

**The military career of Pte. John Cummings
of the Cheshire Regiment (1896-1916)**

Introduction

This report arises from my ongoing family history research, and the suggestion that the grandchildren of John CUMMINGS ought to know something of his career in the Cheshire Regiment before and during the First World War, as well as the circumstances that led to his death.

There are a number of documentary sources dealing with John CUMMINGS and the Cheshire Regiment. These are:

- a) The record of the subject's service with the Militia from 1896 to 1897
- b) The record of the subject's service with the Regulars from 1897 to 1904, and his subsequent period as a reservist from 1904 to 1914
- c) The record of his service from 1914 to 1916. This is one of the "burnt records", damaged by Luftwaffe bombing in September 1940, but enough of it survives to be of use.
- d) The subject's medal card
- e) The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's record of the subject's burial

This report will be split into the following sections:

- a) The Cheshire Regiment
- b) 4th (Militia) Battalion
- c) 2nd Battalion - Ireland
- d) 1st Battalion – India and the Reserve
- e) 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion and 1st Battalion in France & Flanders

Appendices

- 1) The 5th Division
- 2) The Infantry Battalion
- 3) Select Bibliography

a) The Cheshire Regiment

The Cheshire Regiment had been raised in 1688 by the Duke of Norfolk, and was subsequently numbered the 22nd Regiment of Foot. Later it became known as the 22nd (Cheshire) Regiment of Foot, and by the end of the 19th century, it was known simply as the Cheshire Regiment. At the time when John CUMMINGS joined the regiment, it consisted of seven battalions:

The 1st & 2nd Battalions were the regular infantry of the line. Soldiers signed up for twelve years, seven with the colours and five with the reserve. It was intended that one or other of the battalions would be stationed overseas and one at home, with the battalion at home recruiting and training new recruits and sending regular drafts of men to the battalion overseas to keep the latter up to strength. In practice, though, this sometimes failed to happen due to the exigencies of the service, and Pte CUMMINGS served through one such period, the Second Boer War, when the 1st Cheshires were in India and the 2nd on active service in South Africa.

The 3rd & 4th Battalions were the militia units. These were part-time soldiers, intended for home defence. The Cheshire militia dated back to the middle ages, but had been formally part of the Cheshires since 1853.

There were also the 1st, 2nd (Earl of Chester's), 3rd, 4th & 5th Volunteer Battalions. These had been formed as a result of the war scares of the 1850s, and had become a part of the Cheshire Regiment in 1860. These were also part-time soldiers, intended for home defence, but were generally of a higher social class than the Militia Battalions, as the original Volunteers had been required to outfit themselves at their own expense.

b) 4th (Militia) Battalion

John CUMMINGS attested for the first time on the 19th of October 1896, at Stockport, before the adjutant of the battalion, signing up for the period of 6 years, contingent on passing a medical examination. His details were entered on Army Form E.504, the Militia version of the attestation form. Attestation papers also survive from his transfer to the regulars and from his re-enlistment at the start of the First World War, which gives us an opportunity to see the subject as a youth in 1896, again as a young man in 1897 and lastly as a man in his mid thirties.

The attestation begins with the his regimental number and then goes on to record some basic information:-

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Service No. | 3435 |
| Name | John CUMMINGS |
| Corps | 4 th Battalion Cheshire Regiment |
| Address | No 4 Edwards Street, Millgate, Stockport, Cheshire |
| Age | 17 years & 2 months |
| Born | Parish of St Mary's, Stockport, Cheshire |
| Trade | Cotton Operative |
| Marital Status | Single |

The next day, the subject attended a medical examination at Chester, and was passed fit for service. The Medical Officer also recorded a physical description of the new recruit:-

| | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| Height | 5 feet & 3 inches |
| Weight | 108 lbs. |
| Min. chest expansion | 31" |
| Max. chest expansion | 32 ½" |
| Complexion | Fresh |
| Eyes | Blue |
| Religion | Roman Catholic |

Under the heading of Distinctive Marks, the medical officer wrote :-

“Pistol tattooed on left forearm, J.C. back of R forearm, large scar front of R forearm”

5' 3" was the minimum height for enlisted men at this time, but John CUMMINGS was still a lad and was still growing, though he would never be tall.

He did not stay in the Militia for very long. The first page of his attestation form is over-written with the words “Ches Regt 1-9-97”, so he spent less than a single year with the 4th Battalion. This was not unusual – young men would often sign up with the militia to discover whether they had a taste for soldiering or not. A common complaint of militia officers at this time was that this continual drain of trained (or at least partially trained) men made it difficult for the militia battalions to carry out its home defence duties. About 35% of militiamen transferred to the regular army each year, so it was a serious problem, and one which would be addressed in a later round of army reforms.

The last document from the subject's militia service is the reference from the adjutant of the 4th battalion, dated 3.9.97. It restates Pte Cummings' physical description, gives an assessment of his character as being "very good", and gives an account of the number of drill days (days of training) attended by the subject:-

| | |
|-----------------------|---------|
| Drill on enlistment | 49 Days |
| Musketry ¹ | 14 " |
| Annual Training | 27 " |
| | 90 " |

By the time that he transferred to the regular army, John CUMMINGS had trained with the militia a little more than one day in every four, a big time commitment for a working man and perhaps a reflection of a youthful enthusiasm.

1 In the British Army 'musketry' is used to refer the handling of firearms generally, not just of muskets. In 1896 the militia were in a process of transition from older rifles to the newer .303 Lee-Netford types. They were performing drill with the Lee-Netford rifles, but not musketry training because the new .303 round was too powerful for the existing firing ranges and a lower-powered training cartridge had not yet been developed. Once Pte CUMMINGS transferred to the regular Army, he would have found a similar process happening there due to the adoption of the new rifle, the famous Lee Enfield which had been adopted in 1895.

c) 2nd Battalion - Ireland

John CUMMINGS attested for what was then called Short Service with the Cheshire Regiment at Stockport on the 1st of September 1897. He was given a new regimental number to replace his old militia number, and was now No 5478, Private John CUMMINGS.

Short Service was always for the term of twelve years, split between regulars and reserves, and varied with the branch of service. The actual numbers reflected the number of each soldier required in peacetime, and the number required in war time. A driver in the Army Service Corps would serve two years with the regular army and ten with the reserves, a trooper in the Household Cavalry ten with the regulars and two with the reserves. For the infantry of the line, and therefore also for John CUMMINGS the terms of service were seven years with the colours and five with the reserves. It was possible to convert this Short Service to what was termed Long Service which was for the term of twenty one years, something that was generally restricted to promising NCOs.

Private CUMMINGS' details were entered on Army Form B-265, the usual attestation document for short service. He now stated his age as 18 years and 1 month and was no longer a cotton operative, but a labourer. He passed his army medical the next day in Chester, and the figures recorded showed that he had grown over the last year and was now 5' 4" in height and 119 pounds in weight. His minimum chest expansion was 32" and the maximum 34", both greater than at the medical examination the year before.

The following day, he arrived at the regimental depot at Chester, where he joined D (Depot) Company to be trained to the standard required of a regular infantryman. He was re-vaccinated on the 6th of September. The army surgeon's notes say that this was his third vaccination, that he received the jab in his left arm and that the result was 'Perfect'.

This period at the regimental depot also saw his first period of hospitalisation. He was hospitalised for psoriasis from 28th September to 5th October. The army surgeon noted that the origin of the outbreak was obscure and that he had treated it with Mercury(II) Chloride and Potassium Iodide, both regularly prescribed for psoriasis in those days – up until the 1890s, psoriasis was held to be a relative of syphilis. Generally, medical records contain few details of the course of treatment prescribed, but in this case, the surgeon, being required by army regulations to record any use of mercury, needed to be specific.

He was signed off at the regimental depot on the 23rd of November and received his first posting, to the regiment's 2nd Battalion, then stationed in Buttevant, County Cork. He arrived on the 24th of November and would serve with the battalion until October of the next year.

Buttevant is a place of no great size, and when Pte. CUMMINGS arrived there the barracks was an important part of the economy. Today the only parts of the barracks that survives are the boundary wall and the garrison gate; the rest of the site is now a Gaelic Athletic Association sports ground.

Pte CUMMINGS was assigned to E Company of the 2nd Battalion², under the command of Lieutenant C.G.E. HUGHES, an officer who would later briefly command the 1st Battalion on the Western Front. Arthur CROOKENDEN mentions him in his History of the Cheshire Regiment, saying that “Officers and men had the greatest confidence in him because he was always up at the tight corner with clear, decided and unmistakeable orders.”³

Pte. CUMMINGS found himself in trouble more than once while with the 2nd Battalion. Up until the end of 1897, he had had a clean charge sheet, but that only lasted a few days into the new year. On the 6th of January he was charged by Sgt. HUSKISSON with “laughing in the ranks.” For this he was given two days C.B. - “confined to barracks” - by Lieut. H. E. MAYO, from the 7th to the 8th of the month, a fairly light punishment. He could not leave the base, and had to report to the guardroom with full pack and equipment at reveille in the morning and at the sounding of the retreat in the evening. There was also extra drill for all defaulters.

On the 24th of March, he managed to get placed on a charge twice, first by L. Cpl. CROSBY[?] for “refusing to clean his Barrack room”, and then by Cpl. LOWE for “making improper replies.” Capt. A.G.W. TOD gave him 3 days C.B., from the 24th to the 26th of the month.

In the time between this punishment being carried out and the next entry on Pte CUMMINGS charge sheet, the battalion seems to have left Buttevant and headed west, because when he was charged by Sgt HOLLAND with “inattention and laughing in the ranks” on 7th April, the place is given as Tralee, County Kerry. Presumably the battalion was housed at the Ballymullen Barracks, where the Royal Munster Fusiliers had their depot. For this offence, he was given 4 days confined to barracks by Lieut. W. H. ANDERSON⁴, running from the 9th to the 12th of the month.

Then, on the 11th of April, while still confined to barracks, John CUMMINGS was placed on another charge. Capt. A. B. STONE noted that Pte CUMMINGS was “absent from Defaulters Drill at 5.30 pm till found in his Barrack Room about 5.45 pm.” Lieut W. H. ANDERSON gave him another two days to his sentence, the 13th & 14th of April.

To crown off the month of April, he was again charged with “laughing in the ranks” on the 27th, this time by a Capt. TEMPLEMAN⁵. Lt. ANDERSON handed down a sentence of 3 days confined to barracks, from the 28th to the 30th of the month.

After this last punishment, Pte CUMMINGS seems to have been able to pull himself together and the next few months were quiet. There are no events recorded until the 21st

2 An infantry battalion at this time had eight companies, usually designated A to H.

3 pp. 36-7. This officer was certainly in command at the time that Pte CUMMINGS left for India, but it isn't clear that he was in command when CUMMINGS first joined E Company.

4 This officer was promoted ultimately to the rank of Lieutenant General, and wrote a history of the Cheshire Regiment. His father was General David ANDERSON, who was also a colonel of the Cheshires at this time.

5 The writing is relatively clear, but no such officer is to be found in the Army List for 1898.

of August, when he was required to sign a statement declaring that he had “elected to come under Regulations governing issue of Messing Allowance in accordance with provisions of para 5 of Army Order 65 of 1898 from 21-8-98.”

What this actually meant was that 3^d a day would be stopped from his pay to pay for groceries. He would still receive a daily issue of 1 lb. of bread and $\frac{3}{4}$ lb. of raw meat (including bone), but everything else was paid for out of this “allowance.”

In a parliamentary speech of 25th of June 1901, the Duke of Bedford, a soldier himself, complained that this 3^d allowance was too small to provide the soldier with the food he needed and that he might have to pay another 2^d from his own pocket to make up the shortfall. Since the daily pay of a private soldier was 12^d, rising to 15^d when he reached 19, this represented quite a large portion of his income. This was not, however, the only stoppage. The Duke continued :

“Such charges are $\frac{1}{2}$ d. a day for washing, 1d. a month for hair-cutting, 2d. per month for recreation room and library, 2d. per month for cricket and football clubs. At least it is supposed that a soldier is lodged free of charge, but even that is not the case. The men are charged 2d. a month for barrack damages—that is, wear and tear to their quarters. This charge is greatly increased whenever a regiment changes stations. If a man goes to hospital when not on service, he is stopped 7d. a day. In the event of a recruit being sent to hospital in consequence of vaccination, he will be stopped 7d. a day. He is compelled to be vaccinated, he is ordered to go to the hospital, and he is stopped 7d. a day to teach him not to go to hospital without some good reason⁶.”

This was not all; the Duke calculated that a soldier would also need to spend 30 shillings a year on shirts, socks, underwear, trousers, cleaning materials and so on. His conclusion was that the soldiers’ pay was quite inadequate, being actually only half of what was required.

Returning to John CUMMINGS and the 2nd Cheshires, the 30th of August saw their arrival at Limerick, a more populous place than Buttevant or Tralee, and filled with temptations for a young soldier. On the 9th of October, Pte Cummings was charged by Colour Sergeant RYAN and L. Sgt HURST⁷, with “Irregular conduct in town about 9.20 pm,” for which Capt TOD handed down the punishment of three days confined to barracks, from the 10th to the 12th of the month.

Later on in the month, he was placed on a charge once more. On the 21st of October, Cpl. PATCHETT⁸ charged him with “talking in the ranks.” Captain TOD gave him 4 days confined to barracks, from the 21st to the 24th of the month.

His last appearance as a defaulter in Ireland was on the 18th of January 1899. Cpl. RICHMOND and Sgt. SWINNATON charged him with “laughing & grins[?] & irregular conduct in the Ranks.” Capt. TOD gave him another 3 days confined to barracks, from the 19th to the 21st of the month.

⁶ These hospital stoppages were not abolished until 1917.

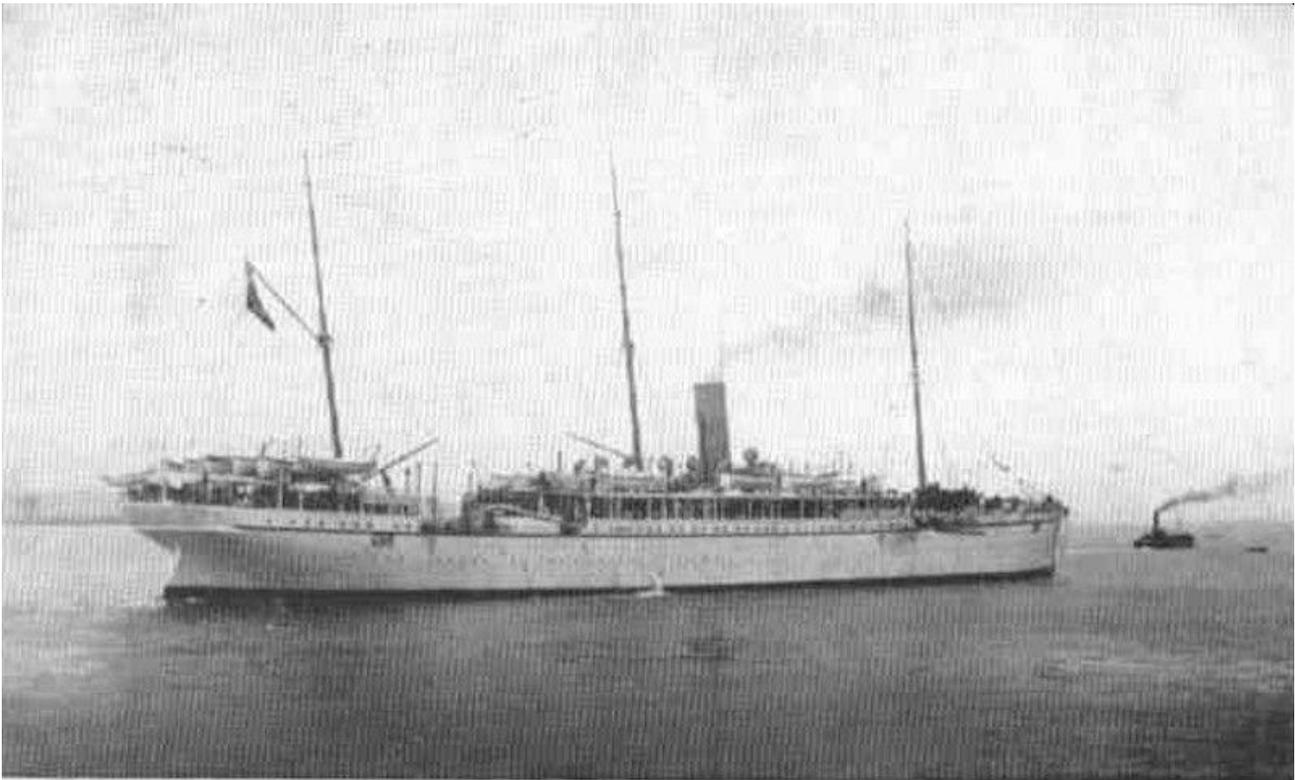
⁷ A Lance-Sergeant was a corporal appointed to perform the duties of a sergeant

⁸ This must be the same man as the L. Sgt. J.T. Patchett who appears on the Cheshire Regiment South Africa War Memorial in Chester Cathedral.

To mark 2 years service with the colours without appearing in the regimental defaulters book, and despite his many appearances in E Company's defaulters book, Pte. CUMMINGS was granted Good Conduct pay on the 1st of September 1899. Also around this time, the 2nd Battalion was required to assemble a draft to be transferred to the 1st Battalion, then stationed in India at Secunderabad. One of those selected was Pte CUMMINGS, and on the 4th of October, Lt. HUGHES signed off his record in E companies defaulters' book. The next day Pte. CUMMINGS was officially part of the British Army in India.

