

Private Leslie Edwin Smith

The British Fifth Army attacks on the Somme front stopped over the winter of 1916. They were reduced to surviving the rain, snow, fog, mud fields, waterlogged trenches and shell-holes. As preparations for the offensive at Arras, due in the spring of 1917, continued, the British attempted to keep German attention on the Somme. In February 1917 the 7th Royal West Kent Regiment found themselves back in the trenches they had attacked the previous November near Grandcourt and the river Ancre.

We know very little about Leslie's family, apart from the information provided on the 1901 and 1911 census. Leslie was born in the spring of 1897 in Balsall Heath, Birmingham.ⁱ His father Henry William Smith was a 'tin plate worker and an employer'. His mother was called Harriett and in 1901, the family lived at 6 Hallam Street, Balsall Heath with Henry Harold Smith, Leslie's new born brother. By 1911 the family had moved to 81 Reddings Road with their three children, including Dora Randle Smith, born in 1907. The family employed a general domestic servant, Emma Sadler.



Figure 1: A photograph of Camp Hill School Boys School taken in 1933 by William A Clarke, before its move to the present site in Kings Heath

Leslie went to Camp Hill School for Boys,ⁱⁱ now the Bordesley Centre. The school was originally opened in 1883 at Camp Hill on the Stratford Road, Bordesley, Birmingham before moving to its present site in Vicarage Road, Kings Heath in 1956 because the original site proved to be too small for a growing school.ⁱⁱⁱ

When war was declared on 4th August 1914, Leslie was too young to enlist. His British Army Medal Index shows only an entitlement to the Victory and British War Medal, which indicates that Leslie enlisted in 1916 as part of Kitchener's New Army recruitment drive. Leslie's army record records that he enlisted in Birmingham and became Private Leslie Edwin Smith, No G/24650 in the 7th Battalion of the Queen's Own (Royal West Kent Regiment).^{iv}

In 1916 the Royal West Kent Regiment, was part of the 18th Division of the 5th Army and in action on the Somme and in the Battle of Albert capturing their objectives near Montauban. The regiment also took part in the Battle of Bazentin Ridge, the Battle of Thiepval Ridge and the Battle of the Ancre Heights where they played a part in the capture of the Schwaben Redoubt and Regina Trench. The regiment's last action in 1916 was the Battle of Ancre.^v

The 7th Battalion enjoyed two months of rest after the long spell of fighting and after arriving in the Abbeville neighbourhood at the end of November 1916 it did not return to the front line until the middle of February 1917.

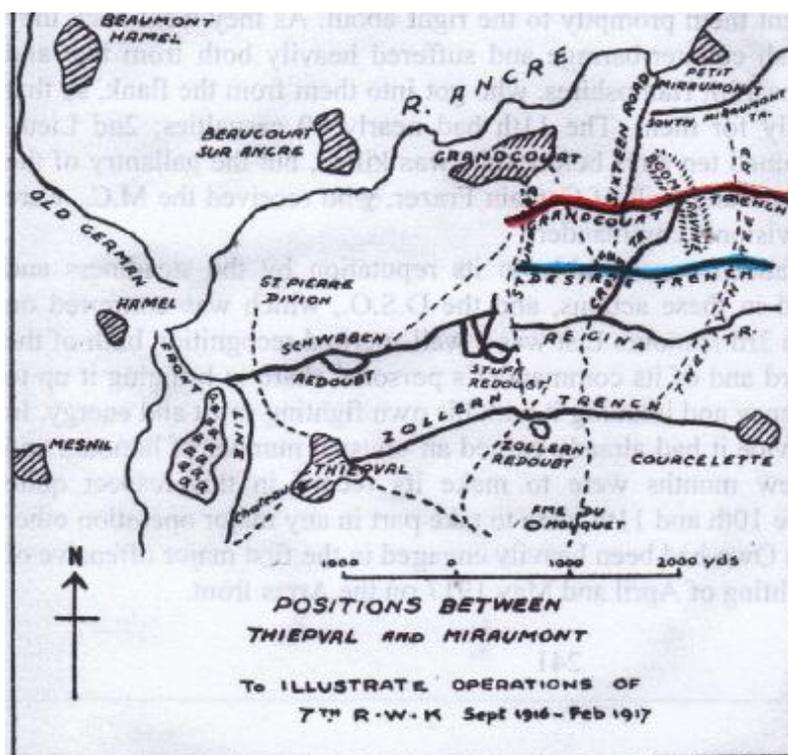


Figure 2: Map showing the operations of the Royal West Kent Regiment and their positions in Desire Trench and Grandcourt Trench in early February 1917

When the Battalion returned to the front line it found itself holding part of Desire Trench, but somewhat to the left of the line it had attacked on November 18th 1916. Part of the Grandcourt Trench was in the hands of the

British but the continuation of the trench eastwards was still in German hands. An attack to capture it was launched in the early hours of 14th February 1917 in two waves. At first it seemed to go well but in the darkness direction was lost and the attackers achieved only the left of their objective. The right platoon had run into uncut wire in front of the eastern German stronghold and the attack was held up and caused deplorably heavy casualties. Between 19th to 23rd February, when the Battalion was next in the front line, they found the enemy beginning to retire from the salient, the preliminary to the general retreat three weeks later out of the larger salient from Ancre to Arras.

