



Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre (the Norfolk Regiment) is interred in Carnoy Military Cemetery -Grave reference D.10.

A former student of Methodist College in St. John's, Bernard Pitts Ayre was sent to the United Kingdom in 1906 at the age of fourteen years where he was to continue his scholastic career, at first at Leys' School*, Cambridge, before then taking up medicine at Jesus College, also at Cambridge.



****Leys' was a Methodist-oriented institution for boys of ages eleven to eighteen.***

(continued)

He made at least one return voyage home during this period as he is documented as having disembarked from the SS *Sicilian* in Glasgow on October 4, 1910.

(Page preceding: *This photograph of Sicilian was apparently taken on August 29, less than four weeks after Bernard Pitts Ayre had stepped ashore from her in Glasgow in that summer of 1910. – from Old Ship Picture Galleries*)

Exactly when he applied for and then received a King's Commission* does not seem to appear in his available official documents, but it *is* recorded that he landed in the French port of Boulogne at ten-thirty in the evening of July 25 as one of the thirty-one officers and eight-hundred ninety-five *other ranks* of the 8th (Service) Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment travelling from Folkestone across the Channel on that day.



**Nor does it seem to be recorded to what rank that appointment was made. The Battalion War Diary appears not to make mention of any subsequent promotion, thus it may be that his Commission was for an immediate captaincy.*

By this time in the War, the British Army had taken over sectors in the area of *the Somme* which the French had previously manned. Thus the 8th (Service) Battalion of the Norfolk Regiment, as a unit of the 53rd Brigade of the 18th Division found itself at first just to the west of the provincial town of Albert before moving forward into the trenches just to the east.



(Right above: *a French cemetery alongside the Serre Road, an area transferred in 1915 to the British Expeditionary Force – photograph from 2010(?)*)

Apparently this was a quiet sector at the time, the 8th Battalion War Diary recording only minor incidents, even in the front lines. Casualties were typically light: those for the month of November numbered three killed and eleven wounded, all *other ranks*.

In early 1916 it was decided by the Allied High Commands to undergo an offensive in that same quiet area of *the Somme*. At first planned as a mainly French affair, the ever-increasing needs of the French at Verdun meant that it eventually was to be an overwhelmingly British offensive.

Yet despite all the preparations ongoing up until the very eve of the attack, the assault preceded by a seven-day artillery bombardment, little activity – by either side - was reported in the War Diary entries for that entire spring – May was spent withdrawn from the front lines; June was mostly reported as *quiet*, even the week-long bombardment eliciting no recorded response.



(Right above: *a British 9.2 inch howitzer being prepared for action – from Illustration*)

July 1 of 1916 was, of course, a different matter and was to be the blackest day in the entire history of the British Army with some fifty-seven thousand casualties of which nineteen thousand dead, mostly during the first four hours of the attack. It was to continue for a further twenty weeks.



(Right: a grim, grainy image purporting to be Newfoundland dead awaiting burial after July 1 at Beaumont-Hamel – from ...)

In the early hours of the morning the Battalion was in position in the four assembly trenches, i.e., in their battle position ready for attack (excerpt from the War Diary, 8th (Service) Battalion, the Norfolk Regiment). Tea was served and all was in readiness for the assault of the German trenches in front of Contay.

7:30 a.m. The assault commenced. MINE TRENCH was reached and crossed by these (the two assaulting) Companies with practically no opposition and without loss on our side. MINE SUPPORT was taken about 7:40 a.m.

Up to this point the Battalion suffered very few casualties. BUND SUPPORT was reached and taken at 8: a.m. where a halt was made.

The two assaulting Companies on leaving Bund Support came under a very heavy enfilade machine gun fire... and suffered heavily, Captain B.P. Ayre being killed... (excerpt from the War Diary, 8th (Service) Battalion, Norfolk Regiment).

In a more personal vein, a fellow officer submitted the following report: *"His company led the attack and did it magnificently. This was due entirely to his fine leadership. It would be impossible to express in words the skill, coolness and courage that he showed. He started off in the most characteristic fashion, smoking his pipe and leading the men on with his stick...I wish you could hear what everyone individually thinks of him."* (From IWM – Lives of the First World War)



The son of Robert Chesley Ayre and Lydia Gertrude Ayre of Brookdale, St. John's, he died at the age of twenty-four years: date of birth, November 28, 1892.

His brother Eric was also *killed in action* on that same morning, while serving with the Newfoundland Regiment at Beaumont-Hamel. His remains lie in Ancre Military Cemetery. Likewise two cousins, Wilfrid and Gerald of the Newfoundland Regiment, were also to be counted among the dead of that July 1, 1916.

The photograph of Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre is from the Provincial Archives.

(continued)

Captain Bernard Pitts Ayre was entitled to the 1914-1915 Star, as well as to the British War Medal (centre) and to the Victory Medal (Inter-Allied War Medal) (right).



The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of Rosemary Ayre and of Mrs. Kathleen Knowing in correcting some of the errors which were to be found in the original biographies.