

### Meeting notes from BMS meeting 3.6.2021

President Roger Bragger welcomed all guests and BMS members to tonight's talk.

In attendance were 12 BMS members and 10 guests.

### 'Remembering Captain F.A. Ninis. Cheshire Regiment. A late casualty in the Salonika Campaign' by Dr Chris Davies.

This talk offers a tribute to Captain F.A. Ninis., but in recalling him, I wanted to remember of all those who fought in the Salonika campaign especially those who didn't return. Apart from reference books and journals as listed at the end of the talk, my main sources of information used for the talk were the Ninis medal group, family papers, the National Archives, Ellesmere College Archives and 12/Cheshire War Diaries.

Chris explained his talk would cover the following areas: a small [but necessary!] dose of Balkan politics and history, conditions for the troops in Macedonia, Ninis' Military Cross and how he won it, the unexpected and unrelenting enemy that was Malaria, the Battle of Pip Ridge [Ninis' final battle as part of the third Battle of Doiran September, 1918] and footage of Sarigol Commonwealth War Graves site where Captain F.A. Ninis is buried.

Chris explained that Francis Aubrey Ninis was his wife's great uncle. His medal group had been inherited through the family. In common with other collectors, the 'Covid' era of 2020-21 had presented some opportunities, in particular, to organise our medal collections and review our research. Chris had also used the time to add the entire family tree to the internet so it was time to tell the Ninis story for the first time!

Here is our only photo of Francis Aubrey Ninis' outside the family home in Sefton Road, New Ferry. The reverse is dated April, 1915. Only after the restoration could the reflection of his spectacles be seen.

**Below left and centre:** Captain Ninis photo pre and post restoration [Zita Ballinger Fletcher].



**Above far right:** Cheshire Regiment cap badge [author's photo].



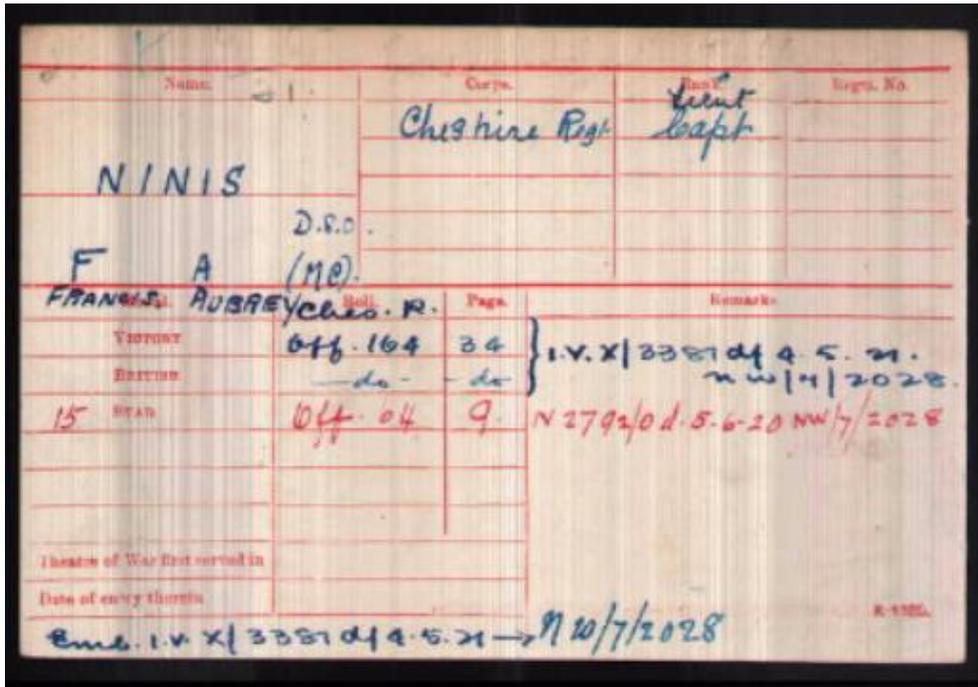
**Above:** Captain F.A. Ninis medals: Left to right - Military Cross [MC], 1914-15 Star, British War Medal [BWM] and Victory Medal [VM] with 'Mentioned-in-Despatches' [MiD] Oak Leaves cluster [Author's photo].

The MC had been instituted in December, 1914 as a gallantry award for junior officers and warrant officers. There were about 37,000 awarded during the Great War and all were issued unnamed – The MC reverse was dated with the year of issue from 1937 onwards. Naming and eligibility changes followed in the 1980's and 1990's. Chris commented on the fine detail and designs of medals which so often are not fully appreciated till the medal image is shown enlarged. The cipher of King George V is in the centre of the cross.



**Above:** Capt F.A.Ninis MC showing *privately engraved* reverse.[Author's photo].

His Medal Index Card ['MIC'] was shown next which made no reference to theatre of war or date of entry therein stated. A soldier posted to the Macedonian theatre would usually have 'Med Ex Force' ['Mediterranean Expeditionary Force'] stated.



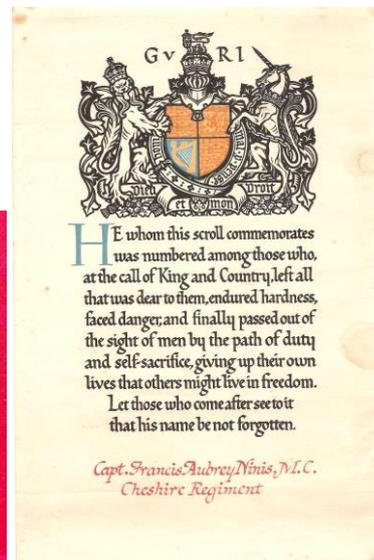
**Above:** Capt. F.A. Ninis MIC [National Archive].

