

Rfn J.Spooner – The Rifle Brigade (The Prince Consort’s Own)

James Spooner was born in 1895, the son of Alfred and Ann Spooner of Mill Cottage, Logmore Lane, Westcott. A painter by trade, he enlisted at Guildford on 24th November 1915 and joined the Queen’s (Royal West Surrey Regiment). He was posted to France on 5th June 1917 to join the 3rd Bn The Rifle Brigade which had served in France since October 1915, as part of the 24th Division in General Sir Hubert Gough’s Fifth Army.

In the summer and autumn of 1917 the 24th Division was involved in the Third Battle of Ypres and later in the Battle of Cambrai. During the ensuing winter the German High Command moved nearly 50 Divisions from the east, following the Russian surrender, to gain a numerical advantage in the west. Their aim was to mount a major offensive to win the war before the American forces joining the allies were fully engaged.

In early 1918 it was agreed that the British front should be extended. The understrength Fifth Army took over lines from the French Third Army around St Quentin, but the new lines were very exposed and their position was much weaker as a result. On 21st March 1918, the German launched their offensive and it was on this area that the attack was concentrated.

The offensive began with the biggest artillery barrage of the war which destroyed the British defences and cut communications to the rear. The German infantry then attacked in great strength using new stormtrooper tactics, and in thick mist overwhelmed the British positions. After desperate fighting the Fifth Army’s forward zone was captured. James Spooner’s battalion and the other units of the 24th Division were at Le Verguier, near St Quentin. The Division fought stubbornly but severe German attacks on either side of their position led to orders to evacuate.

James Spooner was killed on the first day of the Battle of St Quentin which continued for three days and was the first of a series of battles that lasted from 21st March to 5th April. He is remembered on the Pozieres Memorial which commemorates over 14,000 members of the British forces who fell in those battles and who have no known grave. Over 600 men of The Rifle Brigade are named on the memorial, more than any other regiment. ‘St Quentin’ is one of The Rifle Brigade’s accredited battle honours.

General Gough's Fifth Army was forced to retreat across the River Somme and was then able to establish a new line and hold it. Despite this General Gough was dismissed. Marshal Foch of the French Army was put in overall command of the allied armies for the rest of the war and this brought better command and control. The German offensive continued until July but their armies were exhausted and they were forced to give ground. By this time the Americans had joined the war and the Allied advance continued until the Armistice was signed on 11th November 1918.