



**Mike Snell
explores
some of the
personal
histories of
Troth family
members
who fell in
the Great
War**

Few families were to escape the carnage of the Great War.

Homes across Britain were touched by loss, as an entire generation of young people died on the fields of Europe and beyond.

But there would be few so affected, so wasted, in that time of sorrow as one family in Sidemoor, Bromsgrove.

Aspirations

In April 1911 Robert Troth was a 45-year-old labourer with Bromsgrove Urban District Council. His wife, Emma, was 44 and, despite continuing to raise a large family, she worked at home in the nail making industry.

Their home at 21 Melbourne Road, Sidemoor, was full of children. The couple had 12 with Osbert – at 16 the eldest still living at home – working as a local errand boy. The three oldest children were Lucy, Mary and George and they had already left home to find work. In fact, George was serving as a young stoker in the Royal Navy.

When the First World War arrived just three years later every family was expected to give up their healthy young men in

response to Kitchener's recruitment poster, and the three oldest Troth boys were not slow to come forward. Alfred and Osbert both joined their local regiment - the Worcestershire - while older brother George had already chosen a career with the Royal Navy – joining up long before war broke out.

But between 1915 and 1918, all three were to lose their lives. For Robert and Emma each of the three years brought the chilling knock on their door at Melbourne Road and the news that they grew to half expect.



Above: Troops in cheerful mood. Right: Come on boys! - A March 1915 recruitment poster.

The battle for Neuve Chappelle

Osbert Troth was 19 when he enlisted in Birmingham.

He was placed in the Worcestershire Regiment's 1st Battalion and sent to France where the battalion had become part of the 8th Division of Douglas Haig's First Army. The Division was formed during October 1914 by bringing together regular army units from various points around the British Empire. When the Division arrived at the Western Front in November 1914 it was a badly needed reinforcement to the original British Expeditionary Force that had been all but wiped out at Ypres.

By the spring of 1915 French Commander-in-Chief General Josph Joffre considered it vital that the Allied forces should take every advantage of their growing numbers and strength on the Western Front, both to relieve German pressure on Russia and if possible break through in France. British commander Sir John French agreed and pressed the BEF to adopt an offensive posture after the months of defence in sodden trenches.

Neuve Chappelle is a small village a few miles west of Lille. It was here that the first large scale organised attack was undertaken by the British Army during the First World War and Osbert Troth, with his chums in the Worcestershire Regiment, was destined to play his part.

The battle for Neuve Chappelle opened on the 10th March 1915 with a 35-minute bombardment of the front line, followed by 30 minutes on the village and reserve positions. Captain W G Bagot-Chester MC, of the Indian Corps, reported: *"At 7.30 am artillery bombardment commenced, and never since history has there been such a one. You couldn't hear yourself speak for the noise. It was a continual rattle and roar. We lay very low in our trenches, as several of our guns were firing short."*

At first the battle went well with the 1st Worcestershire playing a support role for the advancing army, but by the end of the 11th March the battle – like so many in this war – had become confused and at stalemate.

At dawn on the morning of the 12th March Osbert and his comrades were dug in just outside Neuve Chappelle. The Germans had already heavily shelled the ground around the British trenches. Suddenly they increased their range and almost at once through the mist came a dense mass of attacking battalions of the 21st Bavarian Reserve Regiment in close formation with a mounted officer in their midst. *"On they came in a great mass,"* wrote a Worcestershire subaltern. *"Their officers in front waving swords, then a great rabble followed by a fat old blighter on a horse"*.

"You couldn't hear yourself speak for the noise. It was a continual rattle and roar"



Right: A depiction of the counter-charge of the Worcesters against the 21st Bavarians (Gilbert Holiday).

The brother who chose to fight at sea

The Germans came to within 70 yards. Then at last from flank to flank the whole line of the Worcestershire broke into the crackling roar of rapid fire – the “mad minute” – so assiduously practised. “We brought them down in solid chunks,” wrote one subaltern. “Down went the officers, the sergeant-majors and the old blighter on the horse.” Then, as the German battalions reeled under the storm, the Worcestershire broke from their trenches and charged with the bayonet. “We counter-charged...and back the rabble went, full tilt for their own trenches 400 yards away.”

