



Henry Page Croft (1881-1947)

Henry Page Croft served in the 1st Battalion of the Hertfordshire regiment T.A. and within a year of joining went on to command it into battle. He fought in the Battle of Loos and the Somme and had the dubious honour of spending 22 continuous months at the front, longer than any other MP. His experience of trench life with its casual loss of life, propelled him to be a vocal critic of the Government and military command. As detailed in his memoirs, “the question that puzzled me was not how many of us would get hit, but how many could possibly survive.”¹

In November 1914, his Hertfordshire Regiment were mobilised for the front and were sent to join the 4th Guards Brigade at Ypres. Already, 2 months in, the war had taken its toll on soldiers and the surrounding countryside, “we saw houses still burning after the days bombardment, then a body in huddled in the corner, and we knew that this was war”². Just a week later, the magnificent Cloth Hall in Ypres would also lie in ruins.

In the first Battle of Ypres, Germany initially made rapid progress with a large mobilisation of troops and cavalry. British and French units were forced on the defensive towards Calais and Dunkirk; the key coastal towns that German military command wished to capture. However, as the British Expedition Force and French troops fortified their positions, both sides became locked in the now familiar trench warfare.

The 1st Battalion Herts were called up to relieve the 10th Hussars and Royals and defend one of numerous positions along the coast. The Battalion was entrenched only 60 yards from enemy lines and in the cold and mud their rifles frequently jammed. As German High Command sought to break the stalemate, spotter planes were employed to locate key British positions for more precise artillery fire. The atrocious conditions of trench life were only reinforced by the casualties around them,

“over the field in front of us were scores of great bodies, of the men, of the Kaisers Guard, some lying facing us who fallen in the attack...Up to now we had most of us felt a good deal of the sport of war, but here we were against the reality, for all around was death”³

By December 1914 his battalion followed a familiar pattern of providing relief and support to other battle-weary troops. On 24 December they marched to Bethune to replace Indian soldiers on the front line. Despite there being a cease fire for many on Christmas Day, Page-Croft’s “first Christmas in the trenches was celebrated at dawn with rapid fire...Early in the day I got news that a lad who lived in my native Hertfordshire had been killed by a bullet whilst on sentry duty.”⁴

In January 1915 he was appointed to command a Brigade and was tasked with devising a strategy for attacking the Cuinchy area. His first criticisms of the war began to emerge as in “spite of the eloquent speeches of a certain statesman.... in reality we had hardly any ammunition at all.”⁵ Once supplies had arrived he adopted a tactic seen throughout the war of heavy artillery fire overhead followed by troops over the top. Deploying the Irish and Cold Stream Guards and 1st Herts Battalion they managed to take the enemy trenches and captured much needed “booty-machine guns, a trench mortar, stores.”⁶

¹ P.89, My Life of Strife (1948), Lord Croft

² Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.13

³ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.30

⁴ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.69

⁵ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.83

⁶ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.85

The use of trench mortars became a regular feature of the tactics employed by Page-Croft. Though the weapon was initially unreliable and could land wildly off target, they soon became an effective barrage against German positions. It was also during this period that he first witnessed the effective use of tunnelling to target the enemy from below.

By May 1915 his battalions were being held in reserve at the Battle of Festubert. As it transpired his troops were not called into action and lay in wait for further orders. The juxtaposition of the horror around them “as we sat warming ourselves in the sun...whilst thousands of men were fighting and dying within a mile or so” was graphically highlighted. The popularity of football amongst troops relaxing away from the front was also noted, “What a strange race we are! Look at those hulking giant babies, rushing for goal whilst comrades cheer.”⁷

In September 1915 his battalions were again redeployed, this time to La Bassée in what was to become known as the Battle of Loos. The area had been subject to significant tunnelling and explosions leaving the area littered with craters. British troops now attempted to use the hollows as cover to edge nearer to the enemy. Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Foulke, gave the orders for the first use of gas by British forces⁸, followed by an infantry assault. However, such an attack was dependent on wind conditions and unfortunately the gas blew back into British trenches. The infantry surge did finally proceed but was met with heavy machine gun fire with mass casualties and little territory gained.

