

Private Harry Bunce

The earliest census records place the origins of Harry's family in Bobbington, now in Staffordshire. His grandparents William and Ann Bunce were both agricultural labourers. In 1874, William's son Thomas married Ann Elizabeth Eaton in the district of Solihull and settled down to live in Birchwood Road, Moseley. Thomas was a general labourer and Ann, as well as bringing up a large family, added to the family income by working as a laundress. Harry was born in 1891. We know little about Harry's early life but by 1911 at the age of 19 he was working as a general labourer and living at home with his parents at 87 Coldbath Road. Not long after the census was taken, Harry married Rose Helena Paget and set up home at 80 Coldbath Lane, a few doors down from his parentsⁱ.

After his marriage, Harry gained employment with the Birmingham Corporation Tramways Permanent Way Department in Miller Streetⁱⁱ. This department had the responsibility of maintaining the infrastructure of the tram system.



Figure 1: Private Bunce

When war was declared, Harry enlisted in 'A' Company, 9th (Service) Battalion of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment (9th Royal Warwicks)ⁱⁱⁱ and in October 1914 became Private Bunce, No 8848. The Battalion was formed in Warwick as part of Lord Kitchener's First New Army and joined the 39th Brigade, 13th (Western) Division which assembled on Salisbury Plain.^{iv}

Harry's medal Index records the date his overseas service began as the 31st October 1915 in area 2B, the Balkans. As the first draft of the 9th Royal Warwicks had left for Gallipoli in July 1915, Harry would have been part of a contingent of additional men sent out from England to bring the battalion up to fighting strength, as a result of devastating losses from combat and disease. One action, in particular, on 8th August, at the Aghyl Dere water course which leads up to the highest point on the Sari Bair mountains, left 57 men dead, 227 wounded and 117 missing leaving only 248 men in the battalion.^v

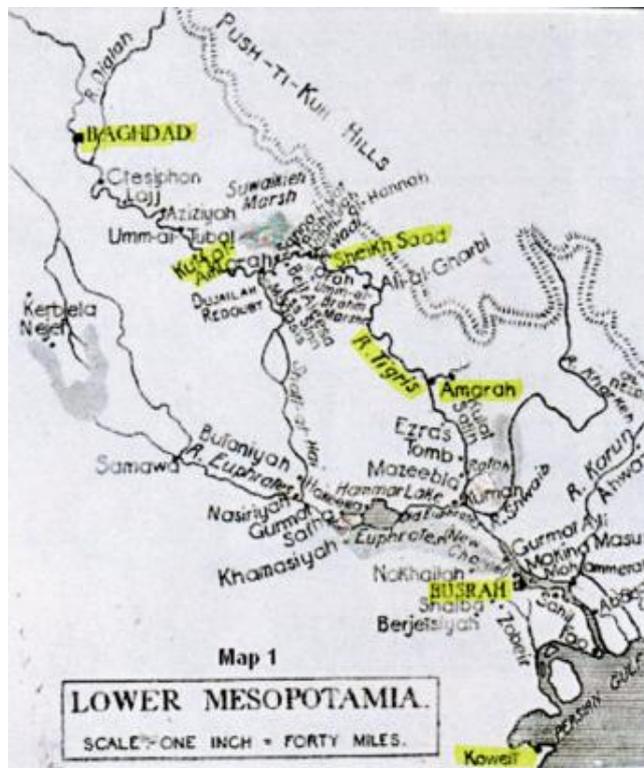


Figure 2:
Far left: Map showing route from Lemnos to Cape Helles

Left: The beach at Cape Helles on 7th January 1916 prior to evacuation

Following severe weather conditions, the 9th Royal Warwicks withdrew from Gallipoli over night on 17th and 18th December without suffering any further losses. After ten days of welcome rest at Mudros in Lemnos, they were called up to assist with the evacuation of the rest of the British troops at Cape Helles bringing an end to the Gallipoli Campaign.^{vi}

On January 19th 1916, the 9th Royal Warwicks left Lemnos, and after a five days' voyage reached Port Said in Egypt, where they remained for over three weeks. From there, the 13th Division were sent to Mesopotamia, where General Townshend, after his fruitless victory at Ctesiphon, had been besieged by the Turkish Army in Kut-el-Amara since 5th December 1915.^{vii}



On February 16th, the 9th Royal Warwicks left Port Said reaching Koweit Bay (modern day Kuwait) in the Persian Gulf, thirteen days later, before finally disembarking at Basra. On 15th March, the battalion began its journey up the Tigris to Sheikh Saad, behind the British Front, a voyage of six days. After several attempts, some successful, to capture Turkish held strongholds around Kut-el-Amara, a final attack on the 23rd April proved impossible and the attempt to relieve Kut failed. On 29th April General Townsend was forced to surrender the city.^{viii}

Map 1: Lower Mesopotamia showing the locations of places mentioned in this article highlighted in yellow

