt for our original front line opposite them. Our guns dropped any number of them before their fire could be stopped.' - *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.5

morality of the sort which ordinary men on either side of no-man's-land seemed to feel for their opposite numbers caught in the war machine: 'hundreds of Germans came rushing towards us with their hands up...We felt inclined to shoot them, but our officers would not let us...They looked a dejected lot. Some of our chaps were carrying wounded Germans...'¹⁰⁵

An 'eyewitness' quoted by Threlfall appeared to get the account of the capture of prisoners confused with the success of the attack:

The Germans made a desperate attempt to hold their ground... but it was all useless. Once that tide of angry Liverpool men had got going there was nothing made in Germany strong enough to stop it... They seemed to lose all heart. Some threw away their rifles. Others tried to run, only to be shot or bayoneted. None of them seemed to have the gumption to surrender, until one of their officers stepped forward and held up his hands. At that signal hands went up all round and then the place that had been the scene of so much of the noise and roar and madness of battle only a few minutes before was quiet as a Quakers' meeting.¹⁰⁶

As far as the newspapers were concerned, the capture of the enemy was a coup for the Battalion, and an important little victory over the enemy. For the professional soldier, it was an event of little significance. Marriott only gave it a passing mention in his letter. After the first group had run out and a shell landed in the middle, Marriott told his father another '500-600 came out with their hands up. They were full of watches, money, cigars which they gave to our men as they came in'.¹⁰⁷ The 7th King's Diary referred to fatigue parties found to supply rations to 1st King's, burial parties, and the continuous shelling from German lines. The Battalion was relieved during the night of 19th/20th under heavy shelling.¹⁰⁸

The Orme brothers, from D Company, demonstrated the dangers of reporting events second-hand. They related tales - not actually witnessed - about German atrocities. No evidence was produced but the stories were well received at home, coming hard on the heels of the **Lusitania** riots and the publication of Lord Bryce's report into alleged German atrocities.¹⁰⁹ Though subsequently seen to be a flawed report,

¹⁰⁵ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11

¹⁰⁶ Threlfall *The Story of the King's* pp. 167-169

¹⁰⁷ Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915

¹⁰⁸ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 20th May 1915

¹⁰⁹ *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* HMSO London 1915

writers such as Sanders and Taylor have pointed to its significance for the Home population's morale at the time.¹¹⁰ The 'atrocities' in Belgium referred to in the report and the sinking of the **Lusitania**, had been emphasised before a concert at the Christ Church Soldiers Institute in Southport on 13th May, justifying the actions of rioters and looters in the North West, referred to in the previous chapter.¹¹¹

Drummer Alfred Orme reported that:

When they took a few of the Black Watch prisoners the other week we found out that they stripped them of their clothes and sent them in front of their trench and riddled the Scotsmen with a Maxim. A fine lot of rascals to be fighting, but we have had a bit of our own back, and if I have the luck to get home I'll be able to tell you something.¹¹²

Orme seems to have suggested that the British were not above underhand tactics, which was probably true. It was unusual to see as much admitted in the press, however. His brother, Lawrence gave a similar story:

With regard to the atrocities you will have read about them. It is all true. In the trenches recently taken I am told a Guardsman had been crucified against a dug-out door, his body having been shockingly mutilated. There were also some Highlanders who had been stripped of their kilts, sent back to our trenches and then shot down in cold blood when half way across.¹¹³

While there is no direct evidence available of these events, the stories were clearly rife in D Company for, as well as the Orme brothers, Corporal Critchley's account made reference to it too in an oral interview: 'At the beginning of May the Jocks did a bayonet charge but were cut up and prisoners taken. The Germans took their kilts and turned them loose and opened up machine guns on them.'¹¹⁴ Although interviewed in 1981 Critchley also remembered 'we were like wild animals, we took no prisoners'.¹¹⁵

Stories of atrocities were routinely used throughout the War to castigate the terrible Hun and later commentators have shown that officials working on such propaganda

¹¹⁰ Sanders and Taylor *British propaganda during the First World War* p.144

¹¹¹ *Southport Visiter* 15th May 1915 p.2

¹¹² *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.7

¹¹³ *ibid.*; *The Times* had run the now infamous story of a crucified Canadian soldier on the Ypres Front on May 15th, a story quickly repeated and expanded in the trenches – Gilbert *First World War* p.162

¹¹⁴ Critchley

did not deny their involvement in such falsehoods.¹¹⁶ The fact that the tales from D Company all corroborate each other should not be taken to mean they were an accurate reflection of events. No direct evidence has come to light to support this story, although March's 6th Brigade Diary report may indicate where its foundation lay. The entry for 16th March 1915 included reference to the return of some wounded men:

Four wounded have recently crawled back, or been recovered from close to the enemy lines after enduring great hardships - it is apparent from their statements that our wounded can expect little mercy from the Germans. If not actually shot, they are stripped of equipment and even of clothing...In some instances, the shooting of our wounded as they lay out close to the enemy trenches seems well substantiated.

The brigade has an account to settle - we hope at no distant date.¹¹⁷ The threat in the final line of the report in the official War Diary appeared to sanction similar action in retribution, enforcing the strength of feeling at the highest level. Notwithstanding that, the incident was back in March, and was clearly unrelated to the Scots' charge at Aubers the previous week. The similarities were such, however, that this type of act may have had some of its roots in fact, although any promulgation of it was designed to stiffen resolve. As well as the *Times*, the soldiers' access to other national or local newspapers was likely to have fuelled their imagination. Such reports and the stance taken by senior officers marked a significant difference to the attitude of the men and company officers when faced with hundreds of German prisoners being shelled by both sides.