The battle ebbed and flowed over the next 24 hours and eventually ground to a halt. The losses on all sides were severe. The 1st Worcestershire lost more than 370 of all ranks, including 19 officers. Among them was Osbert Troth, who was reported killed on 13th March. His body was never found, and he was not alone. Commanding Officer of the 1st Worcestershire, Lieut.-Colonel Ernest Wodehouse, also fell some time between the 10th and 13th March and has no known grave.

Osbert, who was just 20 years old when he died, and his commanding officer are both remembered at the Memorial in Le Touret Military Cemetery, a short distance from Neuve Chapelle.

Below: The cemetery at Le Touret, and Osbert Troth's memorial inscription.



Joining up for **George Troth** was more of an adventure than for his brothers or his friends in Sidemoor.

He chose to go to sea – an interesting decision, given there was no family connection with the Royal Navy and he came from a town almost as far from the sea as you can get in England!

As spring turned to summer in 1916 George found himself on board HMS Invincible, the first of a new class of warship pioneered by Admiral Sir John Fisher. Fisher saw them as powerful – and fast – armoured cruisers, ideal for roles in trade protection at sea and support for light forces. The class introduced steam turbines to large cruisers giving them the speed to overhaul enemy cruisers or evade any ship powerful enough to defeat them.

Invincible was built at Newcastle upon Tyne in 1906, completed in March 1909 and cost £1.8 million. In 1914 she took part in the Battle of Heligoland Bight and, later, the Battle of the Falkland Islands, before being refit at Gibraltar in February 1915 and joining the 3rd Battlecruiser Squadron.

The Royal Navy began the First World War

with a numerical advantage in ships over the Germans but by the spring of 1916 the Germans felt they had a distinct advantage through their U-Boat fleet. They decided to station their U-Boats off the major British naval bases and then entice the Grand Fleet out of harbour and above the predatory submarines.

George Troth was a stoker, working deep inside the Invincible ready to produce the power and speed that the ship was built for.

The German plan was to use Vice-Admiral Franz Hipper's fast scouting group of five modern battlecruisers to lure Vice-Admiral Sir David Beatty's battlecruiser squadrons through a submarine picket line and into the path of the main German fleet and so destroy them. But the British had learned from signal intercepts that a major fleet operation was likely, and on 30th May Commander in Chief, of the Grand Fleet, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, sailed to



Top: Rear-Admiral Hood. Centre: HMS Invincible. Bottom: the moment the Invincible blew up.

Alfred - the last to do his duty

Alfred Troth was the last of Robert and Emma's three boys to join up. He enlisted locally, at Bromsgrove, and like Osbert joined the Worcestershire Regiment. However, unlike his brother, Alfred ended up in the 3rd Battalion.

The 3rd Battalion of the Worcestershire spent most of the War (from 1915) as part of the Fourth Army's 25th Division, and saw action at some of the iconic battles including Vimy Ridge, the Somme (of course), Messines and Bapaume.

In June 1918 Alfred and his fellow Worcesters were transferred from the 25th Division to the Third Army's 19th Division.

Retreating

Alfred was most likely seriously wounded in the Battle of the Selle (17th-25th October) or possibly in the Battle of Valenciennes (1st-2nd November). The War was now in its last act with the Germans retreating rapidly through Picardy but at the same time covering their withdrawal mainly by means of rearguards formed of machine-gun companies, placed in depth, and artillery. Significant fighting was required by the British to oust the enemy from their emplacements and make good their advance.

Alfred was taken to a hospital near Boulogne on the northern French coast where, since early in 1914, the British had established numerous hospitals, rest centres and other medical facilities. He died of his wounds on 3rd of November 1918, just eight days short of the Armistice, at the age of 22. He is buried in the

rendezvous with Beatty, side-stepping the German submarine pickets before they reached station.

Over the next 24 hours George on HMS Invincible was to take part in the Battle of Jutland, the largest surface naval battle of the metal ship era – and the last of its kind.

The role of Beatty's battlecruiser squadrons at Jutland was both crucial and tragic. The 3rd Battlecruiser Squadron was under the command of Rear Admiral Horace Hood who was on the squadron's flagship Invincible. On the afternoon of 31st May, it was the battlecruisers under the command of Beatty that first engaged the German naval forces but, owing to a mixture of bad initial positioning, sloppy signalling, lack of initiative and bad luck his battlecruisers were left exposed. By 6.22 pm Hood had joined forces with Beatty and the combined battlecruiser force was maintaining a heavy and accurate fire on the German van.

