

Sidney Herbert Willis

killed in action 15 Sep 1916

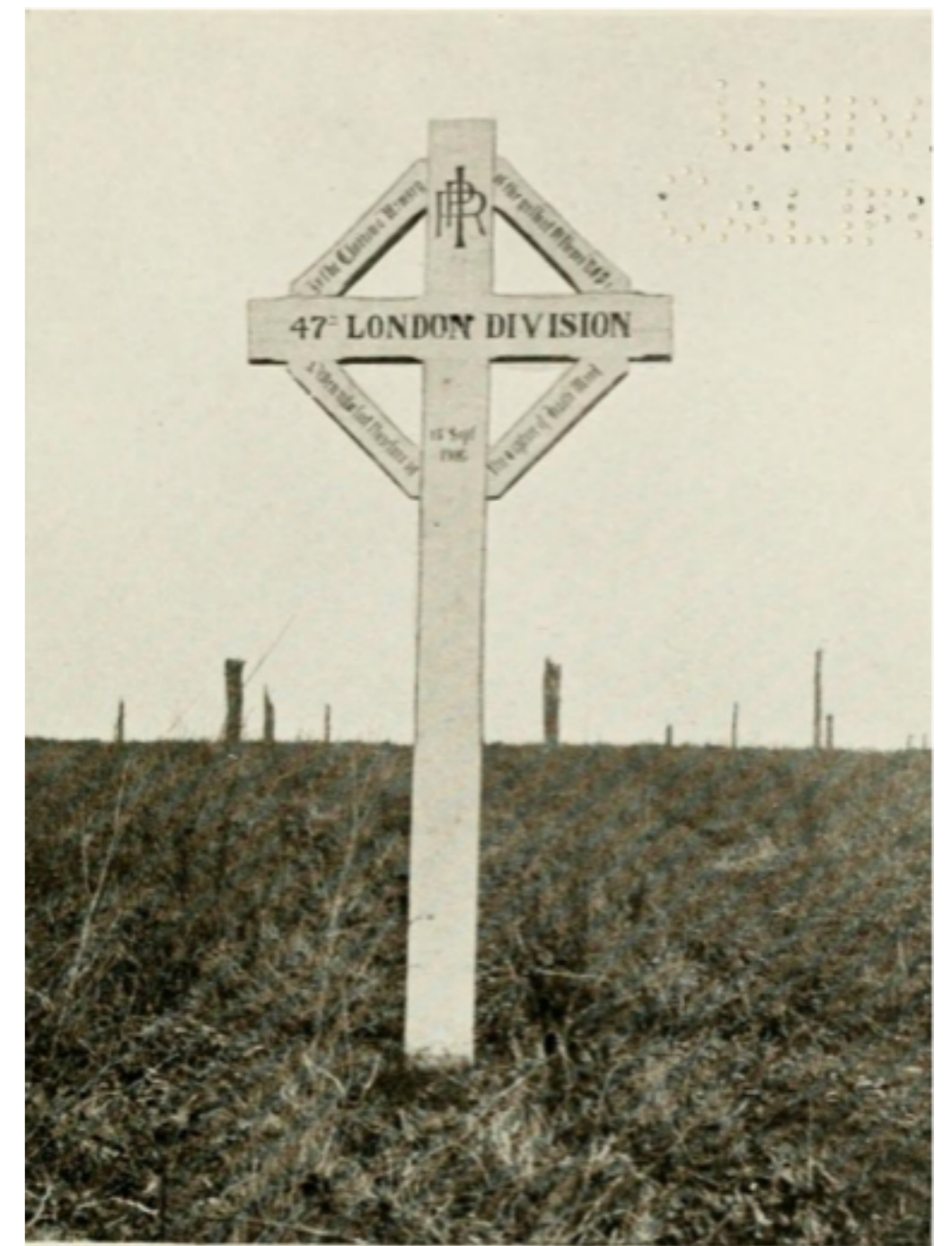
age 18 years



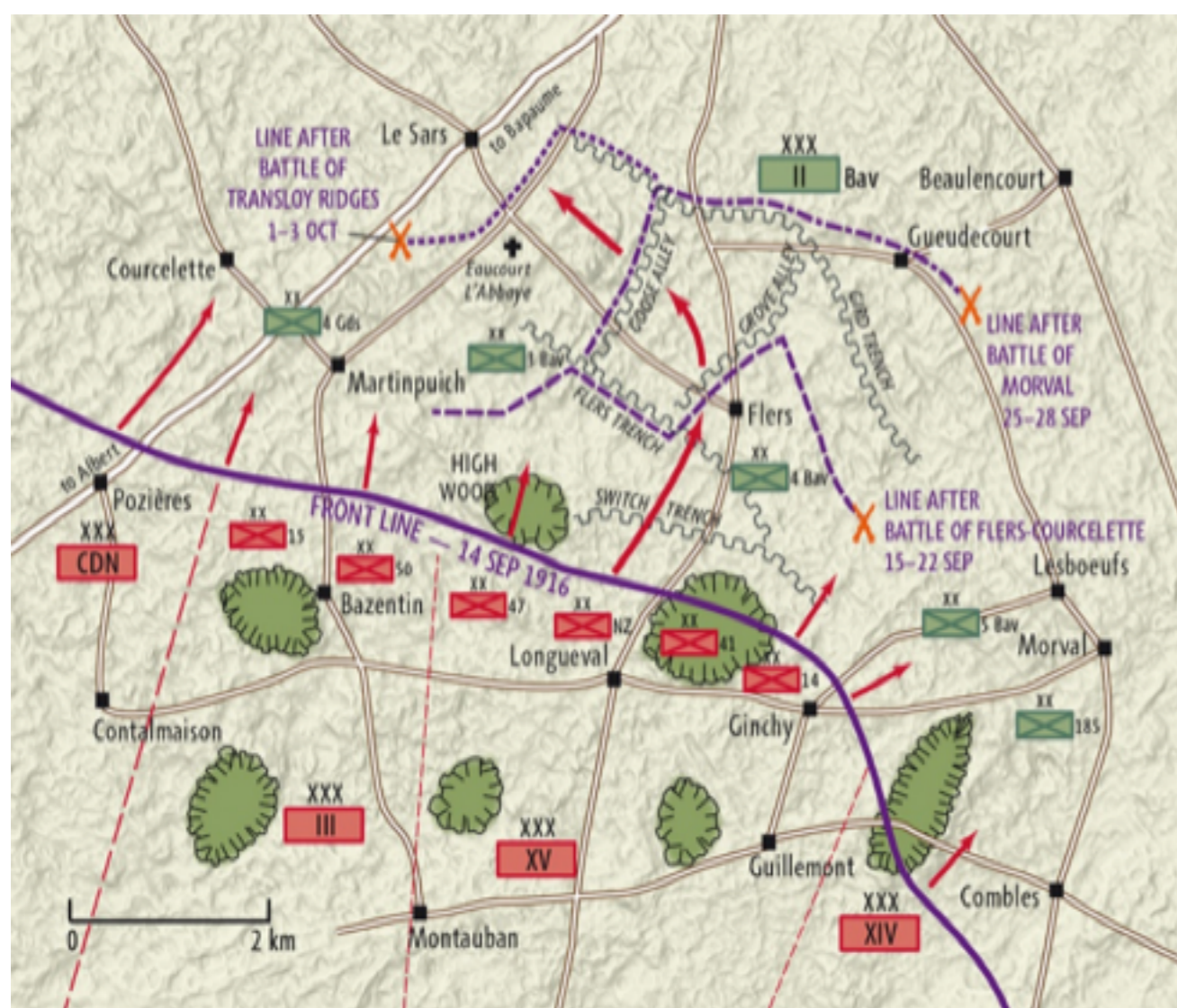
Sidney Willis was born in 1899 in Highclere. His mother Leah White had married Arthur Willis in 1887 and by 1901 the family were living in The Dairy at Highclere. Arthur was working as a stockman. They had five sons and one daughter.

Sidney's father Arthur died in 1910 at the age of 50 leaving Leah a widow with four of the children still living with her. She moved to Dummer to live with her younger brother, Charles White, who was single and the Town Postman. William, John and her youngest son, Sidney, moved to Dummer with her, together with their sister Beatrice. Arthur, her oldest son, was away working as a gardener and Frederick was working as a cowman in East Woodhay.

In 1913 Leah married the recently widowed gardener, Stephen Cole Humby who had been working at Kempshott Park. He and his late wife, Elizabeth, had 6 surviving children of their own. The family subsequently moved to Croydon. Sidney enlisted in the 23rd (County of London) Battalion of the London Regiment. Three of his brothers also served in World War 1, but survived.



