

Second Lieutenant Frank Aldridge Fawcett

Second Lieutenant Frank Fawcett lived in Moseley, Birmingham and was one of 19,240 British soldiers who were killed on the first day of the Somme. He was the only child of Frederick and Eva Fawcett and just nineteen years old when he died.

Frank Fawcett's family began its association with Kings Heath and Moseley when his grandfather, John Fawcett, born in Halifax, Yorkshire married a Birmingham born girl, Mary Ann. John was a linen merchant, living in Vicarage Road, Kings Heath in 1881. Two years later his business went bankruptⁱ and with six children to provide for including Frederick, his eldest child (Frank's father) he obtained employment as a draper's assistant.ⁱⁱ By 1901 John was a draper in his own right, living at 121 High Street Kings Heath with nine children (the shop more recently was Clinton Cards and is now a computer and video games shop). The eldest children were all engaged in the family drapery business as assistants.

Frederick married Eva Kate Shill in the spring of 1894ⁱⁱⁱ and two years later their only child Frank was born.^{iv} After his marriage, Frederick moved to 14 Springfield Road, Moseley^v and by 1911 the family was residing further along the street at number 32.^{vi} Frederick started his working life as a commercial traveller in cotton goods^{vii} before setting up a manufacturing business, making ladies' and children's clothing such as pinafores, aprons, blouses and general soft goods.^{viii} By February 1914 the business at Paternoster Row (a cul-de-sac near Moor Street Station) was registered as a company with a capital of £10,000 in £1 shares with Frederick and his brother John as the main share holders.^{ix}

We do not know much about Frank's early life but he is recorded on the roll of King Edward's School, then at New Street, Birmingham, between 1911 and 1913.^x

On leaving school Frank worked as an accountant at Tyndall and Hall^{xi} at 86 Colmore Row^{xii} in Birmingham city centre before joining the 1st Birmingham Pals Regiment in September 1914 (soon after becoming 14th Royal Warwicks) as Private Fawcett, number 14/236.^{xiii}

Over the next year the 14th Royal Warwicks trained in Sutton Park, Coleshill and Wensleydale, Yorkshire.^{xiv} Frank's abilities as a leader of men



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were soon recognised during this training period as he was promoted to Sergeant on 5th September 1915 at the same time receiving a commission into the 2/5 Battalion, before joining the 1/5 South Staffordshire Regiment (South Staffs) on 24th October 1915.^{xv}

His medal index card records the date of 20th October 1915, and Sector 3 as the 'Theatre of War' he first served in. Sector 3 is the code for Egypt indicating that he was sent there shortly after he obtained his commission which also qualified him for the 1915 Star.^{xvi}

Frank's letter home on 18th April 1916^{xvii} refers to him being sent to Egypt but soon returning to France. The Regimental records for the 1/5 South Staffs indicate that the Battalion moved to Egypt in early January 1916, returning to France the next month which correlates with this letter (see below).

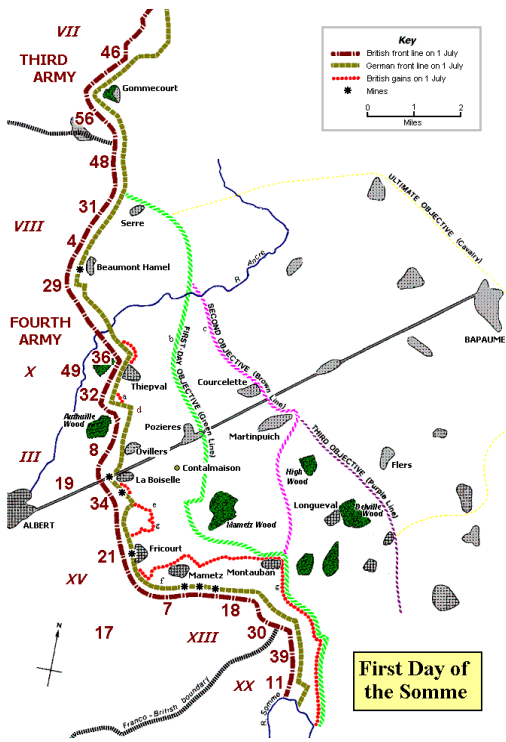
**1/6 South Staffs Rgt
BEF France
18.4.16**