According to the subsequent Report in 6th Brigade Diary, 1/7th King's (referred to in the report as 7/8th using the old nomenclature for the Regiment – 8th Foot) swung a little to the left of their objective and did not actually take it, although this was not known at the time.¹¹⁸ In fact, Private Cook claimed that in taking three lines of trenches, they accomplished what had been 'deemed improbable' - perhaps feedback of information to the troops was not very good.¹¹⁹ The Report went on to note that machine gun fire and shelling were heavy and attempts to move other units up to the captured trenches were fruitless, though by daylight on 16th men in ones and twos were able to get to the German line. With these trenches thick with troops,

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Sanders and Taylor *British propaganda during the First World War* p.264

¹¹⁷ WO 95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 16th March 1915

¹¹⁸ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary Extracts from Narrative of Operations from night 15th/16th to 19th May 1915

¹¹⁹ James Cook correspondence 21st May 1915

it was fortunate that German shelling was more on British trenches, though these were also congested.¹²⁰ The 7th Battalion were amongst those withdrawn to British trench breastworks on the night of 16th/17th, while 1st King's took the objective originally thought to have been secured by 7th Battalion.

Reliefs from the Guards and Sirhind Brigades took over the attack on 18th, leaving the line to be held by 1st and 7th King's only, and they were withdrawn on 19th. According to the report, nearly 1,000 yards of enemy trenches were won and 200 prisoners taken. The artillery cooperation was described as 'very satisfactory', but casualties were around 2,500 for all ranks. Brigade Diary reported that the forming up of the men for the attack in successive lines outside the parapet, and pushing men out gradually as flares subsided, had been successfully carried out. The Brigade report clearly felt the operation had been reasonably successful.¹²¹

A number of writers including Private Dobbs, claimed that a passing General praised the Battalion.¹²²

We came through with the highest honours...we fought a great battle and came out with flying colours...Of course there were more regiments in it besides ours...They all spoke well of us. The general gave us a good name, and he waved his hand to us as we were leaving the village.¹²³

Marriott's letters home confirmed what had appeared to be a rather anecdotal claim.¹²⁴ Subsequent gallantry awards also appeared to confirm that view of the

¹²⁰ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary Extracts from Narrative of Operations from night 15th/16th to 19th May 1915

¹²¹ *ibid.*

¹²² Private Sherwood also felt it worth mentioning when he wrote home: 'We were praised by the General. No doubt you will see something of it in the papers by now', *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9. The *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7 printed an extract from a letter from an officer which read that 'The Brigadier is very pleased with us, and said to a sergeant of ours, 'Well, your regiment has made a name for itself anyway.' Corporal Wainwright, who also wrote to the Mayor, was wounded in the charge. In his letter to his parents he concluded 'my section were advancing like heroes, through a downpour of shells and bullets, and the Liverpool Terriers, if never before, made a name for themselves. To be in the first line of charge was a thing never expected by our boys. The way the good old regulars charged an encouraged our chaps I shall never forget.' *Southport Guardian* 22nd May 1915 p.7

¹²³ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6

¹²⁴ Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915

hierarchy with the award of a Military Cross, a DCM and several Officers and NCOs 'Mentioned in Dispatches'.¹²⁵

The *Official History* summed up the battle as 'tantalizing'.¹²⁶ Objectives had been reached by some units and if the British had had as much artillery as well as equipment for close-quarter fighting as the Germans clearly had, then success could have been complete. This was the story of so many of the battles of the War, a British attack held up apparently for want of men and equipment. The difference in emphasis with 6th Brigade's view is explained by the fact that other elements of the attack were less successful. The *Official History* put it down to 'British unpreparedness for war' - a verdict warmly welcomed by Haig in 1927: 'I am glad you put this in' and 'I hope that the British people will realise what 'unpreparedness for war' cost the Empire in flesh and blood'.¹²⁷ At the time of planning the Festubert battle, however, Haig did nothing to address these shortages or unpreparedness and, had it not been for other factors, would have carried on the assault at Aubers Ridge regardless. Kearsey pointed out, however, that to await better preparation would have saved casualties but would not have fitted into the general plan of combining with the French.¹²⁸ The failure to knock out German machine-gun positions did contribute to the heavy casualties on the second and third days and the delay in being able to pursue the attack caused congested trenches which were prone to enemy shelling. More effective planning might have dissipated these shortfalls.

After the battle, as if to reinforce the feeling of being on a long and exciting excursion, some soldiers were keen to collect souvenirs and send them home as proof that they had been there when the 7th King's made their charge. As noted above, surrendering Germans handed over some of their possessions. Private Sharrocks 'got a German helmet, a belt, a knife, a cigarette case, a water bottle etc. One chap got a cat-o-nine-tails'.¹²⁹ James Cook had a water bottle and belt, but

¹²⁵ Threlfall *The Story of the King's* pp. 192-7

¹²⁶ *Official History* 1915 Vol. II p.76 and 77

¹²⁷ CAB44/20 Draft Chapter on Festubert for the *Official History*

¹²⁸ Kearsey 1915 *Campaign in France* pp. 11-12

¹²⁹ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.11

found the helmets too bulky to carry.¹³⁰ Private Farrington sent his sister a rather gruesome souvenir:

One of the Germans came running in my direction. I let him have a couple in memory of 'Lusi' and other things besides. I have got his helmet. I am going to send it to you along with some more souvenirs.¹³¹ If you get it all right you can put it in your shop window.

At least Arthur Butterworth recognised what was going on when he wrote 'I think the horrors of war make one unusually callous. During the scramble it was most amusing to see the men looking for souvenirs. Helmets were the order of the day, though bayonets, buttons, watches, and even clocks came into our hands'. Private Greaves was not one of them - 'I was only too glad it was all over'.¹³²

One of the immediate after-effects of the action was illness. On 24th May Private Cook reported that he had had diarrhoea for the last three days and put this down to the change in and rationing of food while they were in the attack, together with the rain, lack of sleep and having no change of clothing. He wrote: 'Xcuse writing (sic) but I have to keep still & lie on my back. There are lots of others with the same complaint'. He had earlier referred to resting shattered nerves, hardly surprising having had a bullet through his hat too.¹³³ Again, the home community should not have been in any doubt as to the conditions under which their sons were fighting. For instance, Drummer Orme reported:

I can tell you it's been awful. You could have got plenty of souvenirs, but the sight of men blown to pieces, fed me up, and I do not wish for any souvenirs of that massacre. A better name would be scientific murder. You were walking over dead men all the time, and the smell was suffocating.¹³⁴

Private Pirrie of the Machine Gun Company gave another account:

After the charge the battlefield was a terrible sight. There were thousands of dead. When going into the German trenches we could not help walking over them. Last week the Scotch Guards and a few other regiments made a charge in the same place, but did not come off successful, and believe me we fetched in some of the wounded who had been lying out all week.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ James Cook correspondence 24th May 1915

¹³¹ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

¹³² *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7; *Formby Times* 5th June 1915 p.5

¹³³ James Cook correspondence 21st May and 24th May 1915

¹³⁴ *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.7

¹³⁵ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

In the early years of the War, officers were targeted and certainly suffered disproportionately in casualties, although this was also partly due to their practice of leading from the front; the 7th King's were no exception. Marriott wrote that he was 'the only double company commander to [come back untouched].'¹³⁶ Nonetheless, his Company suffered the second highest casualties behind A Company. He buried his friend (and brother-in-law) Kingston Adams, and was promoted to second in command. According to Tyrer, 'Lieut. Adams was simply worshipped by the men, of whom he was very proud',¹³⁷ a view Pirrie confirmed. "Come on the 7th" shouted...Lt.Adams...nothing could have inspired us more than seeing him fall, for we all loved him, and we went into them with cold steel'.¹³⁸ Other officers also came in for similar praise, and their position in leading the men on was clearly significant. Their loss was keenly felt, noted by Sergeant James Taylor - 'Amongst the officers killed were Captain Harvey, Lieut. McClelland, both my old officers. Our officers died like what they were in life - gentlemen.'¹³⁹

All accounts tell of the large number of casualties. Divisional casualties for the 16th - 25th May 1915 were other ranks: 536 - killed, 3,725 - wounded, and 1,006 - missing; officers: 46 - killed, 120 - wounded, and 12 - missing.¹⁴⁰ These figures came from the *Official History*, written in 1927, by which time figures should have been reasonably accurate. These were not the first casualties for 7th King's and they had certainly seen death by May, but it was the first time that they had been involved in action which saw casualties on a large scale. This was also the case for the communities at home, although other Liverpool Regiments had seen action and it was partly through this realisation that a sense of community evolved. When links were forged after the War, the emphasis was on those places where the dead had fallen.

For the men the casualties were obvious very quickly. Ross recounted the feeling after the relief, 'A good meal - the first we had had for a week...Then we looked around. Oh! the faces that were missing. My three intimate friends were all

¹³⁶ Marriott correspondence 23rd May 1915

¹³⁷ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.12; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5

¹³⁸ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

¹³⁹ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8

¹⁴⁰ *Official History* 1915 Vol. II p.74

missing.’¹⁴¹ Stephens was another to show quite graphically the impact on the ranks: ‘...out of our platoon, which numbered 49, we have only eight left, having 20 killed and 21 wounded...Over a dozen Maxim guns played on us, and our poor fellows kept dropping like rats’.¹⁴² William Campbell's unnamed brother-in-law also referred to the high casualty figures with some degree of passion. When it came to his brother-in-law however, his tone immediately changed. The first part of his letter contrasted with the more idyllic, sacrificial death described in the second:

Men were dropping but still we kept on, and captured the first trench and the second, but at great cost. When daylight broke on Monday, May 17th, we had a roll call, and the cost was appalling. I soon found Will was missing, and asked permission to search for him. I went on my own, and discovered he had been shot through the brain. He looked very peaceful. He was hit while leading his men on.¹⁴³

This was not untypical. Particular deaths were heroic; the general were appalling.¹⁴⁴

It is difficult to arrive at an accurate figure for the Battalion casualty list. The Battalion War Diary noted nine officers killed or missing, and four wounded, on 16th May; along with 220 other ranks (OR) killed, wounded or missing.¹⁴⁵ Marriott noted in a letter to his father that nine officers had been killed and three wounded, while of the other ranks there were c.300-400 casualties. His own Company had been reduced from 252 to c.100 and one officer.¹⁴⁶ The Brigade Diary recorded casualty figures but unfortunately the report of operations and the table were lost, and when a typed form of the precis was done in 1924 and added to the Diary, the table was not reproduced. Thus, all we have is a note that there were c.2,500 casualties in all, nearly half the fighting strength of 6th Brigade. The Diary does note that the Battalion strength afterwards was fifteen officers and 639 OR. This compared with twenty-

¹⁴¹ *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

¹⁴² *Southport Visiter* 3rd June 1915 p.8; Stephens' figures were confirmed by another Private from 12 Platoon *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

¹⁴³ *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7

¹⁴⁴ Private Harold Butterworth described the death of Harry Cave in similar vein - ‘Harry, acting as one of the bomb throwers along with our Major, went in advance of the men, and both acted with great courage and bravery before they fell mortally wounded. It was a glorious death looked at in a military light, for it was their courageous conduct that enabled our men to capture the trenches without many casualties....Southport has been hit heavily in this engagement, and the town should know how gallantly her sons have fought under murderous conditions and, what is more, came through victoriously. Before the Germans are pushed back thousands of lives must inevitably be sacrificed, but then, if we are successful the price will ungrudgingly be paid.’ - *Southport Guardian* 5th June 1915 p.7

¹⁴⁵ WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 16th May 1915

¹⁴⁶ Marriott correspondence 21st May 1915

eight Officers in 1st South Staffordshire Regiment, and 601 OR in 1st King's, 801 OR in 1st Royal Berkshire Regiment.¹⁴⁷

Most of the men are now buried in one of the many small cemeteries in the area, such as the Guards Cemetery at Windy Corner, Post Office Rifles Cemetery, Brown's Road in Festubert, which now includes those originally buried at Cheyne Walk, Givenchy and Le Plantin (South) or Le Plantin (Welsh), and Cuinchy Communal Cemetery, which includes those from the now defunct cemeteries of the Royal Berkshires and the King's Clere, both originally in Cuinchy too.¹⁴⁸ In Marriott's letters he wrote of burying Arthur Hughes where he had fallen, but of taking back Kingston Adams to the British lines and burying him after the rest of the Battalion had been relieved. Later in his correspondence he reported on his return to the area in 1918 and locating graves of Kingston Adams, Hughes, McClelland, Hannon and Captains Tweedale and Chisolm amongst the battle debris.¹⁴⁹

