

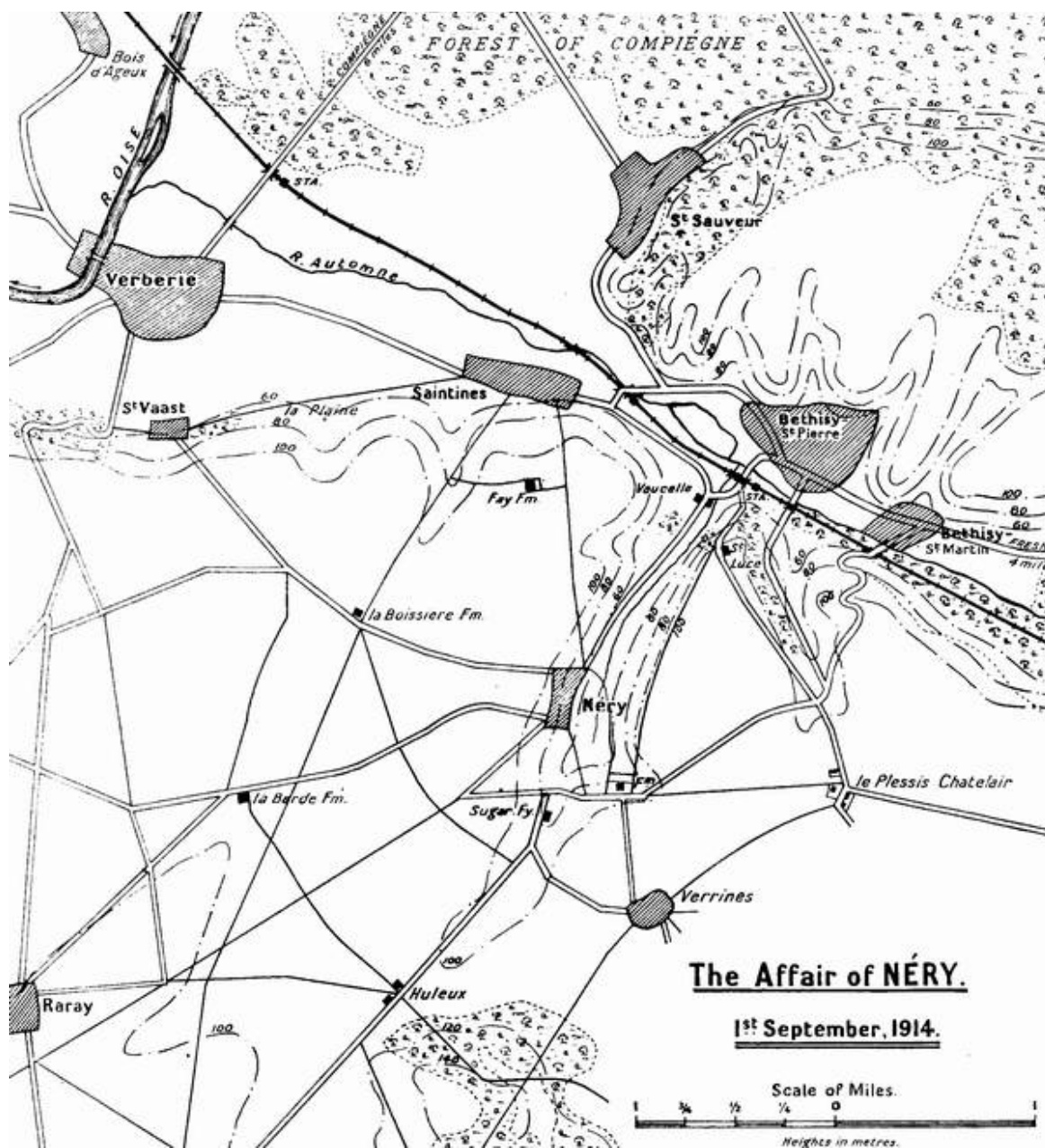
# 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment in action at Néry, 1 September 1914

## Introduction

The following is an extract from Howard Anderson's excellent homepage *The Die Hards - 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment, 1914-1918*. For most parts the text is quoted from the regimental history - *Die Hards in the Great War* by Everard Wyrall - published in 1926-1930. [1\)](#)

The headlines, illustrations and the postscript on 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade have been provided by me. The map is from the regimental history.

## Map of the Néry Area



(From *The Die Hards - 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment, 1914-1918*)

## Urgent assistance needed



*British Infantry on Active Service, ca. 1914.*  
Contemporary postcard, published by  
Gale & Polden, Aldershot.

