

Lieutenant Arthur Procter M. C.

Lieutenant Arthur Procter, Regimental Number 241, of the 1/8 Royal Warwickshire Regimentⁱ was one of 19,240 British soldiers killed in action on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.ⁱⁱ He was 28 years old.



2nd Lt Arthur Procter

The 1841 census records Arthur's grandfather, William (born c1816) as a gun maker. By 1851, William had moved to Shoreditch, London with his wife Ellen and five children, having obtained employment there as a gun finisher. Two further children were born to Ellen and William during their time in London, one of them being Arthur's father, also named William, in 1855. By 1871, the family had returned to live in Aston, Birmingham and in the next census in 1881, grandfather William is recorded as an 'inspector of small arms (gun)' and Arthur's father William as a 'clerk in a church Poor House'. Two years later, early in 1883, Arthur's father married and by 1891, he and his wife, Sarah, had moved to their own accommodation at 77½

Smallbrook Street (razed to the ground in 1958 to make way for Smallbrook Queensway)ⁱⁱⁱ. This is where his first born son, William, was born in 1886, followed two years later by Arthur. Arthur's father had by then set up in business as a tailor and by 1901 was doing well enough to move out to the suburbs in Balsall Heath and to employ the services of a domestic housemaid to assist Sarah in the house with a family of four children to care for. The family continued to prosper, and by 1911, Arthur's father was now a 'tailor master', and had moved to 91 Trafalgar Road, Moseley. Arthur having left King Edward's School, Camp Hill,^{iv} was employed as a 'draper shop assistant', joining his brothers in the family business.



Map showing the Ploegsteert sector in France and the River Douvre. Ref xxi

Arthur's father had at one time been a volunteer in the Old Warwickshire volunteers and, unsurprisingly, with his knowledge and practice in gun making, was renowned as a famous rifle shot, competing in the final stages for the Queen's and King's Prize, a small bore rifle competition. He had also competed in International Competitions.^v

After the declaration of war on 4th August 1914, the two younger Procter brothers immediately joined up, Arthur as a Territorial in the 1/8 Battalion the Royal Warwickshire Regiment (1/8 Royal Warwicks), Regimental Number 241 and Frank in the 1st City Battalion.^{vi} Arthur was initially stationed at Aston Manor in Birmingham as part of the Warwickshire Brigade before moving to Chelmsford. During this time Arthur rapidly rose through the ranks to become Company Quarter-Sergeant. Not long before

embarking for France on 22nd March 1915 Arthur received a commission, gaining the rank of Second Lieutenant.^{vii}

By the end of the day on 23rd March, the Battalion had reformed at Le Havre and over the next six days they made their way by train and foot to Neuve-Eglise where further training was undertaken to ready the Battalion for the realities of Trench Warfare.

By 16th April, this period of training was over and the Battalion went into line, taking over from the 1/7 Royal Warwicks in the Ploegsteert sector.^{viii} This is where Arthur received his first wound, fortunately only slight, on 5th May in the Douvre trenches. Just over a week later, 13th May 1915, the 1/8 Warwicks became part of the 143rd Brigade, 48th South Midland Division in preparation for the 'big push'. The Battalion, however, remained in the Ploegsteert sector until the end of June, during which time Arthur received a second wound on 22nd May, but it was not sufficiently serious to take him out of the action.^{ix}

On 30th June the Battalion was moved to Cauchy-à-La-Tour as Brigade reserve for three weeks. From here they proceeded to Saily-du-Bois, where, as part of the 48th Division, they took over the Fonquevillers trenches near Gommecourt. The Battalion remained in this sector for the next year experiencing being under fire from the German trenches on a regular basis. It was a time for the Battalion to practice the skills of advancing under a creeping barrage, sniping, laying trenches and the occasional trench raid, often to capture the enemy for intelligence purposes.^x



Map showing the British front line trenches at Fonquevillers (in blue). Ref xxii

Trench raids, meant going over the top and across No Man's Land to take what was called 'an identification', meaning a prisoner to identify the enemy. The raids were unpopular as it always involved a disproportionate number of casualties for what was got out of it.