Temporary memorial to the 47th London Division dead at High Wood 1916



High Wood 1916

Name.	Corps.	Regt. No.
WILLIS Sydney. H.	23 Lond. R.	7528
Medal.	Roll.	Page.
VICTORY	T.P. 23/10/18	66
BATTISM	- do	- do
Star		
Remarks.		
R/A 15.9.16		
Theatre of War first served in		
Date of entry therein		
E/268306/2 EF/9/4399		
K. 1380		

The Battle of Flers-Courcellette: the capture of High Wood 15 September 1916

During the Battle of Flers-Courcellette the 47th (2nd London) Division in III Corps, Fourth Army was tasked with the capture of High Wood, which had been attacked on many previous occasions without success. This action was also notable for the use of tanks in an offensive operation for the first time, though with limited success.

The 47th Division's commander Major General Barter protested that the battlefield was not suitable for the use of tanks but was overruled by III Corps' commander, Lieutenant General Sir William Pulteney. Four tanks were allocated to 47th Division but only proved partially effective. Of the four present at High Wood, two tanks ditched, one was set on fire and the last got stuck on a tree stump. The presence of the tanks, and the closeness of the lines also meant that there was no concentrated artillery support, and the infantry attack met with stiff German resistance when they reached the wood.

Within twenty minutes of starting at 06.20, the three London Battalions attacking the wood were held up, the enemy meeting them with bombs and rifle fire from their undamaged trenches and machine-guns from concrete emplacements.

Four further London Battalions were sent in to attack towards a point known as Cough Drop. Incredibly around one hundred soldiers led by two officers managed to hold Cough Drop and made contact with the New Zealand troops nearby by digging a new trench.

An intense barrage from 140th Trench Mortar Battery finally demoralised the German defenders and by 13.00 hours High Wood was declared free of Germans. Further on from High Wood lay the enemy trenches of the Starfish Line and Cough Drop. 142nd Brigade was brought out of reserve to begin their attack around 18.00pm.

To the right, 21st London Regiment (1st Surrey Rifles) advanced through No Man's Land to the Starfish Line and despite many casualties took the Starfish Redoubt but could not close on the Cough Drop; 24th London Regiment (The Queen's) also advanced with 21st London Regiment, both battalions suffering heavy casualties. From 17 officers and 550 men, only 2 officers and 60 men returned to 21st London Regiment.

On the right, 23rd London Regiment, including Private Sidney H Willis, advanced to the east of the wood, under heavy enemy fire, A, C and D Companies were totally wiped out.

47th Division overall lost over 4500 men during the capture of High Wood and the actions of the next few days.

High Wood was never fully cleared after the war, and it is estimated that the remains of around 8000 soldiers, British and German, still lie today in High Wood.



A destroyed British Mark 1 tank, first used in the 3rd Battle of the Somme including the Battle of Flers-Courcellette



The Colours of the Regiment which are now housed in St Mary's, Battersea. St Mary's also has a memorial to the 1125 Officers, Warrant Officers, N.C.Os and men of the 23rd Battalion, the London Regiment, who lost their lives in the Great War.

1/23rd (County of London) London Regiment

The London Regiment was unusual. Not only were all of its battalions of the Territorial Force (although the first four were affiliated to the other City of London regiment, the all-regular Royal Fusiliers) but each battalion was regarded as a corps in its own right.

The 23rd Battalion mobilised at Clapham in August 1914 and was quickly renamed as the 1/23rd (County of London) Battalion when a second line unit was formed.

The 1/23rd Londons went to France in March 1915 as part of the 142nd Brigade, 47th (2nd London) Division with which it remained throughout the war. Its first offensive operation on the Western Front was an attack on the German line at Givenchy on 25/26 May 1915; the objective was seized but the cost was considerable - 237 killed and 262 wounded. Other major actions included Loos, the Somme (581 casualties including Sidney Willis at High Wood), and Messines.

Location of operations

1st / 23rd Battalion

1915
Givenchy
Loos
1916
High Wood
Eaucourt L'Abbaye
1917
Ypres
Messines
Gavrelle
Bourlon Wood
1918
Metz en Couture
Aveluy Wood
Bray sur Somme
Moislains
Tournai

In Memory of
Private
Sidney Herbert Willis
7528, 1st/23rd Bn., London Regiment who died on 15 September 1916

Remembered with Honour
Thiepval Memorial

Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission