THE ROAD

TO

OPPY WOOD

A.D. GERRARD

FOREWARD

The passage of time has resulted in an ever-increasing number of churches falling into disuse, with the result that a large number of memorials to former generations are being lost completely. Churchyards and cemeteries increasingly are becoming the target of vandals, thus adding to the loss of historical evidence. War Memorials are not exempted from these depredations and so the sacrifices made by our predecessors are gradually being expunged from the nation's consciousness.

This chronicle is an attempt to provide an insight into the effect of war on just one family - the Harrisons of Hull. It is intended to provide glimpses of a once thriving and vibrant family and to show how two wars have been the causes of its total destruction. The Harrisons are representative of thousands of families throughout the land who have suffered a similar fate and are now gradually being forgotten.

1997 is the 80th anniversary of the death of one of the Harrison family. Jack Harrison gave his life, in battle, so that others might live. This is a tribute to his memory.

2nd Lieutenant John Harrison VC MC
11th (S) Battalion, The East Yorkshire Regiment.

Greater love hath no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends.

St. John Chapt. 15, V. 13

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks are due to the Yorkshire Air Museum, Elvington, for permission to reproduce the aerial reconnaissance photograph of Oppy Wood on the front cover, to the University College of Ripon and York St. John for the civilian photograph of Jack Harrison and to Keith Butler Esq., of Stanwix, Carlisle, for the uniformed photograph.

I am also indebted to the following for advice and information generously given;

Dr A. J. Peacock, Editor, *Gunfire;* Dr John Addy and Roger Wolfe, Esq., Archivists, UCRYStJ, York; Lt.Col. T.C.E. Vines, Retd-.RHQ, The Prince of Wales Own Regiment of Yorkshire; John Andrews Esq., Headmaster, Malet Lambert School, Hull; Peter Sharp Esq., Secretary, Hull lonians RUFC; William Dalton Esq., Hull RLFC; Stewart Evans Esq., York RLFC; H. Bates Esq., Cottingham, East Yorks; Philip J- Turner Esq., Hull; Malcolm Mann Esq., Bransholrne, Hull; The Revd. N.P.Hancock, Archivist, Trent College, Nottingham; Miss M.J.Tottle. Hornsea, East Yorks; Mrs Judith Anderson, Beverley, East Yorks. John Maw Esq. and Stanley Barries Esq. both formerly of UCRYStJ York; Mrs Marion Shields, York; Mr Michael Wood, Editor, and Ms Liz Howell, Librarian, *Hull Dally Mall;* A.E.Eaton Esq., and Trig Ellis Esq., both of the Yorkshire and Humberslde Branch. WFA.

Alan Gerrard
Yorkshire and Humberside Branch
Western Front Association
1997

Jack Harrison
Schoolteacher, Sportsman, Husband, Father,
Citizen Soldier.

THE ROAD TO OPPY WOOD

PROLOGUE

On the 16th and 17th of December, 1996, The *Times* carried reports of a discovery made on the 13th by French construction workers at the edge of an industrial park near Monchy-le-Preux, a village to the south-east of Arras in the Pas-de-Calais. Excavators working in a sea of mud had uncovered the temporary burial ground of twenty-seven British soldiers interred almost eighty years previously. A variety of artefacts identified the remains as men of the 13th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, a unit which was in the forefront of the fighting on the 11th of April 1;') 17, a day on which the battalion suffered more than one hundred fatalities. As the bodies had been buried fully clothed and, in some cases, still, wearing equipment, the most likely explanation for their unidentified burial ground is that they were interred where they fell and that the men who had buried them were themselves killed and the record of the temporary interment lost as a result.

Another newspaper. *The Independent had* published an obituary on 14 October 1993, which has a tenuous link with the *Times* report. Lt.Colonel Henry Williams, who had died at the age of ninety-six, spent seven years in France and Belgium looking for the missing Royal Fusiliers and for the hundreds of thousands of men who had also disappeared in the maelstrom of war between 1914 and 1918. Shortly after the armistice. Col.Williams, no stranger to battlefields himself, was appointed a member of the War Graves Commission. He headed a 5,000 strong multi-national volunteer force charged with the task of finding the bodies of fallen soldiers, identifying them wherever possible and re-interring them in marked graves The War Cemeteries now lovingly maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission bear testimony to the success of the team so ably led by Williams. Inevitably however, ground constantly churned by high explosives would retain many of its secrets no matter how diligent the search. After Col.Williams and his team had done their utmost, many bodies remained concealed in the rich soil of Flanders, Artois and Picardy. At Thiepval on the Somme more than 73,000 names are inscribed on the memorial to the men who tell in that area and have no known grave. Similarly, the Menin Gate at Ypree records another 55,000, Tyne Cot Cemetery has 35,000 from the Battle of Passchendaele and another 36,000 names are inscribed on the wall of the Faubourg d'Amiens CWGC Cemetery in Arras.

Seven, six, or even five figure numbers mean little or nothing to the average person. Someone who has attended a match at the Empire Stadium, Wembley would have a good idea of what a crowd of 100,000 people looks like, but his Imagination would have to Be given full rein if he were to visualise the casualties of Verdun totalling almost one million, the Somme, a larger figure and Passchendaele, more than six hundred and fifty thousand. The number of British casualties at Arras, totalling 159,000 may seem comparatively modest, but losses in the order of 4,000 men per day were exceeded only at LOGS. The names of the twenty-seven Royal Fuseliers