Note the MIC states 'DSO' [Distinguished Service Order] but the MC he was awarded is written in brackets. [Some clarification about this followed in members comments]. The MIC indicates that the medals were being claimed by Ninis' father Alfred Longley Ninis in March 1920.

Any serviceman killed in action in the Great War was issued with two specific items – a bronze 'Memorial Plaque' and a 'Memorial Scroll'. Ninis' Memorial Plaque [the plaque is commonly known as the 'death penny'] has had much grief polished into it through the years. An unpolished example shown below reveals the contrast and loss of detail through polishing. Also, there is much verdigris which, although possible to remove, would leave residual marks on the metal's surface.

Chris read out the middle section of the scroll '..left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice...'.

**Below left to right:** Ninis' memorial plaque, unpolished example to Ernest Bush and the Ninis scroll.



Alfred Longley Ninis [born 1868], F.A. Ninis' father, was the second husband of Mary Darlington [Born 1856 and née Preston] and they had two children Mary Gertrude [born 1896 and my wife's maternal grandmother] and Francis Aubrey born 1.3.1897 [known in the family as 'Tim' and 'Jim'].



**Above:** Mary Gertrude Ninis circa 1920 known as 'Tim'. She died in 1975 and was the last family member to have known Francis Aubrey Ninis [author's photo].

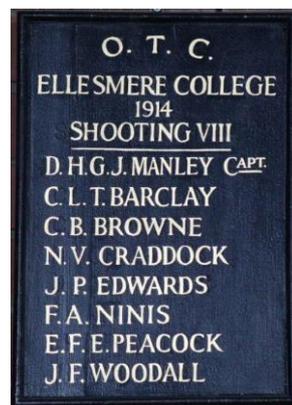
Mary Darlington had had eight children by her first husband Thomas who'd died aged 40yrs in 1894 so 'Tim' and 'Jim' had eight half siblings.

Ninis' great grandfather had been Commander George Ninis who had died in service in the Royal Navy in 1832. His career had started as a Midshipman in February, 1793 rising through the ranks to become Commander [like C.S.Forrester's character 'Horatio Hornblower'!] In the family papers was an Admiralty statement from 1905 listing the ships that he had served on [some examples were given 'Harpy', 'Hussar' and 'Thesius'].

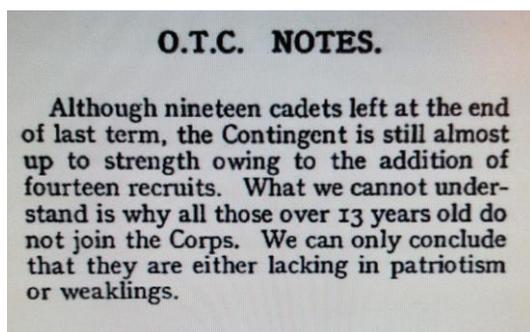
There is reference to the young F.A. Ninis by his paternal grandfather in a letter of 1906 '..[Francis Aubrey] has the knack of getting some pleasure out of nearly everything that comes his way..'

In 1907, Francis Aubrey becomes a boarder at Ellesmere College. His uncle Richard Duncan Ninis had been the first 'School Captain' of this College when it had opened in 1884. I would anticipate his schooling and activities there [various skills, sports and Officer Training Corps [OTC] where he is part of the 'Shooting VII' and a bugler] would have been very character building in terms of leadership skills and popularity which were later important assets in his military career. There are many references to Ninis in the 'The Ellesmerian' Magazine'. Ellesmere College have provided me with more photos of Francis Aubrey from the school archive [photos and information reproduced below with the permission of Ellesmere College].

**Below left to right:** F.A. Ninis Under 14 Rugby, Cricket 1<sup>st</sup> XI 1913 and OTC 'Shooting VIII' wall plaque.



**Below:** OTC recruitment notes from 'The Ellesmerian Magazine' Autumn 1914.



[reproduced with permission Ellesmere College]

In November, 1914, the magazine reports his joining the 12<sup>th</sup> Service Battalion Cheshire Regiment as a Second Lieutenant. A 'service battalion' was one drawn up specifically for 'war service'.

Also shown was Ninis' application for a temporary commission in the Regular Army which had to be countersigned by his father [as Ninis was under the age of 21 years] and character reference given by his headmaster at Ellesmere College Mr Hedworth MA.

### **Terminology and the Great War 1915. Contextualising the fighting in the Balkans.**

The opposing sides during the Great War were known as the 'Central Powers' [Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria] and the 'Entente' [England, France, Russia and Italy. Greece was not allied to the Entente until June, 1917]. In 1915, things were not going well the Entente especially with the failure of the Gallipoli landings. Through the year, Prime Minister Venizelos of Greece, had championed the idea of Entente military support for Serbia. The Entente were slow to provide this – the reasons are many but can be narrowed down to the accepted military thinking of the era – that the Army's resources were best concentrated on the Western Front to try to deal the 'knockout' blow to Germany. There was also the feeling that another front would be a 'sideshow' and just not *that* important. Through the first year of fighting, Serbia had held out well militarily against Austria-Hungary but when Germany, Austria Hungary and then Bulgaria attacked Serbia in October, 1915 [Bulgaria had allied with the Central Powers in September, 1915 mobilising her Army in the same month], the Entente hurriedly sent troops to the area.

