Captain Harold Morley Eyles

Harold Morley Eyles was the youngest child and only son of William Henry Eyles and his wife Elizabeth (nee Morley). By the time he was born, on 24th July 1895, the couple had moved to 2, Springfield Road, Kings Heath from 'Park Place' on the Pershore Road in Northfield, Birmingham.[i] William and Elizabeth had seven children of which four survived. Harold's elder sisters were Elizabeth Morley (b1886), Clara Clarissa (b 1888) and Jessica Mable (b 1891). William is described as a 'master tailor' in the 1911 census. He was taught his tailoring skills by his father, John, who ran a tailor and drapery business in Knowle, Warwickshire.[ii] When John died in 1891,[iii] William must have benefitted sufficiently from his father's estate to describe himself as a 'tailor retired' in that year and in subsequent censuses.

By 1911 the family had moved to a substantial dwelling at 120 Church Road, Moseley (photograph left). Jessica, known as Jessie, was still living at home but Elizabeth had moved to Kings Heath after her marriage to Frank Edmunds in 1909. Harold is recorded as a 'boarder' at Solihull Grammar School. A year later, in 1912, Clara married Dr Ronald George Canti in London. Their only child, Peter, was born the following year on 20th October 1913. Ronald went on to become a well known cancer research worker and pathologist at St Bartholomew's hospital London.[iv]

At school Harold was a keen hockey player and played right back in the Hockey XI and was described as someone who, ''usually hits cleanly and tackles well'' but is ''occasionally erratic''. His soccer was just as good and Harold is described as a ''very good tackler'' although ''there is still room for improvement in his kicking. He feeds his forwards from the left-half well''.[v] On leaving school, Harold began a course in agriculture at Sambrook Hall, Newport, Shropshire,[vi] but shortly after the outbreak of war, he left to sign up with the 14th Warwickshire Regiment (1st Birmingham Pals) on 8th September 1914 for a three year Short Service Commission. Having been a member of the Officer Training Corps for two years at school, attaining the rank of corporal by April 1911, Harold was quickly awarded a probationary commission on 30th December 1914, in the 6th (Reserve) Battalion Worcester Regiment.[vii] Training with his new regiment continued until the summer of 1915, when he was reassigned to the 3rd Battalion, after his rank as 2nd Lieutenant was confirmed on 13th July.[viii] Harold joined his new battalion in France at a time when morale was

very low after five members of the 3rd battalion had been executed by firing squad on the ramparts of Ypres on 26th July for desertion. This was the largest single execution by the British army during the war.[ix]

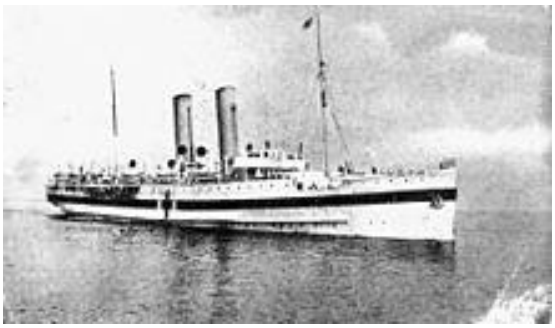

Figure 1: Hospital ship TrSS St George

Harold's initial regimental duties involved various spells in and out of the front line in a number of different sectors. On August 3rd, his brigade (7th) was ordered to march to the trenches near La Brique in the infamous Ypres Salient where there had been a fair amount of action. The regimental diary records that there had been 'no notable incidents but with continual casualties[x]. Ten days later, on August 13th, Howard was injured by a bursting high explosive shell partially burning him. His name appeared on the casualty list for 15th August from General Headquarters for the Red Cross Hospital at Rouen. From there he was sent to England on the hospital ship *St George* to Southampton where he was transferred to the First Southern General Hospital in Edgbaston.[xi]