A week after this, the South African or 2nd Boer War broke out, and one of the first British units sent to fight in South Africa was, by chance, the 2nd Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment. Pte. CUMMINGS had, perhaps, dodged a bullet.

d) **1st Battalion – India & the Reserve**



H.M.T. "DILWARA."

John CUMMINGS joined the Hired Military Transport Dilwara⁹ on the 5th of October 1899, probably at Southampton. This ship was owned and operated by the British India Steam Navigation Company, but was under contract to the government to transport soldiers during the Indian Trooping Season, which ran from September to March each year, when the weather was reliably cooler. The journey from Southampton to Bombay¹⁰ via the Suez Canal took around three weeks in normal conditions and Pte. CUMMINGS' medical records show that he landed in India on the 27th of the month. Officially, he had been posted to the 1st battalion on the day he joined the Dilwara, but he didn't reach their barracks in Secunderabad (roughly 400 miles from Bombay) until the 12th of November.

Nowadays Secunderabad is a part of Hyderabad, but in 1899 it was a town in its own right, separated from Hyderabad by the Husain Sagar lake to the north. The Cheshire Regiment was housed in the barracks at Trimulgherry¹¹, along with a number of other units, a hospital and a military prison.

During the period when John CUMMINGS was in Ireland, the most helpful record was actually his charge sheet, but the same doesn't apply for his service in India. Here the most useful documents are his medical records.

⁹ Built in 1891 by A & J Inglis, Glasgow. Tonnage: 5,441g, 3,517n, 6,560dwt. Engine: Triple Expansion by Builder, 4,800 I.H.P., 14 Knots. Launched 3rd November 1891, Completed 29th December 1891, Yard No 217.

¹⁰ Modern Mumbai.

¹¹ Modern Tirumalagiri .

Just weeks after landing in India, John CUMMINGS was hospitalised for 6 days with a sprained ankle, from the 18th to the 23rd of November 1899. The medical officer's notes classified it as a slight injury, that it was treated with liniments and that the patient recovered.

A Court of Enquiry was held into this injury by the regiment, and because it was held at Trimulgherry, we know that must have been where Pte. CUMMINGS was based.

A panel of three officers was assembled to hear the case on the 17th of February 1900. This consisted of Major H. E. NAPIER (President), Lt. T.G. COUSIN and 2nd Lt. W.L.E.R. DUGMORE. The panel first heard evidence from Pte. CUMMINGS :

"At Trimulgherry on the 14th December 1899 I was playing football at about 5 p.m. when Pte HUNT "E" Coy 1/Ches Regt coll[ided] with me and I sprained my right ankle I was admitted to Hospital on the 17th December 1899."

Pte. T. HUNT then gave his evidence :

"At Trimulgherry on December 14th 1899, I was playing football; there was a scrimmage near the Goal when Pte. CUMMINGS & myself Kicked at the ball together causing him to sprain his right ankle. Pte. CUMMINGS was admitted to Hospital on the 17th December 1899"

Written evidence from the army doctor who had treated the patient was then read into the record :

"Capt. H. HEWETSON, R.A.M.C.12 states in writing that No 5478/Ches. Pte. J. CUMMINGS 1/Cheshire Regt was admitted into Hospital on the 18th December 1899 suffering from a sprained ankle. The injury is not likely to interfere with his future efficiency as a soldier."

The board's findings were passed on to Lt. Col. F. W. BROMFIELD, the commander of 1st Bn. Cheshire Regt. His verdict was that :

"I am of opinion that N^o 5478 Pte J. CUMMINGS 1st Bn Cheshire Regiment was injured when not on duty : the injury is slight and is not likely to affect his future efficiency as a soldier."

The result of this was that Pte. CUMMINGS was liable for six days of hospital stoppages, a total of 3^s& 6^d.

The next entry in his medical records shows him at Wellington in the Madras Presidency, about 560 miles from Secunderabad, having arrived there on the 31st of March 1900. This was probably a company posting, since the 1st Battalion HQ was still in Trimulgherry and would remain there until 1901.

12 Royal Army Medical Corps.

Wellington is about 540 miles south of Secunderabad and is 6068 ft above sea level. The climate is described as mild and salubrious and it was seen as a good place for troops new to India to spend their first summer and become acclimatised to the conditions.

On the 21st of July 1900, while still at Wellington, Pte. CUMMINGS was revaccinated, but the medical officer remarks in his notes that the vaccination had failed, meaning that no lesion had formed at the injection site.

On the 29th of October, Pte. CUMMINGS arrived back in Secunderabad. He had now been in India for just over a year, without any difficulties other than a sprained ankle. However, this state of affairs didn't last long, since he was admitted to the hospital on the 31st of the month with gonorrhoea and stayed there until the 13th of November – fourteen days. Sexually Transmitted Infections were the scourge of the army in India. Around 1/3 of British soldiers' hospital admissions were for what were then called venereal diseases, though better hygiene and prophylaxis were soon to have some effect on this. Between 1897 and 1910, this had dropped to only one tenth.

John CUMMINGS' gonorrhoea would have been treated by urethral lavage with dilute antiseptics, such as silver nitrate or potassium permanganate. It is hard to make out the medical officer's notes here, but not impossible. He says that it was a "Contag[ion]", that it was "Mild" and that it was treated with "Liquid." There is a further note that is too faint to read, but would most likely have been "R" indicating that the patient recovered.

At the start of the next year, the 1st Battalion moved to a new cantonment, this time in Quetta, around 1140 miles from Trimulgherry as the crow flies. The name Quetta is derived from the Pushto word for "fort" and its strategic position close to the borders with Afghanistan and Iran means that it remains important today. With an elevation of 5500 feet and a dry and arid environment, it was a popular posting.

John CUMMINGS arrived in Quetta on the 16th of January 1901. There are only a couple of entries for the year he spent there. The first is that he was inoculated against enteric fever on the 17th of April. This was actually quite unusual for the period. Enteric fever is better known as typhoid and the vaccine was relatively new and was widely offered to serving soldiers, but the extremely harsh side effects associated with it meant that hardly any of them took up the offers. The army in South Africa lost thousands of men to typhoid during the course of the Boer War, but only 5% of the force volunteered to be inoculated.

Pte. CUMMINGS would have expected to suffer from fever, nausea or other side effects for a couple of days after being inoculated, and he almost certainly had some of these, but he was diagnosed on the 20th of April with S.C. [Slow Continuous] Fever, ie brucellosis and spent 8 days in hospital. The medical officer's notes put the origin of the disease as the climate, note that it was a mild case, was treated with tonics and quinine, and that the patient recovered. There is, however a comment between the entries for the inoculation and for brucellosis, which says that Pte. CUMMINGS "had fever on him at the time of Inoculation but Concealed the fact from Capt COCHRANE." Perhaps he hoped to escape from having to pay hospital stoppages.

The rest of the year was quite uneventful, but at sometime during the year, Pte. CUMMINGS was selected to travel to Poona¹³ to take a course of instruction at the Mounted Infantry School, in line with the practice at the time of training Indian soldiers in the warmer summer months and British soldiers in the colder winter months. The colder winter months, it should be said, could still be as warm as any English summer.

Mounted Infantry training, though by no means a recent innovation, was popular in the first decade of the 1900s as a result of the experiences of the employment of mounted infantry in the South Africa War. It is fair to say that the earliest attempts to use mounted infantry there had been woeful, the soldiers being poor riders without the skills needed to care for their mounts. In time, though, they improved and did good duty as a highly mobile fighting force that could fight the Boers on equal terms.¹⁴ During this period a company of the 2nd Cheshire Regiment was retrained for this role.

After the conclusion of the South African War, the army continued to experiment with the concept and established a number of M.I. Schools. In India, these were located at Poona, Amballa, Bangalore, Sialkot and Fatehgarh. Pte. CUMMINGS was assigned to the first of these, arriving on the 31st of December 1901.

Here, he would have trained in equitation, horsemanship, scouting, musketry and outpost duty, and participated in many exercises. This training lasted until the 15th of March 1902, when he officially passed the course of instruction, after which he should have returned to Quetta, However, his departure was delayed by the need to hold another Court of Enquiry, this time at Poona on the 17th of March.

Pte. CUMMINGS had spent six days in hospital, from the 10th to the 16th of March, 1902, with a wound to the left wrist. The medical officer remarked that he had been “stabbed by a pen-knife”, that the wound was slight and that the patient had recovered. He also noted that the injury was not likely to result in a permanent injury or injury his efficiency as a soldier.

