

Second Lieutenant Frank Neville Cowper

The Cowper family's origins are in Leicestershire after Frank's great grandfather, who was born in Canterbury c1810, married a Leicestershire girl and set up his turning business employing two men.ⁱ Grandfather William (born c1841) started out as a book keeper to an elastic web manufacturer and then became its agent.ⁱⁱ By 1871, William had moved his family to Birmingham having taken on a new dealership in leather and lived for sometime at 24 Trafalgar Road, Moseley. By this time John Stert Cowper, Frank's father, having left school, started earning a living as an elastic web agent. Following in his father's footsteps, John became a commercial clerk and then a leather merchant.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1901 John had married Ellen Gilmer and had two children, Stert Gilmer, born 1895, and Frank Neville, born 1897. Initially residing in Augusta Road, the family, by 1911, had moved to 'Ewell', Belle Walk, Moseley. The leather business must have been thriving as John was affluent enough to employ two domestic servants and afford to send both boys to King Edward's Grammar School, then in New Street, Birmingham.^{iv}

Frank commenced his education at KES in 1908 and remained there for five years. On leaving school he joined a firm of accountants in Birmingham.^v



When war was declared, both brothers having previously been in the Officer Training Corps at school, joined the 14th Warwickshire Regiment (1st Birmingham Pals) together on 10th September 1914.^{vi} Frank became Private F N Cowper, No 14/588, and his brother Private S G Cowper, No 14/589.^{vii} They were both given commissions on the same day, 11th August 1915, as Second Lieutenants in 3rd Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment.^{viii}

Second Lieutenant F N Cowper^{ix}

The 3rd Battalion Suffolk Regiment was designated a reserve battalion based in Felixstowe and is where Frank undertook his officer training.^x Frank arrived in France on 13th July 1916, at an early stage of the Somme campaign. He was attached to the 7th Battalion Suffolk Regiment (7th Suffolks). The battalion had arrived in France the previous year on 30th May and had been involved in heavy fighting in the Front Line.^{xi}

The 7th Suffolks, part of the 35th Infantry Brigade, were ordered to Douzens on 26th September where they came under the orders of the 12th Eastern Division in preparation for the Fourth Army's assault of the Transloy Ridge planned for early October. The fighting commenced on 1st October in worsening conditions and dreadful battlefield conditions. The 7th Suffolks at this time were in training and in reserve in a hurriedly made camp south of Longueval. On the 10th October they relieved the 10th Middlesex Regiment in Bulls Run near Flers. There was heavy shelling of the Front Line by the Germans resulting in some casualties and trenches blown in. Despite these setbacks, preparation for a full scale attack continued for the 12th October. The 7th Suffolks war diary for the 12th October records very briefly the regiment's unsuccessful attempt to gain their designated objectives against impossible odds.

Front line. Attack to be made on Bayonette Trench and Luisenhoff Farm. Morning very quiet

5am: Battalion lying in shell holes in front ready

10am: Major Henty went forward to advanced battalion HQ in Grass Street to receive reports

2pm: Zero. Attack started. German barrage very intense. Battalions proceeded in four waves, each company with a platoon front.

No definite report until 6pm when battalion was back in front line having failed to obtain objectives. B & D Coys gained objectives but were driven out by superior numbers. Battalion withdrew to Reserve in Flers Trench. C.^{xii}

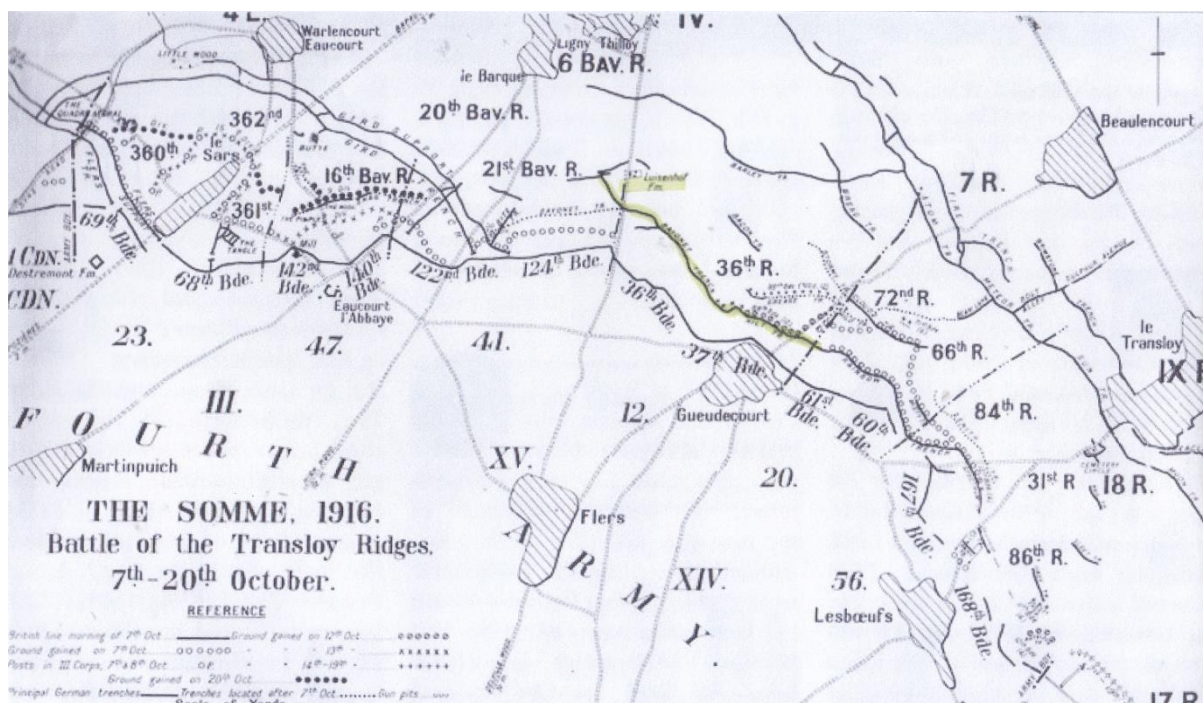


Figure 1: Map showing the position of Bayonette Trench and Luisenhoff Farm (highlighted in yellow), the objectives of the 7th Suffolk Regiment on 12th October 1916 in the Battle of the Transloy Ridges^{xiii}

Casualties are reported on 10th October, but are conspicuously absent from the regimental diary on 12th October. By extrapolating the names of those who were killed on 12th October from the 7th Suffolk Battalion's Roll of Honour for the whole of the Battle of the Somme, it is possible to deduce that 9 officers and 98 NCO's and other ranks were killed. The number of wounded must have also been considerable but again unrecorded.^{xiv}



Thiepval Memorial (above) and St Mary's Church WW1 Memorial, Moseley (right)

Frank is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial, France and at St Mary's Church, Moseley.

Frank's brother, Stert, was with the 3rd Suffolk regiment in France from 28th August 1916. He survived the war despite being wounded on two occasions. On his recovery he was posted to 2/7th Durham Light Infantry and from 7th October 1918 saw the war out in North Russia before the battalion was withdrawn in January 1920.^{xv} In 1926 he married Nora Sophie Hall and carried on working as a member of William Cowper and Sons, leather factors at Hinckley Street Birmingham. He became vice president of the Lawn Tennis Association.^{xvi} He died on June 4th 1945, aged only 50 years. His father had died only seven months previously leaving him £38,896. He left Nora a very wealthy widow.^{xvii}

The Cowper story has a remarkable ending as Frank and Stert's mother Emily Louise Cowper lived to be a 100, and died in Solihull, 49 years after the death of her younger son Frank.^{xviii}

Researched and written by Jim Hone and Edwina Rees

Moseley Society History Group

Endnotes

- i 1851 census
- ii 1861, 1871, 1881 census
- iii 1891,1901, 1911 census
- iv 1911 census
Service record of King Edwards School (1914-1919)
- v *Birmingham Daily Post*, 20th October 1916
- vi British Officers after 1913, National Archives, Ref WO 339/36174
- vii Birmingham City Battalions Book of Honour, 1920
- viii *London Gazette*, 11th August 1915, Issue 29259, page 7989
- ix *Birmingham Mail*, October 21st 1916
- x See vi
- xi The Long, Long Trail. 3rd Suffolk Regiment
<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-british-infantry-regiments-of-1914-1918/suffolk-regiment/>
- xii The National Archives. WO 95/1852/3. Regimental War Diary of 7th Battalion Suffok Regiment, 1st September 1916-31st December 1917, pp 30, 31
- xiii Map of the Battle of Transloy Ridges, 7th-20th October 1916
<http://forum.irishmilitaryonline.com/showthread.php?9058-The-Somme-Day-by-Day/page5>
- xiv Battle of the Somme, Roll of Honour 7th battalion Suffolk Regiment
http://somme-roll-of-honour.com/Units/british/7th_Suffolk.htm
- xv The Long, Long Trail, 2/7th Durham light Infantry
<http://www.1914-1918.net/dli.htm>
Service Record of King Edwards School 1914-1919
- xvi *Birmingham Daily Post*, 6th June 1915
- xvii Probate Calendars of England and Wales 1855-1959
- xviii England and Wales Deaths 1837-2007