Captain William Herbert Hedges M.C.

William had just become director of Hedges Ltd, a chemist and druggist business founded by his grandfather, when war broke. He was a well known 'gentleman' sportsman. He was the middle and heavy weight boxing champion for the Midlands, a cricketer who played with and against Percy Jeeves of P G Wodehouse fame, and an active golf member of Moseley Golf Club. He died of his wounds on 21st August 1916 in the Battle of the Somme, aged 23.

The Hedge family's origins are in Barton upon Humber in Lincolnshire where William Hedges was born circa 1786. William married Margaret Ross and in 1829 their first son, William Ross Hedges was born in Brocklesby, Lincolnshire.[i] By the time he was twenty-two, William had left Lincolnshire and become an assistant druggist to John Yeoman, who ran a Chemist and Druggist business at 7, Dale End, Birmingham.[ii] By 1861, William had taken over the business and was now head of the household employing an apprentice and a porter. William married on 11th July 1867 at St Mary's Church, Warwick to Barbara Phoebe Ashwin and the following year they baptised their first child, William Ross after his father.[iii] The business continued to expand over many years and the innovative abilities of William Ross senior produced many patent medicines. William Ross junior concentrated on the retail side.[iv] From the company's stock book (1881-96) and various other items conserved in the Wellcome Library , London, it is evident that not only did Hedges and Son sell the general paraphernalia associated with a chemist shop, for example, drugs, chemicals, patent medicines, sponges, invalids requisites, perfumes, soaps, toilet requisites, domestic and dietetic articles, foreign mineral waters etc but they also made their products like Cold Cream for the ladies and menthol snuff for the gentlemen as a cure for colds, a product still sold today.[v]

Figure 1: Coaster advertising Hedges Snuff L260

Figure 1: Original Hedges snuff box

Figure 3: Hedges & Son Cold Cream

William Herbert Hedges was born in the spring of 1893[vi] to William Ross Hedges and Emily (nee Lunn).[vii] A second child, Elsie Marion, was born two years later. William Ross Hedges, a chemist, having married Emily in the summer of 1892, moved from the parental home, at 65 Church Road, Moseley, to live at 'Ellerslie', Hayfield Road, off the Yardley Wood Road.[viii]

William attended Wintersloe School in Moseley from 1905 to 1907[ix] before becoming a boarder at Malvern College at the age of fourteen. [x] On leaving school in 1911, William moved back to the family home at 117, Anderton Park Road, Moseley and joined the family firm, now Hedges Ltd, as a director of the company.[xi]

William enjoyed an active sporting life. He was well known in local athletic circles as a 'prominent member of the Birmingham Athletic Club winning the middle-weight championship of the Midlands and subsequently the holder of the heavy-weight championship.'[xii] As a well known 'gentleman' sportsperson, William was interviewed by Mr H Clarke in 1913 on behalf of the True Temperance Association, for his views on alcohol consumption. The survey was carried out in order to question a claim by 'teetotal extremists' that alcohol is injurious to persons and that athletes while in training invariably abstain. The following is his response to the question:

In my opinion, alcohol, taken in strict moderation of course, is beneficial rather than otherwise to anyone training for the more strenuous branches of athletics. It entirely depends upon the individual, but it necessarily follows that when a man begins to work harder, he needs more nourishment, and therefore if he is accustomed to taking alcohol he should continue to do so.[xiii]

William was a also a 'promising cricketer' who accomplished 'useful work for the Moseley Club in the Birmingham and District League games'[xiv] In 1914 William played for Moseley Cricket Club against Warwickshire at the County Ground in Edgbaston. Jeeves (of P G Wodehouse fame) was bowling for Edgbaston, but William lost his wicket for 12 runs, not to Percy, but a fellow bowler, Harry Howell. Edgbaston won the game by 110 runs.[xv] Percy Jeeves was the Moseley Cricket Club's professional player in the Birmingham League in 1912, so William would have been well aquainted with him and the county team.[xvi] William was also described as a 'splendid golfer'.[xvii]

When war broke out, William obtained a commission in the 1st (North Midland) Field Company, North Midland Divisional Engineers, a Territorial Force, and was gazetted as a Second Lieutenant on 22nd August 1914.[xviii]

Figure 4: Photograph of the newly commissioned Second Lieutenant W H Hedges

From December that year to April 1915 it was joined to the 28th Division, although the 1st (North Midland) Field Company did not arrive in France until 23rd February 1915.[xix]

William, however, went over to Le Havre, France on January 19th, 1915, as part of an advanced contingent. embarking at Southampton.[xx] The Division moved to and concentrated in the area between Bailleul and Hazebrouck.[xxi]

On 6th April 1915, the *Birmingham Gazette* reported that William had been shot through both legs by a rifle bullet while attempting to rescue one of his wounded men in front of the trenches as a result of fierce fighting at Zillebeke near Ypres[xxii]. He sustained 'flesh wounds to both thighs, the bullet having entered on the left thigh then into the right thigh. The bullet impacted on the head of the fibula after fracturing the bone'. William was taken to one of the base hospitals in Boulogne before returning to England to recover in the Empire Hospital, Vincent Square, Westminster, London. During his time in hospital he wrote to the editor of the Sporting Buff saying:

I am getting on very well, and may be able to do a small journey on crutches in about ten days time. By means of X-rays they have discovered a splintered bone in my right leg so I will probably be stiff knee'd for some months. The left leg is healing up well and the muscles and nerves, which were mostly severed, are joined up again, as I can move my right foot several inches already. It is rather a slow business, though. I had also frost bite in my right foot, through having to lie in a 'Jack Johnson' hole[xxiii] for nearly six hours before we could be got away. No stretcher party could have lived there by daylight, of course, and the hole was about one third full of water, in which my feet were submerged. It was really a most uncomfortable way of

spending a Sunday afternoon. I much prefer an armchair and a glass of port! Except in boxing season, of course, when both are taboo, a brisk walk in the immediate future will be in a bath chair, I'm afraid.''[xxiv]

The Military Hospital in Lichfield passed William as 'fit' on 15th September 1915. By December he has taken up boxing again at Curzon Hall, commenting that:

It was quite like old times to have the gloves on again, although I seem to have lost all judgement of distance. I think lack of practice affects one in this way more than another.[xxv]

Figure 5: Captain W H Hedges

On the 29th November 1915, William was gazetted as a temporary captain from the 14th October,[xxvi] shortly before the 45th (North Midland) Division was ordered to proceed to Egypt via Marseilles They embarked on the 23rd December and arrived three weeks later on 13th January 1916. The order came as a bit of a surprise for William as he was in the middle of a game of golf at the time and had to leave straight away to make the journey to join his Division.[xxvii]

After just a few days in Egypt the move of the Division was countermanded and the units were returned to France, remaining in Flanders for the rest of the war.

As part of the 46th Division since April 1915, the Division would have been preparing for the 'Big Push' on 1st July 1916. It must have come as a great fillip when, early in June, William was given notice that he had been awarded the Military Cross for the rescue of one of his injured men near Ypres the previous year.[xxviii]

On the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the 46th (north Midland) Division took part in a diversionary attack at Gommecourt. The Division's senior commander, Major General Edward Montagu Stuart Wortley, seeing the futility of the attack, was cautious about sending his men to certain annihilation by the Germans. As a consequence, the Division had to live with the reputation of having a 'lack of offensive spirit'.[xxix] After the attack at Gommecourt the 46th Division was not involved again in the four and a half month battle of the Somme. The time between July 1916 and September 1918 was spent in minor attacks and trench raids.[xxx]

In a letter written in August to Harry Cleveland, a journalist for the *Evening Despatch* and father of Ernest, a fellow cricketer, who had been killed on 31st August, William writes that:[xxxi]

I am expecting to move to the Flying Corps shortly, having got down to 11stone. I have met Lieutenant R Erskin, who won the Public Schools feathers the day after being in the A.B.A. final. He afterwards represented England against France and America, winning very easily each time. He was wounded some months ago, his machine being shot down, and had a wonderful escape. He looks wonderfully fit now, however. I am likely to be attached to the same squadron. We hope to get up a big competition shortly. I will send you particulars when it comes off. We have got a gymnasium now rigged up in a old barn, with a shower and a bath, etc.[xxxii]

It is not known where and in what circumstances William was severely wounded on the 18th August, but he was taken to the 20th Casualty Clearing Station based at Warlincourt, he died three days later on the 21st August 1916.[xxxiii] He was 23 years old. William is buried at Warlincourt Halt Cemetery.

In a letter home to his father, his Brigadier-General said:
Your son was doing very well and the men adored him. He is a great loss to me and the company.[xxxiv]

Harry Cleveland, said of him:

It is hard to realise that this splendid specimen of officer-sportsman has passed over to where so many other heroes have gone. I shall miss his cheery letters, and my heartfelt sympathy is extended to his parents.[xxxv]

William is commemorated at St Mary's Church, Moseley and the Moseley Football Club (Rugby Union) memorial in the grounds of Moseley Ashfield Cricket Club. He is also on the Roll of Honour in '*Wisden in the Great War*' [xxxvi]

Figure 8: St Mary's Church WW1 memorial

Figure 9: Captain W H Hedges grave at Warlincourt Halt Cemetery

Figure 10: Moseley Football Club Roll of Honour 1914-1918

William Ross Hedges, William's father died on 22nd February, aged 53 years. He left an estate of £45,901 4s 6p. Less than a month later, on 16th March, William Ross Hedges, William's grandfather, died aged 92 years. His estate was valued at £92,737 8s 6d.[xxxvii] Had William survived he would have been a very wealthy young man.