Wyrall, who tabulated casualties by year, listed 109 deaths in the Battalion.¹⁵⁰ Written in 1935, this was not too far away from the 'official' figure of 115 found in *Soldiers Died*, although his total number of deaths for the War was 100 less than that in *Soldiers Died*. Simply from this research, it is known that there are also a few omissions in *Soldiers Died*. 115 represented nearly 12% of the total deaths for the Battalion 1914-19 of 960. Of those 115, 98 had enlisted at Bootle, Seaforth, Southport, Crosby or Birkdale. That figure of 98 does not include those who were born or lived in the catchment area, but enlisted elsewhere, including Liverpool itself.¹⁵¹ By any calculation, therefore, this was a severe blow to the area. It must also be remembered that 6th Brigade contained the 1st and 5th King's Liverpool Battalions, and their casualties also impacted on the area and on the Regiment as a whole. The impact of officer casualties was severe: all of the nine had pre-War Territorial commissions and the officer contingent was practically halved. The effects of this would have repercussions for the following years. Analysis of a similar nature for Givenchy 1918 shows a further 79 men killed and this explains the importance of

¹⁴⁷ WO95/1352 6th Brigade War Diary 25th May 1915

¹⁴⁸ *Indices of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*

¹⁴⁹ Marriott correspondence 10th and 11th December 1918

¹⁵⁰ Wyrall *The history of the King's Regiment* pp. 230-231

¹⁵¹ *Soldiers Died* pp. 48 - 58

the area to Liverpool and Southport in the years after the War, a feature which is discussed in chapter six.¹⁵²

Reports of the Battle stressed the honour of the Regiment, and this would have been helpful in securing more recruits for the Front. While Purser had much praise for other units, including the 5th King's, the Irish and the stretcher bearers, as well as the officers and men who risked a lot to save their friends, his point was to refer to the local appeal. 'No wonder the Liverpool regiments have a good name out here. They deserve it and the General sent good praise for our battalion.'¹⁵³

Relations between ranks was a key issue. The attitude toward officers who had been killed (see examples relating to Harvey and McClelland above) tends to confirm Sheffield's and Morris' findings, that the amount of deference and respect accorded the officer was related to their battlefield performance.¹⁵⁴ It was also undoubtedly to do with the role played by company officers, in particular in routine matters. This factor was recognised in Orders in November 1915 of 22nd Brigade, 7th Division:

It is most noticeable that both the spirit of the men and the amount of work done is far better in those battalions where the Officers are constantly amongst their men, inspiring them to work and even taking a hand themselves. Everyone can learn from the experiences and difficulties of others.¹⁵⁵

Another element of the success in the field was to enhance the reputation of the Battalion and the Regiment. There was a real regimental pride in being part of the Liverpool Regiment, as well as the more localised identification with the Southport Terriers. This will be seen throughout this study, somewhat contrary to the findings of other writers. For instance, Fuller has argued that rapid dilution in 'local' battalions took away any sense of local identity and that the local identity which did exist was very specific and did not extend to a sense of regimental identity.¹⁵⁶ Any dilution which did occur is explored in subsequent chapters, but it had not begun in 7th King's until after this first action thinned the ranks.

¹⁵² *ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9

¹⁵⁴ *Sheffield Leadership in the trenches* pp. 146-148; Morris "The Leeds Rifles" p.919

¹⁵⁵ WO95/1660 22nd Brigade War Diary 4th December 1915

¹⁵⁶ Fuller *Popular culture and troop morale* p.57; Beckett has also referred to the high

It was also important for the men to know that others had respect for them. Private Percy Oliver said: 'The 7th King's can always say they have fought and beat some of the cream of the Kaiser's Prussian Guards. We have won a grand name from our Brigade staff'.¹⁵⁷ Ormerod wrote: 'We have covered ourselves with glory, and have gained great respect from the Regulars. The Irish Guards, I am told, say we take 'The cake and biscuit too' '.¹⁵⁸

The Territorials had had a poor reputation, and their levels of discipline in particular had been a key feature of Kitchener's decision not to send them out in autumn 1914. Nonetheless, a number of units had already left for the Front by Christmas and, as Simkins has pointed out, there were mixed views about their deployment.¹⁵⁹ Despite the high number of volunteers for overseas service and the fact that Home Defence was now in the hands of Third Lines and troops in training, Beckett noted that Kitchener did not alter his opinion of the Force.¹⁶⁰ This was a line well known by the Territorials themselves, and this was one reason why it was so important to prove their ability and enhance their own reputation, as well as that of Territorials in other Divisions. This sense of inferiority caused some officers to lead their men shouting, as reported by Private Pirrie, 'We are only Territorials but we'll show them what we are made of'.¹⁶¹ Presumably the intention was to encourage the men to show that the Territorials were more than able to hold their end up.

Some signs of the strains between Home and War Fronts began to surface in some of the correspondence, although it was in the minority. An unnamed writer, printed in the *Bootle Times* complained that: 'When one is hard at it out here doing one's level best and then picks up a paper and reads of some of the blighters striking for more pay it makes one disgusted'.¹⁶² However, the concerns were generally more directed at persuading people to enlist, such as Private Webster's entreaty from his hospital bed:

I have not yet realised being in England, it seems too good to be true, and yet there is so much to be done and so many brave lives to be

extent of dilution in these units: Beckett "The Territorial Force" p.147

¹⁵⁷ *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7

¹⁵⁸ *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 5th June 1915 p.12

¹⁵⁹ Simkins *Kitchener's Army* p.44

¹⁶⁰ Beckett "The Territorial Force" p. 131.

