

Sergeant James Arthur Keegan
D.C.M.
(Served as J. King).

Killed in Action at Hohenzollern
Redoubt
during the Battle of the Craters in
March 1916.



DUD CORNER - LOOS MEMORIAL
(Photo taken by G. Dewsall in August 2011)

By Graham Dewsall (His Nephew)

Sergeant James Keegan DCM

(Served as J. King).

Summary.

Sergeant James Keegan DCM served in the 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment in the name of J. King, having run away from home in Brighton, to join up at the age of sixteen. It was against his fathers wishes that he should join the Army at such a young age, so he changed his name to prevent being traced. In August 1914 he was one of a party of NCO's sent to Chichester to form the 7th Battalion, part of Kitchener's "New Army". At the end of May 1915 the Battalion left for Boulogne, to commence their tour of duty in France. James fought in many battles on the Front Line, carrying out a great number of heroic and dangerous deeds infiltrating the enemy lines, mostly on his own, for which he was awarded the DCM. Unfortunately, like many of our brave soldiers, he was killed on 4th March 1916, during the Battle of the Craters at the Hohenzollern Redoubt, during a fierce attack by German heavy artillery. He is one of many, who with no known grave, is reverently remembered with honour in the Dud Corner Memorial at Loos-en-Gohelle, on the road to Bethune.

Introduction.

I chose to research the short life of James Keegan as he was my Uncle, one of my Mothers brothers. Although we knew of him, and that he died in the Great War, Mum did not appear to know much about him herself, but then she was only five when he died and her parents did not talk about him, so very little was passed on. Having decided in recent years to investigate my family history, Uncle Jim became one of the first to research after my parents, as I thought it would be an easy route to follow. Not so. I assumed his military record would be listed under J. King and could find very little information, but following the advise of an officer at the Imperial War Museum we found him and the Memorial at Loos under his real name. I went from there.

Background.

James Arthur Keegan was born on 23rd June 1896, at Thompson Street, New Bradwell in Wolverton, a Sub-district of Newport Pagnell, Buckingham, the fourth child of Henry Keegan, a Blacksmith working in a Railway Carriage Factory, and Harriet Amelia Keegan, formerly Spendelow. Henry and Harriet where both born in what is now East London, married in 1886 and it is known that they spent there early married years living in Stratford, Essex with Harriet's parents, where their first three children where born.

James was one of ten children, but very little is known about his early years as all of his siblings are long gone and many of those were not blessed with offspring of their own. Unfortunately, most of the family members still living have very little or no knowledge of their distant relative.



James' Birth Certificate [authors collection]

It is known that the family moved to Brighton in 1899, when James was just three years old where his father Henry worked as an Engine Smith and Market Gardener. They lived in 9, Kingsley Road, Preston, moving to No 24 sometime before 1911. James is known to have attended Stanford Road Junior School, probably between 1903 and 1907. In 1911, when James was fourteen, he was working with his father as an apprentice Market Gardener, a career that he obviously was not that keen to pursue, because whether through boredom or lack of excitement, he ran away from home when he was sixteen and joined the army. It is not known if there was any other underlying reason why he should do this, but it was totally against his fathers wishes. To avoid being traced he changed his name to King, and enlisted with the 2nd Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment, which at that time was stationed at Inkerman Barracks in Woking, part of the 1st Division, where it was considered far enough away from home to remain un-detected.

Detail.



Thinking that he would be posted overseas to France with the 2nd Battalion once it had completed its mobilisation, James, now a Corporal, found himself posted to the Regimental Depot at Chichester as part of Lord Kitcheners New Army instruction staff, to form the nucleus of the regiment's first battalion under this scheme. On the 8th August 1914, he left Woking with Captain J. L. Sleeman, who had

served with the 1st Battalion in the South African war and in India, also with the 2nd Battalion in Ireland, so was considered suitable for this duty, owing to the fact that he had recently returned after having formed the first units of the Officers Training Corps in Ireland. They left with Lieutenant E. W. T. Rowe and 2nd Lieutenant J. S. Magrath and 14 other N.C.O's, and were subsequently joined on the 12th August by Captains E. C. Beeton and R. M. Birkett, and Lieutenants R. J. A. Betham and J. A. Thompson, who were home on leave.¹

