



WORLD WAR ONE – ROLL OF HONOUR

WILLIAM HENRY GIDDINGS

Corporal (1181), 11th Battalion, Rifle Brigade

Killed in Action, Battle of Mount Sorrel, France – 6 June 1916

William Henry Giddings was born in Honey Street in the Parish of Woodborough on 20th June 1879, the son of James Giddings and Elizabeth Giddings (nee Beake) who had married in 1875.

Aside from his registration following birth and the memorial plaque in the Parish Church in Woodborough, there is no record of William being used as his first name. Rather the name Henry appears to have been preferred.

At the time of Henry's birth, his father James is recorded as being a groom and the family were still living at Honey Street Wharf on the 1881 census.

In addition to Henry, James and Elizabeth Giddings are known to have had three other children – Oliver (born 1876), Charlotte (born 1878) and Rosa Maud (born 1884). However, aged 39, Elizabeth Giddings died of pneumonia in September 1884, shortly after the birth of Rosa.

The following year James Giddings married Hannah Allen and on the 1891 census Henry, aged 12, is recorded as being a Milk Boy living with his father, step-mother and older brother Oliver in Honey Street, Woodborough. Following the death of her mother, Rosa Giddings had been sent to live with her uncle and aunt, James and Jane Bartlett (nee Giddings) in Alverstoke, Hampshire. The location of Charlotte is unknown but she is recorded as living with her husband in Aberdeen in 1920.

Initially, Henry Giddings remained in Honey Street and started working as a Sawyer in the local timber yard. However, on 31 December 1897, aged 18 years and 6 months, Henry enlisted with the Rifle Brigade at Gosport.

The enlistment papers state that Henry was 5' 6 1/2", weighed just 116 lbs (8 Stone 4 lbs), and had an anchor tattoo on the back of his left forearm. It was also noted that Henry's right ear was deformed and

that he had scars on his left cheek just below the angle of the eye, on the back of his left hand and on his right knee.

Henry remained in the UK at Gosport Depot until November 1898 when he was posted to Crete with the 2nd Battalion of The Rifle Brigade, arriving on 19th November 1898. The Rifle Brigade remained in Crete until October of the following year before being posted to South Africa, arriving there on 2nd October 1899. The Second Boer War commenced just 9 days later and hostilities continued until the war formally ended on 31 May 1902. Henry and the 2nd Battalion of The Rifle Brigade remained in South Africa for the entire war.

Henry's service in the Second Boer War resulted in a number of decorations being awarded including the Queen's South Africa medal and claps for Belfast (Battle of Bergendal), Tugela Heights and the Relief of Ladysmith.



2nd Battalion, The Rifle Brigade at Bergendal (21st to 27th August 1899)

The Rifle Brigade left South Africa in September 1902 and spent the next three years in Egypt. Henry eventually returned to the UK in October 1905 and, having spent 8 years on active service, was transferred to reserve on 30th December 1905. After 4 years on the reserve list, Henry received his final discharge from the army on 30th December 1909.

After leaving the army it appears that Henry went to live with his younger sister Rosa and her husband, Christopher Moore, at 39 Whitworth Road in Gosport where he is recorded on the 1911 census. The census also states that Henry was still single and employed as a carman in the house furnishing business.

However, shortly after the outbreak of War in 1914, Henry signed up again. Aged 35 (and now 5' 11" and 9 stone 7 lbs), Henry enlisted at Winchester on 30th August 1914. Henry returned to his old Regiment, being posted to the 11th Battalion of The Rifle Brigade on 5th September 1914.

The 11th Battalion spent the winter training in the Winchester area and then at Blackdown in Surrey before moving to nearby Witley in February 1915. The Battalion was transferred to Hamilton Camp near

Stonehenge in April 1915 for final training. After training was completed the Battalion embarked for France leaving from Folkestone, taking the short trip to Boulogne on 21st July 1915.

On arrival in France the Battalion was moved to Fleurbaix, just west of Lille and approximately 30 kilometers south of Ypres, for trench familiarisation training.

Henry's service record notes that he was promoted to Acting Corporal on the 14th August 1915. Doubtless this was a reflection of Henry's experience, although the record also notes that this was unpaid. However, Henry was promoted to Corporal on a permanent basis on 26 February 1916 (with pay!).

