

Sergeant James William Prior Ponsford

After the disastrous start of the Battle of the Somme and the failure to capture the Bazentine Ridge, the 20th Royal Fusiliers were given the task to secure the area around High Wood and to gain the ridge between the 22nd and 31st October 1916 in preparation for fresh assaults the following year. This resulted in a large numbers of casualties due to enemy sniper activity and shell fire.

The Ponsford family have their origins in Exeter, Devon, where James' great grandfather, a cordwainer (shoemaker), and his wife Fanny resided. At the time of the birth of their son, William Caryl, on 8th December 1833 they lived in Goldsmith Street, Exeter.ⁱ

By the age of seventeen years old, James' grandfather, William Caryl Ponsford had left home and become a waiter at 7 Falcon Square, Saint Giles in London.ⁱⁱ Two years later, in the summer of 1853, he married Sarah Gaylor.ⁱⁱⁱ By 1871, William and Sarah had two children, Isabelle Charlotte, born in 1855, and William Charles (James father) ten years later. William Caryl Ponsford, by then, had worked his way up to the position of hotel manager and in 1871 was living at 27 Russell Street, Covent Garden, which remained the family home for some years. When William Charles left school he became employed as a clerk to a stockbroker. His father, by 1891, had made an occupational change, leaving his position as hotel manager to become an auctioneer's clerk.

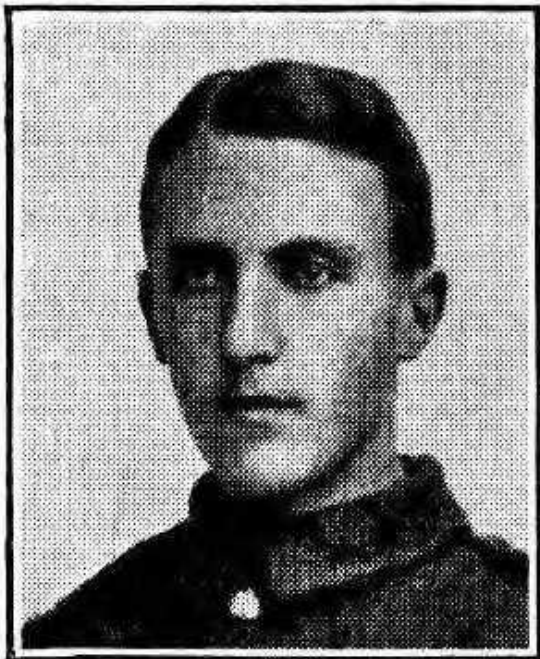


Figure 1: Photograph of Private J W P Ponsford

William Charles Ponsford relocated to Birmingham, sometime in the 1890's to take up a position with Cutler & Lacy, stockbrokers,^{iv} and in the summer of 1896, married Caroline Louisa Prior in Kings Norton, Birmingham,^v On 1st May 1897, Caroline gave birth to their only child, James,^{vi} in Islington, London most likely his parent's home in Isledon Road, Islington. By 1901 William and Caroline had their own home at 49 Strensham Hill, then Kings Norton, now Moseley. William worked his way up in the company and eventually became one of its partners.

William took an interest in many local matters and was associated with Moseley Bowling Club, the Moseley and Balsall Heath Institutes and the Midland Conservative Club.^{vii}

James was educated at Greenhill School, Lickey Hill School and Shrewsbury College. On leaving school he was articled in 1914 to Messrs Charlton and Long, Chartered Accounts, in Birmingham.^{viii} Being too young to join the Army when the war broke out, James joined the Officer Training Corps until he was of military age. In June 1915 James enlisted in the 20th Battalion Royal Fusiliers (3rd Public Schools Battalion), as Private J W P Ponsford, No PS 8002. He became a Lance-Corporal two days after joining, and Sergeant eight weeks later. He never wished for a commission, but preferred to serve in the ranks.^{ix}

The 20th Royal Fusiliers disembarked at Calais on 14th November 1915 and reached Boulogne at 6pm later that day. Over the next four days the 20th Royal Fusiliers made their way to Bethune by train and on foot. On 27th November the 20th Royal Fusiliers were transferred from the 98th Brigade to the more experienced 19th Brigade, in the 33rd Division. Trench warfare training commenced in the area around Morbecque, and in the front line of the Bethune and Cuincy area over the next few months alongside more experienced battalions. Additional instruction in grenade throwing, bayonet fighting, rapid loading and gas mask training took place back in their billets. Casualties occurred from 22nd November and steadily mounted over the following months mainly from shell fire and sniping from the enemy trenches.^x