Rapidly the depot filled beyond capacity with new recruits. Consequently on the 21st August, the nucleus of the new battalion left Chichester for Sobraon Barracks in Colchester, where Colonel W. L. Osborn took command of the officially designated 7th (Service) Battalion the Royal Sussex Regiment, posted to the 36th Infantry Brigade of the 12th (Eastern) Division. By this time, James had had been promoted to Sergeant and assigned to 'A' Company, assisting in the strenuous training of the large number of recruits that had joined the battalion. Far more recruits than had ever been envisaged, to the extent that there were insufficient experienced N.C.O's responding to the call, that Captain Sleeman resorted to inserting an appeal in the Sussex newspapers. Officers came and went, but the securing of a splendid supply of junior officers from the Senior Division of the Officer's Training Corps eventually produced a stable and well established regiment. One important addition to the ranks was a puppy dog of unknown breed discovered in the barracks at Colchester. A label tied around his neck made it clear that his name was "Harold" with "Please take care of me" added. He became the battalion mascot and served continuously throughout the war. Harold was initially attached to 'A' Company.

By early September the battalion stood at full war strength, with training progressing rapidly, so that on the 2nd October the battalion left Colchester by train, for St. Martin's Plain, Shorncliffe, a well known area for its annual Territorial camps. The shortage of tents caused massive overcrowding, resulting in a move into hutments at Sandling, being a more convenient place for training, due to its closer proximity to Hythe Ranges. During this time the battalion had its first taste of active service, as a report was received that a German raid on the coast near Hythe was anticipated. Orders were received to prepare defensive positions along the coast, so trenches and strong-points were dug, and night patrols sent out to investigate light-signals to German submarines. Serviceable rifles were in short supply, with only 200 of the 1,100 required for each battalion, so the other three battalions handed over their rifles to enable the 7th to become the defending force. Luckily the threatened raid never took place.

Following a particularly stormy night in December, when the entire camp was flooded out, the brigade billet was moved to Folkestone, where 'A' Company latched on to one of their former officers to gain experience in correct procedures. During this period three Royal Sussex Regiment battalions met on the same day during a route march, the only time in

three hundred years' history of the regiment that this had happened. Also Harold was reported AWOL and guilty of losing his kit by neglect, but was subsequently found during a training march. By the middle of February, rumours were about that the Division was to move to Aldershot. A route march started on 3rd March, via Ashford, Maidstone, Edenbridge, Dorking and Guildford, to satisfy Sir John French's refusal to accept New Army troops out in France without experience of moving and working in divisions. Arrival at Aldershot put the battalion in Ramillies Barracks, Marlborough Lines, which they shared with 11th Middlesex.

Company and battalion training was again stepped up, with field exercises, including night operations, courses in machine-guns, bombing and signalling, and with the introduction of poison gas by the Germans at the Second Battle of Ypres, this new form of warfare had to be coped with. An inspection was carried out by Lord Kitchener on Queen's Parade followed by the Colonel of the Regiment, Major-General J. C. Young C.B. addressing all ranks. With training now drawing to a close, the battalion was anxious to go overseas, and following the attendance of His Majesty the King, accompanied by Her Majesty the Queen and Her Royal Highness Princess Mary, at a divisional church parade, the long awaited orders were received and the division began to move from Aldershot to Folkestone Pier on the 29th May 1915, embarking for Boulogne on the S.S. Victoria.

After ten days travelling by train and route march the battalion reached Armentieres, where they were attached to the 82nd Brigade in trenches in front of Le Touquet, to be provided with technical instruction in the support line by 1st Leinsters and introduction into the doubtful pleasure of night digging and carrying-parties, with the 1st Royal Irish. It was during this period at Le Touquet that James started to make a name for himself by 'working on his own', as he later described it. He frequently went out to cut the German barbed wire defences and accounted for shifting a great deal of it, along with enemy telephone wires. He also carried out a good deal of sniping, and claimed with great satisfaction that out of the eight German snipers he eliminated, one was the sniper who shot 'A' Company's commanding officer Captain J. G. Bussell on 28th June, whilst inspecting the line in an advanced salient. Throughout early July, James continued his exploits, carrying out numerous daring patrols by making long reconnaissances of the enemy's front line and wire entanglements, often carried out in broad daylight making the task extremely difficult and dangerous. Sometimes he was out all day and night and he knew that discovery would have resulted in certain death, but although he had a few narrow escapes, he came through unscathed.