### **12/Cheshire Battalion:**

The battalion underwent training in England before being posted to France 6.9.1915. Second Lt F.A. Ninis is now aged 18 and a half years. The Battalion was based in the Vosges – specifically the trenches at the village of Foucancourt but, after a matter of weeks, the battalion was relieved by the French and quickly entrained for Marseilles [6]. The Battalion boarded HMT [His Majesty's Transport] 'Marathon' leaving Marseilles 28.10.1915 and arriving at Thessalonika on 6.11.1915. Was there a portent in the name of the ship? Marathon had been a famous Greek success against the Persians in 490BC. The 12/Cheshires became part of the British Salonika Force [BSF], a conglomeration of troops with a French Commander-in-Chief [CiC] General Sarrail.

### **Balkan troubles:**

The Balkans countries are arguably some of the most quarrelsome and their territories much contested in Europe over the last 150 years. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Serbia had become much more nationalistic [as had many countries] and had taken on the role of defending the interests of the 'Slavic' peoples [meaning an ethnic grouping of people from Eastern Europe and Russia who

speaking a 'Slavonic' language]. In 1908, Austria-Hungary had annexed Bosnia Herzegovina where 50% of the population were Slavs. Tensions were rising in the early part of the twentieth century.

There were two 'Balkan Wars' in 1912 and 1913. In 1912, an Alliance of Montenegro, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria had joined forces to successfully remove the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans. In 1913, there was further fighting to redistribute the conquered territories of 1912, Greece and Serbia gaining at Bulgaria's loss. Therein, the competence of the Serbian Army had been demonstrated.

Greece had two factions and much friction. Prime Minister Venizelos was 'pro-Entente' yet the King Constantine I appeared pro-Germany or neutral. His Queen, Sophia, was sister to Kaiser Wilhelm II making the Kaiser his brother-in-law and making his pro-Germany position easier to understand. Queen Sophia and Kaiser Wilhelm II were grandchildren of Queen Victoria.

[For information, the late Duke of Edinburgh, HRH Prince Philip was nephew to King Constantine I of Greece – he was the son of Constantine's brother Andrew].

There was a temporary administration called the 'Provincial Government of National Defence' in Thessaloniki between August, 1916 and June, 1917 – One of the reasons for this was that Pro-Venizelos Greek Army Officers could not tolerate the uncontested seizure of Greek territory by the Bulgarians [that which had been won in the 1913 Balkan War and Constantine I had ordered no defence be made of it] that they mounted a coup. This had the support of the Entente and led to the forced abdication of King Constantine I in June, 1917 with the Greeks then becoming allied to the Entente.

Bulgaria had allied to the Central Powers in September, 1915 as they wished the return of territories lost in 1913 a condition the Entente was unable to offer.

Germany did not wish to upset the Greeks and after knocking out Serbia, held the Central Powers advance to the old Greco-Serbian border.

The Country of Serbia was overwhelmed by the Central Powers' attack of October, 1915. The French had attempted to assist Serbia from the south but had been blocked by Bulgaria's push from the east. The Serbian Army retreated with difficulty in Winter over the mountains of Albania. Significantly, 120,000 men were rescued from the Albanian coast by French vessels, taken to Corfu where they regrouped and were re-equipped. By June, 1916, they became a sizeable contribution to the Entente forces.

### **Initial Entente activity and Conditions for the troops:**

An advance on Thessalonika by the Central Powers was feared so initial defensive activity was focussed on preparing defences for this – new entrenchments and the famous 'birdcage' defensive barbed wire around the city.

The Entente front line moved north in June 1916 to the position shown in the map below. The territory held the British Salonika Force stretched from the Vardar River to the Mouth of the Struma River a distance of some 90 miles. The terrain was roughly 600-3000 feet in height with a periphery of many low-lying lakes and the rivers – with the rivers, there were many marshy areas favourable for the mosquito reproduction.



**Above:** 1916 The Salonika Front eastern half. The BSF sector ran from the Vardar River to Gulf of Orfana. Lakes Doiran and Ardzan are seen in the central area [1].

The Entente soldiers numbered about 20 divisions only thought to be sufficient only for defensive operations whereas both British and French Generals felt that nearer 29 divisions might allow for a more offensive strategy. They lacked heavy artillery especially in the early phases on the campaign. The Macedonian infrastructure was basic so much troop activity was dedicated to improving this. Lt. General Sir George Milne commented that 'For the first two years of the campaign communications were the main difficulty, but like the Romans of old, roads of the British Army will long remain the best memorial of its presence.' [1]

The Central powers were defending higher ground and so had the obvious advantage when this combined with trenches and machine guns. The Entente had not anticipated the harsh Winter weather there being recorded 1568 cases of frostbite or trenchfoot [2].

### **The Terrain:**

There are many marvellous images of Macedonia as painted by William Wood of the RWS [Royal Watercolour Society]. Wood was an acting corporal in the Royal Flying Corps [RFC]. He was tasked to sketch the enemy positions from barrage balloons for which he was MiD. He was a skilled painter and was allowed to continue this too. Barrage balloons were filled with hydrogen gas with the added hazard of no parachutes for the balloonists.



**Above:** Rupel Pass and Struma villages from Gumusdere [William Wood].

## 12/Cheshire War diaries:

Roughly 340 pages relate to this campaign. Many entries refer to the routines of training, mountain training, trench building and repair, the weather, soldiers returning from and leaving for hospital and the effects of enemy shelling. Some later entries refer to the task of antimalarial ground works along with battalion numbers available for muster. There are several references to patrolling, some trench raids and even the occasional air raid mentioned in February 1917 when one bombed was dropped which missed [3].



Above: Roadbuilding by British troops Salonika late 1915 [Imperial War Museum].

## Malaria:

This medical condition was endemic [already existed] in the area but had also been brought in by colonial troops from Africa and the Far East. Malaria is caused by a red blood cell parasite called 'Plasmodium' which is, in turn, transmitted by the bite of the *female* mosquito. Macedonian Malaria has been dubbed 'one of the greatest surprises of the War', 'a relentless foe' and 'an unforeseen enemy'. [4,5] Quite possibly the 'Spanish flu' of 1918 might compete for these tributes.



**Above:** Female Anopheles mosquito. Mosquitos need 60% humidity and temperature <16 degrees C to reproduce [creative commons free image].

The drug quinine was widely used to try to prevent malaria but some Royal Army Medical Corps doctors were not convinced of its usefulness in this. Quinine had been known for several hundred years being the extract from the bark of the Cinchona tree in South America [also known as 'Jesuit's bark']. The drink 'Gin and Tonic' is said to have originated in the Colonial Officer Corps in the nineteenth century. They were so used to the astringent flavour of preventative quinine treatment

that they added it to their alcoholic drinks! There was a penchant then for 'tonic' wines especially, hence, the presence of quinine in small amounts became the familiar 'tonic water' of today.

Many other methods were used to reduce the Malaria hazard which included ground works to prevent mosquito breeding and mosquito proof barriers for the troops [for example netting to prevent being bitten]. There were so many cases of Malaria that it affected the fitness levels and availability of soldiers the Army. A total of 162,517 cases were recorded in the Salonika campaign with 787 deaths [2]. The chaos of warzone conditions favoured mosquito reproduction with a combination of shell holes filling with heavy rain, as well as the necessary heat and humidity.

There was a practice of repatriation for treatment of more serious Malarial cases with an unforeseen consequence of Malaria transmission to non-malarious areas such as England and even as far north as Archangel in Russia. Although Plasmodium was first known around 1900, its full life cycle was not fully understood till the 1940's. There are some disease similarities of onward transmission in the current Covid crisis [Covid in 2020 - a new and unfamiliar condition] with unanticipated spread of Covid between countries through the 'air corridors' of international travel.

In the Macedonia Campaign, you were twenty times more likely to suffer illness than be injured by enemy action. [2]. For British and Dominion forces, you were almost as likely to be killed in action [KIA] or die of wounds [DOW] as die from illness or injury [4096 and 3744 totals respectively][2].

#### **Ninis' Trench Raid:**

The London Gazette [LG] citation for Ninis' MC reads as follows: 'He led a raid against the enemy's trenches with great courage and determination'. [LG 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1916 P12433]

Much could be gleaned by a raiding party on enemy trenches. For example, just how good had your own artillery barrage been at preparing the way, what was the preparedness of the enemy and could you capture any maps, documents or even a prisoner?

From the War Diaries, I was surprised by the extensive planning of such trench raids and, in particular the sheer size of this one which took place in the Lake Ardzan area against an enemy position known as 'The Nose'. The raiding party on the evening of 28<sup>th</sup>, October, 1916 consisted of Captain Barff [subsequently awarded a DSO for this raid], six other officers including Ninis, 70 other ranks [OR] along with two flank parties of 85 soldiers each and thirty OR reserves making a total of 277 persons.

At about 20.55hrs, they divided into three groups. The main raiding party assaulted the main enemy position and succeeded in entering the enemy's trenches at 21.15hrs but encountered serious opposition of enemy fire, bombs and trench mortars. The two groups on the right were compelled to withdraw owing to their losses described as 'a heavy bombing encounter with the Germans'. The third party bayoneted two Bulgarians and bombed a dugout. This group then found the Germans had moved to trenches in *their* rear and but were fortunately able to escape through a passage in the wire.

There are other raiding parties referred to in the Diaries [July13/14<sup>th</sup>, 1917] with striking documented, detailed preparations. In one, the attackers were specialised into small teams where some were bomb [grenade] throwers, others were bomb carriers and some were bayonet men; there were detailed signalling instructions whether by whistle or flares of different colours and white armbands were to be worn on each arm for obvious identification purposes. Weapons were specified for some: '...throwers won't carry rifles but use bayonets or the hammerhead axe if possible'. [3].

**Below:** William Wood's sketch of Vardar River, Lake Ardzan and Dragomir Village from the east.



The National Archive states that Ninis was awarded his MC ribbon in the field on 2<sup>nd</sup> December, 1916. The War Diaries often record a ceremonial parades for these purposes but there is no documentation of this in December, 1916. In fact, the weather was poor as six consecutive entries between 3-8<sup>th</sup> December, 1916 start with the phrase 'Rained all day. No wind'!! [3].

Ninis becomes a full Lieutenant in November, 1916 - his application is recommended and signed by Lt. Col. The Honourable A.R. Clegg-Hill, the Battalion CO, who was also killed in the Battle for Pip Ridge. Clegg-Hill states Ninis to be 'a reliable and gallant man. I strongly recommend the officer for promotion' [National Archive].

### **1917-18:**

Ninis was fortunate to be allowed home leave being away from the regiment for about five weeks [21<sup>st</sup> December, 1916 and returning 2<sup>nd</sup> February, 1917] Any trip home to England was not without hazard: The land journey was difficult and ships were at risk of being torpedoed and hitting mines.