discovered at Monchy will almost certainly be recorded on the wall at the Faubourg d'Amiens Cemetery. As with all other exhumed remains, where a positive identification can be made, either from identity discs, personal possessions, or forensic evidence, each fusilier will be re-interred with full military honours under a headstone bearing his name and regiment. Unidentified remains are customarily buried each under a stone inscribed with the words: A soldier of the ...Regiment. Known unto God. The Fusiliers are the latest in a succession of discoveries made over the last eighty years. Theirs is the largest number to be found since the discovery of fifty-one British soldiers in 1982. French farmers ploughing their fields often turn up human remains or unexploded ammunition. Nineteen bodies were discovered in this way during 1993. None were identifiable. Another in the same year was identified. Sergeant David Kitto, who had been a schoolteacher at Hartbill, Lanarkshire before he joined the 37th Field Ambulance, Royal Army Medical Corps, was discovered in a field near Cambrai. He was buried with full military honours at Terlincthun British Cemetery near Boulogne. Although neither his wife nor sister had survived, at least his ninety-year-old brother-in-law at long last knew what had happened to Kitto. A year later, amongst other unidentifiable remains, another body was discovered which did have some identification. A farmer ploughing a field at Bullecourt, a village to the southeast of Arras, turned up the remains of Sergeant John James White with his wallet, letters and a lock of hair. Jack White, as he was known to his fellow Diggers, was serving with 22nd Australian Infantry on 3rd May 1917 when he was killed in action. He had left his wife Lilian and two children in Victoria when he sailed for France in 1916. A bearer party of six serving Australian warrant officers and non commissioned officers carried his coffin to its final resting place at Queant Road Cemetery on 11th October 1995. His 79-year-old daughter, Myrtle, had flown in from Tasmania to be present at the ceremony to honour the father she couldn't possibly remember.

Today, only centenarians can remember the Great War and its horrors and few of them are now alive to recall the first day of the Battle of the Somme, when 20,000 British soldiers died. Numbers such as that make little or no impact on today's younger generations, whose lives have been untouched by war. The millions of dead are cloaked in anonymity and names on monuments hardly worth a glance. A representative life can, perhaps, stimulate more interest. Like Jack White, another Jack tells on 3rd May 1917. Like David Kitto, he also had been a schoolteacher. He fell at Oppy, northeast of Arras. This is Jack Harrison's story.

THE JOURNEY

Sir John Tenniel's famous allegorical cartoon entitled 'Dropping the Pilot', which appeared in an 1890 edition of Punch magazine, depicted an elderly reefer jacket clad figure descending a ship's ladder whilst a younger uniformed figure with a crowned head leaned over the ship's rail, watching the old man's departure. After a two year long struggle, the Iron Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, had wearied of his attempts to restrain the militaristic German Emperor, Wilhelm II. Bismarck had steered the German ship of state for the best part of thirty years with great success, but he had had to admit defeat at the hands of the headstrong Kaiser.

The resignation in Berlin of an elderly Prussian aristocrat would have caused few ripples amongst the citizens of Kingston-upon-Hull. Allegorical ships of state would have had scant attention in the Drypool area of East Hull, where the residents were far more concerned about ships being built or re-fitted in the yards on the north bank of the River number. It was in the steam trawlers, triple expansion engines and warships under construction that their interests lay, because it was on them that their livelihoods depended.

At 20, Wllllamson Street, a terraced house in a road leading down to Earle's Shipyard, Charlotte Harrlson's concerns were even closer to home. Charlotte, the 28-year-old wife of John Harrison was expecting her fourth child. After bringing three daughters, Beatrice, Lilian and Ethel into the world, she was hoping that this time she would deliver a son to carry on the family name. John, a 29 year old boiler maker and plater at Earle's, then the largest shipyard on the Humber, was, no doubt, delighted when Charlotte was delivered of a boy on November 12th. The latest addition to the Harrison family was named John, but very soon was given the name Jack, to distinguish him from his father.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the North Sea. The Kaiser was setting in motion the machinery designed to transform Germany into a military state. In 1891, General Alfred Count von Schlieffen was appointed Chief of the German General Staff. A brilliant strategist, von Schlieffen worked for twelve years on a plan to avoid Germany being crushed between the armies of France and Russia. The Schlieffen Plan, as it is now known, (the Cannae Plan originally), required the German Army to attack westward through Holland and Belgium and to take Paris in forty two days before transferring to the Eastern Front to counter the anticipated delayed Russian reaction. The Plan stipulated that the German Army right wing should attack with a numerical superiority of 7 to I against opposing forces, but von Schlieffen was no longer alive when his diluted plan was put into action by less capable hands and thus. In the event, it failed. The Plan Itself, however, ensured that almost from the day of his birth, Jack Harrison had set out on his journey to Oppy Wood.

Life in the docklands area of any major seaport is, more likely than not, to be rough and tough and the Drypool area of Hull at the end of the 19th Century was no exception. Jack Harrison spent his formative years in a world of hard knocks where weakness was unlikely to be tolerated. He grew up strong, courageous and well able to fight his corner. Unlike many artisan families however, John and Charlotte Harrison were determined that anything and everything that the family could afford would be devoted to developing the talents with which the boy had been born. When the expanding family moved from Williamson Street to Newbridge Road, Craven Street Higher Grade School, opened in 1893, was situated conveniently round the corner. Jack became a pupil there in 1901 and remained until 1909. In the normal course of events, the boy would have had to leave on his 12th birthday, having completed his statutory period of attendance, but scholarship winners or fee payers were able to stay on, taking advantage of laboratories and workshops equipped to the highest standards of the time. Jack left the school at the age of 18 with a Preliminary Certificate majored in Mathematics. Despite the hardship which Jack's education would have caused the Harrison family, especially as three more mouths to feed had appeared by the time he started at Craven Street, John and Charlotte were delighted when their son was appointed to the post of student teacher at Estcourt Street Senior School. Their eighteen-year long investment was at long last bearing fruit and Jack's younger siblings; Elsie, Elma and Stanley would also be able to enjoy a less restricted lifestyle. Craven Street School eventually outgrew its premises and was moved to a green field site in 1932, becoming Malet Lambert High School in the process and a Grammar School some twelve years later. In Malet Lambert School, Jack Harrison's name is still remembered with pride.

In 1909 Jack applied for the two-year course at the York Diocesan Teacher Training College and was accepted for admission in September 1910. The year was not an auspicious one, either for the country in general or the Harrison family in particular. In early May 1910, Edward VII died, thus bringing to an end the strenuous efforts he had made to ensure the peace and stability of Europe. Two weeks later a rigid faced Kaiser rode in his uncle's funeral cortege, livid that pride of place behind the gun carriage bearing Edward's coffin had been allotted to Caesar, the deceased King Emperor's favourite fox terrier. Another low point in Anglo- German relations had been reached. A low point also arrived in the Harrison family life coinciding with Jack’s departure to- start his college course in September. The Shipbuilding Employers Federation, in an effort to curb the unofficial disputes which were crippling the industry, chose the week of Jack's departure to lock out the Boilermakers Union and ancillary workers, laying off 100,000 men nationwide. Earle's Shipyard was no exception. Strife was rampant at home and abroad. The Golden Age of Edwardian England was at an end.