On one occasion James secured from a dead German the identification of the 104th Regiment, XIX (Saxon) Corps, and on another he brought back to his own lines a German flag, which the enemy had erected over a trench mortar by which it was attached by wires, booby trapped so that it would explode if interfered with. He also brought back the bomb. This venture was the more hazardous, as again it was carried out in daylight.

15th July found 'A', 'B' and 'C' Companies in billets with the Royal Irish Fusiliers in Houplines, 'A' Company's front line included Hobb's Farm which had become a favourite target for German whizz-bangs and aerial

torpedoes, but also gave admirable opportunities for patrolling both day and night. James found and secured a very good observation and sniping position on this farm, from where he was able to watch the German lines and direct the British artillery onto good targets. Having been recognised as the battalion's champion in lone patrolling, following his exploits and having distinguished himself at Le Touquet, James continued to make the most of the opportunities by carrying more daring and successful patrols in search of enemy identifications. In one such exploit he crawled in broad daylight to the German lines and after a good look round, took down an amour plated loophole from their parapet and returned to the allied trenches with it. When questioned about it later, King laconically said, "It was crawling all the time, it took me an hour to crawl just 600 yards". On another occasion he went out and brought in a German hand-grenade, attached to another flag placed near their trenches, inscribed "Gott strafe England".

Throughout this period the battalion came under very heavy mortar and aerial torpedo fire and sniper activity, and suffered a number of casualties, but this did not deter James. On the 6th August, sounds of hilarity were heard coming from the German lines, followed by a notice board being erected, informing the allies that Warsaw had fallen. The following night James wriggled his way across to the German lines and "borrowed" the notice board, inscribed "WARSCHAU DEUTSCH" painted on cloth, as well as a roughly made German flag. British working parties that went out at night to repair the allied wire entanglements were considerably 'annoyed' by the attentions of an enemy automatic machine gun. James volunteered to stop it. It took him an hour to get to it, but he successfully bombed it. He recorded that he also discovered an enemy listening post. It was just getting dark when three Germans approached. When the first soldier was about six inches from his muzzle, James halted them, then as the German spoke, James opened fire and shot all three. He then returned and reported back.

For all of his exploits through July and August 1915, James is believed to have received a letter from Brigade Colonel W. L. Osborn congratulating him on his 'good work in close proximity to the enemy trenches', who apparently also wrote to his commanding officer, stating that King was to be promoted in the field for bravery. Another letter of congratulation came from Major Sleeman, who alluded to James' scouting exploits behind the German lines in broad daylight, proving that James had a type of courage which few men possess. Major Sleeman presented James with a pair of field glasses, a periscope, a watch and a revolver, but coupled with his congratulations a word of warning, not to risk his life too much on minor issues as "such men as you are wanted out there very much". In recognition of his many exploits, James was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Citation for the Distinguished Conduct Medal recorded in the [London Gazette](#) in the 8th October 1915 issue.

10187 Serjeant J. King, 7th Bn.,
R. Fus. R. (LG 9 Oct. 1915).
For conspicuous gallantry during
the months of July and August,
1915, in patrol work, usually
alone. On the 9th September, at
Hobbs Farm, Serjeant King ambus-
caded three Germans going to their
listening post, and on their
refusal to surrender he shot them.
He has invariably shown great cour-
age and zeal and resource in the
performance of dangerous and
difficult duties.

Throughout August and September the battalion continued to play their part in holding the line in the Armentieres and Houplines area, spending part of the time in the trenches and the remainder "resting" in "safe areas" in the towns, where they often came under heavy shell fire. Early September brought a period of leave, so James found himself back in Brighton on an eight day furlough, which gave him the opportunity to make his peace with his mother. Through the good offices of a local councillor, James was introduced to a representative of the Sussex Daily News, who found the gallant young soldier very reluctant to speak about himself or the incidents which had led up to the coveted distinction he had gained. He was found to be a fresh coloured, clean-limbed, well set up youth, modest and unassuming in his manner, but very positive about one thing. "The Royal Sussex is the finest Regiment in the British Army".

