

Captain John Robert Kent, MC



John Robert Kent was born on 22nd November 1892 at Musland, Westray, the third son of farmer John Kent and Jane Kent (née Grieve). Known as John R, he completed his schooling at Kirkwall Burgh School, boarding with his great aunt Isabella Leonard in 26 High Street. John R became a student of Arts in 1913 at Edinburgh University. He joined the Officers Training Corps' artillery unit there in 1914 and reached the rank of Cadet Bombardier. John R successfully applied for a commission, awarded on 10th August 1915 as a Temporary 2nd Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery.

John R was posted to 180th (West Ham) Brigade RFA and joined its C Battery in London, after purchasing his own uniform and equipment. C/180 Battery was equipped with the standard British field gun, the reliable 18-pounder. With three other artillery brigades, 180th Brigade crossed to Le Havre in February 1916 and on the 22nd joined 16th (Irish) Division. It had been in France since December 1915 and its infantry had gained experience with other divisions.

In the middle of March 16th Division moved into the Loos Salient, where the British Army had launched a major offensive in September 1915 and used poisonous gas for the first time. The Germans earlier used chlorine gas at Ypres in April 1915 and they did so again at Loos on 27th April 1916. 180th Brigade's gunners, although hampered by wearing gas masks and having to fetch up shells from wagon lines three miles back, kept up a five hour barrage to prevent a significant German success.

At the end of August C/180 Battery received two more 18-pounders, to meet the new 6-gun establishment. The Battle of the Somme was into its third month when 180th Brigade deployed to support 16th Division in ten days of intense fighting at the start of September. The Irish Division lost heavily capturing the ruined villages of Guillemont and Ginchy, before its infantry was relieved and moved north to Flanders. 180th Brigade stayed behind to support the major Somme offensive launched on 15th September that used tanks for the first time. John R saw them go into action, although the two tasked with capturing the Quadrilateral strongpoint "ditched" themselves. A week of heavy rain then turned the battlefield into a muddy quagmire that gun teams needed eight, and later twelve, horses to move the guns out of. 180th Brigade moved to the valley west of Morval to cover French troops, before was relieved on 29th September and completed a six day march in heavy rain to re-join 16th Division in Flanders. John R received a written commendation from General Hickie, 16th Division's G.O.C., for his "constant devotion to duty in the field in 1916".

180th Brigade enjoyed an unusually quiet ten week spell up to Christmas in the Ypres Salient, most of it in support of 23rd Division. In the early months of 1917, 180th Brigade returned to supporting 16th Division and the artillery war became more active. 16th Division spent most of April and May in the Kemmel Sector, before deploying to take part in the offensive called the Battle of Messines. The battle opened on 7th June with the explosion under German lines of nineteen large underground mines, which John R reported rocked the ground violently, but did not sound very loud. The crash of the opening artillery barrage by 2,266 guns and howitzers (including 756 heavies) was stunning. The combined power of the mines and artillery crushed most of the German defences on Messines Ridge and the Irish infantry advanced to take Wytschaete village and its wood with relatively light casualties, but those killed included the popular 56 year-old Nationalist MP Willie Redmond.

John R was promoted to full Lieutenant in July 1917, then a month later to Acting Captain – the rank that he held for the rest of the war.

180th Brigade went into action in front of Ypres on 10th July and covered three partially successful major attacks by 15th and 16th Divisions in the next six weeks. The Brigade's ammunition parties were drenched with German mustard gas for the first time in the offensive that became known as Passchendaele, losing forty-seven casualties and nearly one hundred horses to its chronic, often deadly, effect. John R's friend Lieutenant Smith of Ipswich was amongst those badly affected by the gas, but he recovered and they kept in touch after the war.

180th Brigade left Flanders on 26th August and by end of the month it was at St. Leger, near Arras. During the relatively quiet autumn months 180th Brigade carried out training that bore fruit in the difficult last year of the war. 180th Brigade supported 16th Division in its last offensive as an Irish division, a diversionary attack to the tank offensive at Cambrai. 3rd and 16th Divisions on 20th November captured nearly 3,000 yards of Tunnel Trench in the Hindenburg Line near Bullecourt.

The collapse of Russia and the Italian defeat at Caporetto gave the Germans the opportunity to reinforce the Western Front, then take the offensive in early 1918 and try to win the war before American troops reached Europe in significant numbers. John R was able to get home to Westray on leave in February, but was back in France in Picardy with his battery when the Germans struck.

The German "Michael" Offensive launched on 21st March over-ran most of 16th Division's forward infantry, destroyed five of C/180 Battery's guns and drove the surviving units back across the old Somme battlefield. When the Germans tried to break through at Villers Bretonneux on 4th April to capture the vital communications centre of Amiens, 180th Brigade fired over open sights to stop the advance. John R took command of C/180 Battery, when Major Ormond Stevens was wounded.

16th Division's losses were so severe that it returned to the UK, to be reformed with new (mostly English) battalions. However, 16th Division's artillery remained in France and supported other British divisions, also the Canadian Corps in July and August. The tide of war turned then for the last time and the Allies moved over to the series of offensives that eventually, after hard fighting and heavy casualties on both sides forced the Germans to seek an Armistice in November.

John R was awarded the Military Cross "For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty", in one of the early attacks of the final Allied offensives. 180th Brigade's batteries moved forward to east of Fampoux and, in the last few days of August and first of September, fired numerous barrages to exploit the success of the Canadian Corps, with 51st (Highland) Division attached, in breaking through the Drocourt-Queant Switch Line. John R observed and directed the fire of some 400 rounds from his battery to cut German wire, despite heavy enemy fire that forced him to switch his post three times and continually disrupted his communications. John R was lightly wounded on 3rd September, but after treatment in France returned to his battery at the end of the month.

When the Armistice was announced on 11th November, 180th Brigade was in support at Rumes, near Tournai in Flanders. The Brigade's casualties during the Great War totalled about 700. John R returned to Edinburgh University after he was demobilized in February 1919 and graduated M.A. in 1920. He took up the teaching post of Assistant Headmaster in Dalkeith. John R returned to Westray to marry farmer's daughter Caroline Brown at Breckowall on 10th August 1921, then started work as Headmaster of Pierowall School on 5th December.

John R and Carrie had three children: son John Robert Charles (known as Charlie), daughters May and Jean. John R was a member of many sporting clubs, including rifle, golf, tennis, football and sailing, also served as treasurer of the District Nursing Association. When German invasion threatened in World War 2, John R commanded the Westray Home Guard. Carrie died in March 1945, May in August of that year. John R retired on 5th July 1957 and died on Westray in 1979, aged 86.