Overall, the Macedonian front line was fairly static through 1917 to June, 1918. That month Ninis was promoted to temporary captain. Also in June, 1918, a new French Commander in Chief [CiC] arrived – he was General Louis Franchet D'Espèrey. He was posted to Salonika having lost to the Germans at the Third Battle of the Aisne in May, 1918. Unsurprisingly, the British troops found his name difficult to pronounce so he was nicknamed either 'Desperate Frankie' or 'Desperate Frenchie'. Interestingly, the French verb 'espérer' means 'to hope' so quite a contrast to his nickname 'Desperate'! He was a much more dynamic CiC and re-activated the front.



**Above:** New French CiC General Louis Franchet-D'Espèrey [The Great War].

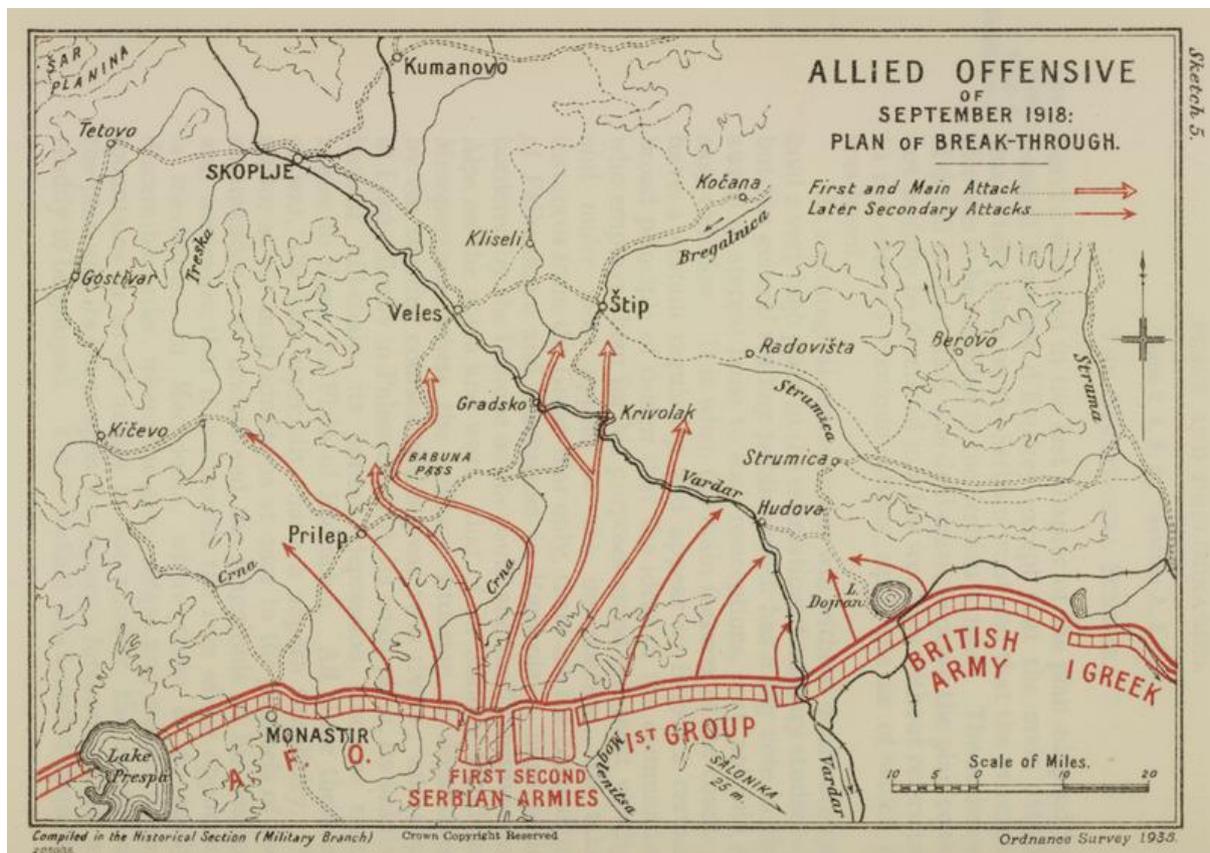
### Contextualising the twelve months up to August, 1918:

The Entente is very much in control which is a complete contrast to 1915. Although the Russians are now out of the war, the Americans are in, the Royal Naval blockade is causing great hardship to the Central Powers, the German Spring Offensive has failed, there is a sense of weakening of the morale of the Bulgarians troops and there are Franco-Italian successes on the Western side of the Macedonian front with the liberation of Albania from Austria-Hungary.

### Balkans Allied Offensive of September, 1918. Success at the Battle of Dobro Pole:

The final assault had been planned by Serbian General Misitch *and* agreed by the Entente. [Misitch had been in the Serbian Army retreat through Albania in the Winter of 1915-16]. What his plan achieved in mid-September, 1918 was a large salient of 20 miles over three days through the Bulgarian lines at 'Dobro Pole' between Monastir and the River Vardar. The BSF contribution to this Dobro Pole success was to be a third assault on Doiran the objective being to capture the heights of the 'Pip Ridge' and Grand Couronné to prevent any movement of Bulgarian reinforcements westwards to at Dobro Pole.

