

Marlow Men in Gallipoli

AUGUST - OCTOBER 1915

The Gallipoli campaign was one of the most controversial conflicts of the First World War. From the spring of 1915 until early in 1916, Allied and Turkish servicemen fought for control of a small strip of land in modern-day Turkey. Over 110,000 on both sides were killed in the fighting. Amongst the 17 men and boys from Marlow who died during the campaign were 3 who were killed in fighting on the same day in August 1915.

The Ottoman Empire joined the First World War on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary in November 1914. Its lands covered much of the Middle East as well as modern-day Turkey and its entry into the war was seen as a threat to the Allies.

The Allies, made up of British, French, Australian, New Zealand and colonial forces, attacked the peninsula of Gallipoli in modern-day Turkey in April 1915 to try and capture the capital Constantinople and knock the Ottoman Empire out of the War. However, the Allies were underprepared and poorly led. They also badly underestimated the resilience of the opposing Turkish troops and suffered heavy casualties in the fighting. They soon needed reinforcements from home.

Because the British Army was now severely stretched fighting both in France and Gallipoli, it had to call upon volunteer regiments outside the regular army to provide reinforcements. One of these regiments was the Royal Bucks Hussars, who left England in April 1915 and were first sent to Egypt for training.



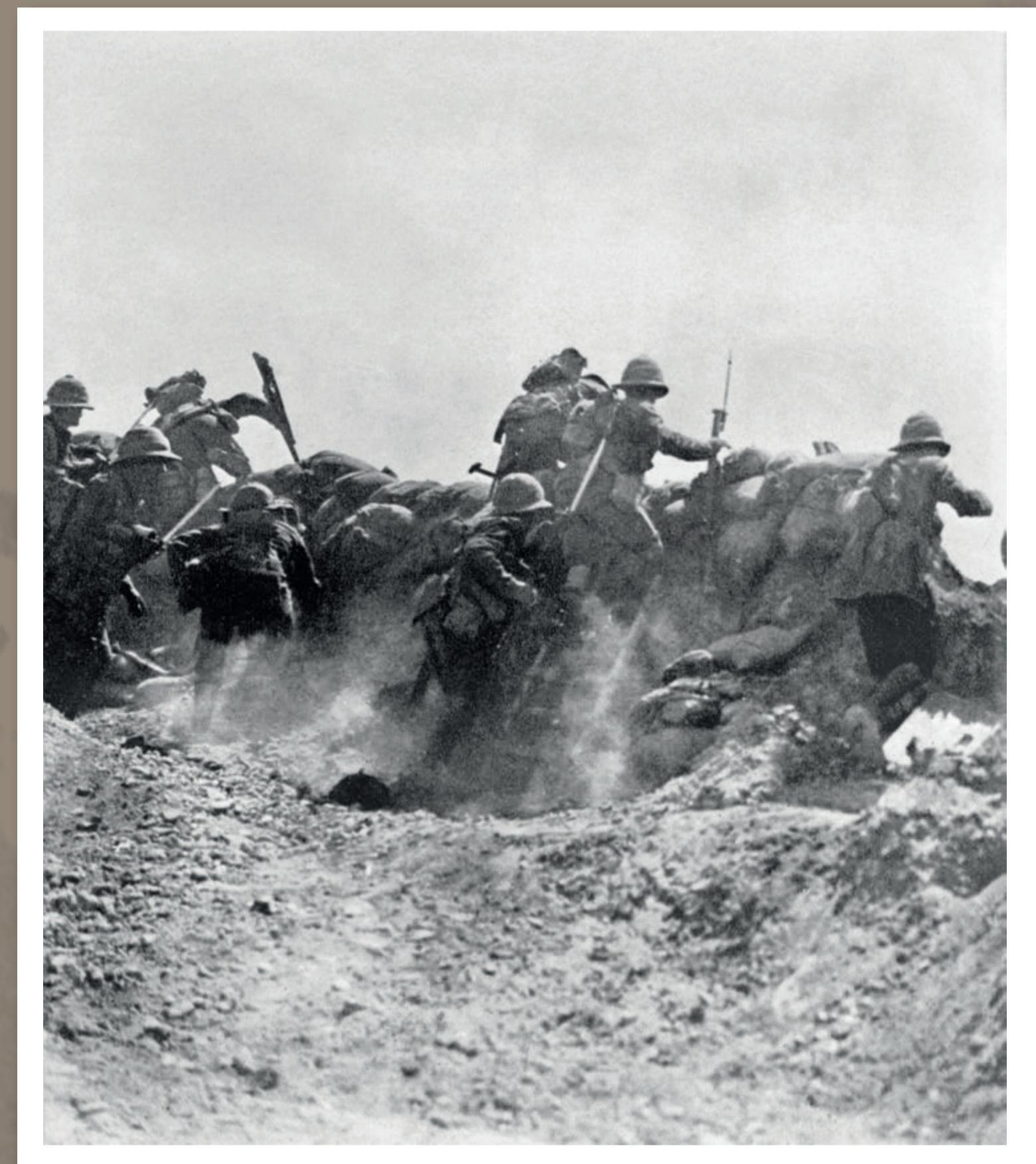
Scimitar Hill today.
Courtesy of The Gallipoli Association

The Hussars landed at Gallipoli on 18 August and on 21 August were part of the forces sent to capture nearby Scimitar Hill. While they seemed initially to make good progress in their attack, they were eventually driven back by heavy shell and machine-gun fire. Much of the scrubland over which they crossed had caught fire in the shelling and the soldiers had to bunch together to avoid the fires. This in turn made them easy targets for the Turkish machine-guns. Of the 321 officers and men who started the attack, 140 were killed or wounded.