Dear Uncle Jack,

Hear that you have joined the Arty: good luck, are they Field Guns or F(...sic)? Think I told you that we were sent to Egypt but returned within a month of landing there, was a very interesting experience; called at Malta - spent 10 days in Alexandria, awfully nice place and some time at the Suez Canal in the desert, expecting Turks. The weather was all against us since we came back to France - snowed for the first month, which wasn't pleasant, now it's quite nice - weather I mean! Have been in a bit of a "bother" during this last month. I'm battalion Bombing Officer which is a bit of a hot job, hence had quite an exciting 12 hours. Lost a few pals, which is rotten. Mining has been our chief trouble, the moral effect of a mine going up in ones trench is bad. The crater of one was 50 feet deep and about 60 yards across - and every time things round about fairly loops-the-loop. After this every straffing machine that opens & shuts, commences! You will say "Thank goodness I'm not a "footslogger"! Am writing this in an old German dug-out - very well fitted, two beds, fire place, mantelpiece, one or two pictures, table [polished?] chair and an acetylene lamp, the whole being about 30 feet below the earth's surface - hence we are very safe & very comfortable. Am sending this to Grandma to post to you.

**Yours &c
Frank**

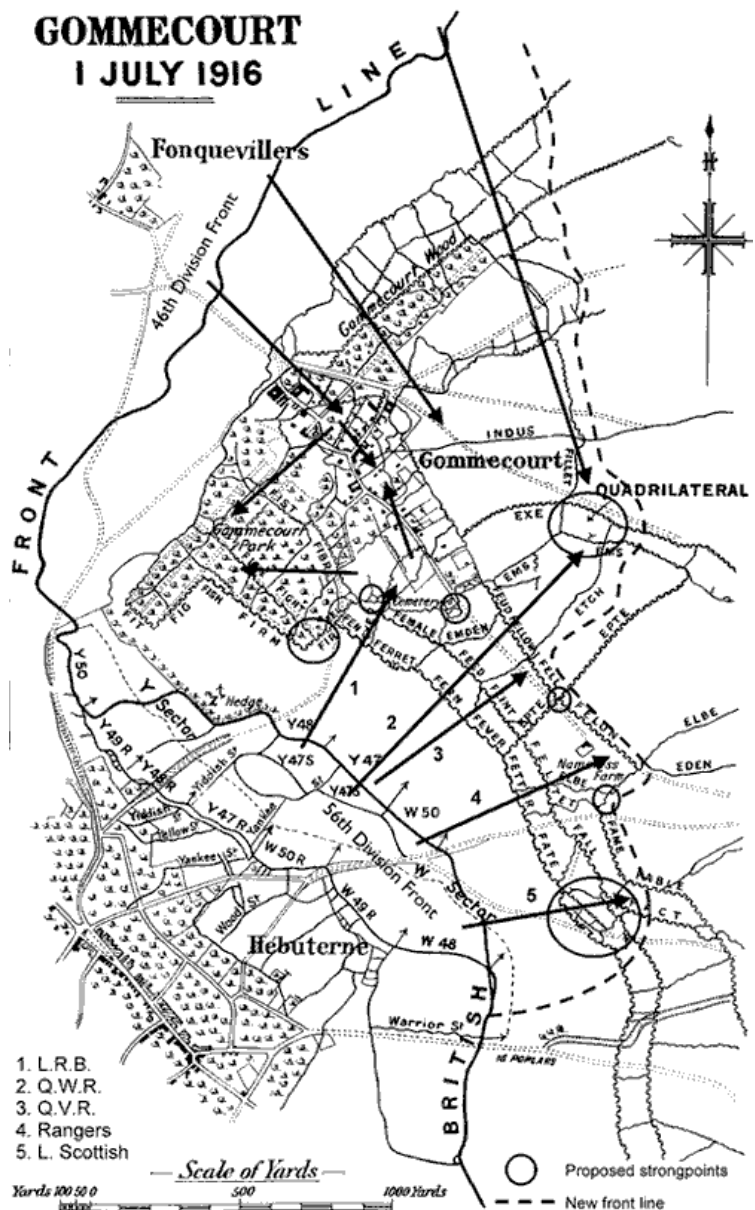
The Battalion was billeted near Amiens by the middle February. During this time there was an outbreak of paratyphoid and diphtheria that weakened the units and men for months to come.^{xviii}



Map showing the position of the 46th Division, part of the 3rd Army on 1st July 1916 Ref xxvii

The Battalion was ordered to assault the north side of the Gommecourt Salient on 1st July. This was a diversionary attack for the main attack a few miles south. The 1/5 South Staffs were supporting the attack with rear wave bombing parties and by carrying heavy loads of trench equipment for consolidating the anticipated captures. The assault was a disaster. The first wave soon discovered that the earlier bombardment by the British guns had had little effect either on the barbed wire of No man's Land or the deeply dug in Germans. As a result the men were almost immediately killed or wounded by counter-artillery and machine gun fire as they bunched to pass

Between 23rd April and 7th May 1916, Frank was sent to Divisional Training School^{xix}, where the officers in Kitchener's New Army were being made ready for the 'Big Push'. On 2nd June, Frank was given home leave for a week. This was to be the last time he saw his family. The 1/5 South Staffs were part of 137th Brigade, 46th (North Midland) Division. During the time Frank was at Officer Training School, the 46th Division went back into line in the Vimy sector, suffering a steady trickle of casualties over the coming months.^{xx} On Frank's return, his Battalion began to move south to take part in the forthcoming Somme offensive.