**Below:** Misitch's planned assault between Monastir and the Vardar River. The British and Greeks were to assault at Doiran [Wikimedia Commons]



**'Pip' Ridge or 'P' Ridge naming:**

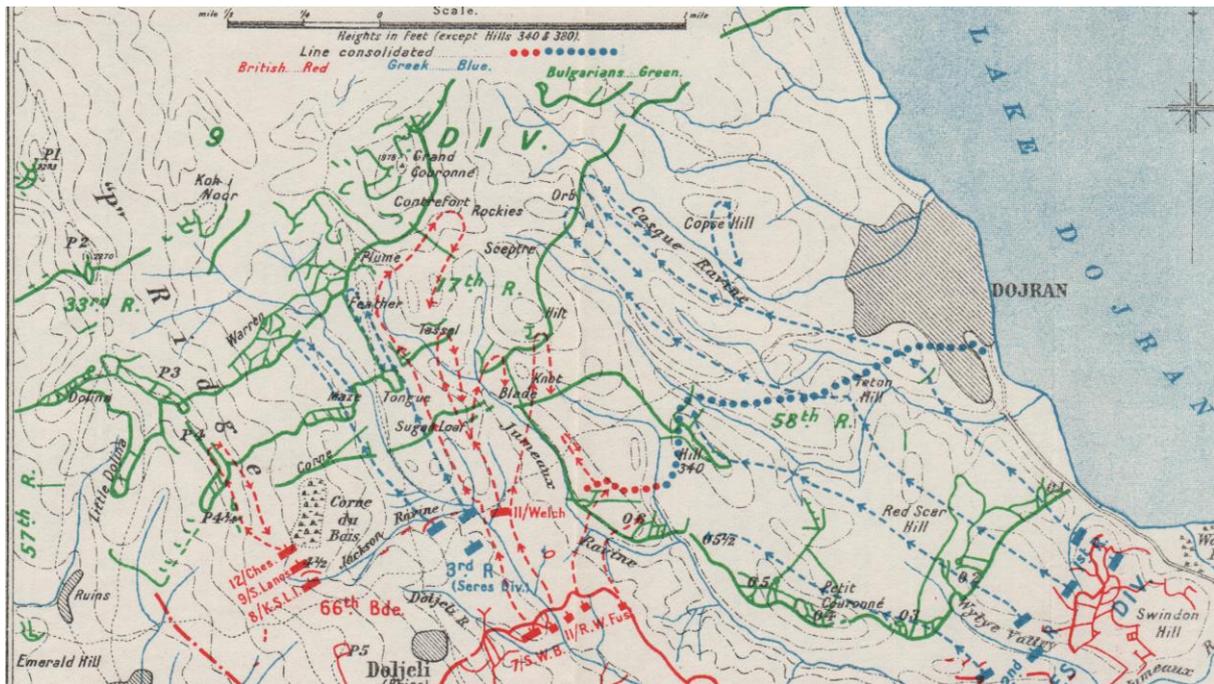
This is derived from the French word 'piton' which means 'a peak' – 'Piton' became 'Pip' which shortened to 'P'. The French Army had named many of the local features when stationed in this part of the line. Some of these include Grand Couronné ['large crown'] the location of the 'Devil's Eye' observation post, Petit Couronné ['small crown'] and La Tortue ['the turtle'].

From the Devil's Eye, the Bulgarians could easily see troop movements and even the arrival of ships at the port of Thessalonika. The heights of 'P' ridge and GC were 2000' and 1977' respectively.

**Pictured below:** More of Wood's artistry. From the south, view of 'P' ridge centre and Lake Doiran to the Right [Wood].



**Above:** Recent photo of Doiran looking west from the Doiran Memorial, Lake Doiran on the right with the high peaks of 'P' ridge and Grand Couronné in the background. [Glenn Stennes]



**Above:** The Battle of Doiran showing Bulgarian trench system [shown in green] at Doiran with the 'P' Ridge on the left. British positions and troop movements shown in red. Greek troop movements in blue [Alamy stock photo].

The Bulgarian defenders had the advantage of engineered concrete-reinforced positions with opportunity for enfilade fire, the high ground, barbed wire and deep ravines – they were well motivated and led by General Vazov of the 9<sup>th</sup> Pleven Division.

The orders for 66<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade [consisting of 12/Cheshires, 9/South Lancs and 8<sup>th</sup> KSLI – King's Shropshire Light Infantry] for 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1918 were as follows: 'To assault and capture P4 and a ¼, P4, P3 and Little Dolina'. [P4 and ¼ was a fortified hill near P4].



**Above:** View south from the 'Devil's Eye' on Grand Couronné showing the remarkable view and steep terrain. On the left is Lake Doiran and the high peaks to the right are P4 and ¼ and P4. [Glenn Stennes].

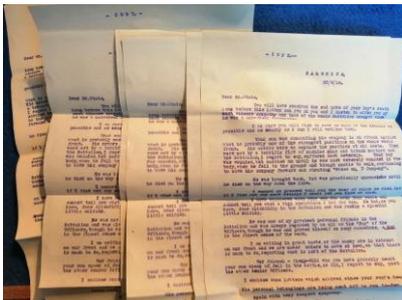
### The Third Battle of Doiran 18-19<sup>th</sup> September, 1918:

The action started at 05.08hrs. By about 08.00hrs, P4 and ¼ was being assaulted. There was severe hand to hand fighting to capture P4 and ¼. Captain F.A.Ninis was leading 'D' company and held up in the assault of the eastern side of P4 trenches. 'B' and 'C' companies do penetrate the western end of P4 trenches and proceeded to attack P3 trenches. All these soldiers were to fall to enfilade fire of the Bulgarians and well as trench mortars. Colonel Clegg-Hill was mortally wounded in the assault on P4.

The senior officer in the field for 66<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade became Lt. Col. Erskine of the KSLI. Erskine could see that the attack was being repulsed and issued orders for the KSLI and 9/S.Lancs to cease their advance and 12/Cheshires to withdraw. This order to withdraw did not reach the 12/Cheshires who continued their assault. The Brigade suffered high casualties especially 12/Cheshires including Captain F.A.Ninis. [3].