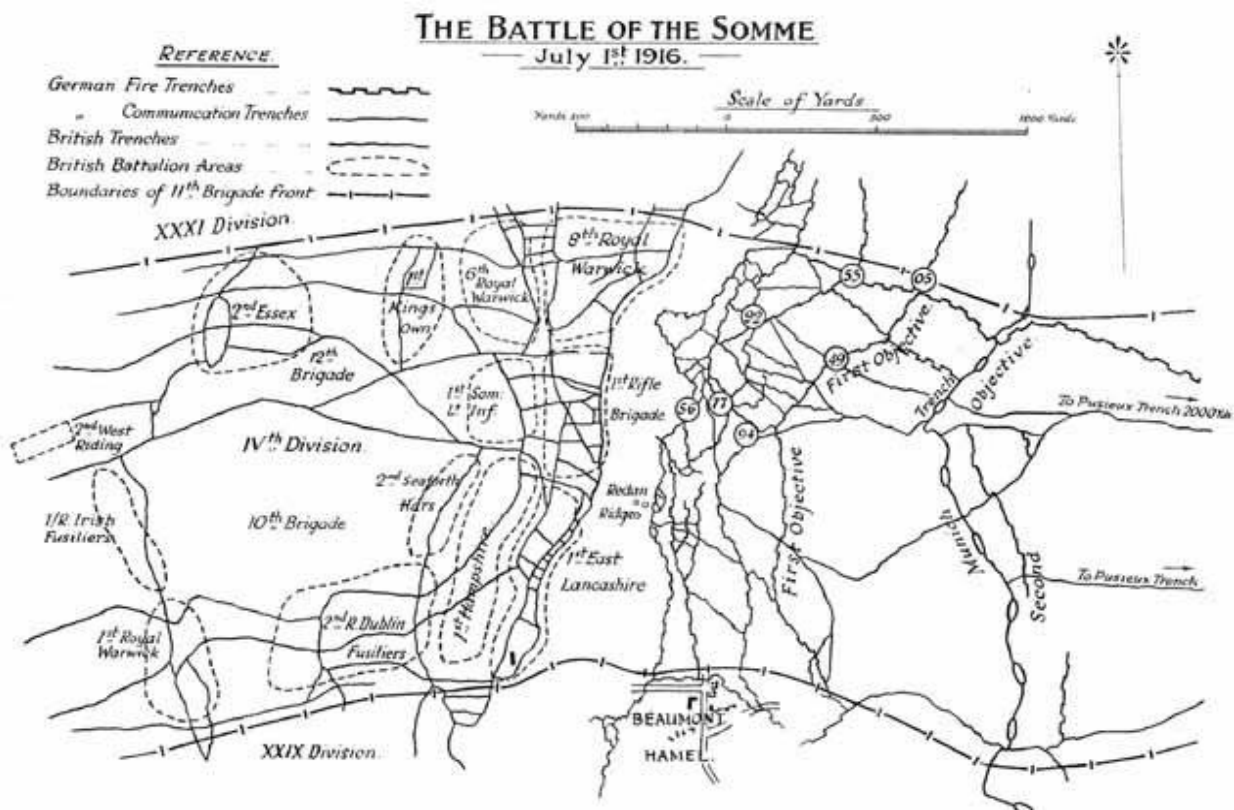
Arthur, as the Commanding Officer of the wire party for the Battalion, was in one such raid, referred to as a 'Special Enterprise', on 22nd March 1916. The following is an extract from the account of the raid, written by Captain Cowen:

After leaving the French trench, we got nearly half way before the bombardment started. The party commenced to crawl forward. The two men carrying the first torpedo with Lt Adams rushed forward and placed it in a position located to him by 2nd Lt Procter. 2nd Lt Procter came forward with the second torpedo, as there appeared to be some difficulty in lighting the first, but retired as soon as he found it likely to explode. As soon as it had exploded, he came forward again and placed the second in position which failed to explode. Lt Adams then caused the third torpedo to be brought along but was unable to use it as it had come in half. 2nd Lt Procter, thereupon, orders his party who had wire cutters, to come forward and they soon made short work of the rest of the wire. 2nd Lt Procter then went along the German parapet to the right and threw in bombs. The Trench parties then entered in more or less confusion taking a single prisoner who was then passed up the ladder and sent over to our trench by the prisoner party. Another prisoner was killed at the foot of the ladder and a bag of bombs was passed out and sent over to the French trench. After the party had been in the German trench for 9½ minutes, three red flares were sent up from the right, all coming from the same direction and falling within nearly 40 yards of the point of entry. Thinking this to be a signal by the enemy to denote the position of the attack and that it was no longer a surprise, I gave the signal to retire which was complied with with great alacrity, and all concerned gained our own trenches in safety.^{xi}

Arthur was awarded the Military Cross for his part in the raid. The London Gazette for the 16th May 1916 cites:

2nd Lt Arthur Procter, 1/8 Bn., R. War. R. (T.F.)^{xii}

For conspicuous gallantry and good leading during a raid on the enemy's trenches. He guided the raiding party, cut the wire, and then ran along the enemy's parapet bombing. The success of the enterprise was largely due to his courage and skilful direction.