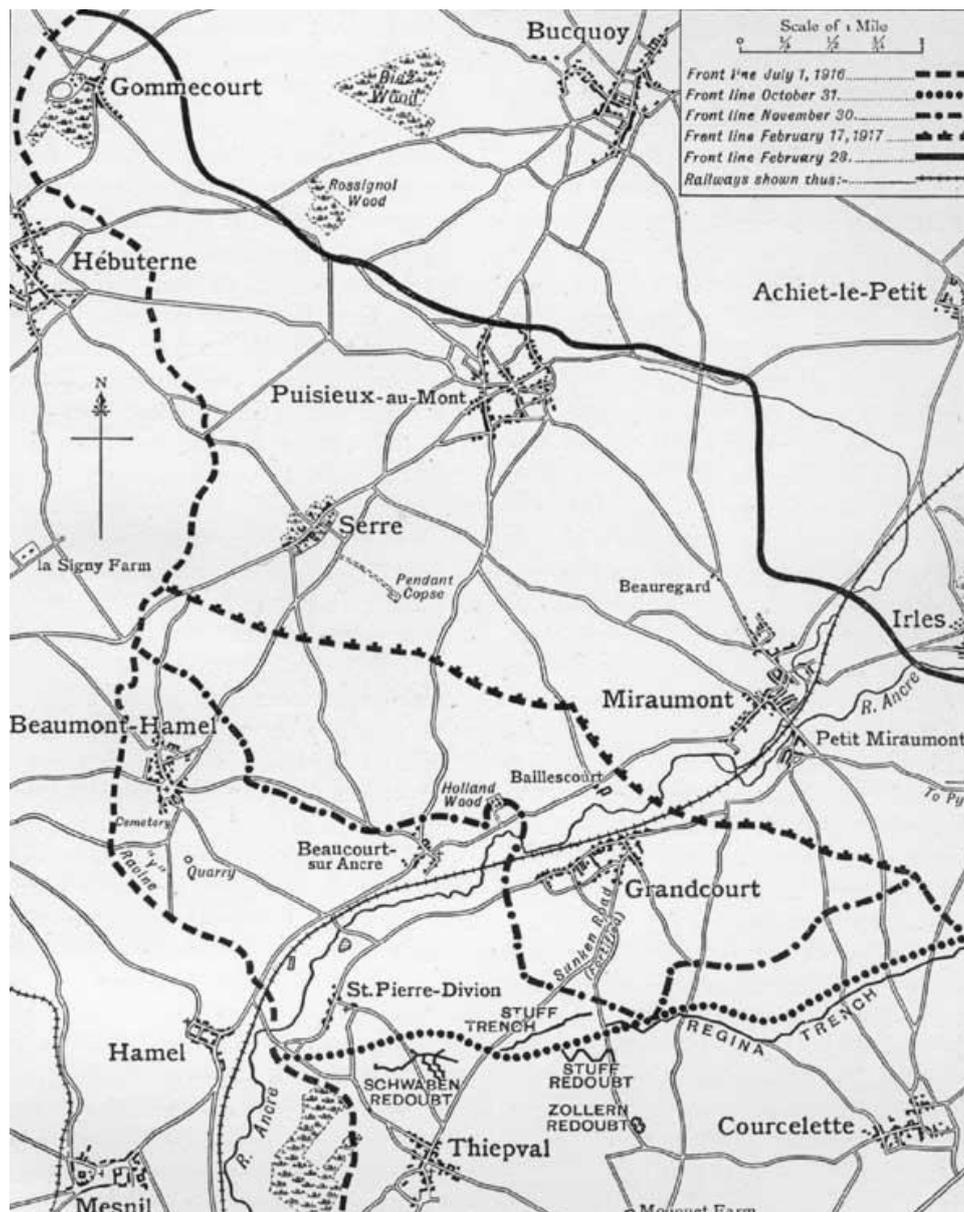


Figure 3: The dot-dash line shows the British front line in November 1916. The two lines above it show the push through Grandcourt, Serre and Miraumont to the new front line position (shown by a thick black line) by 28th February 1917

Leslie died of wounds on 20th February 1917. The war diary for the 7th Battalion Royal Kent Regiment for the 20th February 1917 simply states 'Battalion in front line'. There is no mention of casualties.^{vi} Leslie's death from wounds could have been from an unlucky sniper shot or a shell fragment from the German artillery on the day. Another possibility is that he died from wounds received in action at an earlier date, the 14th February. The Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension where Leslie is buried was the site of the Casualty Clearing Station at the time of his death. He was just 19 years old.^{vii}



**Figure 4: Top Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension
Bottom Left: Camp Hill Boys School Memorial
Right. St Mary's Church, Moseley WW1 memorial**

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Endnotes

- i England & Wales births 1837-2006, Kings Norton, 1897, 2/4, 4C, 405
- ii *Birmingham Mail*, 7th March 1917
- iii Bordesley Centre
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bordesley_Centre.jpg
- iv Soldiers who died in the Great War
<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbm%2fwwisd%2f0346155>
- v The Wartime Memories Project
<http://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?pid=7432>
- vi Atkinson, C D. 2003 *The Queens Own Royal West Kent Regiment 1914-1919*, Naval and Military Press Ltd, East Sussex, pp 233-234
National Archives. War diaries of the 7th Royal West Kent Regiment. Ref W095/2049/2
- vii Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension
<http://www.cpgw.org.uk/cwgc-cemeteries/dernancourt-communal-cemetery-extension/>

Illustrations

- Figure 1 William A. Clark's photograph at Camp Hill School for Boys shows school children in the playground dressed for participation in physical education or sporting activities. This photograph was taken in 1933.
Reference: WK-B12-2
<http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/bordesleygallery>
- Figure 2 Map of 7th Royal West Kent Regiment, September 1916 to February 1917
See vi, p 242
- Figure3 The Long, long trail. Campaign and battle maps
<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/maps/somme16f.jpg>
- Figure 4 Dernancourt Communal Cemetery Extension
<http://www.cpgw.org.uk/cwgc-cemeteries/dernancourt-communal-cemetery-extension/>

Camp Hill School memorial from the records of Ruth Livermore