### Information from condolence letters received by F.A.Ninis' father Alfred Longley Ninis:

From the family papers, there are five different condolence letters received from the Salonika front 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1918 to 28<sup>th</sup> October, 1918. Sadly, *none of the originals* exist but Alfred Longley Ninis' careful manuscript copies exist from which he has had many carbonated copies typed. I have to speculate why there are so many copies but conclude that, with all the Ninis half-siblings, Alfred Longley Ninis wanted all his family and social circle to know the high esteem in which his son was held - copies of letters were probably the easiest and least personally traumatic way to circulate the information.



**Left:** Many carbon copies of condolence letters [author's photo].

One letter is from Captain Morley. The War Diaries record Morley had suffered from shellshock for the last fifteen months of the war caused by being buried in a collapsed dugout with two others on 5<sup>th</sup> April,1917[3]. Another letter is from 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1918 is from his Orderly Sergeant.

The following is an extract from Major Stanley Watson's letter of 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1918 first made public in today's meeting.

***'Dear Mr Ninis, Your son was commanding his company in an attack on what is probably one of the strongest positions on the whole world front. His orders were to capture the position at all costs. They were met by a terrific fire of machine guns and trench mortars and the Battalion, I regret to say, suffered most severely. Your boy was wounded, but carried on until he was more severely wounded in the body, when he fell to the ground and though unable to walk, continue to wave his company forward and shouting "Press on, D Company". He was brought back but was practically unconscious until he died on the way down the line'.***

Soldiers mustering for 12/Cheshires on the day of the battle for Pip Ridge numbered about 470 OR. The numbers had steadily declined every month since March, 1918 when 803 OR had mustered [3].

### **Summary of the difficulties facing the British at Pip Ridge:**

Apart from those already discussed, it is worth reviewing the statement the troops 'didn't keep up with the creeping barrage' which was moving at 100 yards per minute [a creeping barrage was one which soldiers advanced behind towards enemy positions].

The War Diaries actually indicate the barrage had moved *too quickly* as on the following day when the assault was repeated, the creeping barrage was slowed. Different troops were to repeat the attack unsuccessfully on 19<sup>th</sup> September, 1918.

Communications difficulties and confusion characterise many battles of this era: even though the assault was abandoned, *this* message had not been received by the 12/Cheshires [3].

### **Casualties sustained by 12/Cheshire Regiment at Pip Ridge as follows:**

The total mustered approximately 470 men. Eight Officers were killed including Ninis and the CO Colonel Clegg-Hill and ten were wounded. OR killed or missing were 144 and OR wounded 130. [3]

The approximate percentage casualties sustained is 62%.

2<sup>nd</sup> Lt L. Richmond was the only uninjured officer after the battle. He had bandaged the wounded Clegg-Hill. When the CO had died at around 08.00hrs, Richmond was tasked with destroying the confidential maps and papers. Richmond led the 50 or 60 survivors back to Jackson ravine and was awarded the DSO for his part in the action. Ninis was MiD for the action [ref LG of 30 Jan 1919 P1478].

### **Summary of awards for Pip Ridge to 12/Cheshires:**

Three MC's were awarded to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt E. Stockton, F.E.Sidaway and R.P.Jervis.

A Distinguished Conduct Medal [DCM] and a Croix de Guerre with palm were awarded to 13767 Sgt S. Yarwood.

Four Military Medal [MM's] were awarded to 16260 L.Cpl. A. Mycoe., 13036 L.Cpl. J. Pollitt., 66333 Private T. Boshier and 58411 Private W. Ellis [3].

POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.

A° 23/9/18

Prefix: Code: (Inland Official) (Telegrams only.) No. of Telegrams: *B/11 2/2*

Office of Origin and Service Instructions: O. H. M. S.

Words: Sent: I certify that this Telegram is sent on the service of the

At: To: By: (Signature) *S. Clegg*

Attention is called to the Regulations printed at the back hereof. Dated: *23/9/18*

TO: *Ninis 24 Lepton Rd New Ferry Chester*

*Deeply regret Salonica reports Capt and Adjutant F.A. Ninis M.C. Cheshire Regiment wounded September 18<sup>th</sup>, died of wounds September 19<sup>th</sup>. Army Council express sympathy*

FROM: SECRETARY, WAR OFFICE.

The Name and Address of the Sender, IF NOT TO BE TELEGRAPHED, should be written in the space provided at the Back of the Form

PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE

Ref: *W0 350-14588*

21 cms

**Pictured above** [National Archive] is the telegram informing Ninis' parents that their son had been killed. It states **'Deeply regret Salonica reports Capt and Adjutant F.A.Ninis M.C. Cheshire Regiment wounded September 18<sup>th</sup>, died of wounds September 19<sup>th</sup>. Army Council express sympathy'**. A shell had caused Ninis' mortal abdominal wounds – My impression is that he must have sustained significant blood loss to render him unconscious but even so, a journey to a casualty clearing station could have been a long and grievously uncomfortable transit.

**Other Ninis character statements from the condolence letters to Ninis' parents:**

From Captain Morley **'...His loss is keen to me. To you, it must be terrible.'**

From Sergeant Stanley Newton **'..Ninis was held in high esteem both in and out of the line, through thick and thin, he always had the interests of his men at heart'**.

Perhaps the contribution from Major S. Watson [who became the Battalion CO following the death of Colonel Clegg-Hill] is most poignant **'He was always regarded as the 'boy' of the officers though he was and proved himself a man in the finest sense of the word. I've soldiered with him for over four years and have a high admiration for him. He was my greatest personal friend'**.