The Board assembled on the 17th of March by order of the Chief Instructor of the School, Major P. ENGLAND. It consisted of the president, Capt. A. T. ROWLANDSON, of the 26th Bombay Infantry and Asst. Instructor, Lieut, E. H. JONES of the 1st Cheshires and Lieut. S. M. BRUCE of the Bombay Cavalry.

Pte. CUMMINGS gave evidence first :

“At Poona on the 9th March 1902 at about 4.30 p.m., in the lines of the Mtd. Infy. School at Poona, I saw two men, ptes WALSH & MCGOWAN, fighting – I saw a knife in the hand of the latter – so I went to separate them & to try & take the knife from MCGOWAN – whilst I was struggling with him pte MCGOWAN struck me with the knife twice in the left wrist.

I went to hospital & was detained for that day and admitted the next morning.”

The next witness was Pte. J. WALSH, also of the 1st Cheshires :

¹³ Modern Pune.

¹⁴ The 2nd Battalion of the Cheshires fielded a company of mounted infantry in that war.

“At Poona on the evening of the 9th March 1902 I was fighting with Pte MCGOWAN, when I received a blow with a knife ... Pte CUMMINGS stepped in & tried to take the knife away from Pte MCGOWAN. I saw Pte MCGOWAN twice strike Pte CUMMINGS in the left arm with a knife.”

The next witness was Pte. T. SCOTT, another Cheshire :

“At Poona, in the Mtd Infy Lines, on the evening of the 9th March 1902 I saw Pte CUMMINGS go up to Pte MCGOWAN to prevent him from using a knife, at the time a fight was going on between Ptes MCGOWAN & WALSH, as Pte CUMMINGS got up to Pte MCGOWAN I saw the latter strike at Pte CUMMINGS wrist twice & afterward saw blood on Pte CUMMINGS wrist. Pte MCGOWAN then ran away.”

Lastly, there was written evidence from Lt. J. DORGAN of the Royal Army Medical Corps :

“Station Hospital Poona – Certified that N^o 5478 Pte CUMMINGS 1st Cheshire Regt M.I. School was admitted to hospital on the 10th March 1902 suffering from wound (left wrist) – The injury is not likely to result in a permanent disability nor will it affect his future efficiency as a soldier”

The findings of the court were supposed to be passed to the Chief Instructor for his opinion, but in this case, Major ENGLAND delegated the task to Capt. ROWLANDSON, who found in favour of Pte. CUMMINGS :

“I am of opinion that the injury was received when on duty, as it was this man’s duty to try & stop the fighting & get hold of the knife.
Therefore I recommend hospital stoppages to be remitted”

After the completion of this Court of Enquiry, Pte. CUMMINGS returned to Quetta to rejoin the 1st Battalion, but the date of his arrival is missing from the medical records and there are no other entries elsewhere to work from. Poona is 914 miles from Quetta as the crow flies, so even by rail it would have taken days.

The next entry on his medical records finds him in the hospital in Quetta, this time with Soft Chancre. He spent 12 days there, from the 7th to the 18th of February, 1903. The medical officer noted that it was a contagion of local origin, that it was mild and that the patient recovered.

Soft Chancre is another sexually transmitted infection, now known as Chancroid¹⁵. At the present time, it is easily treated with antibiotics, but in 1903 the treatment involved cauterising the lesions and ulcers present on and near the genitals. The medical officer involved in this case says nothing about the course of treatment administered to Pte. CUMMINGS.

Pte. CUMMINGS was again granted Good Conduct pay of 2d on the 1st of September 1903, and the next month moved with the battalion to Deesa, arriving there on the 9th of October.

The British army cantonment at Deesa was located within the Princely State of Palapur, a British protectorate. As the crow flies, Deesa is about 519 miles from Quetta. Its elevation is about 433 ft above sea level (though the cantonment was rather lower, at about 400 feet) and the climate hot and dry, which made it a relatively healthy posting.

One month after he arrived at Deesa, on the 9th of November, John CUMMINGS was appointed Lance-Corporal. This was not a substantive rank, and could be withdrawn by the soldier's commanding officer at any time, but the appointment came with a single chevron to be worn on his sleeves and with extra pay.

Also at Deesa, L/Cpl CUMMINGS was hospitalised once again, this time for 34 days, from the 31st of December 1903 until the 2nd of February 1904. The writing is difficult to read, but it seems to read "Inf[ectio]n ly[mph] gl[and]s g[roin]". The Medical Officer writes that he opened and scraped these, that the origin was obscure and the patient recovered.

Despite this, L/Cpl CUMMINGS had been undertaking professional development, and on the 9th of February 1904, he was awarded the Certificate of Education 3rd Class, in those days a prerequisite for promotion to Corporal.

After this point, the records give out, and there are no more entries for L/Cpl CUMMINGS time in India. What we do know is that the 1st Battalion returned to England in the Trooping Season of 1904, and that he is recorded as being on Home Service from the 14th of November, and that the 1st Battalion was then based at Lichfield. Here, he made one last appearance in the Company Defaulter Book. On the 18th of November 1904, he was charged by Corporal FODEN¹⁶ with being "absent from Tattoo when Orderly Corporal". He appeared before Major R. P. GROVE, the second-in-command, on the 19th and reprimanded. Since John CUMMINGS's rank has been put here as "Pte.", it looks like he also lost his stripe as a result of this. This was doubly unfortunate, because this was just two days before he was to leave the battalion, having served his full seven years on active service.

¹⁵ A condition known as Hard Chancre also existed, as another name for syphilis.

¹⁶ Possibly the C.S.M. W. FODEN listed as missing in action on the 24th of August 1914.

On the 21st of November, Major GROVE certified John CUMMINGS' transfer to the Section A Reserve. For a period of no more than two years, he could be required to rejoin in an emergency that did not require general mobilisation. He would also have to attend twelve training days a year. For this commitment, he would receive the sum of 7 s. per week.

He then would have had to transfer to the Section B Reserve, where he would only be required to rejoin in the event of general mobilisation. He would have received 3 s. 6 d. a week for this period.

There are a couple of entries in John CUMMINGS' army record for this period in the reserves. The first is the matter of his next of kin. Ever since joining up, his next-of-kin had always been his mother, Harriet and she remained so until her death in late 1906. His siblings, George, Elizabeth and Harriett succeeded her for the space of a year, until John married Alice BARTON in Heaton Norris on the 22nd of February 1908. Their first child Elizabeth May CUMMINGS was born on the 19th of May 1908 and was added as a dependent child, followed by Bernard on the 27th of January 1910, but who died before his first birthday.

This is important because by the time Bernard was born, John CUMMINGS' period in the reserve should have come to an end. Looking at his service record, it appears that it had already expired, on the 31st of August 1909, but that on the 12th of February 1910, he had chosen to sign up with the Section D Reserves for a further four years, on the same terms as for the Section B Reserve. Presumably, he rejoined because, with a new and sickly baby to be looked after, he needed the extra money.

In 1911, he appears in the English Census, living at 98 Oxford Street in Heaton Norris and working as a Warehouse Porter, Cotton at the Bleachers Association mill in Edgeley, the former Sykes mill.

The next year, John and Alice CUMMINGS had another child, Eileen, whose name has not been marked down on her father's pre-war service records as it ought to have been. She is named on his World War service record, however, as is her brother Thomas (b.1915).

In February 1914, John CUMMINGS' enlistment in the reserves came to an end for a second time, but it is clear from his WWI service record that he had joined the National Reserve on or shortly after the end of his Section D service. This was a register of trained officers and men who had no further obligation for military service, but who agreed to be contacted in the event that the country's military resources need to be rapidly expended in a time of crisis.

The nation found itself in such a time of crisis in the summer of 1914, when civil war in Ireland seemed unavoidable, and mobilisation imminent. This crisis is often forgotten today because it was derailed by a much larger crisis that arose in continental Europe at the same time.

(e) 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion and 1st Battalion in France & Flanders

John CUMMINGS attested for the third and last time on the 14th of August 1914, this time in Chester. In the ten years that he had been away from the Regulars, there had been another round of army reforms. The big changes so far as the Cheshire Regiment was concerned was that the old volunteer battalions had been made part of the new Territorial Force, and that the old Militia Battalions had been amalgamated to form the 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion¹⁷. So, when he joined this unit in 1914, John CUMMINGS had come full circle, back to the Cheshire Militia where he had started so many years before.

The complaints of the militia battalions mentioned before had been heeded, in part. The Special Reserve was intended to provide trained soldiers for the army reserve, and to provide units for defence of the homeland as before, but the loss of trained men to the regular army was tackled. In peacetime, a man would sign up for six years service and serve for six months in the battalion and then be discharged to the A or B Reserves mentioned before, now a fully trained infantryman who could be called upon in times of national emergency, and who would receive twenty eight days training a year, rather than the twelve that Pte CUMMINGS had been liable for as a reservist¹⁸. In wartime, the battalion's role changed slightly and the battalion would be used to train replacements for the other Cheshire battalions, or (in a pinch) other infantry regiments.