The young men who presented themselves for training at St. John's College in York would have been unlikely to have registered that fact however. Like young men the world over, they would have been excited at the prospect of exploring the unknown and, in many cases, no doubt looking forward to freedom from the watchful eyes of their parents. Their first meeting with the Revd. Henry Walker, MA Cantab. Principal of St. John's, would have left no doubt in their minds that they were going

to be subjected to a virtual monastic discipline. Principal Walker, *Taggy,* to his students, took his role in *loco parentis* very seriously. Whenever the students were allowed out, which was not often, Taggy lived up to his nickname by counting them out and counting them in. Principal Walker believed in hard work in college, hard play on the sports field and regular attendance in chapel. Debauchery was limited to cocoa in the Junior Common Room.

Jack Harrison did not find the regime unduly irksome however. He thrived on hard work and very quickly established himself as an outstanding all-round sportsman. His teaching practice supervisors were highly complimentary, describing him as ' A hard worker, quick to learn. Firm and pleasant manner. Strongly beneficial influence on his pupils.' The only detraction in the supervisors' comments was Jack's carelessness with aspirates and a tendency towards provincialisms. His qualities as a leader were clearly evident in Jack's second year at St. John's. He was appointed Monitor, which entailed responsibility for certain aspects of the corporate life of the first-year students and he was also made Captain of Rugby Football. Sports of any sort came to Jack as naturally as breathing. He made his mark in cricket, football, tennis, swimming and track events, but it was his prowess on the rugby field that first brought him to public notice. A strong athletic build combined with a sprinter's speed brought him to the attention of York Northern Union Rugby Football Club. Jack turned out for the club five times in the 1911-12 season, scoring three tries. Prowess such as this, combined with favourable college references obviously made a good impression on Hull City Education Committee, the minutes of the meeting held on 19 February 1912 recording that Jack's application for a post as a certificated teacher was approved and that he was appointed, on satisfactory completion of his college course, to Lime Street Senior Boys School at a salary of £80 per annum. In the summer of 1912, the Revd. Henry Walker's copperplate handwriting in the 1910 Entry Book recorded the following comments:

"A neat and careful teacher who thinks about his work. Firm and pleasant manner. Sound principles. His Influence will be strong "and good. Exceptionally good sportsman. Strong character."

Grade B Distinction in Woodwork

Jack Harrison was, at that time, approaching his twenty-second birthday. He would complete his journey to Oppy Wood in four and three quarter years.

Jack took up his teaching post in September 1912, quickly gaining the respect and admiration of his colleagues and the affection of his pupils. Lime Street School was situated in the docklands area bordering the Hull River, an area where a few dropped aitches and a splattering of 'Eh ups' were par for the course. Young strong, athletic, practical and a good teacher. Jack fitted easily into this familiar environment. His achievements with York N.U. Rugby Club had preceded his return to Hull and an invitation to sign for Hull Northern Union Club awaited him. Jack turned out in Hull colours for the first time on 5th September 1912. Between that date and 1916, he played in 116 matches, scoring 106 tries and two goals. In the 1913-14 season Hull

RFC defeated Wakefield Trinity at Halifax to take the Northern Union Challenge Cup (now the Rugby League Challenge Cup), the only time in the Hull club's history that it was to be so successful. Jack scored one of the two tries that took the cup to Hull. Contemporary newspaper reports described Jack's electrifying bursts of speed, his ability to swerve and how difficult he was to stop when he was moving fast. Small wonder then that in February 1914 the Education Committee was requested to grant Jack six months leave of absence from Lime Street in order to tour Australia and New Zealand with the Northern Union side. In the event he did not travel, another more personal event taking place later in the year. Jack Harrison was a multi-facetted individual, not merely a man's man extracting roars of approval from the hard-handed workingmen watching his outstanding performance on the rugby field. There was also an artistic side to his character. He had, as well as personal charm, musical talent, being a competent pianist and violinist. Many years ago, a female contemporary of Jack's commented to her now elderly son that, 'Jack was a handsome chap and attractive to women. He knew it and took full advantage of the fact.'

In 1914, the Harrison family had moved a little farther east, to Ainslie House in Southcoates Lane. Lilian, the daughter of George Evans Ellis, a shipwright living in Newcomen Street, a turning off Southcoates Lane, certainly found Jack attractive and the feeling was reciprocated. The couple were married at Hull Register Office on 1st September 1914. By that time the Great War had been in progress for nearly a month and the small British Expeditionary Force, which had engaged the German First Army at Mons in Belgium on 23rd August, was being pushed back through France towards Paris by vastly superior forces. By 4th September however, the German invaders had become exhausted by a month of constant fighting and marching and had also outrun their supplies and communications. They came to a halt on the River Marne. After six more days of fighting the Germans retired to the River Aisne. The Schlieffen Plan had failed and the Western Front extended in stages, until by December it stretched from Belfort on the Swiss border to Dixmude on the Belgian coast. The war of attrition had begun.

At the outbreak of war, on 4th August 1914, Great Britain was the only country amongst all the belligerents unable to field a conscript army. Within two weeks of hostilities commencing, Germany's standing army of 700,000 men had been augmented by reserve forces totalling more than 3 million. The 825,000 strong French army expanded to a similar figure in the same period of time. By comparison with the combined total of 7,500,000 men under arms in the French and German armies, the British Army was miniscule. 'Absurdly small', as the misquoted Kaiser called it. The 250,000 regulars, 220,000 reservists and 270,000 territorials, totalling 750,000 men, were all that could be mustered at the outbreak of hostilities. Popular opinion, that it would be 'all over by Christmas', was a view not shared by at least two people. Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, who had been appointed Minister of War early in August and General Sir Douglas Haig, who was to become Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force at the end of 1915, were both of the opinion that the war would last for at least four or five years. On 11th August 1914, Kitchener issued an appeal to young men to join the Colours. The first

100,000 answered his call within a fortnight. These volunteers were known as 'Kitchener's Army' or the 'New Army'. Subsequent appeals brought in a total of 2,631,000 men by February 1916. From then up to the armistice more 2,339,000 men were conscripted. The British Army was no longer 'absurdly small'.