In less than a month's fighting the 9th Royal Warwickshire had lost nearly all its officers, and its total strength was now not more than 200. They were not engaged in any further action, but stationed near Deltawa (36 miles north-east of Baghdad) constructing a defensive line.^{ix} From May 1916, the 13th Division began to be refitted and re-equipped in preparation for the drive northward to capture Baghdad.^x Major-General MacMunn brought in during mid April to rectify matters of a struggling supply organisation, lamented that, 'No one seemed able to think large' made worse 'by an absurd audit system'. After his first mission upriver to find out about the non-arrival of tinned milk to the front he found that it had been diverted to the hospitals and commented that, 'To keep the milk for the sick when hundreds were becoming sick for want of it was a medical mentality' that he judged incomprehensible'.^{xi}

Harry's medal record index makes no reference to him being 'killed in action' but simply states that he 'died'. Having survived the most difficult of campaigns and weakened by the deprivations that came with them, it is likely that Harry succumbed to disease or even heat stroke sometime in June, when the temperatures often reached 118°F (47°C). Cholera and bowel diseases of all sorts were rife. Coupled with very poor rations, it is unsurprising that there was a huge casualty rate.^{xii} Amara, where Harry is buried, was described by Major-General MacMunn in April 1916 as a place where many of the animals, wagons and oddments of divisional troops from brigades surplus to operational requirements had been left to lessen the drain on

rations. There was no competent control or discipline. Improperly pitched tents had been erected over what was in effect a muddy plain. Men slept in the mud and were left to their own devices, as the young officers, almost all temporary with no experience, had little control over their men or any idea what to do. Every sort of sickness was about, nobody shaved, nobody dressed, odd horses, mules, ordure and horse litter lay in one unhappy confusion. After this critical report the organisation and the infrastructure needed to support the Allied troops here slowly improved and from the 3rd June a hospital centre was established at Amara.^{xiii}

Harry died on 28th June 1916, aged twenty-four and is buried in the War Cemetery in Amara.^{xiv}

He left a wife and three children, Thomas, Florence and Charles aged five, four and three years old respectively^{xv}

Harry is commemorated at St Mary's Church, Moseley and the City of Birmingham, Tramways Department memorial, located on the right of the entrance to the Transport Stadium, off Wheelers Lane, Kings Heath. (see below)



Amara War Cemetery contains 4,621 burials from the First World War. In 1933, all the headstones were removed when it was discovered that salts in the soil were causing them to deteriorate. Instead a screen wall was erected with the names of those buried in the cemetery engraved upon it. There is an interesting story on the BBC News website relating to the rediscovery of this grave yard by British troops in 2003 while on tour in Iraq. This can be accessed on this web site:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/2958143.stm



Figure 3:

Top left. St Mary's Church memorial in Moseley

Top middle and right: City of Birmingham, Tramways Department memorial off Wheelers Lane, Kings Heath

Left: Amara War Cemetery

Endnotes

- i England & Wales marriages 1837-2008 transcription. 1911, Solihull, volume 6D, page 1222
- ii City of Birmingham, Tramways Department memorial
Birmingham Post 18th June 1918
- iii Commonwealth War Graves Commission
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/627675/BUNCE,%20H>
- iv 9th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment
<http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/regiment012.htm>
- v War time memories project: 9th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment
<http://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?pid=7351>
- vi Forces War Records: 9th Battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment
<https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/316/royal-warwickshire-regiment/>
- vii Units that used the Vickers
<http://www.vickersmachinegun.org.uk/units-rwarwicks.htm>
- viii The Campaign in Mesopotamia: The Tigris Corps and the attempts to relieve al-Kut January – April 1916 <http://www.winkleighheroes.co.uk/level3/kut.htm>
- ix <http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=63794>
- x The 13th (Western) Division
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th_\(Western\)_Division](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/13th_(Western)_Division)
- xi Townsend, Charles. *When God Made Hell: The British Invasion of Mesopotamia and the Creation of Iraq*. Faber and Faber, London, 2010, pp 291-292
- xii See xiii
- xiii See x, p 300
- xiv See iii
- xv England & Wales births 1837-2006 transcription.
Aston, 1911, volume 6D, page 512
Aston 1912, volume 6D, page 512
Solihull, 1913, volume 6D, page 1242

Illustrations

Figure 1 Smith, Douglas H. *From Trams to Trenches: The story of the men of Birmingham Corporation Tramways who gave their lives in the First World War*. National Express 2014, p 23

Figure 2 Map of Lemnos to Cape Helles
http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/bat_9_1915.php
W Beach, Helles, on 7 January 1916 just prior to the final evacuation
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallipoli_Campaign

Figure 3 St Mary's Church from the Moseley Society History Group archive
City of Birmingham, Tramways Department memorial. Photographs by Edwina Rees
Amara cemetery
<http://www.winkleighheroes.co.uk/soldiers/harveyaw.htm>

Maps

Map1 Lower Mesopotamia
<http://www.naval-history.net/WW1Book-NavyinMespotamia00.htm>