The number of companies in each battalion had been cut from eight to four, though the new companies were stronger than before.

As on the previous occasions, he had to provide certain information. He was also given a new number.

| | |
|-------------|---|
| Service No. | 10258 |
| Name | John CUMMINGS |
| Corps | Special Reserve |
| Address | 14 Springfield Avenue, Reddish, Stockport, Cheshire ¹⁹ |

¹⁷ There was a local campaign to save the 4th Militia Battalion, so that there would be two special reserve battalions in the Cheshire regiment, but the War Office did not relent..

¹⁸ It was not unheard of for a soldier to enlist in the regulars after finishing his training in the Special Reserve, but that was less of an inconvenience to the officer commanding the 3rd Battalion than it had been to the commanders of the old Militia battalions, simply because the reservists were never expected to be with the 3rd Battalion for a long time.

¹⁹ No longer on the front page of the attestation form, but given as the address of his next of kin elsewhere.

| | |
|----------------|--|
| Age | 34 years & 11 months |
| Born | Parish of St Mary's, Stockport, Cheshire |
| Trade | Mechanic |
| Marital Status | Married |

Pte. CUMMINGS also mentions that he had received a letter from H. Baker of the National Reserve, presumably a member of Cheshire's County Association which administered the Territorial army and the National Reserve for the whole of Cheshire.

The medical inspection was held the same day in Chester and John CUMMINGS' details were put down as:

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| Height | 5 feet & 6 inches |
| Weight | 147 lbs |
| Max. chest expansion | 37 ½"; range of expansion 3 inches |
| Complexion | Light |
| Eyes | Blue-Gray |
| Hair | Brown |
| Religion | Roman Catholic |

The Medical Officer also noted the presence of "tatto [sic] marks both arms" and a "scar of burns lower end right arm."

The 3rd Battalion, under the command of Lt-Col E. T. LOGAN²⁰ had already marched to its War Station, Bidston Camp in Birkenhead, where it was to carry out its training role and also play a part in the Mersey Defence scheme. On the day of mobilisation, the battalion had a strength of sixteen officers and around 500 other ranks, soon to be swamped by new and returning soldiers. By the end of 1915, it would have a strength of around 3000, and at its peak consisted of roughly 4000.

There are few records of John CUMMINGS' time with the 3rd Cheshires, but it would have been a hectic time, and returning veterans must have been a valuable resource for the battalion. Pte. CUMMINGS was appointed L/Cpl on the 7th of October, so he must have been seen as a useful soldier, though nothing is known about his responsibilities.

The next time we hear of his activities is with his posting to the 1st Battalion and the Expeditionary Force. He boarded an unnamed troopship at Southampton on the 26th of January 1915. He is also described here as a Machine Gunner, presumably having qualified in this trade whilst at Birkenhead.

²⁰ Killed at the Battle of Loos, 26th of September 1915.

L/Cpl CUMMINGS seems to have been among the draft that joined the 1st Battalion on 28th January, under the command of 2/Lieut. C. A. MAY. The Battalion was then in reserve at the Belgian village of Dranoutre on the Wulverghem front, about nine miles from Ypres.

By this time, the 1st Cheshires had been almost destroyed twice, once during the Retreat from Mons and once during the First Battle of Ypres, and had received replacements more than equal in number to the battalion that had arrived at Le Havre in August 1914.

The next few weeks were quite quiet, with the battalion serving a few days at a time each in the front-line trenches, the support trenches and the brigade or divisional reserves, so that no unit had to spend more time in the trenches than they absolutely needed to. Casualties were still being incurred, shelling and snipers the most common causes, but at a much slower rate. This was a fairly gentle introduction to the war for L/Cpl. CUMMINGS.

On the 27th of February, the battalion marched from Dranoutre to Bailleul, about 12 miles from Ypres, just over the French border, where they were to act as the Divisional Reserve, while the rest of the 15th Brigade was temporarily transferred to the 28th Division, so that one of the brigades of that division could be taken out of the front line to rest. Bailleul was well behind the front line for most of the war, and retained its civilian population and many amenities.

The battalion remained in Bailleul until the 2nd of March. On the 3rd of March, they set out for Ypres, arriving there on the 4th, alternating between trenches and reserves as before.

It was in this period that John CUMMINGS lost his stripe again. His records are badly damaged by fire and are mostly unreadable here, but a typed summary (likewise fire damaged), says that he was reduced to the rank of a private soldier on the 12th of March 1915 for "misconduct." The battalion was in trenches at Ypres on that day, and there is nothing in the War Diary that throws any light on the matter.

On the 14th the Germans attacked and briefly captured St Eloi to the south of Ypres and when the 1st Cheshires were relieved by the Norfolks that day, they remained in the trenches in support in case this proved to be the first phase of a new German offensive.

Hill 60

Hill 60 was a spoil tip located on the southern of the Ypres salient, one of two separated by a cutting on the La Madelaine-Comines railway, near the village of Zillebeke. On the other side of the cutting was another spoil tip, dubbed the Caterpillar by troops²¹. Flanders is so flat that it was a prime observation site and was fiercely contested in the fighting around

²¹ During the course of the war, Hill 60 was heavily damaged and lost much of its height.

Ypres. The first mention of Hill 60 in the 1st Cheshires' War Diary is on the 17th April, though the 15th Brigade had been in the Zillebeke area since the 12th of April. The entry from the evening of the 17th reads:

“Hill 60 blown up and occupied by 13th Brigade.”

Six mines had been prepared by the Tunneling Companies of the Royal Engineers, and were set off in succession just after 7 pm. Immediately after the first mine went up, the massed artillery of 15th Division, bolstered by attached non-divisional field and heavy artillery, plastered the Hill, and the machine guns of the 13th and 15th Brigades, plus those of an attached motorised machine gun company²² provided supporting fire. John CUMMINGS would very likely have fought in this action as a member of a machine gun team.

The German garrison was largely destroyed, and the 13th Brigade easily occupied the hill, taking only 7 casualties. This was not, however, the end of the matter, because now 13th Brigade was in a salient of its own, subject to flanking fire from the Caterpillar, as well as from the German field and heavy artillery. At 4 am on the 18th, the Germans counter-attacked and, through the course of the day, pushed the 13th Brigade back to a position just below the crest. At 6 pm, the British counter-attacked. The 1st Cheshire War Diary states:

“Fresh attack by 13th Brigade on Hill 60 at 6.0 pm, assault successful.”

The Germans did not give up, of course, and on the 19th, 15th Brigade, heavily reinforced, relieved 13th Brigade on the Hill. The Cheshires remained where they were, in trenches on the left flank of the British position. Here they stayed for several days as the vicious battle continued on Hill 60.

2nd Battle of Ypres

The Second Battle of Ypres began officially on the 22nd of April, but nothing changed for the 1st Battalion immediately. The main attack was not on Hill 60, but against the French defending the NE perimeter of the salient, the Gravenstafel Ridge, and for the first time, the Germans used poison gas.

The Germans released chlorine gas just before dusk on a 4 mile frontage, and the French, having no protective equipment, broke and fled. The Cheshires' war diary reported on the 24th :

²² This consisted of 6 Vickers guns, transported in motorcycle/sidecar combinations.

“About 3. pm: situation on N.E. front of Ypres salient reported critical and provisional orders for withdrawal issued”

Also on the 24th, the 5th Division war diary reported that the Cheshires had complained of being bombarded with “noxious shells causing severe irritation to the eyes.”

The next day, the battalion was relieved by the 1st Bedfordshires and moved up to Zillebeke Lake as brigade reserve. The battalion moved into the dugouts there, and remained there until the 29th of April, sending out a working party consisting of half the battalion each night.

On the 29th, at around 5.30 pm, the dugouts were shelled by a single heavy gun, killing 11 and wounding another 26 of the Cheshires. The decision was taken to relocate the battalion, and it was moved after dark to the casemates in the ramparts of Ypres²³, where they remained for the next few days, still sending out working parties as before. The Battalion HQ was located in the nearby Ecole de Bienfaisance, along with A & D Companies.

In the evening of the 1st of May, the Germans mounted another attack on Hill 60, this time using gas against the trenches there, causing serious casualties amongst the Dorsets and Royal Engineers. The Cheshires’ war diary notes:

“In the evening, several Dorsets were brought in, suffering from effects of gas poisoning.”

Despite this, the Germans failed to take the hill, which was quickly reinforced by the 1st Devonshires.

The 2nd of May was quiet, and on the 3rd, the rest of the battalion was relocated to the casemates, because the shelling of Ypres was continuing apace, and they were still there on the 5th of May, when the Germans renewed their attack on Hill 60.

At 8.45 am²⁴ on the 5th the Germans attacked again with the aid of gas and were in possession of Hill 60 by 9 am. Several British counterattacks during the day failed to dislodge the enemy. At 8 am²⁵ the Cheshires were ordered to move up to the support trenches which were now occupied by the Germans. By 10.30 am the Cheshires reached Larch Wood at the railway cuttings, drove some of the enemy from the vicinity and reoccupied some of the trenches. In Larch Wood, they found 3 officers and about 100 men

23 Ypres has a 17th century city wall, built by Sébastien LE PRESTRE de Vauban, the greatest engineer of his day. Within the ramparts of this wall, there are a number of heavily protected vaulted chambers or casemates, probably the safest places in the whole city

24 This is from the 5th Division war diary ; the 15th Brigade war diary gives the time as 8.35 am. The Bedfords war diary says it was a little after 8 am.

25 The Battalion war diary says 8 pm, but this cannot be right.

of the 1st Dorsets and joined with them in an attack on the old support positions. This was successful, with the old support trenches being reoccupied by this force by around 1.30 pm, but the commanding officer of the Cheshires, Lt-Col SCOTT was killed during the fighting²⁶, and command passed to Major HUGHES, the same officer who had commanded E Company of the 2nd Cheshires when John CUMMINGS had been with that battalion in Ireland.

More counterattacks were launched, but all failed²⁷. The Germans were now in possession of Hill 60 and there seemed little chance of recapturing it in the immediate future. The French and British troops had been forced to contract the perimeter of the Ypres salient considerably, but were still able to strongly defend what was left. During this time, on the 1st of June, John CUMMINGS was again promoted to acting corporal. The Cheshires and the other regiments in the 5th Division were brought back up to strength by drafts from home and reverted to alternating between the frontline trenches, support trenches and reserves and sending out working parties as required, and being subject to occasional shelling²⁸ and sniping. When the battalion was finally informed that it was to be relieved on the 30th of June, the war diary says :

“This news [was] received with general incredulity by the men, who have today completed their 41st consecutive day in the trenches, and have come to look upon them as their usual residence.”

This joyful occasion was slightly marred by the news that D Company was to stay behind in the dugouts at Zillebeke Pond while the rest of the Battalion moved into the huts at Reninghelst, where they spent a week resting and enjoying little luxuries such as baths, a change of clothing, and church parade.

After this rest, they returned to the trenches, but only for a few days until they were relieved by the 5th Lincolns²⁹ on the 12th, after which they were moved to quieter positions at Delamere Forest and Rosenthal Chateau. From midnight on the 13th/14th July, the whole of the 5th Division was transferred from II Corps to V Corps. On the 17th of July, they were relieved by the 6th Liverpools and marched to huts at Reninghelst. The next day, “[t]he whole battalion was fitted out with complete new clothing and underclothing.” On the 21st they were marched after nightfall to Godeswaerwelde, where they spent a few days in

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- 26 He died in the arms of Sergeant-Major FRANCIS, one of the surviving NCOs landed on the 14th of August 1914. He was himself wounded the next day, and ultimately died of his wounds in Nottingham on the 25th of May.
- 27 The British battalions were now but shadows of their former selves. One source says that '[h]aving been gassed, shelled, bombed and shot at continuously since 5 May the Battalion almost certainly now contained only a fraction of its full number of men and there had been very little chance of success.’
- 28 In particular, the Germans carried out a morning and an evening ‘hate’, short but intense bombardment with mortars
- 29 A Territorial unit from the 138th Brigade of the 46th (North Midland) Division.

training and carrying out route marches. On the 30th, the battalion was entrained at Godeswaerwede station, leaving Ypres for good. The division was being moved so that they could relieve a part of the French army entrenched near Bray-sur-Somme.

The planned relief was carried out by the beginning of August, and the 5th Division was in position between the villages of Bécourt³⁰ and Carnoy, with the French on their right flank and the 51st Highland Division on their left. This was a relatively quiet sector, and while artillery fire, snipers, mortar bombs and raids still took place, casualties were light. As before, the battalion moved between front line trenches, support trenches and brigade and divisional reserve.

When the battalion was in divisional reserve at Mourlancourt, on the 29th of August, A/Cpl CUMMINGS was tried by court-martial. The charges were (1) “When on Active Service Drunkenness” and (2) “When on Active Service using insubordinate language to his superior officer”. There are no details given in his service record, other than that he was found guilty, reduced to the ranks and sentenced to 56 days F.P. No: 131. This sentence was confirmed by the G.O.C.32 of 15th Brigade.

Field Punishment No 1 was carried out in camps behind the lines under control of the Provost-Marshal. Here, the prisoner would carry out hard labour under a very strict regime. The most controversial part of the punishment was that the prisoner would be put in irons and shackled to a fixed object, very often a cart- or gun-wheel or a fence when no wheels were available. This was often referred to as “crucifixion”. Stress positions were not meant to be used, but frequently were. The prisoner could not be so punished more than two hours in every twenty four, nor more than three days in every four, and not for more than 21 days in his sentence³³.

While Pte CUMMINGS was serving out his sentence, the Vickers machine guns were removed from most units and transferred to the newly formed Machine Guns Corps, which, it was thought, would increase their effectiveness. That Pte CUMMINGS remained with the Cheshires indicates that he was serving as a Lewis gunner at this time. The Lewis machine gun was a lighter, more portable weapon, not fed by belts but by drum magazines. Such weapons could accompany riflemen in the attack and provide much-needed local fire support.

Living conditions in the trenches became worse with the arrival of wet weather, turning them into a morass. For example, on the 5th of December, the Cheshires were to relieve

30 The village had been destroyed during the Battle of Albert in 1914.

31 Field Punishment Number One.

32 General Officer Commanding.

33 This punishment was widely perceived as objectionable by the wartime volunteers and conscripts, and it was eventually banned – but not until after the war. The Germans abandoned their own similar form of punishment in 1917.

the Norfolks and found the trenches 'in an indescribable state, a great many completely impassable. The war diary says :

“The CO went round trenches in the evening, and it apparently was a very big job. Men's shelters all collapsed. Started to rain about 6 pm.”

There was little that could be done to ameliorate conditions. The mud was so sticky that it clung to the shovels and could not be thrown out of the trenches and the water resisted all attempts to drain it from the trenches. The communication trenches became so hopeless that many times relieving troops had to go over the top of the trenches.

While on the Bray front, the 5th Division began to receive new items of kit, such as steel helmets, and 1½” and 2” trench mortars which replaced the homebuilt catapults and mortars that the troops had been using up until then.

In December, the division was joined by the 95th Brigade. The 95th was composed entirely of battalions from Kitchener's New Army, the idea being that the green troops would benefit from serving and training alongside veterans. On the 1st of January, the 14th Brigade was withdrawn from the division and the 95th became a permanent component of the 5th Division.

On the 15th of January, Pte CUMMINGS was brought before the C.O. on a charge of misconduct, the battalion then being in billets in Bray. He was sentenced to 7 days of F.P. No. 1 and the loss of two days pay.

Also in January of 1916, the 5th Division was relieved over the course of a few weeks by the 30th Division. The 13th and 95th Brigades were moved to rest areas near Corbie by the 20th. The Cheshires did not get to Corbie until the 6th of February.

It had been hoped that the Division would be able to spend some time training behind the lines in the Cavillon area, but this plan had to be curtailed. The Germans launched a new offensive at Verdun on the 21st of February, and on the 24th the 5th Division was ordered to move to the Arras sector so that some of the French forces there could be redeployed to Verdun.

The 5th Division set off for Arras the next day in the teeth of a blizzard. The Cheshire's war diary notes that it “made the road very bad for the transport.” The road was also heavily congested, with French divisions heading south to Verdun and British ones heading north to Arras. This combination of factors meant that the infantry battalions of 5th Division did

not reach their first halt at Candas until very late, and much of the wheeled transport not until the 26th³⁴.

The state of the trenches in the Arras sector was much better than at Bray, and the weather much less wet. The town also had an extensive system of ancient catacombs which could be used to shelter civilians and soldiers alike. The divisional history remarks that the four months on the Arras Front were the happiest time of the entire war, being a relatively quiet sector, having excellent weather, a warm summer and a nearby town to visit. On the 19th of March, the first of the Stokes 3-inch mortars arrived, increasing the firepower of the infantry.

Pte CUMMINGS seems to have fallen foul of the authorities again whilst in Arras, since there is an entry in his service record dated the 25th of March 1916. Almost all of this entry has been obliterated by the 1940 fire, and the only readable word of the charge is 'misconduct' and the only other readable part of it is the sentence handed down, '28 days F. P. 35' It must have been serious, since there is a note to the effect that these 28 days were not to be counted towards a pension.

Being in a quiet sector did not mean that the war had stopped for the Cheshires and their war diary records a lot of bombardments, a few raids and, on the 4th of June, a large-scale German raid on the 1st Norfolks that was preceded by the explosion of a number of mines beneath the Norfolk's positions³⁶.

