

Sydney John ALLEN

Date of Birth: 22 March 1895.

Address: 83 Langdale Road, Thornton Heath.

Family: Son of Frederick James Allen & Jessie Mary Allen of 83 Langdale Road, Thornton Heath.

School Record: Joined 3rd Form in September 1909; left in April 1911.

House: Green

Age: 21.

Date of Death: 1 July 1916.

Service No: 3123

Medals: 1914 Star.

Service Record: Corporal in 1st/9th Bn. London Regiment (Queen Victoria's Rifles).

Details of Casualty: Missing believed killed 1 July 1916.

Commemorated: Thiepval Memorial, France.

Corporal Sydney John Allen

1st/9th Bn. London Regiment (Queen Victoria's Rifles)

Sydney was born in Brixton on 22 March 1895 to parents Frederick James Allen and Jessie Mary Allen (nee Easton). Whitgift Middle School records give the family's address as 83 Langdale Road, Thornton Heath, and Sydney was living at this address when the 1911 National Census was completed; they also, along with *Croydon and the Great War*, list his name as John Sydney. He had at least two elder brothers, Frederick Montague Allen (born in 1891) and Lionel George Fife Allen (born 1892) and an elder sister Louise. Frederick also attended Whitgift Middle School and would also serve in the Great War as Private no. 3140 in 2nd Bn. London Regiment (Royal Fusiliers); he was discharged as medically unfit for service ("melancholia") in December 1914.

Sydney attended Winterbourne Road School before joining the Third Form at Whitgift Middle School in September 1909. He was a member of Green House and played in their football 1st XI. He also appeared in the Annual Concert of 1909 and was awarded the Headmaster's special prize for essay writing in 1910 before leaving the School in April 1911. He joined Lloyds Bank and was based in their Lombard Street branch in Central London before joining Trinity House.

Upon the outbreak of War he enlisted at Thornton Heath and joined the 1st/9th Battalion of the London Regiment (Queen Victoria's Rifles) at their HQ at 56 Davies Street, London W1, in September 1914 as Private no. 3123; this was the same battalion as fellow Old Mid Ernest Vining. A Territorial unit that formed part of the 3rd London Brigade within 1st London Division, upon mobilisation they moved to Bullswater (near Aldershot) and then St. John's Hill camp, Crowborough, in September, guarding railway lines. These duties caused some disappointment among the men as they had volunteered for foreign service but on 27 October the Battalion was ordered to move to Southampton for transport to France. After disembarking at Le Havre on 5 November 1914 the Queen's Victoria Rifles were posted to the 13th Infantry Brigade within the 5th Division. Sydney's medal index card confirms this move, although the date given is the date of embarkation – 4 November; this entitled him to the award of the 1914 Star. At some stage Sydney was promoted to Corporal.



Picture courtesy of Croydon Advertiser

The Queen Victoria's Rifles spent three weeks training behind the lines and had their first period in the trenches on 29 November 1914 in Flanders when "A" & "B" Companies relieved units of the Royal West Kent Regiment and King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in the Wulverghem sector of the Ypres Salient. Their first large battle occurred on 21/22 April 1915 at the infamous Hill 60 and the Battalion also saw further action during the Second Battle of Ypres. The *'Mid-Whitgiftian'* April 1915 edition includes a couple of letters from Sydney to the headmaster (GA Jones). The first, dated 13 January 1915, is short and says he was just out of the trenches after a strenuous time (73 hours in the rain). He had seen his name in the Croydon Advertiser and had found his knowledge of French an asset. The second letter dated 13 February 1915 was written after he had received a copy of the "Old Boys' Magazine" in which his name was mentioned. This is reproduced below:-

C/o British Expeditionary Force.
February 13th, 1916.

DEAR MR. JONES.—I have just received from home a copy of the "Old Boys" Magazine, in which my name is mentioned, and I thought, perhaps, you would like to receive a few lines from me.