HMS Invincible had already scored eight hits on the German battlecruiser Lützow when she came under the combined fire of the Lützow and the Derfflinger. At 6.33 pm Invincible was hit in her "Q" turret by a salvo from the Lützow which blew the roof off the turret. It was either this shell that caused a flash down the magazine, or a second shell in the same salvo that penetrated the ship's armour and exploded in the magazine, that caused a massive explosion. Invincible broke into two and sank with the loss of all but six of her crew of 1,021. Those, like George, working in the ship's engine room, stood no chance. Rear Admiral

Hood – a man whose family's naval heritage was legendary – was also lost, as was the ship's captain, Arthur Cay.

In his later despatch on the Battle of Jutland Admiral Jellicoe paid tribute to those who slaved in the ships' engine rooms:

"It must never be forgotten, however, that the prelude to action is the work of the engine-room department, and that during action the officers and men of that department perform their most important duties without the incentive which a knowledge of the course of the action gives to those on deck."

Threat

Both sides claimed victory. The British had lost more ships and many more sailors, and the British press criticised the Grand Fleet's actions, but the German plan to destroy Beatty's battlecruiser squadrons had also failed. The Germans continued to pose a threat that required the British to keep their battleships concentrated in the North Sea, but they never again contested control of the high seas. Instead, the German Navy turned its efforts and resources to unrestricted submarine warfare.

After the war, Invincible was located by a minesweeper at 57-02-40 north latitude, 06-07-15 east longitude, and 180 feet down. Leading Stoker George William Troth, aged 24, is remembered on the Portsmouth Naval Memorial.

Terlincthun British Cemetery, Wimille.

His death, coming after those of his brothers Osbert and George, and so late in the five-year conflict, must have been impossible to bear for Robert and Emma.

As they closed the curtains of their little home in Sidemoor for a third time in mourning, they must have felt that their sacrifice had undoubtedly been far beyond what should ever have been expected.



Last offensive for the heart of Jerusalem

Albert Troth was just 17 when the First World War broke out. He was the son of John Troth who, with his older brother George, had been the first to escape the nail making industry in Sidemoor by moving to Barrow-in-Furness, the booming north Lancashire town.

By the spring of 1891 the two brothers were living at 28 Franklin Street, deep among the back-to-backs of Barrow. George, aged 27, was married to Mary, while John, who was 23, had been joined by his bride-to-be, 18-year-old Rebecca Juggins who John had met at home in Sidemoor. The brothers were general labourers in the steelworks.

John and Rebecca married in 1894 and had two children: Harriet in 1895 and Albert two years later.

However, within four years John and Rebecca had decided to leave Barrow and return to the Midlands. The 1901 Census shows the four of them sharing the home of John's younger brother Simeon and his wife Betsey at 73 Midland Road, Kings Norton, Birmingham.

It was no surprise then that, when Albert answered the call of his King, he enlisted in Birmingham. Unlike so many others Albert

joined the Devonshire Regiment and found himself serving in the Middle East theatre of war.

On 14th January 1917 the commanding officer of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, Sir Edmund Allenby, gave orders for the reorganisation of a number of brigades of yeomanry – including Albert's Devonshire – who, at the time, were serving on Suez Canal defences.

Offensive launched

Today the land where the British forces were active in 1914 to 1918 lies in Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria. "Palestine" is a shorthand, applied to a widespread war that was initially centred along the banks of the Suez Canal which links the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, in Egypt. Later, operations were necessary in the Hejaz and Aden, nowadays in Saudi Arabia, before in 1917 an offensive was launched which took British troops into the Holy Land and Syria.

The Suez Canal was a vitally important supply route for the British Empire. During the war, troops and equipment of the Australian, New Zealand and Indian forces passed this way en route for the Western

Above: The city of Jerusalem today, scene of British victory in 1917.

Front, in addition to millions of tons of foodstuffs, minerals and other provisions bound for Britain and her allies. The importance of the canal had been recognised by the British Government long before the war, and steps were taken to provide defences.