Towards the end of June, the 5th Division began to prepare with the 55th Division to take part in an offensive aimed at the German positions south of Wailly. All the necessary preparations were made, but it was ultimately called off. On the 3rd of July, the division was relieved and moved to Le Cauroy to rest and train. Whilst they were billeted there, the Wailly operation was resurrected and then almost immediately cancelled again, most likely because the First Battle of the Somme had started on the 1st of July and the division was likely to be needed there.

First Battle of the Somme

The division received marching orders at 8 a.m. on the 14th and the 1st Cheshires moved out at 2.30 p.m., heading south, towards the sound of the guns. The 17th found them at Ville-sur-Ancre, and on the 19th the 5th Division was ordered to the front to reinforce the 7th Division by taking over a stretch of the front stretching from Longueval to High Wood. The

34 This march was remembered by the men who participated in it as "The Retreat from Moscow."

35 This burned part of the record would also have told us when he was again promoted to the rank of A/Cpl which he held at the time of his death.

36 The 15th Brigade war diary estimate that five or six hundred German soldiers took part in this action, a far larger force than is usually implied by the word 'raid'.

15th Brigade was held in reserve in the redoubt at Pommier Ridge, some distance to the rear.

Just as at Ypres, the Somme battlefield was flat, offering little cover to attackers. There were some areas of higher ground and of woodland, which the Germans had taken care to incorporate into their defences.

On the 20th, the 5th, 7th and 33rd Divisions launched their attack on the German positions in High Wood under the cover of an early morning mist. The Cheshires remained in reserve during this period, but took the precaution of sending a small number of officers, N.C.O.s and Lewis gunners back to the battalion's first line transport, so that if the Cheshires once more suffered very heavy casualties, at least there would be a cadre to help consolidate and rebuild the unit.

The British met with some successes on the 20th, but were unable to clear the High Wood. The attempt was renewed on the 23rd, and the 15th Brigade left the Pommier Ridge Redoubt and moved into the support trenches located one mile to the south of High Wood. Over the night of the 25th/26th the Battalion moved into the front line trenches, relieving soldiers of the 1st Devons, taking about 20 casualties in the process. Later that day, the 26th of July, the battalion received orders that they were to take part in an attack the next day. In the evening, B Company relieved elements of the 12th Gloucesters in trenches to the west of Longueval. Casualties for the day were about 25.

The attack began at 5.10 am on the 27th, with a two hour long bombardment of the German position, followed by an assault on the village by the 1st Norfolks. They and the 1st Bedfords captured most of the village, though German infantry still held out in the northern outskirts. The Cheshires' own attack went badly wrong. Troops dispatched to capture a German strongpoint found themselves under very heavy crossfire from machine guns in High Wood and Longueval. Of the three parties assigned to the attack, only one came back. Of the other two parties, the Regimental History says "none were ever seen again." Lt-Col CLARKE was twice wounded himself during the course of the day and so command passed to Capt. DRESSER.

On the 28th a fruitless search was made for the missing officers and men despite the heavy shelling. That evening the battalion was relieved by the 12th Gloucesters and retired to the Pommier Ridge Redoubt. Here they remained until the 31st, when they were ordered to go into support in Delville Wood. This was achieved despite heavy shelling on the ridge, and the regiment moved into positions in Longueval. At 10.40 pm on the 1st of August, they were relieved by the 9th Duke of Wellingtons' and moved back to the Pommier Ridge. The 5th Division was exhausted and as a result of this the battalion was being taken out of the line to rest.

The battalion was then marched to the tiny village of Laleu, tantalisingly close to the English Channel, arriving on the 5th of August. They were to stay in Laleu for two and a half weeks, training, absorbing replacements, and even a sports day.

The infantry replacements were mostly drafts from the Territorials, but one draft of 50 Other Ranks did not wear the Cheshire's cap badge, but that of the Shropshire Yeomanry. The Army had decided that replacements were to be sent to the units that needed them, rather than to their own regiments³⁷. The British manpower reserves were beginning to come under stress.

On the 8th of August every officer and man of the Cheshires was given a 48 hour pass while the regiment was at Laleu, which they could spend in Amiens, Abbeville or the coast³⁸.

It must also have been around this time that John CUMMINGS once again became an Acting Corporal, but it is not possible to pin this down. There is at least one further entry on his service record beneath the 28 days of F. P. No. 1 of March 1916, but only the signature of an officer in the right hand column of the sheet remains; the rest was burnt back in 1940. This period of absorbing and training replacements while out of the line might have been a suitable time for this promotion.

On the 24th, the battalion left Laleu for the front, arriving on the 25th at a place known only as Sandpit E18d. That evening, there was heavy rain. The next day, they relieved the 15th Cheshires in divisional and corps reserve, taking over trenches situated on the east side of Maltz Horn Ridge, known as F.23.a. The weather was noted as showery. It was the intention that the 5th Division would take part in operations to capture the village of Guillemont, not very far away

The weather continued to be bad, with the trenches knee-deep in mud. They required a great deal of work to be put into a fit state. New slit trenches also had to be dug, but the weather continued to hamper the working parties. The weather was so violent on the 29th that the working parties had to be recalled and an issue of army rum made. The weather was so bad that the next day that the 5th Division's attack had to be postponed to the 1st of September. On the 31st the weather was much better, a "very fine day," but the Germans took advantage of this to fire many poison gas shells at the British trenches. The Cheshires were now much better prepared for chemical warfare than they had been at Ypres, and only suffered a single casualty. That evening, the Cheshires moved from F.23.a to relieve the 14th Warwicks in the front line and support trenches.

³⁷ There is a remark in the Battalion War Diary for the 24th of August that the "New drafts march badly."

³⁸ A further entry on the 10th says "leave to Amiens allowed only for 12 hours."

On the 1st of September, the Cheshires moved to Chimpanzee Trench, located to the north west of Hardecourt. Here they relieved the 14th Warwicks. Strong patrols were sent out in the evening. The attack was once again postponed, this time to the 3rd.

The next day, were relieved by the 14th Warwicks and received their orders for the attack on the 3rd. The rest of the 15th Brigade were being placed in support, but the Cheshires were specifically ordered to act in support of the 13th Brigade's attack on Falfemont Farm. At 7.30 am on the 3rd, the company commanders were briefed on the operation and were ordered to be prepared to move on 15 minutes notice.

The 13th Brigade's attack went in at 9 am and went wrong almost from the start. The promised support from the French artillery did not materialise and the German machine guns were not suppressed in any way. The Cheshires were ordered to move up at 10.45 am. They were clearly visible to the enemy as they moved out of their trenches and were heavily shelled. The battalions involved in the 9 am attack had taken heavy losses and were in disarray. Nonetheless the 13th Brigade made another attack at 12.55 pm, which also failed and again at 6.30 pm, this time with part of the Cheshires forming the attack force. At 6.35 pm the war diary records the failure of the attack. The estimated losses on the day were 3 officers and 300 other ranks.

This was not the end of the battle for Falfemont Farm. The 15th Brigade was to attack on the 4th. Zero hour for the Cheshires was 3.10 pm. Casualties were again heavy. This time, though, the attack succeeded. At about 3.30 pm, A Company was reported to have gained its objectives, but had no officers or warrant officers left. B & D Companies were soon ordered forward to consolidate the position. There was no news of C Company until later in the day, but that too was good news when it came. The Bedfords and Cheshires had broken into the German trenches north of the farm³⁹ and worked their way south, destroying the machine gun positions that supported the defenders of the farm.

Fighting continued into the night, but eventually the Cheshires and Bedfords together cleared the farm and were relieved the next day by fresh troops. A/Cpl CUMMINGS was killed during this last phase of the battle, probably while commanding a Lewis gun section. No details of his death have survived. At roll call on the 6th, after the battalion had been relieved and moved back into reserve, its total fighting strength was discovered to be just over three hundred.

There are a few more records in John CUMMINGS's file dealing with his personal effects, his medals & memorial scroll, and with the pension to be paid to his widow.

³⁹ Not one brick stood upon another at the farm by this time, according to the divisional history.

The medals he received were the 1914-15 Star, the British Medal, and the Victory Medal⁴⁰. There are receipts for each of these from 1920 & 1921, signed by Alice CUMMINGS, and for the Memorial Scroll and the Message from the King that accompanied the scroll.

The pension awarded to Alice CUMMINGS was 26 shillings and three pence, for herself and her three dependent children, with effect from the 23rd of July 1917.

John CUMMINGS' body was recovered from the battlefield, and now lies in the Delville Wood cemetery at Longueval⁴¹.

From the foregoing, it seems that John CUMMINGS must have been an able soldier, since he was regularly promoted, but always reduced to the ranks thereafter because of his actions away from the battlefield. He also had a sense of civic duty as we can see from the way he broke up the brawl in Poona and swiftly volunteered for the forces in August 1914.