There is no record of the 11TH Battalion having been involved in any action during 1915, nor in the spring of 1916, and it seems likely that they were being held in reserve. However, by late spring 1916 the 11TH Battalion of The Rifle Brigade had been moved up to the front line to the east of Ypres in support of Canadian troops in the area.

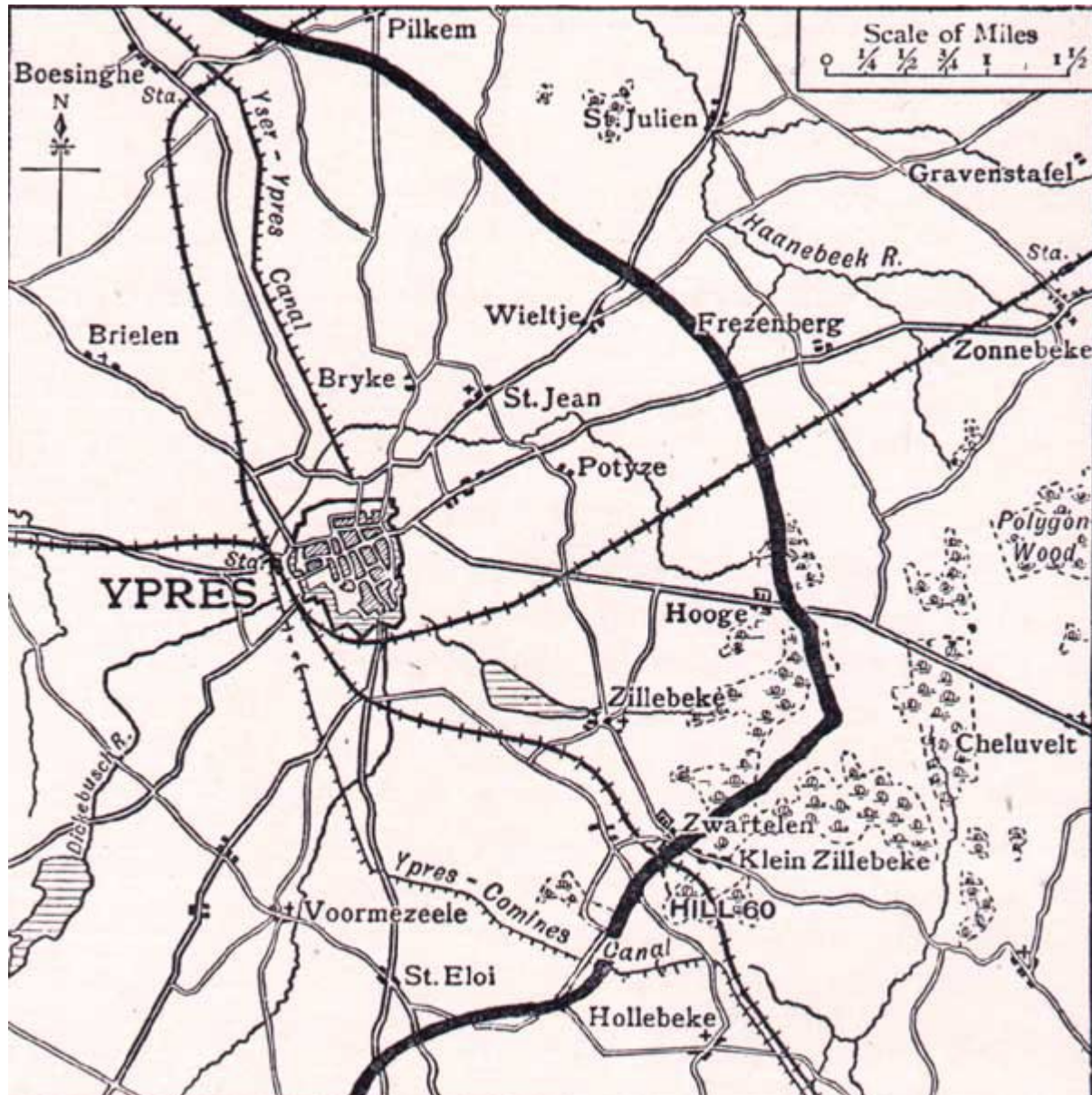
Ypres was held by the allies and protected by a largely wooded ridge to the east. The crest line ran from Hooge on the Menin Road, south to Hill 60 by the Ypres-Comines canal. Between Hooge and Hill 60 stood two other heights named Mount Sorrel and Tor Top, with the latter being the furthest point of the allied lines east of Ypres. Any force occupying the heights enjoyed excellent views over the town of Ypres and all the approaching roads, railways and tracks.