At 5.30 a.m. the 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex withdrew outposts and marched on Saintines, joining up with 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade Headquarters. About 6 o'clock the Brigade, having ascended the hills south of the village, was met by a messenger, who asked for assistance urgently for the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade and 'L' Battery, RHA, which were in difficulties at Néry and had suffered very heavily. Major F. G. M. Rowley [2](#), who temporarily commanded the 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex, was ordered to march his Battalion off immediately towards Néry.

'The enemy appears to have got right round the Cavalry and had succeeded in placing some ten field guns within 800 yards of their camp. The Cavalry had a great many casualties, whilst their horses were lying dead in rows.' (*War Diary, 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade*)

Taking the nearest available Company ('D') with him, Major Rowley at once set off southwards towards Néry. On arriving at the village he reported to the G.O.C. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade, who said that the Middlesex could best render assistance by attacking the German guns which were firing from the high ground east of the village. On reaching the eastern exits of Néry, 'D' Company and the two Battalion machine guns under Lieutenant Jefferd came into action against the hostile battery. Rapid rifle fire and machine gun fire was then opened, and after two minutes the German guns ceased firing.

## 8 guns captured



*Charge!*

Contemporary, but slightly later, postcard,  
published by Gale & Polden, Aldershot.

Major Rowley then ordered 'D' Company to advance and capture the guns. With bayonets fixed and a cheer, the Middlesex men rushed across the small intervening valley and captured eight of the guns which had been firing on the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade and 'L' Battery, RHA.

With the exception of some 12 dead or badly wounded Germans the gun crews had fled. A few minutes later the German limbers were seen about 1.000 yards away and fire was at once opened on them, but they retired rapidly and were seen no more. The guns were found to be undamaged, two of them being loaded. No horses, however, being available the sights were removed and the elevating gear damaged





*Machine Gun in Action, ca. 1914.*

Contemporary postcard by Edgar A. Holloway,  
published by Gale & Polden, Aldershot.

Meanwhile the two machine guns under Lieutenant Jefferd, after assisting in silencing the hostile artillery, had moved towards the sugar factory in rear of 'L' Battery. Here they were under fire from the German gun escort, Lieutenant Jefferd being wounded [3](#)).

About twenty minutes after the guns were captured, the German gun escort was seen retiring across the open from near the sugar factory, and on fire being opened on them about 25 surrendered. A little later some of the captured guns were brought away by the Cavalry, who had made up teams for the purpose [4](#)). In the meantime one-and-a-half companies of the Middlesex, co-operating with a Cavalry Regiment, had captured a German field ambulance with a few prisoners, in the next village eastwards.

This small action, insignificant as it may seem, is of considerable importance to Middlesex men, as the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Regiment was the first British unit to capture German guns in the war.

### **Further assistance to 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade and 'I' Battery, RHA, from St. Vaast, and a composite battalion of troops from the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade (4<sup>th</sup> Division) from Verberie, had likewise responded to the call for help, which had been sent to them as well as to the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade.

The guns of 'I' Battery unlimbered and came into action, but as they did so 'L' Battery ceased firing, for all of its guns had either been put out of action or the gun teams killed or wounded.

## Aftermath

After the action the general retirement was again continued, the Middlesex forming rearguard with the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade. 'Of the eight guns captured by Battalion at least four were brought away, remainder having to be left as not enough horses for them.' The Battalion billeted that night in Fresnoy.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion withdrew outposts at 5.30 a.m. and marched off in a south-south-westerly direction through Othis on Dammartin. The 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade formed the rearguard, and about midday a message reached the Middlesex that General Briggs, with his Cavalry Brigade (i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade), had a cavalry force of the enemy *en l'air*, and asked for the assistance of the guns of the rearguard. But the artillery could not find suitable gun positions, and nothing could be done.

From Dammartin the Middlesex pushed on to Longperrier, where the whole Battalion (with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders on the right and 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Welch Fusiliers on the left) took up an outpost line, west of the village; the 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex had also covered a distance of about 20 miles.

The immortal story of the gallant action of 'L' Battery, R.H.A., should be read in the Official History of the War.

## Postscript - 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade

The 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade to which 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment belonged had been formed on 19 August 1914 from battalions hereto assigned to Lines-of-Communication duties, e.g. working parties for camp preparation, various guard duties etc.

The brigade was independent at first, assigned to various divisions as the situation demanded. From 30 August to 12 October 1914 it was part of III. Corps (Major-General W.P. Pulteney), together with 4<sup>th</sup> Division; in October it was transferred to 6<sup>th</sup> Division.