During this period the battalion lost a number of officers and men due to a new form of abomination introduced by the Germans, incendiary shells. However, there were some light hearted moments when 'A' Company men fraternised with the German soldiers across their respective parapets. 25th of September saw the start of the battle of Loos, and on the 28th the battalion marched to Steenwerck to entrain for Chocques, followed by a further route march to Verquigneul, where they were billeted in the coal mine buildings. Casualties during the first wave of the attack at Loos were very high, in that the 2nd Battalion suffered severely, so the 7th were moved up quickly, through Vermilles, to relieve the 3rd Coldstream Guards in a front line position opposite Hulluch. Throughout October 1915 the battalion again came under continued very heavy shell fire, and a lot of time was spent repairing trenches, and sending out work parties to repair broken communications. There is no doubt that James was very much involved in these activities.

In early November the battalion occupied part of the famous Hohenzollern Redoubt for the first time, which they found to be very unpleasant, with dead bodies from both sides piled everywhere in the trenches and out in No Man's Land. The weather had finally broken, being very cold and wet, and many men went down with trench feet, due to the lack of duck-boards and knee deep muddy water in the trenches. In an attempt to reduce the spread of disease, many corpses were buried where they had fallen after the removal of identity discs, which later became a cause for concern. The battalion was asked why they had not brought them back for burial in the cemetery and had to locate the graves on a map. In mid November the brigade was moved back from the front line to Bethune for well deserved recuperation, due to the increased rate of sickness, which



Map locating the Hohenzollern Redoubt.
 (From The Long, Long Trail)
<http://www.1914-1918.net>
 Loos and Hulluch on 8th October 1915

seriously concerned the generals, and later to St. Hilaire, near Lillers, where the troops enjoyed a thorough clean up and turned to some serious training.

On the 3rd December the battalion returned to the front line and spent most of this period at Festubert, a small ruined village with trenches filled with muddy water, as they had been constructed in water-meadows. This made the lines almost impossible to support for both Allies and the Germans, resulting in very little activity other than sniping, much to James delight. However, on the 13th, 'A' Company once again sustained a severe loss with Captain L. F. Cass suffering the same fate as the units previous commanding officer.

Following this relatively quiet period the battalion was moved to a sector in front of Givenchy, another small village on the banks of La Bassée Canal where

once again heavy shelling and mining operations were experienced. The allies had the advantage in observation in this sector as the village was situated on a slight rise above the enemy, but with mines being exploded immediately in front of the line, heavy casualties were experienced. This form of warfare was continued well into January 1916, such that the Battalion War Diary describes how "There are now so many craters that it is difficult to distinguish one from the other." ²

On the morning of the 16th January, the battalion was pulled back from the line and returned to Lillers, where they marched to Ham-en-Artois for a long deserved rest. Most of the time was taken up with training, but there was always time found for sports activities. On January 20th the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joffre, carried out an inspection of the brigade, accompanied by General Sir Douglas Haig. This was followed on the 8th February by a special parade of the whole battalion at L'Eclème, where Major-General Sir A. B. Scott presented the Distinguished Conduct Medal ribbon to Sergeant James King of 'A' Company, for his magnificent work whilst on patrol. It is recorded in "The History of the Seventh (Service) Battalion", edited by Owen Rutter, that "No honour could have been more thoroughly earned." ³

By the 12th February the battalion were back in the front line, once again facing the Hohenzollern Redoubt. The area had changed significantly since there last "visit" in November, with most of the Redoubt having been replaced by mine craters, due to the hostile underground mine operations having been very active. A plan had been devised requiring the sappers to dig four tunnels under the enemy trenches, which had been in progress for four months and continued throughout February, while the boys above ground held the trenches with bombs, rifle-grenades and trench-mortars. The unpleasant task of clearing all the wire from in front of the British line took place during the night of the 1st-2nd March, with the mines being exploded in the

morning of the 3rd, together with a heavy artillery barrage. The old German craters and the newly-created ones were occupied and held with great gallantry, but not without severe loss. 'A' Company were distributed in Craters 3, 4, A and B, and immediately came under an intense bombardment from large trench-mortars, howitzers and field-guns, which continued Hohenzollern Craters



One of the Hohenzollern Craters in March 1916
 (From a photograph taken by Captain D. F. Woodford)
 West Sussex Record Office RSR PH 7-13

intermittently throughout the night and intensified in the morning of the 4th, even heavier than the previous day. Conditions in the craters was appalling, deep mud with little or no cover, so casualties were heavy with 9 Officers and approximately 210 other ranks killed or wounded.