His sister, Elsie, married Arthur Price a spoon and fork manufacturer in 1921.[xxxviii] The electoral returns of 1927/8 register them as living at 42, Wake Green Road, Moseley. Elsie had two daughters, Pamela, born in 1922, and Gillian, born in 1924.[xxxix] William's mother, Emily, died in 1941, leaving an estate of £1003 1s 6d. Probate was granted to Elsie.[xl]

Researched and written by Edwina Rees
Moseley Society History Group

Endnotes

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i 1841 census
The Hedges Study
http://www.hedges-study.org/william_ross_hedges.htm

ii 1851 census

iii England &Wales marriages 1837-2008, Warwick, 1867, 3rd quarter, volume 6D, Page 615
The Hedges Study, see i

iv The Hedges Study, see i

v The Wellcome Trust: Hedges & Son, chemists, Birmingham: patent medicines stock book 1881-96 (MS 7813)
http://search.wellcomelibrary.org/iii/encore/search/C__SHedges%20and%20Son__Orightresult__U?lang=eng&suite=cobalt

vi England & Wales births 1837-2006, 1893, Solihull, 2nd quarter, Volume 6D, Page 592

vii England & Wales marriages 1837-2008, Kings Norton, 1892, 3rd quarter, Volume 6C, Page 636

viii 1891, 1901 census

ix *The Wintersloe Magazine*, No LX, July 1917, page 9

x Malvern College archives

xi 1911 census for Malvern
Birmingham News, 26th August 1916

xii *Birmingham Daily Post*,24th August 1916

xiii The Whitstable Times and Tankerton Press, 7th June 1913

xiv *Birmingham News*, 26th August 1916
Evening Despatch, 25th August 1916

xv *Birmingham Daily Post*, 15th May 1914
Harry Howell
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Howell_(cricketer)

xvi See 'Jeeves played for Moseley Cricket Club at the Reddings'
http://moseley-society.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Jeeves-played-for-Moseley-Cricket- Club.pdf

xvii *Evening Despatch*, 25th August 1916

xviii *London Gazette*, 25th September 1914, Issue 28914, page 7602

xix The Long, Long Trail
http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/order-of-battle-of-divisions/46th-north-midland-division/

xx British Army Medal Index Cards 1914-1920

xxi The Long, Long Trail
http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/order-of-battle-of-divisions/28th-division/

xxii National Archives, British Officers Records, Ref W0 374/32427

xxiii A slang expression for a German shell, which on explosion, created a crater 20 feet deep. The power and large amount of dark smoke given off by big shell explosions were reminiscent of black Heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson.
http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/wordswar.htm

xxiv *Birmingham Daily Post*, 26th July 1915

xxv *Evening Despatch*, 9th December 1915

xxvi *London* Gazette, 29th November 1915, Issue 29385, page 11915

xxvii *Birmingham Gazette*, 9th December 1915

xxviii *Birmingham Daily Post*, 24th August 1916

xxix MacDonald, Alan. 2008. *A Lack of Offensive Spirit?: The 46th (North Midland) Division at Gommecourt, 1st July 1916*. Iona Books, Milton Keynes,

xxx See xxix, p 562

xxxi 1911 census for the Cleveland family
Commowealth War Graves Commission
Renshaw, Andrew, 2008. *Wisden in the Great War: The lives of the Cricket Fallen'*. Bloomsbury Publishing plc, London, p 215

xxxii *Evening Despatch*, 25th August 1916

xxxiii See xxii
Birmingham Daily Post, 21st August 1916. Commonwealth War Graves Commissions cites the date of death as 22nd August

xxxiv *Birmingham Daily Post*, 24th August 1916

xxxv See xxxiii,

xxxvi Renshaw, Andrew, 2008. *Wisden in the Great War: The lives of the Cricket Fallen'*. Bloomsbury Publishing plc, London, p 233

xxxvii The Hedges Study, see i
http://www.hedges-study.org/william_ross_hedges.htm
Probate Calendars of England & Wales 1858-1959, Year 1922

xxxviii England & Wales marriages 1832-2008, Kings Norton, 1921, 1st quarter, 6D, 89
Arthur Price
https://www.arthurprice.com/our-wonderful-heritage-2/

xxxix Confirmed in Birth Certificates

xl England & Wales deaths 1837- 2007
Probate Calendars of England & Wales 1858-1959.

Illustrations

Figure 1 Coaster advertising Hedges Snuff L260, ebay

Figure 2 Hedges Snuff Box
https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/230879918367295937/

Figure 3 Hedges & Son cold Cream
The Hedges Study
http://www.hedges-study.org/william_ross_hedges.htm

Figure 4 Photograph of Second Lieutenant W H Hedges, courtesy of Malvern College

Figure 5 Captain Hedges
Birmingham Daily Mail, 5th June 1916

Figure 6 Hedges Grave in Warlincourt. Photograph by Edwina Rees

Figure 7 Moseley Football Club Roll of Honour 1914-1918, photo by Edwina Rees

Figure 8 Moseley Society History Group archives