A Mother’s Last Kiss

For Billy Poile the march down Slope Road was the last time he would set foot on English soil. William Francis Poile was 19 and had just finished his basic training with the Royal Fusiliers when orders arrived to move to France. His battalion was entrained for Folkestone, which was a bonus for Billy; that was his home town. Although his brother, Walt, was on active service in the RFC, as was his father, who was working in minesweepers in the North Sea, Billy might get a spot of leave and be able to see his mother and younger brothers and sisters before departure. Billy’s hopes were dashed. No sooner had the 26th Battalion arrived at Folkestone than the order to march to the waiting troops ships was given. But all was not lost, as a kindly sergeant let Billy snatch a precious hour to visit his mother, Elizabeth, in their Denmark Street home. As he rejoined his comrades for the march along the Leas and down Slope
Road there, waving him off, was his mother and 13 year old sister, Alice.

After four years of battles, the last few months of the war witnessed some of the bitterest fighting as the German spring offensive was halted and then pushed back. The Royal Fusiliers were in the thick of the fighting and, on 6 October 1918, with the final prize in sight, Billy Poile was killed in action in Belgium. His CO wrote to Billy’s family telling them that he had played a brave part in a long and victorious advance. ‘He died instantaneously with no pain…I was particularly sorry, because I had marked him previously as a keen smart boy with lots of grit…’

Billy’s mother later wrote ‘...it has made it much harder, because the dear boy didn’t have any leave before he was sent over. But I am thankful that I was able to see him for that one hour and had his last kiss.’

William Poile is remembered on Folkestone’s War Memorial and is buried at the Menin Road South War Cemetery.
Last kiss from the boy who never grew up

THE rows upon rows of graves at the Menin Road South Military Cemetery make it hard to distinguish one from another. Every single headstone has a story to tell, but we came in search of one in particular - that of William Francis Pole, known as Billy to the one he loved, who was killed five weeks before the Armistice. Billy was a private in the Royal Pioneer Corps and had joined the army only six months before he died, aged just 19. His grave lies close to the spot where he was struck by a shell during the Battle of Cambrai and described as “a brave lass in a long and victorious advance.” “He was a quiet, unostentatious boy, and we were particularly sorry, because I had married him privately as a keen, well-behaved boy with lots of grit, and he could be relied upon,” said Captain Arthur Spottwood, Billy’s devastated mother, Elizabeth. His grandmother, Alice McElhinney, who was 18 when Billy died, remembers her brother as an ordinary, inoffensive lad with a sweet heart back to his home town. He was killed while working as a delivery driver for a local firm. Ironically, their older brother, Walter, an observer in France, looks, was in the process of bidding Billy to say with him in the RAF. He was killed before the paperwork had a chance to be completed. Thomas and Elizabeth Pole and their seven children lived in a terraced house in Denham Street, Folkestone. “There were seven of us children and Billy was the only one in the family who was left-handed,” remembered Alice. “Mum worried over him more than the others because he didn’t look all that strong.” Even as he was deemed fit enough to fight for his country, on the last day of 1917, he joined the Royal Pioneers and, after basic training, shipped out to the Front Line and straight over to the Western Front. He never returned. His family saw Billy in uniform only once - in 1916. “He was packing through Folkestone when he called in to the front line and the sergeant gave him permission to go up and see our mother before he left England.” Elizabeth and her daughter Eda were able to talk with the young soldier through the town and down what was later to become the Road of Remembrance. Billy’s mother later wrote to Walter: “It makes it much harder because the boy you didn’t have any more news of until he was even seen. But I am thankful that I was able to see him for that one hour and had last kiss.” The letter continued: “I am trying to bear it bravely and thinking of all the other poor mothers that have got to be, but it is hard. How hard only a mother knows.” Alice was at school when Billy travelled through Folkestone so never saw him. “He was missing in action in the North East - he never saw Billy in uniform, either,” she said. Although it was 90 years ago and time has softened the grief, she can still remember the day the telegram announcing Billy’s death arrived at the family’s terrace home. “She read it, and I went running up to an aunt who lived a few doors down from us. “I always remember her getting a white gown down from the door and saying she had been dreaming this day.” I like thousands of families up and down the country, the Pole’s never really recovered from Billy’s death. “Mum was never the same again, and soon after the war, she went to Belgium with the Belgian Army to see his grave.” We never forgot him. Even now, I still wonder what he would have done with his life, what he would have been.” Noting the grave brought all the memories back. He could have been 89 now, but I think of him as he was - still a boy, he never grew old,” she said. • Amanda McElhinney and her party travelled to Ypres courtesy of Foreign Travel Service, phone 0234 634 5000.