Canadian troops occupied most of the crest line with British troops in support on Mount Sorrel. The 20th (Light) Division, including Henry's Battalion of The Rifle Brigade, were situated on the north side of Hooge and the Menin Road on the edge of Railway Wood.

In addition to the crest line being tactically important, German commanders were aware of the build-up of allied troops on the Somme and were keen to draw away as many British units as possible. Plans and preparations had therefore been made for an assault on the crest line with the primary objective of capturing the high points of Mount Sorrel and Tor Top looking down on the town of Ypres.

On 31st May and 1st June 1916, the three Canadian Divisions holding the crest line reported much increased incoming artillery fire and airborne activity, but no infantry attack materialised.

However, on the following day (2nd June) the German artillery fire intensified during the course of the morning. The two senior Canadian commanders (Major-General Mercer and Brigadier-General Williams), who had been touring Mount Sorrel and Tor Top, were caught in the artillery fire with the former being severely wounded (and later in the day taken prisoner) and the latter being killed.



Area map for the Battle of Mount Sorrel (2 – 13th June 1916)

Just after 1300 hrs on 2nd June, German pioneers blew a small number of mines near the British fire trench on Mount Sorrel and this was the signal for the launching of a German infantry assault on both Mount Sorrel and Tor Top.

The German artillery fire had proved very accurate, having a devastating impact on the British position on Mount Sorrel and, despite strong resistance and hand to hand fighting, the German infantry overran the Allies line, capturing the heights at Mount Sorrel and Tor Top. Their advance made some headway down the slope of both heights, before the defenders recovered and with reserves arriving the German infantry were halted.

However, it was not until 0710 hrs on the following day (3rd June) that the Canadian reserve troops were in place to make a counter-attack, by which time it was broad daylight. Although a coordinated attack on three points had been planned, the rockets signaling the start of the counter-attack did not go off at the same time. In consequence, the attacks began at different times enabling the German defenders to

concentrate their fire on each attack as it came. The Canadian troops took heavy casualties with the result that, where trenches were captured, their numbers were too small to hold their ground. Between noon and 1300 hrs the remaining Canadian troops returned to their start positions, although all gaps in the Allied lines had now been filled and positions closer to the German trenches were established.

Sir Douglas Haig, desperate to avoid diluting the build-up of forces on the Somme, had little choice but to reinforce the area and insisted that the heights of Mount Sorrel and Tor Top be recaptured. However, in the following days the weather deteriorated, delaying a second planned counter-attack.

On 6th June the German infantry made a second attack, striking again before a counter-attack had been mounted. Following a three hour bombardment and the blowing of four mines at Hooze, German infantry launched an attack at Hooze to the north and on Hill 60 to the south.

Although both attacks were reportedly repelled by Canadian troops, we know from reports the following week that the 11th Battalion the Rifle Brigade was located on the edge of Railway Wood on the northern side of Hooze and the Menin Road. We have no details of the circumstances of Henry's death, other than that he was killed in action on 6th June. Accordingly, it seems likely that he was involved in repelling the attack by German infantry around Hooze on the 6th June and was killed in the process.

Ultimately, after another delay for bad weather, a Canadian lead attack was successful in ejecting German troops from Mount Sorrel and Tor Top on 13th June. Between 2nd and 14th June Canadian losses (killed, missing and wounded) amounted to 8,430 men. German losses amounted to 5,765 men. There is no record of British losses, which obviously includes Henry Giddings.

Henry's next of kin is recorded as being his father, James, who was still living at Honey Street Wharf in 1920. However Henry's few possessions, which included a (broken) watch, alum ring and three pipes, were returned to his sister Rosa.

Corporal Henry William Giddings is buried at White House Cemetery, St. Jean-les-Ypres in Belgium.