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Kent War Memorials Transcription Project

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HOLLAMBY C

Tunbridge Wells civic war memorial

Private 541340 (KF/260) Charles HOLLAMBY. 1/3rd (497th) Kent Fortress Royal Engineers (KFRE). Died 23 December 1918 aged 47 years. Died at his home - 84 Auckland Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Husband of Florence Emily Hollamby (present at his death) of 84 Auckland Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. After Charles died his wife Florence moved to 65 Eastridge Way, Tonbridge, Kent. Buried Tunbridge Wells Cemetery, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Grave reference – C.14.255.

Invalided from army 22 June 1918. Dead 4 months later!

Charles name appears on the Tunbridge Wells Civic war memorial.

Charles wife Florence was buried in the same plot 21 February 1947 aged 70 years.

Charles survived the HMS Hythe disaster off Helles Gallipoli in 1915 and went on to serve with the KFRE throughout the whole war. Details are given below of the circumstances of the sinking where 147 Royal Engineer Sappers went missing presumed drowned. Charles was very lucky to survive this incident as most of his mates perished. Apparently Charles was one of the earliest survivors picked up from the freezing cold water by a rescue party from the SS Sarnia.

Deaths Dec 1918

Hollamby Charles Tonbridge 2a 1986

The HMS Hythe Disaster

8th October 1915

On the 28th October 1915 whilst at sea and about to land her troops at Cape Helles, Gallipoli the ferry "HYTHE" was struck by a larger vessel and empty troop carrier called the "SARNIA". The Hythe sank in ten minutes and due to a number of reasons, including the lack of life jackets, some 155 souls perished. The majority of those who died were members of the 1st/3rd Kent Field Company, Royal Engineers and men from Kent. Their Captain was David Reginald Hermon Phillip Salomons, he died with his men. I will come back to the tragedy in due course.

Our interest began with a simple WW1 Victory medal named to 2543 SPR.T.EDSER R.E. I noticed it on one of the internet auctions whilst looking for medals to a regiment I usually collect. A quick check showed that Reginald Thomas Edser had died as a result of wounds at Alexandria, Egypt on 14th December 1915 following evacuation from Gallipoli. He is buried at Chatby War Cemetery in Alexandria. He was 20 years old and was the son of James and Charlotte Edser from Tunbridge Wells. Having secured the medal I found that Reginald Thomas Edser had resided at 48 Goods Station Yard in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. This address was clearly adjacent to his father's work place. His father is shown as a Railway Engine keeper. He had an elder brother called Albert and a younger sister called Dorothy. These details were correct in 1901 at the census for that year. On the face of it he was one of the many young men lost at the disastrous Gallipoli campaign. But I noticed that his number was quite low for such a large Corps as the Royal Engineers and decided to look a little further. I saw that his Unit was 1/3rd Kent Fortress Company, Royal Engineers. I wondered if this was a locally raised unit because late 1914 and early 1915 saw the establishment of various "pals" battalions. Indeed my own usual collecting is to the Hull pals. I wondered if equivalent units were formed within the Corps of Royal Engineers and indeed they were.

The 1/3rd Kent were founded by Sir David Lionel Salomons (1851-1925) who resided at "Broomhill", Southborough, Tunbridge Wells, Kent. He was the Honorary Colonel of the Kent Royal Engineers. He was a scientist and had interests in mechanics. He is quite remarkable in that he acquired the second car ever in England. He lectured in Electricity and had a great interest in transport. He organised the first motor show and was both a Magistrate and Mayor of Tunbridge Wells (1894). The first meal cooked with electricity was prepared at his home. After his son (also) David graduated from Cambridge in 1907, the possibility of establishing a Royal Engineers Territorial Unit was investigated. This was not possible due to the existence of other RE units but it did not stop the formation of a Cadet Unit in Kent and this was raised and established in 1911. It was the fore runner of the 1/3rd Company. David Salomons (Junior) became the officer commanding. Sir David Salomons paid for the conversion of an old gas works in Southborough and this became the drill hall for the new unit. On the 1 May 1914 the 1/3rd Kent Fortress Royal Engineers came into being because the existing No 3 Company in the Medway Area had difficulty recruiting and a decision to disband it was made. Thus was born the 1/3rd Kent (Fortress) Royal Engineers. They were initially responsible for the protection of the coastline, for searchlights and defence. They were mobilised on 4th August 1914 at 8pm. They all went home to return the following day at 8am. The war had begun.

During the initial stage of the First World War the company remained at home and continued to train. They were converted to a Field Company from a Works Unit. In July 1915 they were at least 185 strong. The final stages of their training were in Woodlands Camp, Gillingham. Lt.Salomons was promoted to Captain on 11th June 1915. Most of their number was tradesmen. Sappers used their trades and pay was by far greater than the infantry. The infantry earned between 7 and 10 shillings and six pence per week (35p to 52p), whereas the Sapper earned 11 and six to 22 shillings and two pence per week (58p - 111p). Captain Salomons was both well liked and respected. He was generous and looked after his command. There is one report of him buying a round of drinks consisting of 161 pints of beer

at 4d per pint plus two lemonades at 2d each for his men. Royal Engineers were required in the Dardanelles to fill vacancies no doubt caused by the appalling loss there.

