

## Cpl. W.J.James – 15<sup>th</sup> (The King's) Hussars

William John James was born in Cholsey, Berkshire in 1889, the son of William and Elizabeth James. By 1901 William, an electrical engineer, and his family had moved to Westcott and were living in St John's Road. By 1914 they were living at Park Farm Cottages, at 'The Deerleap' at Wotton.

William James enlisted at Aldershot and joined the 15<sup>th</sup> (The King's) Hussars which in August 1914 was stationed at Longmoor in Hampshire. The regiment moved to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force and landed at Rouen on 18<sup>th</sup> August. The regiment was then split and its three squadrons were detached to different divisions for reconnaissance work. By early 1915 the opposing armies were entrenched in a static war and aircraft were taking over reconnaissance; the squadrons were re-united and the regiment became part of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division in the British Second Army.

In April 1915 the Second Army comprising British and Canadian divisions was holding a sector of the Ypres salient near the village of St. Julien. The Belgian Army and two French divisions held the line to their north. On 22<sup>nd</sup> April the Second Battle of Ypres began when the Germans launched a surprise attack using poison gas on the Western Front for the first time; 168 tons of chlorine gas were released against French colonial troops who panicked as the yellowish green cloud approached their lines. Men choked and died in their trenches; the line broke, men ran but also died as they failed to escape the moving cloud. The attack opened a wide gap in the line but the Germans held back, uncertain themselves of advancing through the contaminated area. French and British counterattacks re-took the ground and closed the gap.

On 24<sup>th</sup> April, the Germans released more chlorine gas, this time against the 1<sup>st</sup> Canadian Division near St Julien. The Canadians had been ordered to urinate on their handkerchiefs and place them over their mouths as a countermeasure to the gas, but it was not effective. Men were asphyxiated and blinded by the yellow cloud and a gap of 1500 yards opened in the line. Again the Germans were apprehensive about advancing across the contaminated ground and failed to exploit their advantage. Canadian and British counter-attacks regained the ground.

**The Allies protested that the Germans' use of gas broke the Hague Convention, but they quickly developed gas weapons for themselves and both sides used them for the rest of the war. Countermeasures were developed, but the effects of gas weapons were horrific; men died in agony and many of those who survived a gas attack had their health ruined.**

**On 24<sup>th</sup> May 1915, the Germans opened a ferocious German artillery bombardment, accompanied by a release of chlorine gas along the entire length of the British line at Bellewaarde Ridge. The German infantry mounted an immediate assault in its wake, and many of the defenders were overcome because they were unable to don their respirators in time. The defence rallied but eventually had to withdraw to a more defensible line. The Second Battle of Ypres continued until 25<sup>th</sup> May 1915. The town of Ypres was almost totally destroyed by artillery bombardments during the battle which ended with the salient reduced in size but still held by the allies.**

**William James was killed in action on 24<sup>th</sup> May along with seven other members of his Regiment. We do not know how they died; only one of the seven was found. The other six casualties, including Corporal James, have their names carved on Panel 5 on the Menin Gate which commemorates 54,000 officers and men of the Commonwealth forces who died in the Ypres salient and who have no known grave.**