¹⁶¹ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.8; *Crosby Herald* 29th May 1915 p.5

¹⁶² *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7

sacrificed before the Hun murderers are crushed once and forever. I wonder how long will it take for those who know that they are needed to add their names to Southports's Roll of Honour. They have been set a fine example by our late young Captain, who will be sadly missed by the men of 14 Platoon. He was an officer and a gentleman.¹⁶³

Despite this prevailing view regarding their success and the need for recruits to get the job done, the experience had demonstrated to the men that, given a choice, they would rather be at home. This attitude could perhaps be summed up by James Cook's report of a review by Lord Derby on 7th June, who told the men that in a few hours he would be in Liverpool: 'we were all saying "lucky chap" under our breath and derived no pleasure from his speech'.¹⁶⁴ Cook's subsequent career shows that he was no recalcitrant soldier but simply had a very understandable perspective towards the Earl's rather insensitive words.

The general reaction at home, gauged largely through the press, was one of pride and excitement. Reports show a number of memorial services and the casualty lists kept coming into late June, but more was made of the notion of sacrifice than the fact of loss. Recruitment was an important aspect of the home reaction too, and as later evidence will show, Festubert proved an important element in Southport's reconstruction after the War.

The first report of the battle appeared in the *Southport Visiter* on 18th May 1915, though there were few details.¹⁶⁵ The first in-depth reports did not feature until 22nd (*Southport Guardian*, *Crosby Herald*, *Southport Visiter*), while the first mention in the *Bootle Times* was 28th May, and in the *Formby Times* the 29th. This is largely explained by the different publishing dates. The attack started on Sunday 16th May, the troops were relieved from the trenches on Thursday night (20th May), and the first detailed reports appeared in time for the papers on 22nd, but just too late for the *Bootle Times* which had to wait a further week.

Some historians have said that the public knew little of casualties, of the attrition, of the real nature of the War, until much later, and certainly not in 1915-16.¹⁶⁶ However, the evidence of the Southport papers suggests that the information was abroad. As

¹⁶³ *Southport Guardian* 22nd May 1915 p.7

¹⁶⁴ James Cook correspondence 8th June 1915; WO95/1360 1/7th Battalion King's Liverpool Regiment War Diary 7th June 1915

¹⁶⁵ *Southport Visiter* 18th May 1915 p.6

Finn has commented, little attention has been paid to looking at the impact of letters and reports in local papers.¹⁶⁷ The local press had a different perspective on the War to the national press. Certainly, the papers would be unlikely to be as easily available to the enemy, although the sending back of local papers to the lads at the Front was a common occurrence. There was clearly no censorship imposed by the local papers of the horrors of War. Nor was there any attempt to hide the fate of individuals, or spare their families grief. However, this attitude could be seen as reflecting the community spirit, asking the whole town to share in the success and the loss together. In an attempt to make the losses bearable, this notion of shared community experience was vital in keeping morale at home at a high level and was assisted by having a particular local battalion with which to identify. Through such accounts in newspapers, the level of understanding and sense of belonging between the War and Home Fronts was built up at an early stage.

The sparsity of official news of local soldiers was therefore of some concern to the press and anything which broke through that 'fog' of GHQ war information was a bonus. The Press had a dilemma however. They were keen to present a story, but obviously were also aware of the need to maintain interest and increase recruitment levels. Unpalatable descriptions may have hindered that balance but equally honesty may have increased respect. Knightley has suggested that when, in the later 1920s, the truth about the War became known, this was a turning point for the press as a whole in this country and confidence in the newspaper to tell the truth to the public was lost.¹⁶⁸ However, the local publication of harsh accounts by local men demonstrates that, at least in 1915, the home public heard much of the reality of war.

The *Bootle Times* based its report of the action on a few letters, but the *Formby Times*, the *Southport Visiter* and the *Southport Guardian*, produced extensive reports and details under bold titles such as 'Praise for Local Lads', 'Seventh's Glorious Charge', and 'Southport's Heroic Soldier Sons'.¹⁶⁹ These titles and interpretation of events sounded like propaganda, in contrast to the content of actual accounts and letters. There was no attempt to detract from the casualty list as alongside these reports were lists of men killed, and personal details of many of the men who had

¹⁶⁶ Knightley *The First Casualty* p.108; Farrar *News from the Front* p.ix

¹⁶⁷ Finn, M "The realities of war"

¹⁶⁸ Knightley *The First Casualty* p.81

¹⁶⁹ *Formby Times* 29th May 1915 p.5; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.7; *Southport*

been lost. In fact, the *Southport Visiter*, which was able to steal a march on the others as a result of its publishing dates, led with: 'Southport's Battalion's Heavy Losses'.¹⁷⁰

The editorial of the *Bootle Times* was quite clear in emphasizing the local identification with the battle: 'The famous charges will long form the subject of admiring talk in this neighbourhood, which is so closely associated with this regiment and goes to prove that the young manhood of Bootle is doing its share towards crushing that monster of organised brutality which is named militarism'.¹⁷¹

The local orientation of reports backfired a little when the papers reached the Front. The emphasis on the Southport men in the 7th King's caused a few ripples of discontent when copies of the *Southport Visiter* reached the troops, prompting a 'Sandgrunder' to write: 'there are one or two Liverpool or district boys in this battalion...and I think they would have appreciated a word or two on their behalf...now just give a word of praise to the Liverpool boys'. The Editor inserted a by-line reading, 'Of course the whole of the 7th King's Liverpool Battalion has done splendidly, and the designation "Southport Battalion" includes the Formby, Bootle and other men from this district'.¹⁷² This reinforces the assumptions of the thesis that the spatial identity of the Battalion extended beyond the immediacy of Bootle and Southport.

It is interesting to note, however, that the praise heaped on the Territorials was not restricted to the very local press. The *Liverpool Echo* also carried the story. Of course, a number of Battalions of the Regiment were in the fight and so there is a slightly wider Regimental outlook, but even so the headlines tell the story: 'King's in thick of the Fight. Fine work in the battle of Festubert a tribute to gallant local officers. Splendid record of bravery. How our Territorials and Regulars stood the great test of courage'.¹⁷³ In fact the emphasis on the brave work of Territorials and

Guardian 29th May 1915 pp.9 and 11

¹⁷⁰ *Southport Visiter* 27th May 1915 p.6

¹⁷¹ *Bootle Times* 28th May 1915 p.7

¹⁷² A 'Sandgrunder' was one born in Southport; *Southport Visiter* 8th June 1915 p.6

¹⁷³ *Liverpool Echo* 29th May 1915 p.3

Regulars together was a clear message of the solidarity and uniformity in the Regiment as a whole.¹⁷⁴

The *Southport Guardian* reported on the increase in recruiting on 29th May.

