

# FREDERICK GORDON WOODHEAD



31st December 1917

1886-1917 Age 31

**Lance Corporal 9482/763484, 'A' Company  
1/28th Battalion London Regiment (1st  
Artists' Rifles) (T.F.)**

Fred was born in the Manningham area of Bradford in July 1886. He was the eldest of three children of Harry Woodhead and Emma Jane Holroyd and was their only son. When they married Harry was a salesman, perhaps for his father who was a draper and hatter, while Emma was a velvet weaver. In the 1890s Harry built up a merchant tailor's business which in 1912 had three branches in Bradford. After being educated at one of the city schools, Fred went to Bradford Grammar School in September 1900 when he was fourteen. He was at the School for a year, in Form Third Modern. He was an average pupil who did well in Chemistry and English. After school he worked for his father. In the 1911 Census he was listed as a 'Tailor and Clothier', and in the next year when he married as 'Tailor Master'. He married Mabel Hayward, also from Manningham and whose father was a bank manager, at the Salem Congregational Church on Oak Lane in April 1912. They lived at 7 Leylands Lane, where their only child Barbara was born a year later in April 1913.

Fred was twenty-eight shortly before the outbreak of war. He did not volunteer, but in November 1915 under the 'Derby Scheme' which began the move towards compulsory service, he attested his willingness to serve when called upon. He chose the 28th Battalion London Regiment (Artists' Rifles), a socially exclusive unit which attracted men from the public schools and universities. Recruits needed to be recommended and paid a fee, and many became officers. It was an unusual choice since Fred had attended neither, and at B.G.S. he came tenth in Art. He possibly wished to avoid serving with men of lower social status. The call came a year later and on 13th November he reported for duty at Halifax. His medical inspection shows he was 5 feet 4 inches tall and of moderate build. After three months' basic training he joined his battalion in France in late February 1917.

Although the Artists' Rifles had been in France since April 1915, they had enjoyed a quiet war as an Officer Training unit. Woodhead joined 'A' Company at Hesdin, near Boulogne. This was soon to change.



In July the battalion became part of 190th Brigade and went into the front line near Arras to gain experience, then moved north to Ypres in October. On the 30th at 5.50 a.m. it attacked in knee-deep mud alongside the Canadians near Passchendaele village. It was held up by close-range machine guns and lost 334 men, half its fighting strength. Fred survived, and as the remnant rested and refitted he was promoted to Lance Corporal, unpaid. In December the battalion moved to the Cambrai sector where a German counter-attack had negated earlier British success. At 6.30 a.m. on the 30th, dressed in white camouflage suits and spearheaded by flame throwers, the Germans launched a surprise attack in snow south of Marcoing. The Artists' Rifles' 'A' and 'B' Companies were hurried forward from reserve to counter-attack at 11.15 a.m. without artillery support. They did not reach their objective and suffered more than one hundred casualties. Woodhead was one of the wounded who lay out in bitter cold until they were recovered at night. He died the next day at a dressing station at Villers-Plouich, where he was buried. The artist John Nash took part in the attack and later painted the scene. 'It is in fact pure murder', he wrote, 'and I was lucky to escape untouched... It was bitterly cold and we were easy targets against the snow and in daylight. I think the vivid memory of the occasion helped me when I painted the picture ...' Mabel Woodhead never re-married and died in Leeds in 1961. Fred's daughter Barbara also remained single and died in 2000.





## Acknowledgements:

Woodhead's photo is from the School memorial book courtesy of the O.B.A. and B.G.S. The family was researched using Ancestry.com. His year at B.G.S. is recorded in the 1902 Annual Report. His name is not on St Bede's or Bellevue School war memorials. Under the Derby Scheme Fred was due to be mobilized in May 1916. His Service Record is available on Ancestry.com. For the 1/28th London Regiment, 1st Artists' Rifles (the apostrophe was dropped in 1937), I consulted <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artists\\_Rifles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artists_Rifles)>, <<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/order-of-battle-of-divisions/63rd-royal-naval-division/>>, <<https://livesofthefirstworldwar.org/lifestory/1920457>> (biography of Acting Corporal W. L. Hogg who survived the events described overleaf to die in 1978), <[http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/topic/3440-the-action-at-welch-ridge/?\\_fromLogin=1](http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/topic/3440-the-action-at-welch-ridge/?_fromLogin=1)>, <<https://archive.org/stream/regimentalrollof00highiala#page/n33/mode/2up>> (the battalion roll of honour, p.28 for Woodhead). All accessed 11-12-2017. The Battalion War Diary WO-95-3119 was downloaded from T.N.A. The account of the 30th October assault by Private Alfred Burrage, a survivor, can be read in P. Barton, *Passchendaele*, (2007), 398-403.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper in December 2017. For further information, contact Nhooper1956@googlemail.com, or see <<http://www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/bradford-grammar-school-in-ww1/>>.

**John Nash, 'Over the Top'** (<<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/20015>>) © IWM (Art.IWM ART 1656). 'image: a landscape in the snow. On the left, a red earth trench lined with duckboards stretches away from the viewer. A group of soldiers clamber from the trench, going 'over the top'. Two lie dead in the trench and another has fallen lying face down in the snow. Those who have survived plod forward towards the right without looking back. They walk beneath a grey, stormy sky, with clouds from shell and gunfire in the distance. 'Over the Top' is one of very few officially commissioned works depicting a specific and clearly identifiable action. The painting commemorates the 1st Artists' Rifles involvement in an attack on the morning of 30th December, 1917, at Welsh Ridge, near Marcoing (south west of Cambrai). The unit was recalled from 'rest' in response to a German attack and hastily committed to action. The consequences were disastrous and the Artists' Rifles suffered heavy casualties. In a sense this action was typical of the hastily arranged and badly planned local counter-attack. Nash's soldier figures climbing out of the trench, shoulders hunched over, walking out into the snow seem resigned to their fate. This battle experience profoundly affected the artist and his painting. The simplicity and directness of this image is a valuable visual complement to the historical accounts of the event to be found in the unit history and battalion war diary.'