After holding the line around the area of Mametz Woods at the start of the Battle of the Somme on 1st July 1915, the 20th Royal Fusiliers were called up on 20th July to attack High Wood at 3.25 am. The fighting was fierce and not all the wood was taken. The Fusiliers managed to hold their ground until relieved at midnight at great cost. At least 16 officers and 375 other ranks were either killed, missing or wounded.^{xi}

After these devastating losses the 20th Royal Rifles were rested, reorganised and reinforced to bring their numbers back up to strength. By the 18th August the battalion was attached to the 98th Brigade and were in reserve during the battle to capture the rest of High Wood and Wood Lane in order to gain the ridge but not without further losses.^{xii}

In September the Brigade moved to Doullens and after a period of further training was moved to Bernafay Wood on 22nd October.^{xiii} The following day they moved up to 'Straight' Trench, a support trench, north of Ginchy and on 25th

moved in to the front line trenches of Ox, Shamrock and Foggy. The diary records no attack on the day or any casualties but an entry for the 31st October notes:

Throughout the period 22nd to 31st very heavy rains fell and the roads were rendered very muddy and movement was necessarily very slow. Total casualties during the period: 3 officers killed, 2 wounded. Other ranks 18 killed, 48 wounded including 4 at duty.^{xiv}

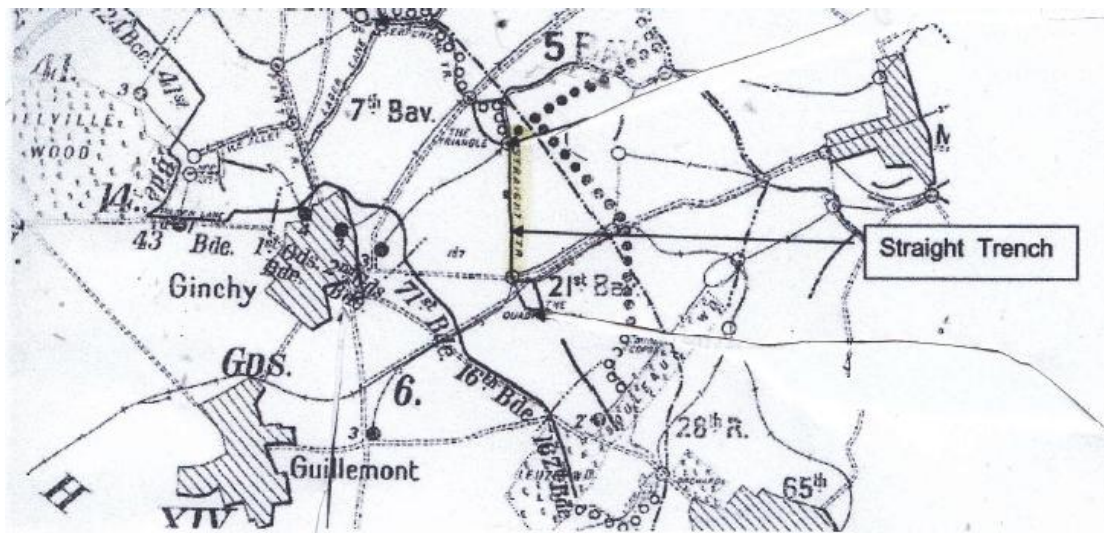


Figure 2: Straight trench, a support trench, near Ginchy highlighted in yellow

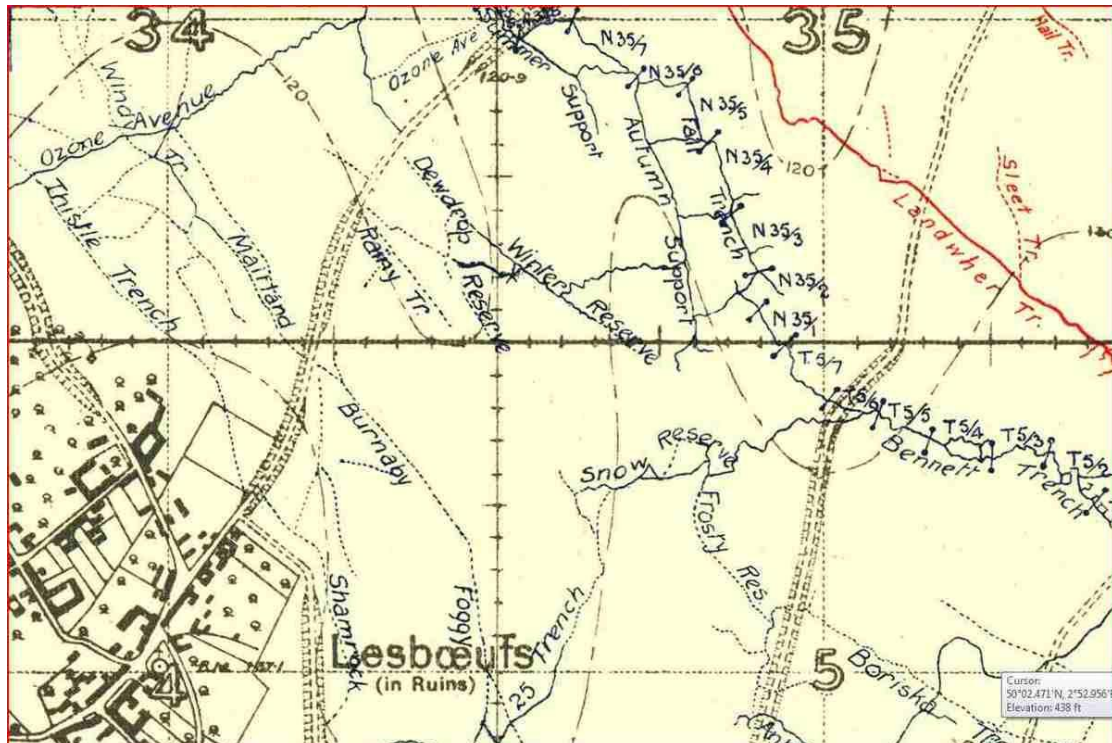


Figure 3: Map showing the location of Shamrock and Foggy front line trenches to the east of Lesbœufs

James was one of those killed and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records his death as occurring on 25th October 1916, He was only nineteen years old.