Obviously the young men of Southport who up to the present had not decided to join the colours, have by this now famous charge at last been moved...the last seven days have constituted a record recruiting week for this popular regiment. Over 150 men have been passed by the doctor. The record exceeds anything that has been done by any other Territorial Battalion in the West Lancashire Division, over 1,800 recruits having been obtained for the 7th King's and quite half of these have come from the Southport and Birkdale district. The Second Battalion is considerably over strength, the Third Battalion is nearly complete, and there are rumours of a Fourth Battalion to be formed.¹⁷⁵

The paper was quoting the recruiting officer, Captain Campbell, and although there is no other corroboration available for the figures, a Third Battalion was fully formed and was engaged on Home Defence for the duration, suggesting that the action was instrumental in providing a boost to recruiting in the area. It did, however, coincide with Derby's call as Chairman of the West Lancashire Territorial Force Association, for local Councils to increase the recruiting campaign in early May.¹⁷⁶

Some letters from the Front were making the point about the need for recruits, including Corporal Wainwright in his letter to the Mayor: 'I cannot say what our casualties are not having seen the list, but I am afraid it will go hard against the town, but trust others will soon come forward to take our places'.¹⁷⁷ The 1st June 1915 edition of the *Southport Visiter* printed a list of recent recruits alongside more letters from the Front, and the report of a memorial service to Private W.A.Scott, who had

¹⁷⁴ 'No words can fittingly describe the pluck and gallantry shown by our troops, Regulars and Territorials alike, during the recent fighting in the Festubert district.' - *Liverpool Echo* 29th May 1915 p.3; a report on 'The Fighting Fifth - Liverpool Terriers in the thick of it' was followed by another on 'Seventh Liverpool's Fine Work - Storming German trenches.' - *Liverpool Echo* 26th May 1915 p.3: Another report included some letters, such as that from Private James Blackwood, B Company, which had not appeared in the Southport or Bootle papers.- *Liverpool Echo* 28th May 1915 p.5

¹⁷⁵ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.7

¹⁷⁶ Bootle County Borough Minutes Volume XXXII 5th May 1915; LUD7 Litherland Urban District Council Minutes 3rd May 1915

¹⁷⁷ *Southport Guardian* 29th May 1915 p.9; *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.4

been killed in the action, thus stressing the importance of continuity and encouraging recruitment with tales from the Front while recognising the sacrifices that had to be made.¹⁷⁸

The local Councils had important roles to play on the Home Front in leading, organising and facilitating the many aspects required to deal with the situation. Two of these roles were also to lead the comment and the mourning. In both aspects, they were strangely muted. While they had responded positively to the recruitment campaign, as noted above, there was no particular civic response to the many casualties. This was perhaps because of the recruitment campaign. People could read about the casualties in the local papers but the Councils were determined to put a positive spin on the battle, emphasizing the call to arms. Nonetheless, it had become the habit for Councils to express sympathy to Councillors who had lost members of their family, and Litherland UDC passed a vote of sympathy to those who had lost relatives on the **Lusitania**,¹⁷⁹ and later in the North Sea battle in May 1916.¹⁸⁰ The absence of this public statement on the casualties may have been due to the close allegiance of a coastal area to maritime events – but it is more likely to have been a conscious decision to not discourage volunteers.

¹⁷⁸ *Southport Visiter* 1st June 1915 p.3

¹⁷⁹ LUD 7 Litherland Urban District Council Minutes 10th May 1915

¹⁸⁰ LUD 7 Litherland Urban District Council Minutes 5th June 1916

Conclusion

Although the battle of Festubert was carried out in conjunction with the operations being pursued by the French, a realistic study of it must place it in the context of the earlier battles in the La Basée area, at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge, part of the first real attempts to launch breakthrough attacks on the German line. As such, it was tactically important as the first planned night attack of the War and was also significant for its involvement of Territorial battalions in the first wave of the assault (although this was not the first occasion on which this had happened). The immediate success was tempered by the failure to follow through with the attack sufficiently to make the break count. Casualties were high and these affected the 1/7th King's particularly severely. This impact had the result of helping to evolve the sense of community identity within the Battalion, within the Home communities, and between the Home community and the Front Line. It also contributed toward a reasonable reputation for combat effectiveness in the Unit.

Festubert was also significant because it marked the end of the wide ranging freedoms in press reporting and the introduction of the official War Office briefings. Reports of the battle of Loos, September 1915, in local newspapers were noticeably less reliant on soldiers' letters home, as editors became more reliant on the War Office and less inclined or less able to print the less palatable soldiers' truths. The press reports around Festubert were significant, however, in galvanising support for a flagging recruitment campaign, albeit temporarily. Despite these key elements attached to it, Festubert has not had the same level of historical attention as either Neuve Chapelle or Aubers Ridge. The historiography has demonstrated this distinction, perhaps because it was less important in terms of the bigger picture of 1915. Nonetheless, the particular elements of the battle, such as the success of the night attack and the immediate relevance of the loss of the **Lusitania**, have deserved more critical attention than they have received. As will be demonstrated by the end of this study, however, Festubert has retained a key place in the Battalion's history and the history of the communities from which it was drawn.

