

## JOHN T ELY

John Thomas Ely was born in Partney in 1891. He was baptised in St Nicholas Church on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1891.

His father George was a labourer. By 1901 his mother Lucy Ann was a widower and working as a charwoman; she was also the Church cleaner. The 1911 Census found John and his sister still living with their mother in Partney. John was now a house painter.

In 1914 John married Mazena Eastwood. The Electoral Register for that year shows John as living 'near the School'. Their daughter Kathleen Mary was baptised in St Nicholas Church on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1915. At the time John was resident in Crowland, a sergeant in the 5<sup>th</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment. His brother Walter William Ely served in the Army Veterinary Corps during the First World War.

John had enlisted in on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1908 and served in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Lincolnshire Territorial Regiment. As a member of the territorial army he attended annual weekly training camps.

The Annual Training at Skegness in 1908 was not of a very arduous character, and every effort was made to render training in Camp attractive and popular. Much good work was done however, Company and Battalion drill were assiduously practised, the elements of manoeuvre were learnt, and the general standard of efficiency at the end of fourteen days was notably improved.

The Annual Training in 1909 took place at Garendon Park, Leicestershire, where the newly-formed Lincoln and Leicester Brigade was brought together for the first time under the command of the Brigadier, Col. A. M. Carthew-Yorstoun. The training was of the usual nature, chiefly Company and Battalion work, with two days of combined Brigade training. The weather was very fine, hot and dry, and a serious heath fire occurred in the neighbourhood, which the Battalion assisted to subdue; in recognition of their services, the owner of the property forwarded a cheque for £50 to Battalion Funds.

In 1910, the Annual Training was carried out at Buxton, where a Brigade Camp was again formed, and more extended Brigade and Battalion manoeuvre was practised than in the previous year, as a large stretch of open land was available. Unfortunately, the weather this year was very bad during the greater part of the time, and seriously interfered with the training programme.

In 1911 the Battalion again performed their Annual Training in a Brigade Camp at Garendon Park under favourable weather conditions.

In 1912 it was decided to assemble for the Annual Training the whole of the North Midland Division in one area, and Aberystwyth was selected as the site of

the Camp. The actual Divisional Training was very elementary but extremely valuable, enabling units of different Arms to obtain a rough idea of how to work together, and affording an opportunity for Infantry to watch the work of other Arms, especially Artillery. Owing to the long marches necessary in Divisional operations the training was strenuous and exhausting, but all ranks worked well, and the Divisional Commander was very satisfied with the result.

John Ely progressed well and was appointed Lance Corporal on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1911, Corporal on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1914 and Sergeant on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1915.

On enlisting he was working as a painter and decorator for a Mr John Goodhand of Partney. He was 6'1½" tall and weighed 174lbs, with a 36½" chest.

On January 1st, 1915, the new four-company Battalion organization of the 5<sup>th</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment was adopted, and the next few weeks were devoted principally to Platoon, Company, and Battalion Drill. .

On February 19th, to the gratification of all ranks, the Division was inspected in Hallingbury Park, Essex by H.M. the King; a special complimentary order was subsequently issued expressing His Majesty's pleasure at seeing the Division, and wishing it God-Speed.

The next week was one of feverish excitement, tempered by the expenditure of much energy, and very hard work. Clothing, boots, arms, and equipment were very thoroughly inspected, and all deficiencies replaced.

The Battalion was now completely at war strength in Officers and Other Ranks, thoroughly equipped, although only armed with the old long rifle, well trained and physically fit as regards personnel, with the Transport in good condition. The Machine Gun and Signalling Sections had been carefully trained, and were very efficient, and all ranks looked forward with a cheery confidence to Active Service in the Field.

At 11 p.m. on Friday, February 26th, 1915, the Battalion, including John Ely, paraded for the last time in England, and marched to Bishop's Stortford station where they entrained for Southampton on their way to the Front. The departure from Stansted of the Battalion headed by the band, which had been selected to accompany the Lincoln and Leicester Brigade as the Brigade band, was witnessed, despite the late hour, by large numbers of the inhabitants, and was a scene of great enthusiasm.

All ranks were in the highest spirits, confident in themselves, eager to prove themselves in the Field, proud to belong to the first Territorial Division to proceed as such, to France. The three miles march to Bishop's Stortford completed, the Battalion entrained without a hitch, arriving at Southampton Docks at 7 a.m. on February 27th.