Map showing the area of attack by the 46th Division. Ref xxviii

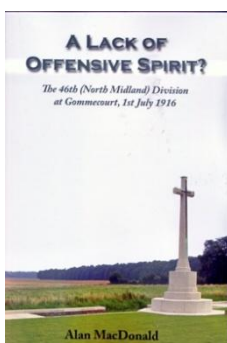
through the uncut wire. The smoke screen which been released to cover the attack had been too thick and confused the situation even further, causing the following waves to be delayed, leaving them vulnerable to enemy shell fire. The commanding officer, General Stuart-Wortley, was ordered to renew the attack at 12.15pm and with no prospect of success he postponed the attack until 1.30pm and then again to 3pm when he ordered only a token attack, but then tried to call them back.^{xxi} The official casualty figures for the 46th Division for the 1st July were: 50 officers killed and 71 wounded; 803 other ranks killed and 1340 wounded. Altogether there were two thousand four hundred and fifty-five casualties from the 46th North Midlands Division, making it the least hit Division on the day due to the actions of General Stuart-Wortley.^{xxii} After the offensive he was sacked and the 46th Division was categorised as showing "lack of an offensive spirit."^{xxiii}



Frank was reported missing and later confirmed killed He is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial, Pier 7, Face B (above left).^{xxiv}

In 1928, to commemorate his son, Frederick Fawcett offered to raise £3000 towards the building of a new extension to Cheltenham Hospital to which he also made a generous contribution. A memorial tablet to Frank was placed in the Nurses Home extension (above right).^{xxv}

Written and researched by Edwina Rees, Moseley History Society



For further information on the 46th(North Midlands) Division on the first day of the Somme and its GOC, Major General the Hon Edward James Montagu Stuart Wortley, read 'A lack of Offensive Spirit' by Alan MacDonald.

Footnotes

- i *Birmingham Post*, 22nd December 1883
- ii 1891 census
- iii England and Wales marriages 1837-2008 transcription. 1894, Birmingham, 2/4, volume 6D, page 202
- iv England and Wales births 1837-2006 transcription. Kings Norton, 1896, 4/4, volume 6C, page 401
- v 1901 census
- vi 1911 census
- vii 1901 census
- viii 1911 census
- ix *Birmingham Daily Post*, 11th February, 1914
- x *Service Record of King Edward's School, Birmingham, 1914-1919*. West Midlands Historical Data www.midlandshistoricaldata.org
- xi MacDonald, Alan (2008). *A Lack of Offensive Spirit?* The 46th (North Midland Division) at Gommecourt, 1st July 1916. Iona Books. Milton Keynes, p 323
- xii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20th April 1914
- xiii Medal Index Cards transcription.
<http://search.ancestry.co.uk/search/db.aspx?dbid=1262>
- xiv Carter, Terry. 1997. *Birmingham Pals: 14th, 15th & 16th (Service) Battalions of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment*. Pen & Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley. pp 53-94
- xv See xi.
- xvi See xiii
- xvii The Great War Archive, University of Oxford .

<http://www.birminghamforum.co.uk/index.php?topic=710.88>Contributor Jill Turnbull
Ref GWA_4012_Letter_from_2nd._Lt._Frank_Aldridge_Fawcett.txt.
<http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/items/show/3547>
(transcriptional error 1/6 should read 1/5?)
- xviii The Staffordshire Brigade. http://www.wikiwand.com/en/Staffordshire_Brigade
- xix See xi
- xx See xviii
- xxi See xi, pp 293-357
- xxii See xi, p 497

xxiii See xi, p 500

xxiv Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-wardead/casualty/751366/FAWCETT,%20F%20A>

xxv Great War Commemorations in Cheltenham General Hospital
http://www.remembering.org.uk/cheltenham_general_hospital_comm.htm

xxvi Imperial War Museum, Catalogue number HU 121937, part of the Bond of Sacrifice, WW1 portraits
<http://www.ruxford.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205294543>

xxvii First Day of the Somme . http://www.johndclare.net/wwi2_FirstDay_map.htm

xxviii The Plan of Attack at Gommecourt. <http://www.gommecourt.co.uk/gommplan.htm>