Epilogue

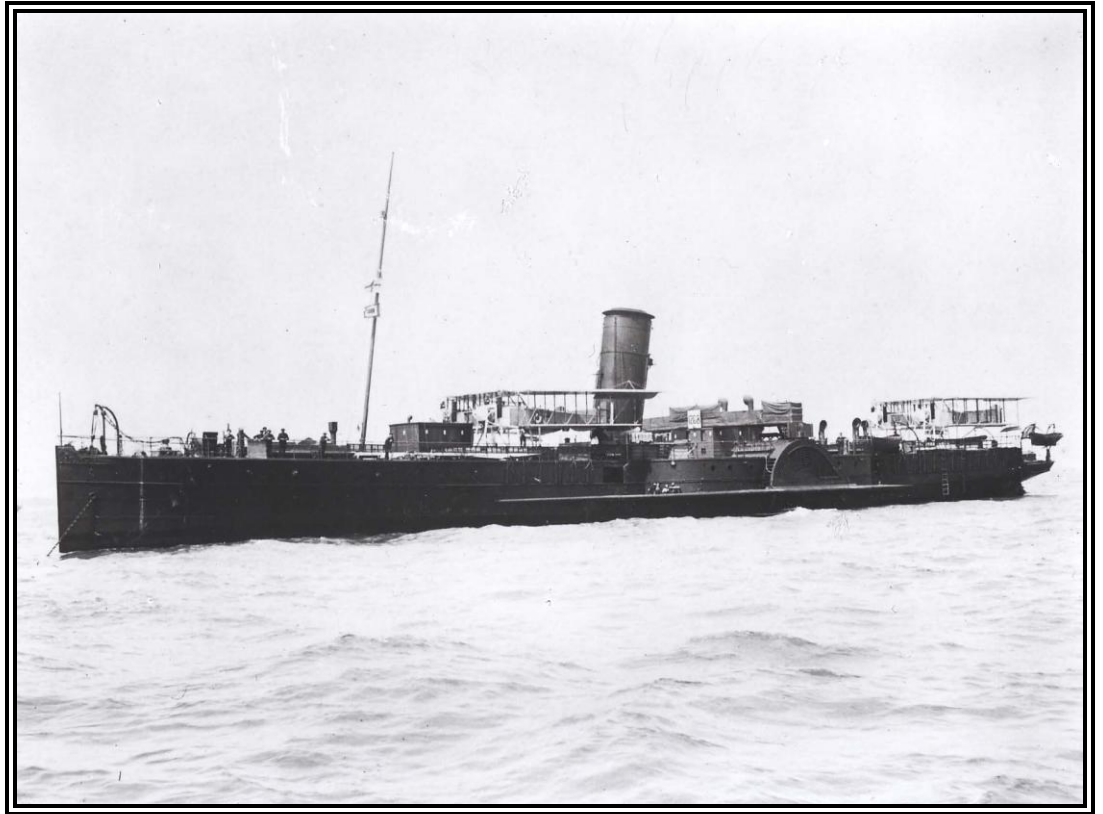
Even in the midst of adversity, or perhaps because of it, the trench humour shone through. The letter below demonstrates well that the Front Line soldiers were in close touch with events in Britain, referring sardonically both to the 'shells scandal' and the campaign by Lloyd George against drinking which he had launched in early May. Transcribed phonetically in Lancashire dialect, it confirms Joyce's emphasis on the importance of dialect, particularly in Lancashire, and its relevance to social identity.¹⁸¹ Shortly after the battle, Private Joseph Peet of 5 Platoon, B Company, wrote back:

I am now enjoying a little Continental trip 'somewhere in France'...and I can't say it is any too healthy round these parts just at present. I have had a good long spell in the trenches, but I got a bit of a change a week last Saturday. We were ordered to charge the Germans...Over we went with cries of "Remember the Lusi". I saw a few Germans running away, and I shouted, "Howd on a bit" but I think they were in too big of a hurry, or else they wanted to catch a train to 'Bonks'.¹⁸² They're quare chaps those Jarmons... German artillery started to shell us...'Tawk about fireworks, Belle Vue's nod in id, and they're nod sich noice tackle to run up again, I con tell tha, and it pays to keep thou heead down. Some folk think as owd England is going down a bit through drinking ale, but they are not as bad as folks in this country. Every other house sells ale here and the ale is so bad it makes me 'screet' every time I look at it. All the youngsters drink ale and smoke pipes as big as themselves...We got a good bath and a clean shirt. I wanted one badly, for my shirt had started to walk and talk for itself. I would like to walk in your house just at present and have a pint. I would give half-a-crown for a pint of "Whittle Springs" for the ale in this country is only fit for drowning fleas...I hope I have the luck to get back to Southport again. At any rate before t'Jarmons get to Bonks.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Joyce *Visions of the People* p.279