A letter to his parents from Sergeant Green, of his platoon, reports that James was shot in the neck by a sniper as he was taking his men across the open to another position and died soon after. His sergeant said: "He was very keen when he heard we were going to the fighting line again, and this was really not counting the few weeks which he did in the trenches, his first time in action. All the platoon want me to express to you their sympathy. They are all sorry we have lost him..... Our platoon has a very fine esprit de corps, and any one of them would do anything for another." Corporal Simon also writing to his father, says: "Your son, whom we always used to call 'Ponny' was a great favourite with every man in the platoon."^{xv}

James is buried at the AIF Burial Ground near Flers. He is commemorated at St Mary's and St Anne's Church, Moseley and is on the Roll of Honour at the Hall of Memory, Birmingham. He is also on the Roll of Honour at Shrewsbury College.

James' mother died a few months later at the age of 47, no doubt broken hearted. At the time of her death she was living at 16 Highfield Road, Moseley.



Figure 4.

- (Top left) AIF Burial Ground, near Flers
- (Top right) WW1 memorial at St Anne's Church, Moseley
- (Bottom) WW1 memorial at St Mary's, Moseley

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Footnotes

- i Devon baptisms, South West Heritage Trust
- ii 1851 census
- iii England & Wales marriages, 1837-2008, St Pancras, 1853, 3/4, 1B, 30
- iv *Birmingham Daily Post*, 31st January 1939
- v England & Wales marriages, 1837-2008, Kings Norton, 1896 3/4, 6C, 719
- vi England & Wales births 1837 -2006, Islington, 1897, 2/4, 1B, 401
- vii See iv
- viii De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour
- ix Shrewsbury School
<http://www.shrewsbury.org.uk/news/news-week-100-years-ago-21st-27th-october-1916>
- x National Archives, war diaries of the 20th Royal Fusiliers, Ref WO 95/2423/3, pp 3-6
- xi See x, pp 18-21
- xii See x, pp 22-24
- xiii See x, pp 25-27
- xiv See x, p 28
- xv *The Birmingham News*, 4th November 1916

Illustrations

Figure 1 De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour

Figure 2 Looking for a Soldier, John McCourt, Cheshire Family History Society, Wallasey Group <https://owlsmoor.files.wordpress.com/20012/11/in-search-of-a-soldier.pdf>

Figure 3 Invision Zone
<http://1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/119936-battle-of-le-transloy-ridges-spectrum-trench/>