



CHELTENHAM & GLOUCESTER BRANCH of THE WESTERN FRONT ASSOCIATION

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Welcome!

I was of course saddened to hear of the passing of Martin Middlebrook on January 19 at the age of 91. Like thousands of others, his book *The First Day On The Somme* opened up the Great War to my mind and understanding and will always count as one of my favourite on the subject.

The first time that I ever spoke to Martin was not long after we had first started the branch. He telephoned me to introduce himself and to explain that as he had not long moved to Twyning near Tewkesbury, he would like to join us at some meetings. He also kindly suggested that he would be happy to give the branch a special talk outside of our usual meetings. Naturally I was delighted to hear from him and thrilled with his offer.

In due course Martin became a very valued branch member attending many meetings and speaking to us regularly until he decided, after his wife Mary passed away, that he would move back to Lincolnshire. I particularly remember

an occasion when Bob Brunson organised a special meeting for us in which he demonstrated, and got many of us to actively participate in, grenade throwing. Martin threw himself wholeheartedly into the occasion, showing an aggressive enthusiasm mixed with boyish charm that certainly belied his years (and made me rather pleased that I wouldn't ever have to face him in open battle!).

To me Martin was always generous in his advice, and in those early days of running the branch he certainly helped me to find my feet. We are blessed in the branch by having had and indeed having some very notable members, Martin will certainly rank as one of our most esteemed.

There are a couple of WFA online talks coming up. On 19 February at 8pm - *I think I was better off in the trenches: Noël Coward, the Great War and the veteran mentality* and 4 March at 8pm - *Turning Points* with Dr Spencer Jones.

Peter

Future branch events

Tuesday, 12 March

*The Women's Land Army during
the First World War*

Helen Frost

The Ed Shed at 7.30pm

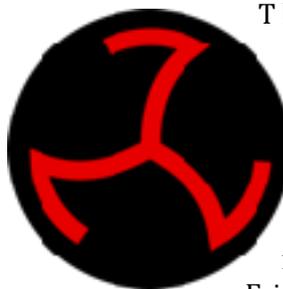
Officially formed in February 1917, the women that eventually went on to join the Women's Land Army (WLA) during the First World War enabled vital food production to continue on the Home Front. Their efforts attempted to fill the enormous void left by men who had gone to serve overseas; men who had previously worked in farming and agriculture. The chief purpose of the WLA was to stave off the very real threat of starvation to the British population by turning more land over to cultivation whilst continuing to farm existing land. This threat to food supply was caused by the devastating impact unrestricted German U-boat attacks had on Allied merchant shipping.

Tuesday, 9 April

The 21st Division on the Somme 1916

Dr Derek Clayton

The Ed Shed at 7.30pm



The story of three ultimately successful assaults during the Battle of the Somme. On 1 July, the Division captured and held its first objectives, resulting in the fall of the village of Fricourt the following day.

On 14 July, the 110th Brigade stormed the Bazentin Ridge, capturing the woods and the village. In September, they played their part in the latter stages of the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, culminating in the capture of the village of Gueudecourt.

Corporal Harold John McKee (240596) 1/5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment

Harold John McKee was born in Gloucester in 1896, one of six children born to James McKee and his wife Susan. James McKee was a blacksmith employed by the Gloucester Wagon Company Limited, better known as the 'Wagon Works' and he died in 1911. The census of that year shows the family living at Clegram Road in the Linden area of Gloucester and Harold employed as an errand boy. Between the time of the census and the outbreak of war Harold emulated his father by becoming an employee of the Wagon Works.



At the age of 18 Harold was one of the first to join up when war broke out: his name appears in the list of recruits joining the 1/5th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, published in the *Gloucester Journal* of 5 September 1914. He was allocated the number 2506; when Territorial Force members were allocated new six digit numbers in early 1917, he became 240596.

The battalion went to France on 29 March 1915 and in May became part of 145 Brigade, 48 (South Midland) Division. After a period of training at Ploegsteert, the battalion was deployed at Hebuterne in the Somme sector until July 1916. It then saw action on Pozieres Ridge and wintered on the Ancre Heights before following up the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line in the Spring of 1917.

Thereafter there was a move to Ypres in July 1917 and participation in the battles of Third Ypres, principally Langemarck and Polygon Wood, before the Battle of Broodseinde opened on 4 October 1917.

Harold McKee had been in France and Flanders since March 1915 and during this time had been promoted to Corporal. He was due a month's home leave in recognition of his length of service and was expected home at any time. It was not to be. On 4 October 1917 he was on attachment to a Trench Mortar Battery (probably the 145th) when 145 Brigade took part in an attack on objectives half way

between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele. The attack went forward in heavy rain and over wet, muddy and churned up ground. The German machine guns took a heavy toll and only a modest advance was possible. The British barrage fell too far ahead of the advance. It seems certain that the Trench Mortar Battery was firing in support of the advance and Corporal McKee was reportedly killed by a retaliatory shell burst. He was 21 years of age.

Corporal Harold McKee's body was never recovered and he is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial to the Missing of the Third Ypres Offensive. He is also listed on the Gloucester War Memorial.

Graham Adams

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"When you go home, tell them of us and say, for your tomorrow, we gave our today."