By September 1914, as the result of the Introduction of 'Pals Battalions', men were joining the colours at the rate 33,000 per day. Hull recruited four units in this manner, the 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th (Service Battalions) the East Yorkshire Regiment. Together they formed 92 Brigade, one of the three brigades comprising 31 Infantry Division. Historians have pondered for some time on the reasons underlying the eagerness of the volunteers. A change from the drudgery of factory or farm is one suggestion, adventure another. Peer group pressure cannot be ignored, nor can jingoism. Honour, duty and a •purer form of patriotism made a quite different impact in the early part of the century than they do as we approach its end. Whatever the reasons, it was to cost the country dear. By the time the war ended, the Central Powers, who were the losers, had lost 3,500,000 men on the battlefield, whilst the Allied Powers, the winners, had lost 5,100,000. This total averages 5,600 soldiers killed on each day of the war, a figure never exceeded before or since.

In September 1914, Jack Harrison had a new wife, a job that he enjoyed, a sport at which he excelled and, later in the year, a child on the way. He saw no reason to join the stampede into uniform. He and Lilian moved across the river to West Hull, setting up home together at 75 Wharncliffe Street, conveniently close to the Hull RFC ground at the Boulevard. The 1914-15 season was an eventful one for both the club and for Jack. The club having scored a record number of points were once again finalists in the Northern Union Challenge Cup match at Halifax. The Education Committee, as in the previous year, granted Jack leave of absence for 16th February 1915. On that occasion, however, victory eluded the Hull team, but by that match Jack had set a new record of 52 tries for the season, a record that still stands today. During the summer of 1915 Jack paid another visit to the Hull Register Office, this time to register the birth of his son, born on 29th June. The boy was named John, the third of three generations, so quickly became Jackie to avoid confusion. As time passed the name faded and Jackie reverted to John.

In the battles, which took place during 1914 and 1915 the British regular army, ceased to exist. Mons, Le Cateau, the Marne, the Aisne, Ypres, Neuve Chapelle and Loos all took their toll, especially of junior infantry officers. The War Office became desperate to secure replacements and began to offer immediate entry for officer training to men with appropriate qualifications and, of course. Jack's qualifications were more than acceptable. When the Territorial Force was formed in 1908, the Inns of Court Regiment, with a history of service stretching back 300 years became a battalion of the London Regiment. On the 28th September 1914 the Officers Training Corps left Lincoln's Inn for Berkhamsted where, during the course of the war it trained between 11,000 and 12,000 officers. One of those officers was John Harrison. Having been interviewed by the Corps Selection Committee, he was accepted, in the face of stiff competition, for training and reported on 4th November 1915 to begin the nine months long course. During the time Jack was at

Berkhamsted, two of the war's most appalling battles started. In February 1916, the German Fifth Army attacked Verdun, which they knew France would defend to the last man. By the time the battle ended in December France had suffered around 540,000 casualties and the Germans about 430,000. In order to divert German manpower from Verdun, a combined British and French assault consisting of 16 British divisions and 5 French was launched on July 1st after an intense artillery bombardment that began on 26th June. The German defenders, concealed in deep dugouts had survived the onslaught and, when the British assault began along a fourteen mile long front at 7.30 a.m., the German machine-gunners were waiting for them. The vast majority of the troops who went over the top on that day were men of the New Armies. Men of the Hull Brigade were amongst their number, but were kept back from the worst of the fighting in the early stages because of lack of experience in trench warfare. The brigade had only arrived in France in March 1916, after serving in Egypt. During that first day of battle, 100,000 British soldiers went into action. At the end of the day almost 20,000 had been killed and 34,000 wounded. By the time Haig brought the battle to an end on the 18th November the butcher's bill had risen to 419,000 British casualties, 100,000 of them dead. The Germans lost approximately the same number and the French around 200,000. The Hull Brigade had found themselves in the thick of the action just before the battle came to its end, the 12th and 13th Battalions losing almost 300 men killed and many more wounded or captured.

Three weeks before the artillery bombardment started, heralding the imminent Battle of the Somme, Field Marshal Lord Kitchener was drowned. The cruiser, HMS Hampshire, in which Kitchener was travelling to Russia, struck a German mine off the north west coast of Orkney and sank. The Secretary for War had not been destined to learn of the destruction of the citizens' armies that he had despatched to France. The citizens of the United Kingdom could hardly have failed to witness the tragedy however. Despite extensive preparations to cope with the wounded in France, the military hospitals were overwhelmed and, as a result, an unending procession of hospital trains left the south coast of England for destinations all over the country, some as far-afield as Inverness. In July 1916, St. John's College, York, was closed to students and converted into a VAD Hospital. Between then and April 1919, when it was re-opened to students, 1200 wounded men had received treatment within its walls. When the battle started. Jack Harrison was approaching the end of his officer-training course at Berkhamsted. On 4th August he was discharged from other rank service. On the 5th he was appointed to a Commission in the East Yorkshire Regiment as Temporary 2nd Lieutenant and posted to the 14th (Reserve) Battalion of the regiment at Seaton Delaval near Newcastle. The battalion had been formed in 1915 to supply drafts for the Hull Brigade and, as a result of the battle in progress when Jack arrived, despatched its reserves to the Front, thereby fulfilling its prime function. The replacements went to wherever they were most needed. When the Pals Battalions of the Kitchener Armies were recruited, they were promised that men who volunteered together would serve together, but that promise was very soon broken when casualties began to rob units of their strength. The Hull battalions were named according to the interests of the *men,* the 10th being the Commercials, the

11th, the Tradesmen, the 12th the Sportsmen and the 13th,the Pals. John Harrison was posted to the 11th.

