

GAZA, the darkest day of WW1 for Manningtree Town.

A number of local men enlisted at Manningtree with the Essex 5th Battalion, it became almost a local 'Pals' regiment. 'D' Company in particular was raised from the area.



John Maxwell Heron studied to be a chemist in London and was a member of the Royal Society of Chemistry, Burlington House, London. He married at Chelmsford in 1909, by which time he was already a Lieutenant with the 5th Battalion.

Promoted to Captain he moved to 'Stapenhill', a house on Mistley High Street, where he started a family and began work as an analytical chemist at the local maltings.

He was mobilised in August 1914 and put on home defence whilst undertaking further

training, including a spell at Mousehold Heath in Norwich. The regiment formed up in St Albans, Hertfordshire, on 21 July 1915 and 29 officers and 649 other ranks set off by train for Plymouth. There they embarked on the Allan Line's ship "Grampian on 22 July 1915. After stopping in Malta for re-fuelling they then went to Alexandria before departing for Suvla Bay, arriving on the 10th August.

Due to illness of one of the senior officers, Major Heron became second in command on the 19th August. He was wounded in action on the 30th August 1915 by which time their strength was down to 11 Officers and 281 other ranks. After a dreadful winter in Gallipoli the Major took the Battalion to Egypt.



Wilfred Ainger came from a Mistley farming family in Horsley Cross and worked for a while at the Xylonite factory in Brantham. His 16 year old brother Harold was killed at sea just after the war started. Wilfred landed with the Major at Gallipoli in August 1915, by which time William Souter, another lad from the small hamlet, had already been killed fighting 'Turks' of the Ottoman empire.

Ernest William Carr was another Horsley Cross lad, working as a farm hand before enlisting at Manningtree, later becoming a Lance Corporal. He also saw action in Gallipoli whilst his younger brother Bertrand was killed in France in 1916.

Harry Dawson was another Xylonite Factory worker, living with his large family in Marsh Row, Lawford (off Station Rd). He looked after his mother and younger siblings after his father died in 1905 and later enlisted. He sailed off with the rest and survived Gallipoli.

So did Stanley Philip Oxley who had moved from Thorpe Le Soken to Manningtree where he had enlisted, with 'A' company.

They all arrived in Alexandria just before Christmas 1915 and spent a year in Egypt on various duties whilst the Ottoman threat to the Suez Canal was slowly rolled back across the Sinai Peninsula. After taking the port of El Arish and Rafa, a railway and water pipe line were constructed as part of the build up to cross into Palestine and take Jerusalem. Despite this the battalion had to cross the Sinai desert on foot, assisted only by camels, mules and a wire net roadway laid down over the sand.



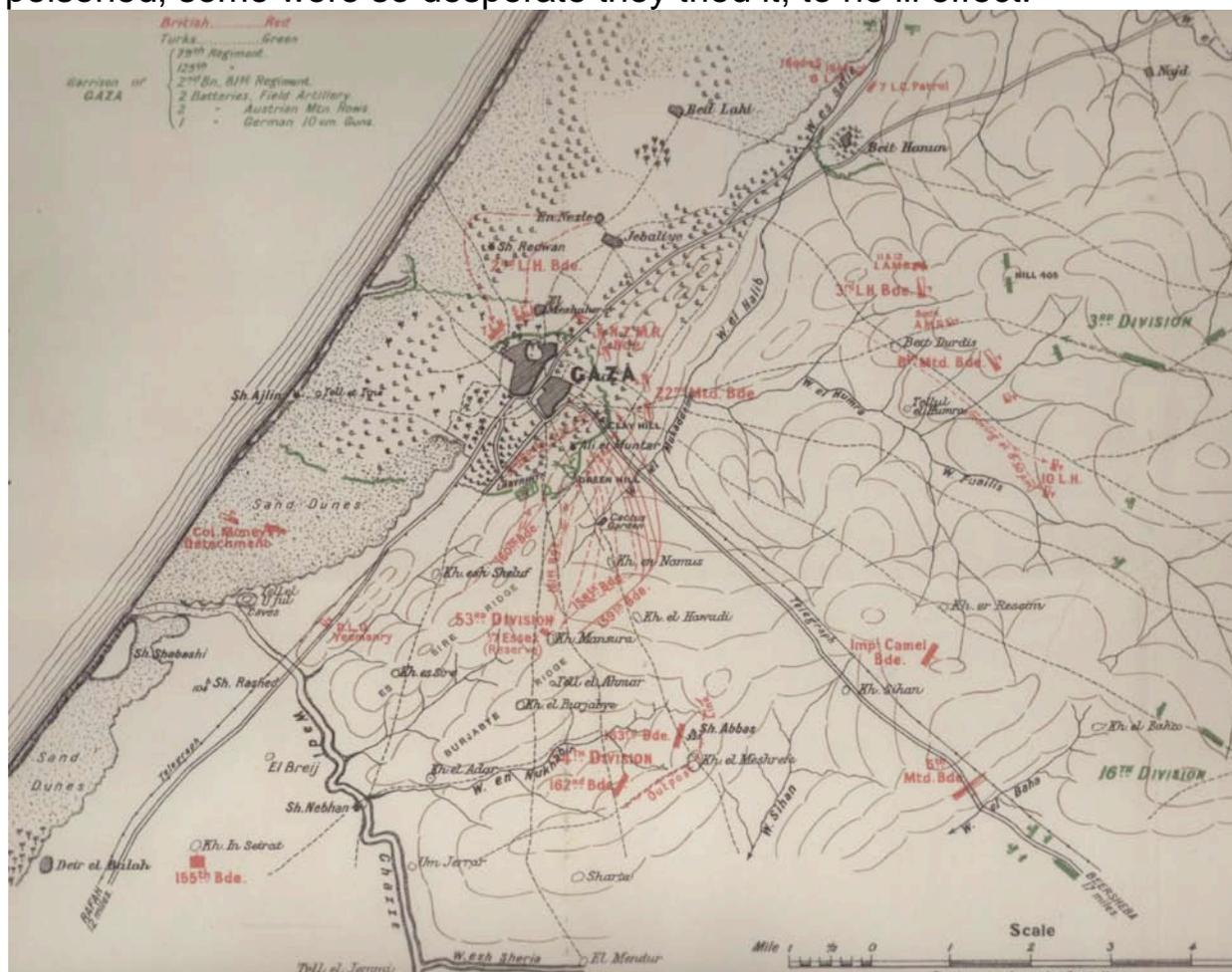
They were joined by three other Essex battalions (4th, 6th & 7th) to form a new brigade (161st).