Well, we have been out here since the beginning of November, and have occupied the trenches on and off for the past two and a-half months or so, during which time we have experienced some very bad weather. The trenches vary a good deal, but we have never managed to get in a really dry one. One trench we occupied was knee deep in mud and water, and one of our fellows slipped in up to his shoulders, and it took five hours to dig him out. On this occasion we were literally paddling, and you can imagine the condition we were in when we left. I managed to find what I thought was a "dry" corner to sit in, but when I got up I discovered that my pack was completely submerged in the mud. We were only 50 yards from the Germans, and fired off many rounds. On another occasion we were three days in the firing line, and it rained the whole time. This time I was one of the ration party, who were told off to draw grub from headquarters, about a mile away. We left the trenches at about 4.30 p.m., and found many routes absolutely impassable owing to the floods—some fields were like lakes—and the way we eventually took was a very difficult one. The night was so dark that you could not see the man in front of you. However, we were five hours on this fatigue, and were soaked through. I may say we managed to keep ourselves in good spirits and make the best of everything, but it has been hard at times. The fields near the firing line are invariably in a very bad condition. Tremendous holes—some 14 feet wide and 7 feet deep—made by shells, dished trenches and ditches, etc., make marching difficult, especially when it is very dark. I once saw a fellow slip in one of these "Jack Johnson" holes!! The farmhouses and buildings in the vicinity of the firing line present a very pathetic spectacle. Most of them are laid very low by high explosive shells. I may say most of our casualties have been caused through shell fire.

We are able to get a little rest in the trenches. As a rule there are dug-outs constructed in the trenches, in which we can sleep, in turn, during the daytime. We have splendid food in the trenches, and we are able to make hot cocoa, tea, or coffee, etc., and even fry bacon by means of an improvised stove taking the form of a small tin of fat with pieces of rifle rag as wicks.

However, we are back again from the trenches for another rest. It was a long march—some 8 miles on cobbles—but tea was served half-way, from our field kitchen, which revived us considerably. You can probably imagine how glad we are to get back to our billets.

I trust you are keeping well, and with kindest regards,

I remain, yours very truly,

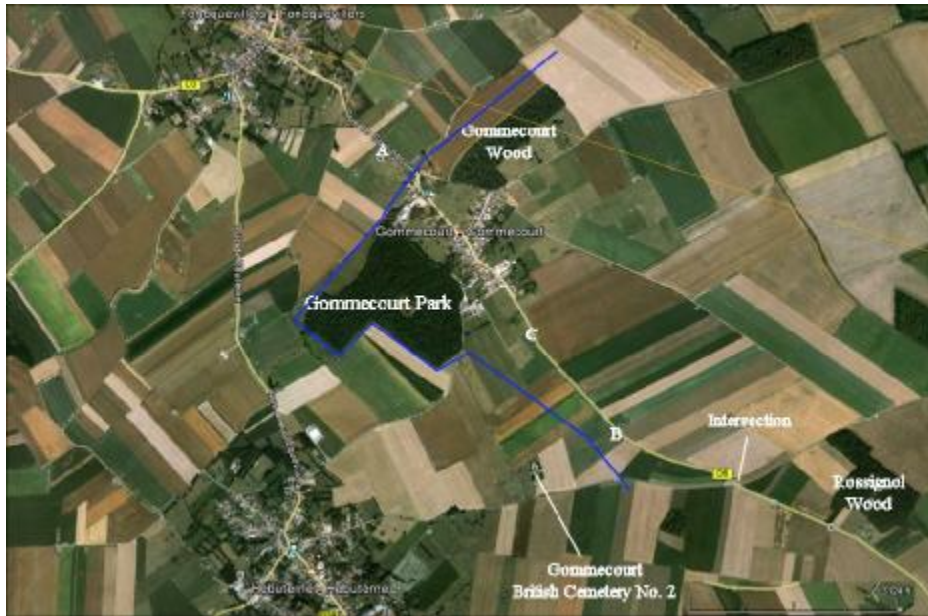
SYDNEY ALLEN. ✱

In February 1916 the 1st/9th Bn. London Regiment was transferred to the 169th Infantry Brigade as part of the 56th (London) Division. This Division was assigned the task of delivering a diversionary attack on the fortified village of Gommecourt on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Two other Old Mid Whitgiftians, Hubert Davis and Alfred Mabbott, were serving with other battalions within 169 Infantry Brigade and did not survive the attack. <http://www.gommecourt.co.uk/>

Chris McCarthy's "*The Somme – The Day by Day Account*" summarises the action: "On 1st July they attacked Gommecourt forming up in No Man's Land under cover of smoke at 7.20am. The wire had been cut and the first two lines were taken with comparatively little loss and the third line after a fight but Nameless Farm stayed in German hands. The German counter barrage cut off the attacking troops and carrying parties could not reach them. The Germans continued to counter attack with an intense artillery barrage and bombs and 1 or 2 light guns in Puisieux Valley did particular damage. By 2pm 168 and 169 Brigades were holding the first and second lines. By 4pm the second line had fallen. At 9.30pm the last of the Londoners withdrew, suffering heavy casualties in No Man's Land."