In February 1916 Page Croft was redeployed to take command of a new brigade that consisted of eight battalions and also miners being trained for infantry roles. Upon inspection of his new troops both he and his Senior Commander were lucky not to be killed as a stray shell hit their trench. Once again a well drilled strategy was deployed, as the “raiders left our trench....whilst our shells was bursting on the German trench.”⁹

Greater dangers lay ahead as his men were mobilised to the Somme in July 1916 in one of the bloodiest battles of the war. The might of the British army was mustered and “there were long lines of guns and howitzers of such calibre that if any one of them had arrived in France in 1914 the whole army would have wanted to visit so unusual a monster.”¹⁰ Page-Croft and his Brigade were given the objective of capturing Contalmaison Village via the covered area of Bailiff Wood. They were met by heavy machine gun fire at Baliff Wood and were forced to retreat, forcing British artillery to shell the wood, followed by a bombardment of the village - waves of troops finally managed to take the village but at the cost of heavy casualties.

The high fatality rate meant that soldiers including Page-Croft’s Brigade had little rest and were moved from one combat zone to the next. They fought along Australian troops in a series of trenches called the Munster Alley. It was here that the musician and composer George Butterworth, a soldier in one of Page-Croft’s battalions, was killed. In writing to Butterworth’s parents Page Croft said, “A brilliant musician in times of peace and an equally brilliant soldier in times of stress.”¹¹

By the end of 1916 Henry Page Croft had been recalled (seeing no further active service), as the dual role of soldier and scrutinising the government came into conflict. He had already written to the

⁷ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.113

⁸ In January 1915, the German military first experimented with the deadly chemical, xylyl bromide, killing around 1,000 Russian troops at Bolimov, on the Eastern Front. The first large scale use of gas was carried out at the First battle of Ypres by German troops causing 7,000 Allied casualties.

⁹ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.193

¹⁰ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft, p.203

¹¹ Twenty-Two Months Under Fire, Henry Page Croft,

Inventions Committee in Parliament urging them to invest in tanks as a means of quickening victory.¹² He was particularly vocal about the Government's treatment of soldiers, who were earning less than munition workers at the time. On November 1916 he asked the Secretary State of War whether his attention had "been called to General Routine Order No. 1730 with reference to canteens in France...the cost of articles such as biscuits, cigarettes, tinned fruits, etc., is approximately doubled and the increased cost falls on the soldiers in France"¹³

Born in Ware, Hertfordshire Henry Page-Croft was the youngest of eight children to Richard Benyon Croft, an officer in the Royal Navy. At the turn of the century, Croft had become actively involved in Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign and had a patriotic enthusiasm for the British Empire. He was elected as a Conservative in 1910 to Christchurch. His wartime experience led him to establish the far right National Party in 1917, with an election campaign focused on the rights of ex-service men and putting 'British citizens' first. The party also stood on a platform of anti-immigration, asking the Prime Minister in 1917 whether "he will introduce a Bill making it impossible for any person of enemy alien birth, whether naturalised or unnaturalised, to vote at the coming election?"¹⁴

At the 1918 election he was elected as the National Candidate for Bournemouth. He was one of two candidates elected out of the 23 seats the party contested. For a newly formed party it was a significant achievement especially with a total of 120,000 votes obtained across the 23 constituencies.

However, by 1921 the newly formed party had been absorbed into the Conservative Party. Page Croft went on to hold his Bournemouth seat until 1940 and was subsequently made Baron Croft of Bournemouth. His involvement in politics was continue until his death being appointed as Under-Secretary of State for War by Churchill.

¹² My Life of Strife, Lord Croft, p.93

¹³ 22 Nov. 1916, Hansard, vol. 87, cc1396-8

¹⁴ Nov. 1918, Hansard, vol. 110, cc2293-4