

FEBRUARY 1917

OMINOUS EVENTS

Although there were no major offensives, this month was momentous - portents of things to come. The Tsar continued to struggle to maintain any kind of control and, outnumbered on the Western Front (154 divisions against 190) Ludendorff shrewdly forestalled another attack by withdrawing with astonishing secrecy to the Hindenburg Line. The Germans had not avoided battle, they had simply decided to fight on even higher ground of their own choosing.

Also post Jutland conviction held sway that submarines were the way forward at sea for Germany and so they now provocatively unleashed unrestricted submarine warfare on all ships of whatever nationality in and around British waters. Its aim? To starve Britain into submission. Its result? Eventually to bring the USA into the war. After the sinking of the grain ship "SS Housatonic" and 7 other American vessels, President Wilson severed diplomatic relations with the Central Powers (altogether 500 ships were sunk in the next 60 days). He asked Congress for permission to arm merchant ships. The British finally released to the press the previously intercepted Zimmerman Telegram in which the Germans promised the return of vast swathes of the American South West to Mexico if it promised to join in a future alliance against the USA. Elsewhere the newly invigorated and replenished British and Indians retook Kut in Mesopotamia and continued to advance on Baghdad.

Our community lost 4 men this month - 2 were to perish on the 14th. **Private George Frederick Graham**, aged 19, formerly of the **King's Shropshire Light Infantry** and later of the **Royal Defence Corps (C18860) 389th Protection Group** was from Chapel Lane, Wilmslow where he lived with his parents, 2 brothers and a sister. A butcher's errand boy before the war, he doubtless was involved in typical Royal Defence Corps work in the UK - defending ports, installation and Prisoner of War camps. He is interred in St Bartholomew's graveyard and commemorated both in the church and on the civic memorial.



Private Thomas Leah of the **11th Cheshire's (49524)** died aged 38 on the same day. He had been a back tenter at the Calico Print Works in Handforth and earlier in the war - August 1916 - had been wounded in the shoulder. Commemorated in Styal Methodist church and on the local memorial, his grave can be found at Tancrez Farm Cemetery near Ploegsteert and Wytschaete at the southern limit of the Ypres Salient. Interestingly Ploegsteert (or Plugstreet as the Tommies called it) was where Lt Colonel Winston Churchill had commanded the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers in 1915 -16. Meanwhile Wytschaete (Whitesheet to the Tommies) was where Corporal Adolph Hitler of the Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment was later gassed, as a dispatch runner between trenches, by a British shell in October 1918.



Styal Methodist Church

Tancrez also marks the last resting place of **Private Albert E Arrowsmith** of the **2nd battalion South Lancs (27192)**. He died, aged 35, on the 16th next to the First Aid Post where he was brought after a brutal exchange of artillery fire. Albert, a native of Handforth, lived all of his life in that community and worked as an engine fitter. Prior to the war he lived at 244 Wilmslow Road with his mother Jane and younger sister Nellie. He is commemorated in St Chad's and on the Long Lane memorial and the newly erected Handforth memorial.



Tancrez Farm Cemetery



On the same day we lost **Private Harry F Bebbington**, aged 33, of the **Australian Imperial Force (5986)**. (Soldiers could choose their regiment before conscription was introduced in March 1916.) Harry is buried in Epsom Cemetery next to Horton War Hospital, Surrey. He had been a cabinet maker and lived with his wife Nellie in Laburnum Cottage, Nursery Lane. He is commemorated in St John's Lindow.

Spring came and better weather approached. Where would the next offensives be? Was victory within reach for any of the belligerents?

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