View of Gommecourt Park (the German front line positions) and village of Gommecourt from the old British front line. The attacks were launched across the fields heading towards the right centre, avoiding the wood and seeking to outflank it.



The village was held by the German IR [Infantry Regiment] 70 and the counter attack was made by RIR [Reserve Infantry Regiment] 55. The Battalion's War Diary lists the casualties in total as 16 Officers and 529 Other Ranks: of these 6 Officers and 51 Other Ranks were

confirmed as killed in action; 5 Officers and 290 Other Ranks were wounded; and 5 Officers and 188 Other Ranks were listed as missing. Sydney, aged 21, was one of those recorded as killed in action. *The Mid Whitgiftian* in November 1916 printed the following letter from Sydney's father:

83, Langdale Road, Thornton Heath,
1st July, 1916.

MY DEAR SIR,—You will be sorry to hear, as I am deeply grieved to say, that my dear son, Sydney John Allen, was killed in the advance at Gommecourt on July 1st. You will remember he joined the 9th County of London (Queen Victoria's Rifles) and went to France in November, 1914. On July 1st his regiment formed part of the brigade that failed to pierce the enemy line at Gommecourt after advancing through curtain fire to the third line of trenches. Although we at home feel the loss keenly, we feel that Sydney's death was a glorious one, as although the advance failed our brave soldiers held the German guns, thereby saving the situation at other points of the line. The advance is graphically described by Mr. Beach Thomas in the "Daily Mail" of 5th inst. under the heading "The Epic of Gommecourt."

Yours faithfully,
F. J. ALLEN.

The Rev. G. A. Jones, B.A.

P.S.—You once very kindly signed his paper when he thought of applying for a commission, but Sydney preferred not to leave his pals, but to rise from the ranks. He was a Corporal.

The 29 July 1916 edition of the *Croydon Advertiser and Surrey County Reporter* carried the following article:

"Old Whitgiftian [sic] Killed in Action.

"Mr and Mrs FJ Allen, residents of Thornton Heath, have learned with deep regret that their youngest son, Sydney John Allen, was killed in action on July 1st. Twenty-one years of age, deceased was educated at the Whitgift Middle School and was for some time a chorister at St John's Church, Upper Norwood.

"On leaving school he entered the service of Lloyd's Bank Limited, Lombard Street, afterwards taking up an appointment in Trinity House. He joined the Queen Victoria's Rifles on the outbreak of war and went to France in November 1914. He took part in the glorious fight at Hill 60 and the second battle of Ypres.

"The charge in which he fell is reported as being one of the most glorious of the war. 700 of the QVR with other Territorial battalions advanced singing through a triple barrage of fire to capture certain trenches and penetrated to the third German line. The enemy it is stated had amassed piles of ammunition and many guns in this sector in preparation for the attack and our gallant boys suffered heavily in the advance. Later, owing to the curtain of fire put behind them by the enemy, supplies were unable to get up in time and the troops underwent the mortification of having to retire from the ground they had won again losing many men and officers as they fell back.

"Deceased, who possessed the true spirit of the soldier is reported to have been one of the smartest NCOs in his regiment and he was much loved by all his comrades and by all who knew him."

Sydney's body was either not recovered or lost, and he has no known grave; he is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/80800/THIEPVAL%20MEMORIAL>





Acknowledgements: -

Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

National Archives: War Diary 1st/9th Bn. London Regt. – Queen Victoria's Rifles (WO 95/2963); Service Record SJ Allen (WO 363).

National Census: 1901 & 1911.

Whitgift Middle School Records and The Mid Whitgiftian, Trinity School Archive.

The Croydon Advertiser and Surrey Reporter.

The Old Mid Whitgiftian.

Croydon and the Great War.

Chris McCarthy – “The Somme – The Day by Day Account”

Jack Sheldon – “The German Army on the Somme – 1914:1916”

Major C.A. Cuthbert Keeson, V.D. – “History and Records of Queen Victoria's Rifles 1792-1922”

The Long, Long Trail - <http://www.1914-1918.net/london.htm>

Gommecourt, 1st July 1916 - <http://www.gommecourt.co.uk/>

Photograph courtesy of The Croydon Advertiser.