Troops on active service were forbidden to keep diaries, but many officers and men ignored the order. One such was Herbert Bates of B Company, 11th East Yorks. An entry in his diary for 19th September records that a number of replacement officers arrived that day, amongst them Jack Harrison, who was posted to 6 Platoon of the same company. Herbert Bates, like most of the other men in the battalion knew Jack well. Over a number of years, they had either watched Jack's exploits as wing three quarter on the rugby field, had read about him in the local press and, possibly, he had taught some of their sons at Lime Street School. He arrived in the battalion a well-known and popular figure. During October, when the Hull Brigade had been withdrawn from the Front to a rear area for rest and recuperation, Herbert Bates noted in his diary that the 11th Battalion had won the Brigade Rugby Tournament, despite being 'Tradesmen' rather than 'Sportsmen'. There is little doubt that Jack Harrison was largely responsible for that particular fillip to the battalion's self esteem and it would have further enhanced his personal standing in 6 Platoon.

Life in the trenches was virtually the same for an Infantry subaltern as it was for his men. All shared the vile conditions, the exposure to extremes of heat and cold, the awful inadequate food, the stinking latrines, the plagues of bluebottles swarming from the unburied putrefying corpses lying in no-man's land. Rats and feral cats, gnawing the bodies, spread disease in the trenches which they infested; Typhoid, trench fever, dysentery, pneumonia and meningitis all took their toll, as did trench foot, which could cause toes or even feet to fall off after being submerged in near freezing water for days on end. These were the norm for men in the trenches and had to be endured before facing a well equipped and determined enemy. The constant bombardment by high explosive and shrapnel shells, the scything machine guns firing 600 rounds each per minute, trench mortar bombs, some the size of oil drums, poison gas which blinded men and caused them to drown in fluid produced by their disintegrating lungs, flame throwers which roasted victims alive, all were part of a soldier's routine. Even in quiet periods, when no battles were in progress, 300 men per day would be killed as a result of enemy activity. The overall casualty rate totalled one man killed for every minute of the war. This was where Jack Harrison found himself learning the trade of the front line soldier.

When Sir Douglas Haig brought the Battle of the Somme to an end on 18th November 1916, the incessant rain had turned the battlefield into a quagmire, the mud was waist deep, drowning men and horses if they fell into it and the armies of both sides settled down to sit out the worst winter in living memory. German losses, between July and November, especially of experienced non-commissioned officers, had been severe and the German High Command, anticipating an Anglo-French Spring Offensive to be launched in 1917, decided to shorten their front line and create new defensive positions. During the winter of '16-'17, German military engineers constructed an immensely strong series of fortifications along a straightened line in Ratios and Picardy. They called it the Siegfried Line, whilst the Allies mis-translated it as the Hindenburg Line. The German army started to make

minor withdrawals to the new line in February, but the main withdrawal did not take place until 26th March. The German line had then been shortened by 25 miles between Arras and Rheims. The stage had been set for another bitter conflict.

The 11th and 12th East Yorks re-entered the front line on 20th February 1917 in preparation for a trench raid on the German lines. They had moved north of the positions they had previously held on the Somme during 1916, edging farther up the line towards Arras. Five days later, Herbert Bates noted in his diary that A and B Companies of the 11th East Yorks were ordered to stand to at 2.30 a.m. on the 25th. At 6 a.m. two patrols of platoon strength advanced towards the German lines. The southern patrol was commanded by Jack Harrison, who, by 7.50 a.m. had sent back a message to Battalion HQ to the effect that the German front line had been taken. By 9.00 a.m. Jack was into the German third line and a prisoner had been taken. The patrol got into the fourth line, but the trenches had been so badly damaged by shellfire that the position was untenable and they retired to the third line. By 9.40 a.m. however, the Brigadier ordered the patrol to withdraw as they were likely to be enfiladed. For his courage and leadership on that day Jack was awarded the Military Cross.

The citation appeared in the London *Gazette* dated 17th April 1917:

> **T/2nd Lieutenant John Harrison, East Yorkshire Regt. For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. He handled his platoon with great courage and skill, reached his objective under the most trying conditions and captured a prisoner. He set a splendid example throughout.**

Jack's MC had been awarded on 8th March. Six days later the Germans withdrew to their new, immensely strong positions in the Hindenburg Line, leaving behind them total devastation and a plethora of explosive booby traps. By that time the preparations for the Spring Offensive were well under way. Traps and thickets of barbed wire had to be cleared and almost 3,000 guns had to be positioned before the Battle of Arras could commence. It, like the Somme, was not Sir Douglas Haig's choice. A political decision had been made that the BEF should tie up German reserves at Arras whilst the French made a major thrust on the Aisne and thus Haig had no choice in the matter. By the time Jack's MC had been gazetted on 17th April, the guns had opened the bombardment on 4th April, the attack had been launched on the 9th and the newspapers back home were publishing page after page of casualty lists. The French offensive was launched on 16th April and Haig, whose troops had experienced initial success when the Canadians took Vimy Ridge, but had been forced to a halt by ever stiffening German resistance, threw more men into the fray to assist the French all-out assault. The French advance, however, could be measured in yards rather than miles and, as a result, after sustaining enormous-is losses, the French army finally snapped under the pressure, mutinies breaking out, especially in rest areas, when troops refused to return to the line. The French army had ceased to be an effective fighting force. Not so the British. On 20th April, the Hull Brigade moved to Ecurie, north of Arras, in reserve and awaiting orders to

advance towards the Hindenburg Line. In fourteen days. Jack Harrison's journey to Oppy Wood, which had started twenty-six and a half years earlier, would have come to an end.

The City of Hull Education Committee published a statement congratulating 2nd Lieutenant John Harrison on the award of the Military Cross. Doubtless it was a source of pride to the Harrison family, but it would have done little to alleviate their anxiety about Jack and three of his brothers-in-law who were also at the Front. For Jack's wife, Lilian, every passing day would have been tilled with the dread of a knock on the door and the buff telegram that would tell her that her world had fallen apart. On 30th April, the first bitter blow fell on the Ellis family. Lilian's younger brother, George, died of wounds received in action. Although back in Hull, they would not have been aware of it at the time, the Hull Brigade had moved east on 28th April and, on 1st May, Herbert Bates, Jack Harrison's platoon runner, noted the 11th Battalion's arrival in what had been the old German 3rd line.

During the time that the Hull Brigade had been in France, since March 1916, each battalion had suffered a considerable number of losses. The original battalion strength, of just over 1000 officers and men had, in each case, been eroded to between 550 and 600. Many of the original 'Pals' had become casualties and their replacements had come from a variety of northern regiments, such as the Durham Light Infantry or the Northumberland Fusiliers. The same thing had happened in most other units that had sustained heavy casualties. The Pals had virtually disappeared.

The German defences at Oppy were extremely strong. Thick belts of barbed wire had been strung in front of the first line. The village of Oppy had a wood to its west to protect it from the winter wind. The wood was a maze of communication trenches linking a large number of machine gun posts and the western edge, facing the direction from which the British attack must be launched, was well supplied with both machine guns and trench mortars. The German line at Oppy was held by crack troops of the 1st and 2nd Guards (R) Divisions who had ample warning of the forthcoming assault by the 10th, 11th and 12th Battalions of the Hull Brigade. As the three battalions left their holding areas between 9.00 p.m. and 11.30 p.m. they had to pass over a rise less than 1000 yards from the German front line. They were clearly silhouetted by a full moon which was setting in the west and the German response was an immediate heavy bombardment of the holding areas in the rear of the British line, no-man's-land and the brigade's assembly area in jumping-off trenches only a couple of hundred yards from the German front.

The weather conditions on 3rd May were markedly different to those of the initial stages of the battle on 9th April. When the Canadians had assaulted and captured Vimy Ridge, to the west of Oppy, they had advanced through driving snow. By the 3rd May the ground was dry, so when the British barrage opened up at 3.45 a.m. and the German guns immediately replied, thick choking dust and smoke blotted out all visibility. B Company, 11th East Yorks were on the right of the line formed up behind the creeping barrage, which was timed to advance at 100 yards every 4

minutes. The barrage quickly outran the attacking battalions however, leaving them exposed to extremely heavy machine gun fire, which cut down the Yorkshire men in swathes. Two attacks by B Company were repulsed with heavy losses before 6 Platoon, led by Jack Harrison, made another valiant attempt to penetrate the three thick belts of uncut barbed wire, only to be pinned down by a machine gun firing from the southern most point of the wood.

6 Platoon was comprehensively pinned down. A hail of steel splinters and shrapnel balls from exploding shells swept the area behind them. In front, six hundred rounds per minute were pouring from the machine-gun, plus rifle fire from the German first line. Desperate measures were required if there were to be any survivors and Jack showed no hesitation at all in taking them. Telling his remaining men to keep the machine-gun position under constant fire and, armed only with a pistol and Mills bomb. Jack hurled himself towards the source of the enemy fire. His prowess on the rugby field, his speed and ability to jink and swerve were now to be the salvation of his platoon. Dodging and weaving from shell hole to shell hole, he got sufficiently close to the machine gun pit to hurl his grenade. By the light of star shell and flare, the men of 6 Platoon saw Jack fall forward as soon as he had thrown the bomb. The machine gun was silenced and the journey to Oppy Wood, which had commenced in Williamson Street twenty six and a half years earlier had come to its end. Jack Harrison was never seen again.

EPILOGUE

Although men of the Hull Brigade did get into the wood and did penetrate Oppy Village, German resistance was too strong and the Yorkshire men were either killed or captured. The three battalions involved in the attack on 3rd May sustained 50% casualties, including more than 200 killed; - half of them being Hull men. Once again an inconclusive battle had come to an end. The casualties on the British side totalled 158,660. The Germans lost more than 180,000, plus 20,000 men taken prisoner, but the action at Oppy, which ended the Third Battle of the Scarpe, was not even mentioned in dispatches.

Jack Harrison's supremely courageous final act was not overlooked however. On 14th June 1917 the London *Gazette* announced that His Majesty, King George V had approved the award of the Victoria Cross to:

T/2nd Lieutenant John Harrison, MC, 11th (S) Bn. East Yorkshire Regt.

Oppy, France, 3rd May 1917.

For most conspicuous bravery and self-sacrifice in an attack.
Owing to darkness and to smoke from the enemy barrage and from our own, and to the fact that our objective was in a dark wood, it was impossible to see when our barrage had lifted off the enemy front line.
Nevertheless, 2nd Lieut. Harrison led his company against the enemy trench under heavy rifle and machine-gun tire, but was repulsed. Re-organising his command as best he could in No-Man's-Land, he again attacked in darkness under terrific fire, but with no success.
The, turning round, this gallant officer single-handed made a dash at the machine-gun, hoping to knock out the gun and so save the lives of many of his company.
His self-sacrifice and absolute disregard of danger was an inspiring example to all. (He is reported missing, believed killed.)

By the time the citation appeared in the London *Gazette* Lilian Harrison had known for more than a month that Jack would never return from France. The dreaded telegram had been delivered, as had many others in the City of Hull. Jack's CO, Lt. Col. S.H. Ferrand DSO.MC, had written to Lilian to say that Jack had been a splendid officer and that his loss to the battalion was great. He had been loved by all his men. Col. Ferrand also assured Lilian that if any further information regarding Jack was received, he would inform her immediately. Conflicting eyewitness accounts had been circulating, these being reported by the *Hull Dally Mail* on 10th May, but as time passed it became obvious that Jack's life had ended shortly before dawn on the 3rd of May.

Jack Harrison's war had come to an end, but it was to be another two years before the remnants of the Hull Brigade formed up for the last time to march to the

Guildhall and a reception hosted by the Lord Mayor. Only the 10th and 11th Battalions remained. The 12th and 13th had been so depleted in action after Arras that they were disbanded, the survivors being absorbed by the other two battalions. 2000 Hull men left the city in 1914 and were never to return. Although comparatively few of them had lost their lives at Oppy, the small village in Artols had left a deep imprint on the city's memory. When the war ended, the city adopted the village, donating money, tools, seed, animals and building materials, forging a bond, which exists to this day. In 1927, the City of Kingston upon Hull unveiled the splendid Memorial to the men of Hull who had given their lives in the Great War. It was erected in Oppy village, with its back to the slender saplings which were thrusting their new growth upwards from the skeletal ruins of Oppy Wood, on land donated by the Vicomte and Vicomtesse du Bouexic de la Driennays in memory of their son, who had also perished during the war. Hull's war dead had a memorial but their names were inscribed elsewhere, on the memorial wall of the CWGC Cemetery at Faubourg d'Amiens in Arras. The men of the East Yorkshire Regiment are recorded on bays 4 and 5. One name stands proud of the left margin of the columns, that of Jack Harrison, MC, whose VC is inscribed in the margin before his name.

The dead had their memorial, a whole generation of them. Other men, who had returned, were living memorials, in their own right, to the horrors of war. Blinded, maimed, burnt, gassed, paraplegic and, in many cases suffering what is now termed post traumatic stress disorder, in those days, shell-shock, they, in many cases had to get on with their ruined lives as best they could. There were others too, whose lives lay in ruins - the women who had said their farewells to their men folk in their hundreds of thousands and would never again lead a normal life. Husbands, fiancés, brothers and sons had gone forever. Such a woman was Lilian Harrison. "At the age of twenty-eight her life as a married woman, with a husband, an infant son and a bright future before her, was over.

Lilian, like so many other women in the same situation, faced a period of great instability. The *London Gazette* regularly printed long columns of the names of soldiers who had died intestate. Making a will was regarded as inviting mortality and, in this respect. Jack was no different. He too died intestate and it was June 1918 before Lilian could obtain the necessary Letters of Administration to settle his affairs. No longer able to stay in Wharncliffe Street, she moved to Anlaby Park, where young Jackie first went to school. On 2nd March, 1918 she attended an investiture at Buckingham Palace, where she received Jack's Victoria Cross from the hands of George V. Eleven days later the Harrison family sustained another bitter blow. Sixteen year old Stanley, Jack's brother, and the youngest member of the family, died. John and Charlotte had now lost both their sons. A week later many more families over the length and breadth of the land also lost their sons as the German Army, re-inforced by large numbers of fresh troops released from operations on the Russian Front, smashed their way through the overstretched and undermanned British Fifth Army defences and came within an ace of winning the war before eventually the tide was turned and an effective counter-attack, which increased in momentum as the months passed, caused the German High Command to accept the inevitable and sue for peace.

Two years after the war ended the nation gathered in London to honour its dead. Lt.Col. Williams had been requested to select the unidentifiable body of a British soldier killed in France, to represent all the men and women who had lost their lives in the war. The King walked behind the Unknown Soldier's coffin on its journey past the newly constructed Cenotaph in Whitehall, to its final resting place in Westminster Abbey. In Hull, since the end of the war, the pupils of Lime Street School had been raising money to commission a suitable memorial to their valiant former teacher. On 7th May 1921, the *Hull Times* published a photograph of the unveiling in the school, of a splendid bronze plaque dedicated to 2nd Lt John Harrison VC MC. The plaque, surmounted by the triple crown arms of Kingston upon Hull and bordered by the white rose badge of the East Yorkshire Regiment, records the citation for Jack's Victoria Cross. The group photographed before the plaque include Lilian, John and Charlotte, the Colonel of the East Yorks and civic dignatories such as the Lord Mayor and Sheriff. The plaque remained in its place of honour in the school for twenty years, until in 1941, the *Luftwaffe,* who turned Kingston upon Hull into the most heavily bombed city in the United Kingdom, damaged the school so badly that it had to be abandoned and later, demolished. Fortunately, a salvage crew was able to recover the undamaged plaque and it was taken to the Guildhall to be stored for the duration of the Second World War. In the turmoil of post-war reconstruction it was overlooked until, in 1978, during building work, it was discovered in the roof space. Its discovery aroused a considerable amount of interest and in 1979, after being displayed at the Rugby League Centenary Exhibition, it was allotted its present position In the main ground floor corridor of the Guidhall.

Co-incidentally, St.John's College was also making preparations in May 1921, to commemorate former students who had lost their lives during the war. The memorial was to be completed in stages, as it involved cladding two rooms of the former library with oak panelling and building a tine oak fireplace in the outer room. On the 14th May, the first part had been finished in time for the Bishop of Beverley to unveil the photographic portrait of Jack Harrison which had been hung over the fireplace. A brass tablet recording the names of eighty former Johnsmen who had given their lives between 1914 and 1918 was also unveiled in the college chapel. Unfortunately, the Discipline of Performance Studies, which now uses the two oak rooms, did not feel able to allow the memorial to remain in its original form. Jack's portrait and citation were given to the college chaplain for safekeeping and are still awaiting a decision on a suitable venue for exhibition.

The unveiling of the Lime Street School plaque in 1921 and the publicity, which accompanied it, focused public attention on Lilian Harrison's situation as a war widow and the mother of a young son. Two years later, a fund had been established to secure a fitting education for young Jackie. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the fund was launched by the Association of the East Yorkshire Regiment in honour of Jack's self-sacrifice. In September 1923, Jackie, now 8 years old, entered an Independent school, Hymer’s College, in West Hull, which he could attend as a day boy from his new home in Springbank West. Hymer's was the springboard to the

Nottingham public school, Trent College, which John, as he was now known, attended between 1926 and 1933. Perhaps not too surprisingly, on the sports field John proved to be a carbon copy of his father. His game was rugby union rather than rugby league, but his position was similar, left centre, rather than wing three quarter and he captained the school's 1st XV in 1933, having been awarded his colours and an honours cap in '31 and '32. John also gained his 2nd XI cricket colours in the early 30s and had become a Monitor in the late '20s. Trent had a particularly successful rugby team during John's time there, another of the leading players being A.Obolensky. He and John were both selected to play in the first and second trials for the England XV in 1936, but, unfortunately, injury prevented John from participating. Prince Alexander Obolensky was selected however, despite being, technically a Russian citizen and his name has passed into the history of the game as a result of the second of two tries, which he scored against the All Blacks.