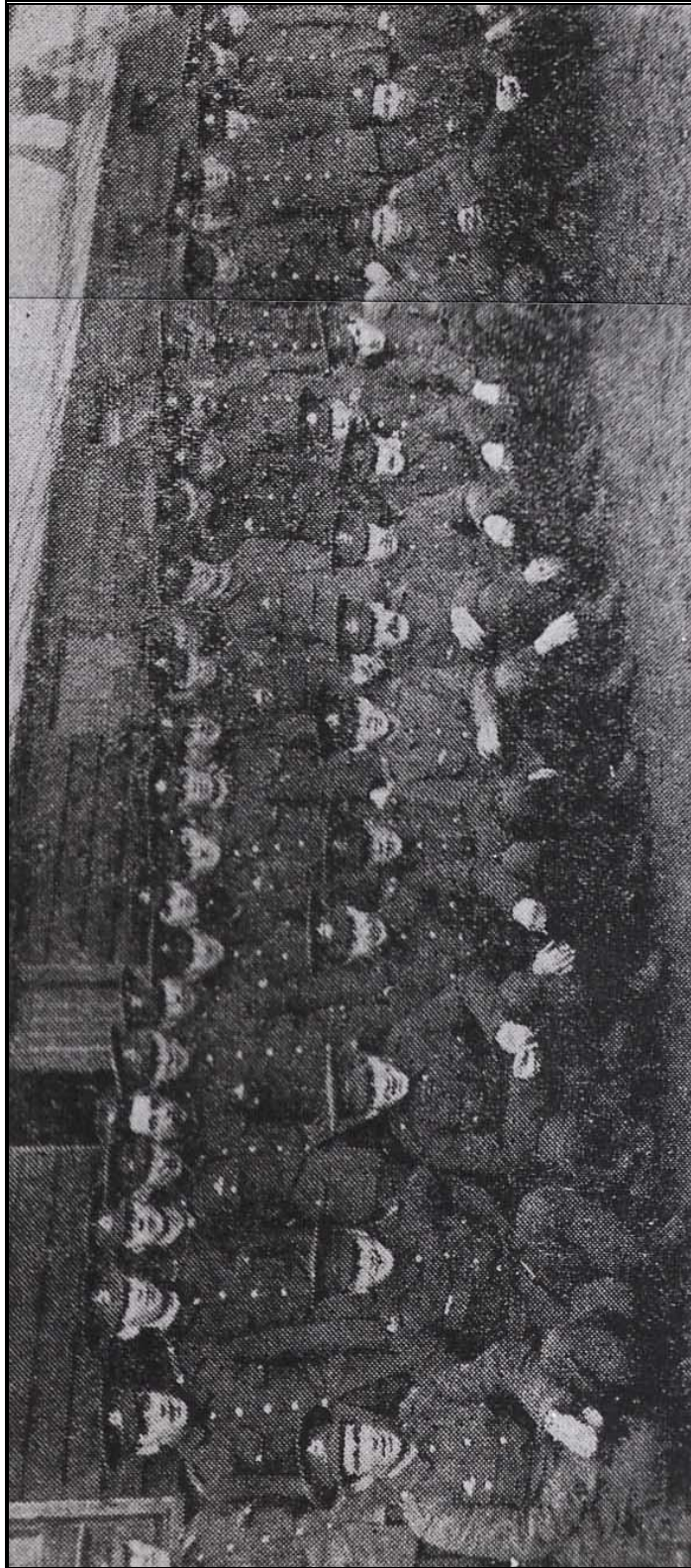
¹⁸² Banks: a village north of Southport

¹⁸³ *Southport Visiter* 29th May 1915 p.4



The Golden Eagle, which took men of 1/7th Battalion across the Channel on the night of 7th March 1915.

Photograph courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London ref. SP3037

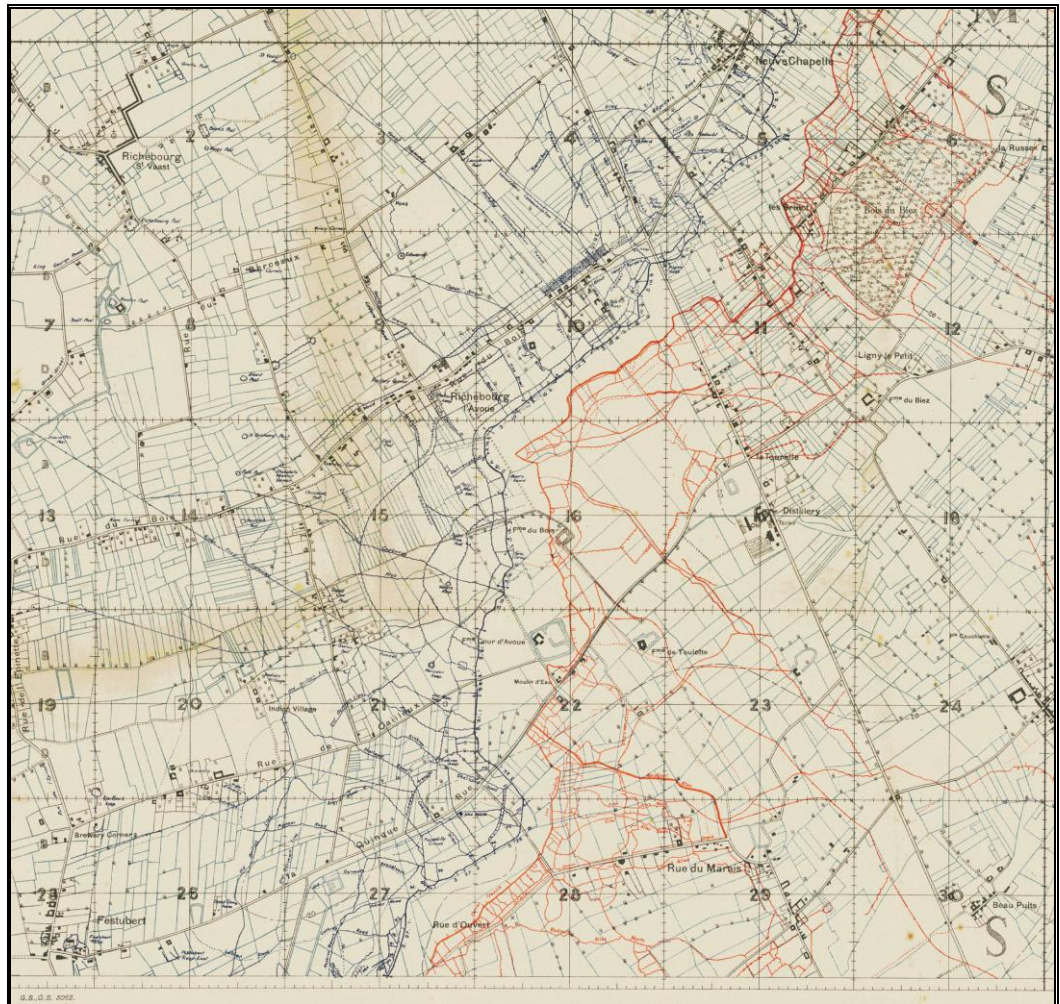


A group of men from 1/7th Kings, presumably the 'Formby Company'.

Photograph from the Formby Times 17th April 1915 p.3



Photograph of 1/7th King's, allegedly in the Front Line, shown on the front page of the *Daily Sketch* 1st June 1915 and later reproduced in *The Year Illustrated 1915* Headley Brothers London p.90
This copy courtesy of Philip Haythornthwaite



Extract from a trench map showing the Festubert area, Allied lines in blue, German in red. Positions had changed little since the battle in 1915.
36SW-7A Richebourg 12th June 1916 Imperial War Museum Trench Map Archive



Left: 2175 Private Robert Balshaw, who died of his wounds on 20th May and below, 2898 Private Bobby Mercer, killed on 17th May 1915. Both from Formby, Balshaw is buried at Boulogne Eastern Cemetery grave VIII.D.31 and Mercer is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial, Panels 6-8.

Photographs from The Formby Times 5th June 1915 p.5