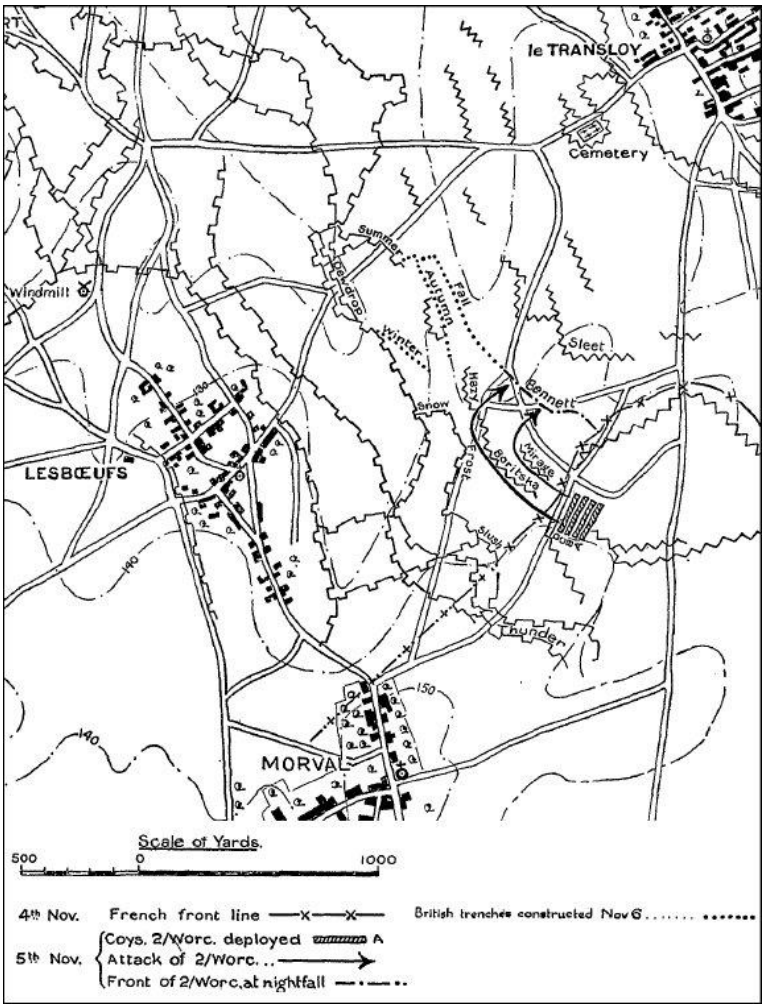

Figure 2: Map showing the position of the 2nd Battalion Worcester Regiment on the 4th and 5th November 1916

Nearly five months later, at a medical board at Davenport on 8th January 1916, Harold was passed as 'fit' and returned to his regiment, continuing to serve with the 3rd Battalion. On 5th May 1916, he was promoted to Lieutenant and served with his regiment at a difficult time in the early weeks of the Battle of the Somme.[xii] The Worcesters, like many other

regiments suffered greatly during this time. This was particularly true of the junior officer ranks.

On 5th November 1916, Harold was promoted to the rank of temporary Captain and given command of 'D' Company of the 2nd Battalion.[xiii] At the time his battalion was involved in fierce fighting as part of the battle to capture the Transloy Ridges. An attack on the 4th November to gain the enemy stronghold called 'Boritzka Trench' failed due to heavy resistance which cost the regiment 90 casualties.

The next day, after regrouping, the decision was made to try again the following day. The companies set to work to dig themselves in. As they worked, the officers noticed a favourable sign. The wind, which for days had brought rain from the west, was changing; and soon it blew from the east, bitter cold but rapidly drying the mud.

The following is an account of the action on 6th November, the day Harold was killed in action:[xiv]

> Dawn broke and the troops crouched in the cover they had made. In front of them, beyond the sunken road, a low crest-line, as before, hid the enemy's position.
>
> With the first light a German aeroplane drifted overhead. The enemy machine suddenly dived down to the position of the Battalion, circled close above the crowded companies, rose again amid a splutter of firing and made off to the eastward. Urged by their officers the troops dug feverishly while there was yet time.
>
> Twenty minutes later German shells came crashing down about the flimsy trenches, mostly not more than 4 foot deep by that time. The troops huddled close in their cover. The bombardment continued fiercely and without intermission. The two leading companies suffered many casualties. Both the company commanders, Captain H. M. Eyles and Captain E.J. L. Warlow were killed, and all the other officers of "D" Company were hit.

Figure 2: Harold's grave at the Allied Cemetery at Caterpillar Valley near Longueval

The Battles for the Transloy Ridges was one of the last major actions of the Somme Campaign which resulted in more than 420,000 casualties. Harold's body was found and brought in. He is buried in the Allied Cemetery at Caterpillar Valley near Longueval. He was just 21 years old.

Harold before he died arranged for his effects in the event of his death to be shared between just two of his sisters Mrs Elizabeth Morley Edmunds and Mrs Jessica Mabel Sheaf. They shared £4570 10s 0d. Harold must have considered that Clara, married to a wealthy professional, was already well provided for, her husband having received

the bulk of £76,552 in his father's will in 1903 .[xv]

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Moseley Society History Group

Footnotes

i National Archives, British Officers after 1913, Ref WO 339/771
1891 census, erratum Eyles written as 'Eylis'
1901 census, erratum Eyles written as 'Egle'

ii 1871 census

iii England & Wales deaths 1837-2007, Birmingham, 1891, 3rd quarter, volume 6D, page 41

iv Marriage certificate for Clara Caressa Eyles to Ronald George Canti confirms that William Henry Eyles (retired) was her father. She has dropped the 'l' from her second name, which is the Italian derivative for Clarissa meaning 'my beloved' perhaps to reflect the Italian origins of her husband's family
1939 Register
Western Daily Press 10th January 1936

v Loynton, John. *Solihull School During the First World War, 1914-1919*, p 49

vi *Birmingham Mail*, 9th November 1916
National Archives, British Officers after 1913, Ref WO 339/771

vii See i, Ref WO 339/771. Letter from the Headmaster confirming OTC training
London Gazette, 29th December 1914, Issue 2902, page 11146

viii *London Gazette*, 13th July 1915, Issue 29228, page 6845

ix Shot at Dawn, Worcestershire Regiment
http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/wr.php?main=inc/shot_at_dawn

x Stacke, Captain H FitxM. 1928 (2nd ed 2002) *The Worcester Regiment in the Great War 1914-1919,* pp 128-134, pp 152-205
CD ROM edition, 2004, Midlands Historical Data

xi See i, Ref WO 339/771

xii *London Gazette*, 15th August 1916, Issue 29708, page 8022

xiii *See x,* Volume 2, Roll of Honour, p 615

xiv Battle of the Transloy Ridges, 4th-6th November 1916
http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/vc_bennett.php

xv *Illustrated London News*, 16th October 1903

Illustrations

Figure 1 Hospital ship St George
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TrSS_St_George_(1906)

Figure 2 Map of the Worcester Regiment on 4th and 5th November 1916
http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/h_transloy_ridges.php

Figure 3 Grave of Harold Morley Eyles
http://www.findagrave.com/cgibin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GSln=Eyles&GSiman=1&GScid=2179611&GRid=15290655&