Map showing the position of the 1/8 Royal Warwickshire Regiment on the first day of the Battle of the Somme. (Ref xxiii)

On the 1 July 1916, the opening day of the Battle of the Somme, the 1/8 Royal Warwicks were temporarily attached to the 11th Brigade of the 4th Division, which was to attack over an area of ground called the Redan Ridge between the hamlets of Serre and Beaumont Hamel.^{xiii}

After forming up in the trenches at 02.00 and having a very early breakfast around 04.30, an intense barrage by the British artillery commenced followed by the detonation of an immense mine in front of Beaumont Hamel. The 1/8 Royal Warwicks were one of the first waves to go over the top at 07.30.^{xiv} The objective of the attack was to capture a German stronghold called the Quadrilateral which lay between the hamlets of Serre and Beaumont Hamel.^{xv} The Battalion was about 800 strong with 200 in reserve manning the original trenches in case of a counter attack. The following is an account of the action reconstructed from the Battalion War Diary on the day:

7.30 a.m. Advance begins. Enemy first line reached and passed very quickly also was the second. Only in one or two cases were any enemy seen in these two lines. Plenty of casualties from machine gun fire in enemy third and fourth lines. At the third line we were temporarily held up by machine gun fire but took it by rushes. From this point the fighting was all with bombs along trenches. We reached our objective probably 35-40 minutes from zero hour (7.30 a.m.) and at once commenced consolidating and cleaning rifles under the direction of Capt Martin and 2nd Lt Turner. By this time the next battalion was arriving but had had so many casualties that they could not go through us so helped consolidating. This happened with all battalions following us. Many times we were bombed from this position and regained it until bombs ran out. We had to retired to their 3rd line parapet and hold on with machine and rifle fire. Parties were detailed to collect as many bombs as could be found (both English and German) and when we had a good store we again reached our objective. No supply of bombs coming from rear so could not hold on and returned again. Enemy machine guns and snipers were doing a great amount of damage all the while. Enemy artillery opened but fortunately their range was over. Held on to this position until relieved by a battalion from the rear. All through the action no troops were seen on our right or left. This had a great deal to do with the inability to push past our objective.^{xvi}



The Thiepval Memorial, France



WW1 memorial, St Mary's Church, Moseley, Birmingham

The 1/8th Warwicks suffered 588 casualties. One hundred and seventy of the dead were never found.^{xvii} One of these was Arthur and he is remembered with honour on the Thiepval Memorial and also at St Mary's Church, Moseley, Birmingham.



2nd Lt Frank Procter
Ref

Arthur's brother, Frank, went to France on 21st November 1915.

He survived the Somme, having been invalided home in July 1916 with trench Fever. On 28th March 1917 he received a commission in the 4th Battalion Cheshire Regiment.^{xviii} Frank was killed in action six months later on 26th September 1917. He is buried in Etaples Military Cemetery, France.^{xix}

William, their eldest brother joined the Royal Navy Air Service on 26th May 1917 as an aircraftsman before transferring to the RAF as a Corporal on 1st April 1918. He remained on reserve until 25th March 1919 before demobilisation on 30th April 1920.^{xx}

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Endnotes

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- i Commonwealth War Graves Commission
 - ii Brown, Malcolm. (2001). *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Western Front*. Pan MacMillan. London, p114
 - iii Inner Ring Road South.
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 - iv *Birmingham Daily Post*, 8th July 1916
 - v *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17th May 1916
 - vi *Birmingham Daily Post*, 17th May 1916
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 - vii *London Gazette*, 12th March 1915, Issue 29098, page 2511
 - viii Williams, Robert David. *A Social and Military History of the 1/8 Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment in the Great War*, p 47-8.
<http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/13/1/Williams00MPhil>.
 - ix *War diary 1/8 Royal Warwickshire Regiment*. Entry for 5th May 1915 and 22nd June 1915.
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 - x See ix, pp 45 -161
 - xi See ix, pp 127,136-7
 - xii *London Gazette*, 16th May 1916. Issue 29584, page 4930,
 - xiii Carter, Terry. 1997. *Birmingham Pals: 14th, 15th & 16th (Service) Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment*. Pen & Sword Books Ltd. Barnsley, p164
 - xiv See ix, p 10
 - xv See xiii

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- xvi See ix, pp 10 -11
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- xvii See xiii, p 165
- xviii *London Gazette*, 28th March 1917, Issue 30022, page 3610
- xix *Birmingham Daily Mail*, 7th November 1917
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- xx Royal Navy Seamen 1899 -1919. Archive Ref ADM 188/619/29684
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- xxi *Michelin Illustrated Guide to the Battlefields: Ypres and the Battles of Ypres*. Author unknown.
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- xxii Derbyshire Territorials in the Great War
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- xxiii Prescott Roll of Honour 1914-1919. http://www.prescot-rollofhonour.info/casualty-322-John_Warbrick.html