## Composition of 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade

(Commander: Major-General L.G. Drummond) [5](#))

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Royal Welch Fusiliers
- 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Cameronians (Scottish Rifles)
- 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Duke of Cambridge's Own (Middlesex Regiment)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Princess Louise's (Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders)

Attached:

- 19<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, Royal Army Medical Corps
- 8<sup>th</sup> (Horse Transport) Company, Army Service Corps.

Captain James Lochhead Jack (1880-1962), 1<sup>st</sup> Cameronians (Scottish Rifles), was the Brigade Staff Captain. His diary (Source 3) provides information on the Brigade and its various duties in the first months of the war.





*Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, A company in marching order, ca. 1912.*  
Contemporary postcard by Harry Payne, published by Raphael Tuck & Sons.

For a more 1914'ish look, one must imagine the kilts covered by khaki aprons, and the white gaiters substituted by khaki ones.

The lieutenant on the left would have worn a jacket with open collar, together with a khaki shirt and tie.

James L. Jack describes 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders as a very smart battalion, and its commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel H.P. Moulton-Barrett, was very proud of it.

At Néry, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were also sent forward in support of 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Brigade, but arrived after the fighting. On seeing the breakfast prepared by the 5<sup>th</sup> Dragoon Guards, who have had no time to eat it, the Highlanders quickly disposed of it, with a healthy appetite.



*Highlanders, Crossing a Square in Boulogne, 1914.*  
This contemporary coloured postcard, published by Underwood & Underwood, New York, may show

2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders  
which landed in Boulogne on 11 August 1914.

Due to their Lines-of-Communications tasks, the units of the later 19<sup>th</sup> Brigade went to France ahead of the British Expeditionary Force, and were the first combatant troops of to land in France.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment and the 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Cameronians landed at Le Havre; 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn. Welch Fusiliers landed in Rouen.



*Captain, 1<sup>st</sup> The Cameronians  
(Scottish Rifles), 1914.*  
From Source 6.

The fact that the captain wears no spurs indicates that he is a platoon commander. Imagine black riding boots with spurs as footwear and a riding crop instead of the walking stick, Captain James L. Jack could have had a similar appearance when he went to Néry together with the advance guard of 1<sup>st</sup> Middlesex. His orders were "to ride there, find out the situation, and tell General Briggs that assistance is coming at once."

In the rifle regiments officers wore black leather equipment, where as officers in other infantry regiments wore brown leather, as shown on the postcard *On Active Service* shown previously. The glengarry cap is rifle green, described by Jack as being almost black. The walking stick used by officers in Scottish regiments had a more "rural" look than the plain sticks used by officers in other regiments.

## Sources

1. *Néry, 1914 - The Adventure of the German 4<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Division on the 31st August and the 1st September* by Major A.F. Becke, Naval & Military Press, London 2004, ISBN 1-84574-030-0.
2. 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, fra *The story of the British Army in the First World War*.
3. *General Jack's Diary - War on the Western Front 1914-1918* by John Terraine, based on the diaries of Brigadier-General James Lochhead Jacks, Cassel Military Paperbacks, London 2003, ISBN 0-304-35320-5.
4. *Official History, Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914* af J.E. Edmonds, London 1922.
5. *The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1918* by Captain J.C. Dunn (ed.), Sphere Books Ltd., London 1989, ISBN 0-7474-0372-4.
6. *British Infantry Uniforms since 1660* af Michael Barthrop, Blanford Press, Poole/Dorset 1982, ISBN 0-7137-1127-2.

Per Finsted

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### Notes:

- 1) Bibliographic data from Naval & Military Press.
- 2) Major F. G. M. Rowley was promoted Lieutenant-Colonel on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 1914.
- 3) Lieutenant Jefferd was severely wounded; for his gallantry he was awarded the French *Croix de Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur*. (From: *The Middlesex Regiment 1755-1966, The Great War, Mons to Ypres, 1914*)
- 4) According to Source 1, the Commander Royal Artillery, 4<sup>th</sup> Division, ordered 37<sup>th</sup> (Howitzer) Brigade, Royal Field Artillery 'to provide limbers to bring away any enemy guns that were worth moving'. Three German guns were moved away, later to be exhibited on Horse Guards Parade, London, however wrongly labelled 'Captured at Le Cateau'.
- 5) The Brigade Commander was wounded 26 August 1914 at Le Cateau. He was superseded by the senior battalion commander - Lieutenant-Colonel E.E. Ward, 1<sup>st</sup> Bn. Middlesex Regiment (killed in action, 21 October 1914).