Choosing a suitable career path after leaving Trent presented John Harrison with no problems. He chose the army. 1934 and 1935 saw him undergoing training as an officer cadet at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. Once again rugby was his principal sport and he turned out regularly for the RMA side and, later on, the Army XV. Both he and Obolensky regularly played together for Rosslyn Park. On successfully completing his course at Sandhurst, John was commissioned in the Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regiment. His mother, Lilian, had moved to the Home Counties in order to be near to him. Fortunately the Earl Haigh Fund was able to offer her a house at The Sanctuary in Green Lane, Morden, Surrey and the 'Officers' Quarters' as they are known locally, was to become John's home until 1940.

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the British Expeditionary Force that embarked for France was somewhat stronger than the one that had crossed the Channel in 1914. The 1st Battalion, Duke of Wellington's Regiment, part of the 3rd Infantry Brigade, sailed on the ss Biarritz from Southampton to Cherbourg on 24th September. By that time. Captain John Harrison had been detached from the establishment of officers to command the brigade's anti-tank guns and would not rejoin the battalion for another nine months.

The BEF took up positions between Arras and Lille as part of the French First Army Group and then spent the next several months waiting for something to happen. On December 5th, 1DWR were briefly in action at Waldwaistroff, but apart from that brief episode, the 'phoney war' or *'Sitzkrieg'* was the order of the day. There was even time for a tour of Great War battlefields in March 1940. Whilst at Pas en Artois, visits were made to Beaumont Hamel on the Anpre and Vimy Ridge. On 10th May however, there was rapid and violent change from *'Sitzkrieg' to 'Blitzkrieg' as* some *2*\ million Germans with 2,500 tanks and supported by 3.500 combat aircraft smashed their way through Holland and Belgium and into France, splitting the French army in two. In two weeks the Germans had taken Boulogne, isolated Calais and shortly afterwards had cut oft British communications with their base port, Cherbourg. The retreat of the BEF to Dunkirk began on 25th May. Winston Churchill ordered the Royal Navy, to organise the evacuation of the British

Army and, on 28th May, 850 British vessels of all shapes and sizes commenced their enormous task.

The perimeter defences around Dunkirk were manned by three British divisions and 3 Infantry Brigade was part of one of them. 1 DWR was in the front line on the canal between Fumes and Bergues, but was well under strength as many men had been lost on the retreat to the sea. At 1400 hrs on 30th May an extended German line appeared and heavy fighting broke out. On the 31st, C Company Commander was killed when a direct hit by a heavy shell demolished his HQ. John Harrison briefly re-appeared, reporting to Battalion HO that all his anti-tank guns had been knocked out, before going to take over command of C Company. During the evening John reported that a 3" mortar in his company was inflicting heavy punishment on the attacking German forces and that he was going to withdraw during the night to the line of the second canal, closer to the coast to prevent his position being enfiladed. By the following day, 1st June, the Germans had concentrated an overwhelming amount of tire power opposite C Company's position and during a day of heavy shelling and mortar tire, the company was effectively obliterated. John Harrison and his men had given their lives so that three hundred and thirty eight thousand men could escape. John was within a few days of his 25th birthday and unmarried. The Harrison line had come to an end.

Unlike the situation in which his father was killed, there were no surviving eyewitnesses to report John Harrison's death. For some time after the event however, there were rumours of his having been wounded and taken prisoner, these even being circulated round Trent College as late as December. 1DWR was evacuated from Dunkirk on 2nd June and re-grouped in Sheffield. The 400 survivors were joined by a few stragglers as time passed, but none had any information about Captain John Harrison. Like his father before him, John had neglected to make a will, so once again his mother was faced with the sad task of applying for Letters of Administration, a task that took two years to complete. War had robbed Lilian of her husband, her son and her brother. She had been a widow for twenty-five years and was to face another thirty-five lonely years before she died. Unlike her first bereavement however, she was to learn of her son's final resting place. John Harrison's body lies in the CWGC section of Dunkirk Town Cemetery, within a very short distance of the position where his company made its last stand. The Date of his death, engraved on his headstone, is given as 1st June 1940. That date was probably determined by the Germans who originally buried him.

Lilian Harrison spent the last two years of her life in St. Augustine's Home, a charitable institution run by a Spanish order of Hospitaller Sisters in Addlestone, Surrey. When she died on the 5th December 1977, aged 88, she bequeathed Jack's VC and MC to the museum of the East Yorkshire Regiment in Beverley. Ten years later, when the museum of The Prince of Wales's Own Regiment of Yorkshire was opened in Tower Street, York, the combined historical artefacts of the East and West Yorkshire Regiments were transferred, from their original museums, amongst **them** being Jack Harrison's decorations.

When the decorations first went on display in Beverley, they and the display of the Lime Street School plaque at the Rugby League Centenary Exhibition at the Town Dock Museum, stimulated the suggestion that Hull RL Football Club should have its own memorial to Jack Harrison, an idea that was taken up by the *Hull Daily-Mail.* As a result, a plaque was produced and unveiled at the Boulevard on 23rd November 1979 in the presence of Mrs Elma Butler, Jack's youngest sister and the sole survivor of the Harrison family. She too had been widowed by enemy action in 1941 and was left with a young son to rise. Seven years later, Elma, now 87 years old, was present at another ceremony, this time the opening of a block of 57 pensioners' flats, named Jack Harrison Court. In Hull, Jack Harrison has not been forgotten.

Even now, as the 20th Century approaches its end, Mrs Elma Butler, now 97 years old and living in a nursing home near Carlisle, has still not lost the hope that one day her brother's body will be found and buried in a marked grave with the full military honours it so richly deserves. In 1997 Elma Butler still grieves over the loss of her handsome, cheerful brother, as, no doubt do the surviving relatives of the 27 Royal Fusiliers recently discovered at Monchy Ie Preux. Time eases the pain of loss, but the men who went off to defend their country and the freedom of the succeeding generations are never forgotten by their loved ones and are owed a debt of gratitude by everyone who is alive as a result of their sacrifice.

Lest We Forget

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