Assault

It was not until early 1917 that sufficient force had been gathered, and lines of communication established, for an assault on the large Turkish forces in Palestine. Albert took part in two attempts between 26th March and 19th April on the difficult and fortified Turkish positions at Gaza on the coast and which narrowly failed. But in October the British forces swept successfully north and east, and on towards Jerusalem.

Albert Troth, at the age of 20, was killed in action on 3rd December – during the final push of the campaign and was unable to share his comrades' joy in the final capture of Jerusalem a week later.

Albert is buried in the Jerusalem War Cemetery, just three miles north of the walled city, which today is in Israel.

The letter that hides the horror of war



It was a chatty letter that Private **James Dean** wrote to his sister Cissie in 1917; the sort of letter that any young brother, away from home for a long time, would pen to someone close.

It was full of thanks for gifts received, news of how he was getting on and imprecations that others in the family should also write.

What this letter failed to convey was the full horror of James Dean's circumstances. He was, in fact, serving in France in the middle of the defining series of battles of the Great War.

The battles of the Somme in 1916 were the most important campaign in which the British Army has ever been engaged, and fighting on the Somme shaped modern memory of the entire War. According to the British official history of the battle, total Allied casualties amounted to nearly 630,000.

James joined up in his home town of Manchester. He was one of three sons born to James Dean and Jane Ann Boniface in 1896, and his only sister Cissie (her real name was Jane) was to marry Arthur Hughes in 1921 - a union that ultimately led to the link with the Troth family.

The family lived in Ardwick, south Manchester, so it was natural that James joined the 18th Battalion of the Manchester Regiment, which became part of the 30th Division and moved to France in November 1915.

The first battle of the Somme began in late June 1916 with a huge, and persistent,

"Total Allied casualties amounted to nearly 630,000"

Above: Jane Dean pictured at her son's grave in France - her only visit.

"I am lost for words, but anyway I am going to do my best till then"

bombardment of the German lines by the British and French artillery and which was designed to destroy enemy positions. On the morning of the 1st July (the Battle of Albert) the Allied infantry attacked *en masse* but were met with quite unexpected resistance. Consequently, the British lost 58,000 soldiers (one third of them killed) on that first day alone.

The attack was launched across a 30 kilometre front, from north of the Somme river between Arras and Albert, and ran from 1st July to 18th November. It featured a number of key battles, the names of which have entered into the vocabulary as the epitome of the horror of trench warfare. The 20-year-old James, and his comrades in C Company, survived these months of fighting, never truly understanding whether they were making progress or not.

None of this though was reflected in the letter to his sister which he wrote on 21st August, when the Germans were resisting dogged Allied attacks during the Battles of Delville Wood and Pozières. Instead he writes of a welcome parcel that had arrived and indicates some of the basic hardships he was enduring:

"Out here you know we hardly can get anything we require (of course we can do without such things as toffee and we get beaucoup des cigarettes). A Daily Sketch costs 2d and a 1/2d bar of chocolate is 2d."

James provides an insight into local French attitudes:

"I can tell you the French people don't give too much away," he writes.

He indicates that he has been learning to speak French, and his letter continues more in the vein of a holiday postcard:

"You ask me how I like France. Well, taking the place all round, what I have seen is alright but the towns and villages spoil the appearance. The only idea I can give you is the French seem to be about eight years behind our time."

Censored

James was unable to express his true feelings, of course. Letters from the trenches were censored by the Army, and the difficulties that this posed is reflected in the last part of his letter home:

"I hope you know sis your letters are not censored but mine are, worst luck. You are leaving me a bit of a thoughtful job in asking me to write to your esteemed friends. I am lost for words, but anyway I am going to do my best till then."

By early November the battles of the Somme were grinding to a close. Winter was fast approaching which would make further operations impossible. The final effort was the Battle of The Ancre which began on 13th November, and it was during this that James was fatally wounded. Ironically, he died on 18th November – generally regarded as the very last day of the 1916 Somme campaign.

James Dean is buried in the Bellacourt Military Cemetery near the hamlet of Rivière, just off the busy Arras to Doullens road. His sister never saw his grave, but his mother, Jane, paid one visit after the war.

Below: Part of James Dean's letter to his sister.