James had been involved with and led bombing parties in attacks and raids on enemy trenches, gone out on his own on missions to collect information and souvenirs, and spent many lonely hours in dangerous locations spotting for the artillery or sniping at the Germans, but through all his fighting he appeared to have borne a charmed life. Men have fallen around him, yet he survived unscathed. On one occasion he was with a working party of thirty men when a whizz-bang shell struck the ground and exploded only about a foot from him. He was not touched but two other men who were further away were victims, one being killed and the other seriously wounded. Unfortunately, this all came to an end and his luck finally ran out on 4th March 1916. It is thought that he was in one of the craters when the heavy bombardment on that morning took place. German bombs were dropping into the craters, making the men easy targets and it was most likely that the contained explosion would have take out many men. One being James.

Conclusion.



For James the war was over, and his family were notified that he had been "Killed in Action" by the Infantry Record Office on the 20th March 1916, at their home in Bates Road, Brighton.

The 7th (Service) Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment continued to fight their way through many battles in WW1, including but not limited to the Somme, Albert, Pozieres, Arras, Cambrai, Amiens and many others, which they did bravely and with great distinction. Between May 1915, when the Division first landed in France and the 11th November 1918, they had lost 2,105 officers and 46,038 other ranks in action. On 16th June 1919 a greatly reduced company returned to England, and after five years serving their king and country with honour, ceased to exist.⁴

Army form B received by James' Mum
 (Taken from family archives)

It is not known what effect James' death would have had on the family. Obviously one would assume that his mother in particular would have been devastated, but other than comments made by my mother in passing, I have no recollection of any of my aunts or uncles that I knew, even mentioning his name. I hope and trust that they were proud of his achievements and his well deserved accolade, as my brother and I are.



Sergeant James Keegan is remembered on the Brighton War Memorial and in Chichester Cathedral as Sergeant J. King D.C.M., but it is in Dud Corner Memorial, along with 20,633 other Officers and enlisted men with no known grave, that he is remembered as Sergeant J. Keegan D.C.M (Served as J. King), a fact only recently discovered by surviving members of his family.

The memorial inscription at Dud Corner.
 (Photo taken by G. Dewsall in August 2011)

Acknowledgements.

I could not have produced this little history without the help and guidance of West Sussex County Council Library Service and the West Sussex Record Office at Chichester.

Majority of the information has been obtained from the following books:

The History of the Seventh (Service) Battalion.
The Royal Sussex Regiment 1914-1918.
Compiled by a Committee of Officers of the Battalion.
Edited by Owen Rutter.
The Navel & Military Press Ltd.

Battleground Europe
LOOS - 1915. Hohenzollern Redoubt.
French Flanders.
Andrew Rawson.
Leo Cooper, Pen & Sword Books Ltd.

The following websites have also provided a dearth of information:

The Imperial War Museum <http://www.iwm.org.uk/>

The National Archives <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>

Commonwealth War Graves Commission <http://www.cwgc.org/>

The Royal Sussex Regiment in 1914-1918. The Long, Long Trail
<http://www.1914-1918.net/sussex.htm>

7th Battalion Royal Sussex Regiment - Battlefields of the Great War
<http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/7sussex.htm>

I would also like to thank my wife Marilyn and my brother David for all their help and support, and our cousin Netta for the information she provided.

Graham Dewsall

ENDNOTES:

1. The History of the Seventh (Service) Battalion. The Navel & Military Press Ltd. p. 1
2. Rudgwick Remembers. Roll of Honour. Maurice Edward Napper.
<http://www.rudgwickremembers.com/>
3. The History of the Seventh (Service) Battalion. The Navel & Military Press Ltd. p. 54
4. The History of the Seventh (Service) Battalion. The Navel & Military Press Ltd. p. 269

In Memory of

Serjeant

James Keegan

D C M

L/10187, 7th Bn., Royal Sussex Regiment

who died on 04 March 1916 Age 20

(Served as KING), Son of Henry and Harriett A. Keegan, of 47, Bates Rd., Preston Park, Brighton.

Remembered with Honour

Loos Memorial



Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

<http://www.cwgc.org/>