The company had a farewell dinner on 11 October 1915 and were cheered by crowds including their relatives as they left on Train Number 13. They went onto Devonport and boarded H.M.T. Scotian (built 1898 Harland and Wolff). They sailed to Malta landing on 20th October 1915, remaining for two days taking on coal, before heading for Lemos Island, Mudros Bay. Orders were received that they were to proceed to Sulva Bay but this was then changed to Cape Helles. Number 1 company was also travelling with them. There were two ships available, one for each company. These were the HMS Redbreast and the HMS Hythe. The 1/3rd were allocated HMS Hythe. In addition to the company were another 30 army personnel of various regiments and of course the Captain and crew of the Hythe.

HMS Hythe was a former cross channel (Dover-Calais) steamer. She was a cargo carrier owned by South East and Chatham Railways. She had no passenger accommodation. She had been converted to a minesweeper in October 1914 and she had two 12 pounder guns fitted. Her Captain was Lt Commander Arthur H Bird Royal Naval Reserve. The navy was using vessels like her because the German and Turkish submarines had been sinking British/French shipping. By using shallow draught craft it was hoped that torpedoes would pass beneath a ship and represent a small target. Hythe was launched in 1905 and cost £19,575 (Admiralty compensated her owners to the amount of £12,500 following the disaster).

Because the Hythe had no passenger accommodation a fabric awning was rigged on her deck to help protect the crowded deck from spray and the weather. Considering her size and construction the ship was very top heavy. The officers would be allowed in the engine room area to keep warm. However before sailing the Company witnessed a public Courts Martial. This took place in Port on her deck. Apparently a sailor had refused orders and was awarded 81 days imprisonment. Some 5 officers and 213 men boarded the Hythe plus 30 other personnel. The Hythe left Mudros at 4pm and had 50 miles to go to Cape Helles. It was travelling in a darkened state to avoid enemy bombardment. They were due to land and some forty minutes remained of their journey. At about 8pm there was a warning that another ship was bearing down on them. This other ship was HMS Sarnia. She was also a steamer, but larger than the Hythe. She had landed her cargo and troops and was leaving the Peninsula. She was steering a course S67W and the Hythe was steering a course N82E. This was near head on. Both ships were travelling in excess of 12 knots. Several attempts at a change of course by both ships, failed to avoid a collision. The Sarnia struck the Hythe 25 feet from the bow on her Port side. The force was so great that the Hythe stopped dead in the water. The foremast on the Hythe fell onto the fabric awning. The impact and devastation resulted in many fatalities on the deck of the Hythe. The force of the impact caused the Hythe to swing around by the stern and break free. The gapping hole in her Port was instantly filled by the cold sea water. She immediately began to sink and would go down in ten minutes flat. On the deck some managed to step onto the Sarnia as she remained alongside for several minutes. Others leapt into the cold sea, no life jackets, only debris to hold onto. Captain Salomons was reported as trying to save his men. He handed over his life jacket to another soldier. The Captain of the Hythe ordered "everyman for himself". There does not appear to be any co-ordinated attempt to organise the rescue. Sarnia put out a boat and saved some life. She was herself holed and would return back to port, steaming stern first to avoid taking water. Captain Salomons drowned and he was not recovered. A further 128 members of 1/3rd Company were lost plus 15 other Army personnel and 11 crew from the Hythe. Only 103 members of the 1/3rd Company survived. The disaster was compounded by the lack of life jackets/emergency lifeboats/poor organisation and could have been avoided by shipping following a set route inward and outward bound from Cape Helles. The Court of enquiry recommended that no soldier should travel on a ship without having a life jacket with him. It is hard to imagine the effect that this disaster had on the people of Kent. Several pairs of brother were lost. A father and son drowned together. Some 99 children had no father.

After some further research I discovered that Sapper Edser was on the Hythe and that he had survived. Sapper Reginald Still wrote home and told of their experience on the Hythe. He says "Reg. Edser is quite safe, in fact he is with me now, writing."

The Company had some rest and leave then went onto Gallipoli. On 24th November 1915 two sappers were injured by a bomb thrown by the Turks and were removed to hospital in Egypt. One of these was Reginald Thomas Edser. He is recorded as writing home to his mother. He claimed that his wounds were not serious; however he died in hospital on 14th December 1915.

The Salomons family lost their only male heir. Several memorials followed. In the Second World War a mobile canteen served troops in North Africa. On the side was the inscription "David R. Salomons 1885-1915". This was paid for by his sister Vera Bryce Salomons.

Between the wars the people of Southborough held a "Hythe Sunday". In church services they remembered the disaster on or near to 28 October. It is not known when this act of remembrance ended. There are several street names in Southborough with a "Hythe" theme.