The National Archive has the list of articles of Ninis' property some of which includes are 'a piece of medal ribbon' [his MC ribbon awarded in the field], 'one revolver with lanyard' and 'one trench dagger'. Alfred Longley Ninis was in correspondence with the War Office protesting that, although he'd received the revolver and other items, not all had been delivered to him. D Seeney clarified that a revolver which was an officer's *private purchase* would be returned to the next-of-kin.

In summary, the success at Dobro Pole rapidly knocked Bulgaria out of the Great War. I feel the Third Battle of Doiran in September, 1918 [as a contribution to the Dobro Pole] was a necessary but great and tragic sacrifice. The 12/Cheshire Battalion was all but destroyed in what is so often described as a 'very sanguinary affair'. Across the whole front, the Bulgarian Army was in full retreat.

The enemy's Doiran, Pip Ridge and Grand Couronné positions were found to have been abandoned on 21<sup>st</sup> September, 1918. The Bulgarians were suing for peace with an Armistice that was signed 29<sup>th</sup> September, 1918 and came into force the following day.

Photographs from Sarigol Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery were shown along with video footage of a flower display commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ninis' death 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2018. The inscription on Ninis' tablet reads 'His All was for his King and his God'.

At Sarigol, there are 703 graves. The 35<sup>th</sup> Casualty Clearing Station [CCS] was located at Sarigol. Originally, just 150 soldiers were buried here [from Doiran battles]. The 31<sup>st</sup> CCS, where Ninis had died, was at 'Janes' [now called 'Metalliko'] which also received casualties from Doiran battles 1917-18. The latter graves were moved in 1921 owing to poor ground maintenance at 'Janes'.

The talk paused for the video of Sarigol the only sound being the gentle Vardar breeze of 19<sup>th</sup> September, 2018.

Photos of the Ellesmere College War Memorial were shown featuring not only Ninis' name but that of Harry Curtis [a Major in the Royal Welch Fusiliers RWF]. Curtis was a member of staff at Ellesmere and would have known Ninis. Curtis was KIA leading the RWF assault on nearby Grand Couronné on 18.9.1918. Curtis had two brothers who were killed in the Great War [but in other campaigns].



**Above left:** Captain F.A.Ninis remounted medal group. [Author's photo and thanks to Phil McDermott and Worcestershire Medal Service].

**Above right:** Ninis' grave at Sarigol CWWG, Northern Greece pictured on the centenary of his death 19th September, 2018. [Bryan Hollamby]

The talk ended with a final coincidence in the relationships of the Ninis family in the 1930's. FA Ninis' sister, Mary Gertrude Ninis, had married Leonard Phillips Smith in 1920. The Ninis and Smith families, having both lived in Sefton Road had now become neighbours at numbers 24 and 26, Sefton Road. Alfred Longley Ninis had been widowed in 1931 but, in 1934, married his son-in-law's spinster sister Euphemia Smith quite literally the 'girl next door' – Euphemia is a name of *Greek* origin meaning 'well-spoken'. So this shows that your sister-in-law can become your stepmother [from Mary Gertrude's point of view] or could your sister become your mother-in-law [from Leonard Phillips Smith's point of view]!!

With my great personal thanks to Bryan and Christine Hollamby [photos and video], Marie-Paule Perry, Deborah Davies [medals and general support!], Pamela Ferguson [background family

information over the years], Zita Ballinger Fletcher [Ninis photo restoration], Paul Russell and John Harvey [Archivists at Ellesmere College: use of photos and 'The Ellesmerian Magazine' extracts], Keith Edmonds and Robert Clarke – advice of the 'Salonika Campaign Society' and photographs of the 12/Cheshire War Diaries respectively] and Glenn Stennes [Doiran battlefield photos].

Other resources not mentioned above; Imperial War Museum photos, Alamy photos, WIKI photos and the late Jeff Taylor's talk on Salonika [meeting notes available BMS archive September, 2018].

Book References and Journal References are listed at the end of this summary.

### **Attendee contributions and questions.**

The 'DSO' mentioned on Ninis' MIC could indicate he was considered for the award. The DSO could not be issued posthumously.

A guest, Glenn Stennes, shared two photos which I have added to the content of the talk at the relevant points.

Another comment confirmed that the vegetation is now more lush than in the Great War era. This is probably explained by irrigation in the North Macedonia side – Greek Macedonia can still look barren. The places painted by William Wood remain entirely recognisable.

Every 21<sup>st</sup> June, there is a local Bank Holiday in Greece celebrating the second Balkan War victories against the Bulgarians and there is a War Museum near Kilkis with memorabilia of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Balkan Wars.

Thanks were presented by President Roger Bragger

Typed 1-14<sup>th</sup> July, 2021. With my usual apologies for any errors or omissions.

Dr Chris Davies

Birmingham Medal Society Secretary.

### **Specified references as follows:**

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- 3- 12/Cheshire Regimental War Diary at National Archive.
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- 5- 'The Incidence and Aetiology of Malaria in Macedonia' by C.M. Wenyon. 'The Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps'. First published 1.8.1921.
- 6- 'The New Mosquito' Magazine. The Journal of the Salonika Campaign Society, 1915-1918. No 13. April, 2006.

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- 8- 'The Gardeners of Salonika' by Alan Palmer. Andre Deutsch Ltd 1965.
- 9- 'Under The Devil's Eye' by Alan Wakefield and Simon Moody. Sutton Publishing 2004.
- 10- 'Great Britain's Great War' by Jeremy Paxman. Penguin Group 2013.
- 11- 'The Sleepwalkers' by Christopher Clarke. Penguin Books 2013.
- 12- '1918 – The Year of Victories' by Martin Evans. Index Books Ltd 2004.
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