

# ***THE 16th (SERVICE) BATTALION, WELSH REGIMENT (CARDIFF CITY)***

**O**n 19th September 1914, Lloyd George, in a rousing speech at the Queen's Hall, London, called for the formation of a separate Welsh Army. Three weeks later, the War Office formally agreed that the "National Executive Committee" should be responsible for the organisation of the Welsh Army Corps. Three battalions already forming under local initiatives were allocated to the WAC - the 13th Royal Welch Fusiliers and the 10th and 14th Welsh Regiment. But permission was refused to incorporate other formed units, such as the 11th Welsh (Cardiff Pals Commercial). So new battalions were needed.

On the 2nd November, the NEC called on the Lord Mayor of Cardiff, Alderman J. T. Richards, to raise a complete battalion and he gave his enthusiastic support to this. On the 19th November, it was announced that the War Office had given its sanction to the new battalion and on the 23rd of November, 1914, the recruiting campaign was opened in earnest. The then Captain Frank Gaskell, at home in Llanishen recovering from wounds, was placed in command.

The war was now 16 weeks old and by this time, the "First Rush" of recruitment had long subsided. Recruits were still coming in, but at a much slower rate than before, so it was no longer an easy task to raise the required 1000 men. A vigorous campaign was therefore undertaken throughout Cardiff and District, involving public meetings, grand military demonstrations, and appeals at soccer matches and at places of work and music halls. One of the most successful tactics for drawing in the crowds proved to be the use of open-air concerts given by military bands. The target was achieved, but it took 8 weeks of hard work.

The men were attested and enrolled at the Custom House in Cardiff and were then given a few days notice to sort out their affairs, before travelling by rail warrant to Porthcawl, where they went into billets. Although the campaign was largely restricted to the Cardiff area, many recruits joined from other parts of South Wales, so it was by no means an exclusively "Cardiff" battalion. There is no truth in the claim made in a recently published book on Mametz, that the battalion was raised from employees of Cardiff Corporation. It did, however, have strong connections with Cardiff Rugby Club, and a number of famous internationals from the club joined, including Captain John L Williams, Lieutenant H Bert Winfield and Lieutenant J M Clem Lewis. Former club vice-captain, Major Fred Smith, was second-in-command of the battalion and became its Commanding Officer after Colonel Gaskell's death in 1916. Fred Smith was an inspector in the Glamorgan Police, which also had a large contingent in the battalion, including Major James Angus, who displayed exceptional bravery at Mametz Wood, and Company Sergeant Major Dick Thomas, another rugby international.

At the end of December 1914, the battalion moved from Porthcawl to Colwyn Bay, breaking its journey at Cardiff to parade through its home city, with some of the recruits wearing the 'Welsh Grey' cloth uniform. The next 8 months were spent in North Wales, before moving to Winchester in August 1915 with the other units of the 38th (Welsh) Division. There was just time in late November for an emotional final visit to Cardiff, which included a parade at the Arms Park, before the battalion embarked on the 4th of December for France.

The City Battalion spent its first few months on the Western Front in the Givenchy-Festubert-Laventie area, where it lost about 50 men. Amongst these was its Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Gaskell, who died of wounds on 17th May 1916. But despite losing the man who had done most to bring it into being, when the battalion moved south towards the Somme in June, it was still substantially the same one which Gaskell had raised.

However, the City Battalion was to experience dreadful losses at Mametz Wood. These were incurred mainly in the attack on the Hammerhead on the 7th July, when the battalion's right flank was cruelly exposed to machine gun fire from Flatiron Copse and Sabot Copse. At the Battle of Mametz Wood, it suffered over 450 casualties, including over 150 dead, two of whom were the Welsh rugby internationals CSM Dick Thomas and Captain John L Williams.

The 16th (Service) Battalion, Welsh Regiment, sustained further heavy losses during the war, particularly in the Third Battle of Ypres, and was eventually disbanded in early 1918. But it is hard to disagree with the words of a survivor of Mametz Wood, William Joshua, quoted in Colin Hughes' book 'Mametz', "On the Somme, the Cardiff City Battalion died".