The Transport and 200 men proceeded to a Rest Camp, while the remainder waited in the Docks till 3 p.m., when they embarked on the S.S. Empress Queen, with various other details, and left the Harbour at 10 p.m. for Havre. The passage was uneventful and fairly smooth and was completed at 4 a.m. on the 28th, but many of the men had never been at sea before and a considerable number fell victims to sea-sickness.

On 16<sup>th</sup> September 1915 John was appointed Company Sergeant Major.

At 4.30 p.m. on October 12th, the battalion left Hesdigneul and marched through Bethune and Sailly-la-Bourse to a field beyond the latter, where they rested till dusk, and then resumed the march to Vermelles, where they were met by the guides detailed to lead them to the trenches in which they were to relieve the Irish Guards.

At Vermelles each Company halted and were served out with the tools and bombs to be carried in the attack next day. The bombs were served out packed in sandbags under superintendence of the Divisional Bomb Officer, and were naturally accepted by the Company Commanders as serviceable stores, but on arrival in trenches, when distributed to the men, much of the load carried from Vermelles proved utterly useless consisting of rifle grenades without rods, and old bombs of all patterns, and the result was a shortage of bombs after the attack at a time of urgent need, which had most serious consequences.

After stand-to at dawn on October 13th, the Battalion devoted itself to a good breakfast, and the morning was spent in organizing the details of the attack. At noon the preliminary bombardment began, probably the heaviest and most concentrated artillery attack by the British Army up to that date, as had been promised by the Corps Commander; the enemy retaliation was not very severe, but a good many casualties were caused owing to the necessarily crowded condition of the trenches.

The wind being favourable, gas cylinders having been previously installed in the front line, a gas cloud was discharged towards the enemy trenches at 1.45 p.m., but a certain number of casualties were sustained in our own front line, as the wind was gusty and occasionally drove back the cloud into portions of our own trenches. Zero hour was 2 p.m., when the Battalion left the trenches, and advanced "over the top" on the enemy position.

The wire in front of the Redoubt was well cut, and the Battalion swept over the W. and E. faces with few casualties but on advancing over the open ground in front of the Fosse trench came under such heavy rifle and machine gun fire from the front and from both flanks, that the lines melted away, and further advance became impossible; although numerous isolated parties maintained themselves in shell holes at various points until dusk, the line as a whole was compelled to

retire to the E face of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, which was consolidated for defence.

All ranks behaved most gallantly, but the very heavy casualties in Officers and N.C.O.'s deprived the men of leadership, just at the time it was most needed, with the result that a certain amount of crowding took place, causing additional casualties.

The following Divisional Order was issued on October 15th:

The G.O.C. wishes to convey to the Division his deep appreciation of their most gallant conduct on the 13th inst. The attack was carried out with great bravery and dash, and it was no fault of the infantry that the objective of the attack was not reached. The Corps Commander has desired the G.O.C. to convey to all ranks his admiration for the manner in which the attack was carried out.

The G.O.C. deplores the loss of so many gallant officers and men, whose names will be inscribed on the Roll of Honour. He is confident that every man in the Division will be ever ready to act in the same gallant manner, when called upon to do so

John Thomas Ely was reported missing on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1915, presumed dead. He was 'struck off the strength' on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1915. At the time of his death he had served just over 7½ years in the army.

He is remembered on the Loos Memorial. The Loos Memorial forms the side and back of Dud Corner Cemetery, and commemorates over 20,000 officers and men who have no known grave, who fell in the area from the River Lys to the old southern boundary of the First Army, east and west of Grenay.

Dud Corner Cemetery stands almost on the site of a German strong point, the Lens Road Redoubt, captured by the 15th (Scottish) Division on the first day of the battle. The name "Dud Corner" is believed to be due to the large number of unexploded enemy shells found in the neighbourhood after the Armistice. On either side of the cemetery is a wall 15 feet high, to which are fixed tablets on which are carved the names of those commemorated. At the back are four small circular courts, open to the sky, in which the lines of tablets are continued, and between these courts are three semicircular walls or apses, two of which carry tablets, while on the centre apse is erected the Cross of Sacrifice.

John Ely was awarded the British War Medal, the Victory Medal and the 1915 Star.

The magnificently detailed account of life in the 5<sup>th</sup> Lincolnshire Regiment from 1908 to 1915 was obtained from a History of the 5th Battalion the Lincolnshire Regiment by Colonel T. E. Sandall, C.M.G., T.D. available at <http://www.4-lom.com/sandall/>