Among those killed on 21 August were 3 men from Marlow:

Private Reginald Buckell, aged 21
Private Charles Gillett, aged 19
Sergeant Henry Haddon, aged 29

All three are remembered on the Helles Memorial in Gallipoli. The Allies eventually withdrew from Gallipoli in early 1916 having failed to achieve their objectives.



British troops fighting at Gallipoli.
Courtesy of Imperial War Museum



Helles Memorial, Turkey.
Courtesy of Commonwealth War Graves Commission



Troops in/near Pullingshill Wood, March 1916

Marlow's Training Trenches

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The First World War Training Trenches at Pullingshill Wood, Marlow Common are amongst the best preserved in the country. They were dug by soldiers who were stationed in Marlow during the summer of 1915 to help train them before they were sent to the Western Front.

Many training camps with trench systems were established across the country in 1914 and 1915 to teach new army recruits the skills needed for the front lines in France and Belgium. The trenches in Marlow were constructed in June 1915 by soldiers from the Grenadier Guards (4th Battalion). The regimental diary for 18 June 1915 records these events:

"During the week the men have been kept busily employed with their training. The range at Quarry Woods has been used for firing parties nearly every morning and trench digging and field exercises have been carried out in the woods to the north of the town."

The trenches were used for field exercises from June until at least November 1915 by a number of different regiments who were billeted at the nearby Bovingdon Green Camp. Although the camp was closed in November 1915 after a storm, troops continued to be billeted in and around Marlow until at least March 1916.



Marlow's Training Trenches Today



COOKING DINNER IN CAMP MARLOW COMMON. 10.

Throughout the summer of 1915, the local South Bucks Free Press newspaper carried reports of sports and social activities involving the billeted troops, including football matches and concerts. The presence of the troops made a lasting impact upon many local residents who could still recall them many years later:

"There was a lot of training of soldiers at Marlow Common, which is still called 'The Trenches' and I can remember them marching through the town to the station...I can remember being at Bisham and there used to be a pear tree in Temple Lane and we boys had picked a lot these pears and we were throwing them to the soldiers as they marched by" (Percival Plumridge, 1988).

"We had the troops all round here because of the trenches. They were practising, rehearsing, in the trenches...We used to love to get down in the trenches and play but mother had two of the soldiers billeted on here and they had lice...She went to the farm and said that she couldn't have them unless they cleaned themselves up" (Lily Cox, 1988).

The trenches can be found off the main road in Marlow Common and are open to the public - please do visit!

William North

“the loss of a brave and promising boy” AUGUST - OCTOBER 1915

William North was one of the youngest soldiers from Marlow to die in the War. Along with many other Marlow men and boys, he joined the Isle of Wight Rifles as a volunteer at the outbreak of the War. He died of sickness aged 16 while serving in the Gallipoli campaign in 1915 and left behind a diary that was printed in the local newspaper.

George William John North (known as William) was born in June 1899 in Cookham, the eldest of six children whose parents, George and Lucy were also from the local area. By 1911, the family had moved to Victoria Road in Marlow where the father was employed as a labourer for a coalman. The family subsequently moved to 68 Station Road.

William was working in a hatter's shop in Marlow High Street before the War. Although clearly under-age, he volunteered for the army and, like many men and boys from the local area, joined the Isle of Wight Rifles.

The reason for this seemingly strange choice of regiment was because the officer in command of the Isle of Wight Rifles, Lieutenant Colonel John Edward Rhodes, had previously been an agent for the Little Marlow Estate. He wanted to attract men to the regiment that he knew and therefore targeted the South Bucks area. His offer of £1 to each man who joined up was more than a week's wages for most of them and ensured a good supply from Marlow – in all more than 20 local men and boys travelled to Newport, Isle of Wight to join the regiment.

Unlike many other Marlovians, these men served not on the Western Front but firstly in Gallipoli and then in Palestine. More than half of these Marlow recruits died in these campaigns.

William kept a “very neatly written diary” of his time in the Regiment from leaving training in Watford in July 1915 until he arrived in Gallipoli. He was evacuated very shortly after landing in August when, like many other British soldiers, he fell ill as a result of the tough climate, thirst and poor sanitary conditions. He was evacuated from Gallipoli with enteric fever on a hospital ship bound for Alexandria but died on board and was buried at sea, aged 16. His diary was later published in the South Bucks Free Press.



Isle of Wight Rifles training in Watford, summer 1915
Courtesy of Wootton Bridge Historical



Isle of Wight Rifles marching through Watford, 1915



The memorial at the Drill Hall, Newport,
Isle of Wight where William North is commemorated
Courtesy of CIS/Geoff Allen