

Pte T.W.Gatford – The East Surrey Regiment

Thomas William Gatford was born in Burgess Hill, Sussex, in 1895. He was the eldest son of Thomas Gatford, and Charity Ann Gatford who lived at Drydown Cottages. Thomas senior was a carter on a farm and his son became a stockman.

Tom Gatford joined the Army on 9th September 1915, serving in 27th Bn The Middlesex Regiment which arrived in France on 26th September 1916. Three weeks later, on 11th October, he transferred to 12th Bn The East Surrey Regiment which was engaged in front line service through to the Third Battle of Ypres which began on 31st July 1917. In the ensuing weeks he was wounded three times – on 5th and 7th August when the Battalion was in action around Hollebeeke, and again on 21st September in the area of Ridge Wood.

The British offensive at Ypres was fought in appalling conditions and ended with the capture of Paschendaele in November 1917 and the loss of over 300,000 men in gaining a few miles of territory. On 18th November the 12th East Surreys moved to Italy, as part of the 41st Division, where they served alongside the Italian Army engaged against the Austrians on a front along the River Piave.

In March 1918 the 41st Division was moved back to France to help resist the German spring offensive which began on 21st March in a desperate bid to win the war before the Americans became fully involved. By that time the Russians were out of the war. As a result the Germans were able to attack in great strength and made rapid progress.

On 24th March 12th Bn East Surreys were defending the front south of Arras. They encountered enemy shelling throughout the day and at 6.00 pm were ordered to withdraw to a line in front of Sapignies. C Company and the Commanding Officer became isolated and, early next morning, had to make a stand under heavy attack. As the enemy were getting round their flanks as well as attacking frontally the Company was ordered to retire, but only the Commanding Officer and one NCO escaped. This action helped the Hampshire Regiment establish a defensive line and saved some 60 guns from capture.

In the late afternoon the East Surreys dug in to support the Hampshires in another stand before supporting them again in a counter-attack on Bihucourt Wood. Thomas Gatford was reported missing in action on 25th March. Later a notification was received via the official German list of

dead that his body had been found that day near a sap and that he had been buried in a large grave. Later he was buried in Plot III.F.3 in the British Cemetery at Douchy-les-Ayette, near Arras. The 12th East Surreys lost 33 men in the actions on 25th March; most of them have no known grave and are remembered on the Arras Memorial.

The German offensive in the Spring of 1918 was perhaps the greatest crisis faced by the Allies in the entire war. South of Arras the allied line was forced back to lose all the territory they had gained in the previous two years. In July the tide turned and the exhausted German armies were forced to retreat. The Allies regained the lost ground and continued their advance until the Armistice was signed on 11th November 1918.