They marched into the evening and after a cold and wet night caused by a blanket of thick fog, stood ready at dawn, on the 26th March 1917. They formed a line along the edge of a dried up river gully that ran out to the sea called the 'Wadi Ghazze'. Here they could see the Minarets of Gaza and the greenery surrounding the

town. Ironically, before the war, Gaza supplied barley to the English brewing industry. The battle that followed proved to be the 5th Battalion's deadliest test of the war.

They were intended as a support unit, placed in the centre between the coastal sand dunes and the large Cavalry force sent out to encircle the Town from the east and prevent re-enforcement from Beersheba. After initially being delayed by the fog, the Cavalry units successfully moved round the Town and started attacking from the rear.

The main infantry units were similarly delayed and failed to take what had been labelled as 'Green Hill', in the centre of the line, on the edge of Gaza. The Essex regiments were sent up between two ridges to take it. The first casualties were caused when they were hit by artillery near Mansura Ridge. It was a hot afternoon and they were already running out of water. They were tempted to use a well they discovered and whilst suspecting it might have been poisoned, some were so desperate they tried it, to no ill effect.



There was no artillery support for the 4th & 5th Battalions that led the assault and the hill was found well defended by machine guns, particularly the last, flat 3,000 yards that lay in front of them. Despite the heavy fire and after some hand to hand fighting, by 5.30pm they had rushed and taken 'Green Hill' just as dusk was

falling. The most difficult trench had been covered by a machine gun positioned in a small stone hut. Once the fighting stopped they frantically started to dig in, to find they were surrounded by the cries of the many wounded & dying. They were unable to help and the only medical support was two miles back across the plane they had just covered.

At that point in time Gaza was surrounded and on the point of surrender, with a number of prisoners being readily taken. In reality the town had not been captured and without access to its water supplies (particularly for the horses), with Turkish relief columns in sight, the Regiment, somewhat perplexed, was ordered at 10.00.pm to withdraw back to Mansura Ridge. This was difficult given the distance, the number of casualties and the lack of a brigade HQ which had been decimated in the attack. Water carrying camels met them behind the ridge at around mid-night, though some forward groups took till early next morning to arrive. By this time it became clear this had been tactical blunder and what was left of the exhausted regiment was ordered back to Green Hill. They found it un-occupied but soon came under attack.



Whilst setting up a station on top of the Hill the Signallers of 'D' Company had a lucky escape when one shell brought down a mass of earth which almost buried them all.

At great cost they held onto Green Hill for most of the day before being nearly surrounded and forced to retreat. So ended the first battle for Gaza. The casualties had been high with over 500 killed, 3,000 wounded and 500 missing, with 246 later found to have been taken prisoner.

The 5th Battalion alone had 56 fatalities. Second in command, Major Heron had been killed, leaving behind his wife Anne and seven year old daughter Rose at Mistley.



Wilfred Ainger died, aged just 21 years and lies buried in the cemetery in Gaza alongside Harry Dawson (age 27).

The body of Ernest (Bert) Carr (23yrs) was never found and he is listed on a memorial in Jerusalem.

21 year old Stanley Oxley, was fatally wounded during the action and is also buried in Israel.

A simple wooden cross was erected where the lives of 5 local men were sacrificed, on a Green Hill, far away, on the 26th March 1917.



Two more bloody engagements followed and Arthur Brown-Sawyer, another Xylonite worker from Brooke Street, was killed on the 4th

November 1917 during the third and final attempt to take the town. This finally opened up the way for General Allenby, T.E. Lawrence & the Arab army to take Jerusalem just a month later.

Philip Cunningham Manningtree Museum.

Thanks to Patience Sullivan (Ainger) & Max Heron for information & photos provided.