There are not many avenues for future research. The Chester Military Museum has a photograph collection that may prove to hold photographs of the regiment at the various barrack, cantonments, stations etc. that John CUMMINGS served at. There are also some miscellaneous digitised Cheshire Regiment records available on the Forces War Records site that may yield more information about him, especially since he was a regular.

Appendices:

1) The 5th Division

This 5th Division was a regular army division established by the 1st Duke of Wellington in 1809, & deployed to the continent in August 1914. This organisation was intended for service in the open field and at that time, it consisted of:

Divisional HQ (KAVANAGH)

13th Brigade (CUTHBERT)

2nd King's Own Scottish Borderers

2nd Duke of Wellington's Regiment

1st Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment)

2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry

14th Brigade (ROLT)

1st Devonshire Regiment

2nd Suffolk Regiment

40 This set of three medals were dubbed "Pip, Squeak & Wilfred", after a comic strip of the time, published in the Mirror.

41 The location of the grave is XXV M 3 – see attached plan.

1st East Surrey Regiment
 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry
 2nd Manchester Regiment
 15th Brigade (VON GLEICHEN)
 1st Norfolk Regiment
 1st Bedfordshire Regiment
 1st Cheshire Regiment
 1st Dorset Regiment
 Artillery (HEADLAM)
 XV Brigade⁴², Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 XXVII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 XXVIII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (8 pdr guns)
 VIII (Howitzer) Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (4.5" howitzers)
 108th Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery (4 x 60 pdr guns)
 Engineers (TULLOCH)
 17th Field Company, Royal Engineers
 59th Field Company, Royal Engineers
 Cavalry
 1st Squadron, 19th Hussars
 5th Cycle Company

Early in 1915, the division was reorganised. The divisional cavalry and cyclists were of little use in the trenches, and were removed from the order of battle. At the same time the engineers were reinforced. The 60 pounder battery left the division as well – these heavy guns were needed to form heavy artillery brigades under Corps or Army control. During the fighting at Hill 60, the division looked like this:

Divisional HQ (MORLAND)
 13th Brigade (O'GOWAN)
 2nd King's Own Scottish Borderers
 2nd Duke of Wellington's Regiment
 1st Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment)
 2nd King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry
 14th Brigade (COMPTON⁴³)
 1st Devonshire Regiment
 2nd Cheshire Regiment
 1st East Surrey Regiment
 2nd Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry
 2nd Manchester Regiment
 15th Brigade (NORTHEY, then TURNER)

⁴² Confusingly, an artillery brigade in 1914 was a battalion sized unit.

⁴³ Colonel THESIGER also commanded the Brigade briefly.

1st Norfolk Regiment
 1st Bedfordshire Regiment
 1st Cheshire Regiment
 1st Dorset Regiment
 1/6th Cheshire Regiment (left March 1915)
 1/6th King's Regiment (Liverpool Rifles)

Artillery (GEDDES)

XV Brigade⁴⁴, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 XXVII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 XXVIII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 VIII (Howitzer) Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (4.5" howitzers)⁴⁵
 108th Heavy Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery (60 pdr guns) (left 9th April 1915)

Engineers (TULLOCH or poss. VESEY⁴⁶)

17th Field Company, Royal Engineers (until 26th March)
 59th Field Company, Royal Engineers
 2/1st North Midland Field Company, Royal Engineers (23rd March to 19th May)
 1/2nd Home Counties Field Company, Royal Engineers

By the time of the 1st Battle of the Somme, the division had changed again, reflecting the development of new war-fighting techniques and equipment. This organisation reflects the changing nature of warfare again. There are now more machine guns and trench mortars have been added to each brigade. There is also a pioneer battalion – an extra infantry battalion to carry out the work needed to maintain the trench system, above and beyond that performed by the other units in the division.

The divisional artillery was actually not with the division at this point, having been removed to the vast artillery park at Caterpillar Valley. Fire support was still available to the division, of course, but generally came from other artillery brigades:

Divisional HQ (STEPHENS)

13th Brigade (JONES)

14th Royal Warwickshire Regiment
 15th Royal Warwickshire Regiment
 2nd Kings Own Scottish Borderers
 1st Royal West Kent Regiment
 13th Brigade Machine Gun Company
 13th Brigade Trench Mortar Company

15th Brigade (TURNER)

16th Royal Warwickshire Regiment
 1st Bedfordshire Regiment

⁴⁴ Confusingly, an artillery brigade in 1914 was a battalion sized unit.

⁴⁵ George NAFZIGER has a detachment of XXX (Howitzer) Brigade, Royal Artillery instead)

⁴⁶ The exact date when VESEY replaced TULLOCH is not in the Divisional History.

1st Cheshire Regiment
 1st Dorset Regiment
 15th Brigade Machine Gun Company
 15th Brigade Trench Mortar Company
 95th Brigade (GORDON-LENNOX)
 12th Gloucestershire Regiment (Bristol's Own)
 1st Devonshire Regiment
 1st Battalion East Surrey Regiment
 1st Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry
 95th Brigade Machine Gun Company
 95th Brigade Trench Mortar Company
 Artillery (GEDDES)
 XV Brigade⁵¹, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 XXVII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 XXVIII Brigade, Royal Field Artillery (18 pdr guns)
 Engineers (VESEY or WHITE)
 59th Field Company, Royal Engineers
 1st/2nd Home Counties Field Company, Royal Engineers
 1st/2nd Durham Field Company Royal Engineers
 Pioneers
 1st/6th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders

51 Confusingly, an artillery brigade in 1914 was a battalion sized unit.

2) The Infantry Battalion

The regiments that landed at Le Havre in August 1914 each consisted of a headquarters, four companies and one machine gun section, organised as:

Headquarters

1 Commanding Officer with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel
 1 Second in Command with the rank of Major
 1 Adjutant with the rank of Captain or Lieutenant
 1 Sergeant Major
 1 Orderly Clerk
 1 Quartermaster with the rank of Captain or Lieutenant
 1 Quartermaster Sergeant
 1 Medical Officer with at least the rank of Lieutenant
 1 Corporal and 4 Privates from the RAMC responsible for sanitation & hygiene
 2 Orderlies
 16 stretcher bearers, usually bandsmen
 1 Chaplain
 1 Transport Officer
 1 Transport Sergeant
 11 Drivers
 1 Drummer-Sergeant
 1 Cook-Sergeant
 1 Pioneer-Sergeant
 10 Pioneers
 1 Corporal and 15 Privates Signallers
 1 Shoemaker-Sergeant
 1 Armourer-Sergeant (attached from the Army Ordnance Corps)
 6 Privates serving as Officers' Servants

Machine Gun Section

1 Section Commander with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant or Lieutenant
 1 Sergeant
 1 Corporal
 2 Drivers
 1 Private serving as an Officer's Servant
 12 Privates

Each section had two guns, originally Maxims, then, after these were lost, the more modern Vickers. Each gun had a crew of six.

Infantry Company

1 Commander with the rank of Major or Captain
 1 Second in Command with the rank of Captain
 1 Company Sergeant Major
 4 Platoon Commanders with the rank of Lieutenant or 2nd Lieutenant
 1 Company Quartermaster Sergeant
 8 Privates serving as Officer's Servants
 8 Sergeants
 4 Drummers or Buglers
 10 Corporals⁵²
 188 Privates
 3 Drivers

There were four companies, but different units gave them different numbers or letters. The most common of these schemes were 1 to 4, A to D, and W to Z. Each Company had four Platoons, numbered 1 to 16. These were a recently introduced innovation and it took some time for them to become tactical units rather than administrative ones⁵³.

Platoon

1 Commander with the rank of 2nd Lieutenant or Lieutenant
 1 Platoon Sergeant
 1 Private serving as both Officer's Servant and Runner
 4 12 man rifle Sections

As the war progressed, there were some changes, the most important one being the arrival of the Lewis Gun. This was a lighter, air-cooled machine gun, much more mobile than the Maxim or Vickers. It was only officially adopted in October 1915, but by then it had been in use for several months. Each gun had a crew of seven or eight men, one to fire it, one to load it, and the rest to carry the necessary ammunition. Initial issue was 1 gun per company, rising to four by the time of the first battle of the Somme. Also in 1915, the battalion Machine Gun Sections were transferred to the Machine Gun Corps.

⁵² This seems too few, if a corporal was required to command each section as intended. It may be an error in the original printed source.

⁵³ Not until 1917. Up till then, the company commander and the CSM would organise platoons on an ad-hoc basis before each battle.

3) Select Bibliography

In addition to reference works like the Army List, George Nafziger's archive of Orders of Battle, and websites like Ancestry, The Long Long Trail, and Researching WW1, three books have been invaluable in assembling this study. These are:

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