

2nd Lt James Henry Duffell

James was born on April 3rd 1894 to Frederick and Mildred Augusta Duffell (née Williamson) in Newcastle upon Tyne. He was the youngest of four children. He had two sisters, Martha and Adelina, and a brother, George. His father was a milliner and a successful businessman with shops in Birmingham, Liverpool, Sheffield and Newcastle. The family lived for a while in Stratford Grove, Heaton near Newcastle. When James was only four years old, his father died leaving assets worth £304 15s to his wife, worth £37,789 in today's money.ⁱ



There is little known of James' early life other than that he was admitted to Heaton Park Road School in 1901, originally opened as a Byker Board School in 1875, and from there to St Joseph's College, Dumfries, a boarding school for boys.

In December 1908, James' grandfather, Oliver Haynes Duffell, died. Oliver was born at West Bromwich in 1831. At the age of nine he started work in an Iron Works as a 'moulder'. In 1863 he secured a job at Jarrow as a forge man, at a time when there was great industrial conflict. He represented the Jarrow men during the crisis. Oliver was subsequently elected a member of the Jarrow Town Council and after serving for sixteen years was elected the Mayor. Owing to increasing deafness, Oliver was obliged to resign his seat and moved to Newcastle. In the meantime, in conjunction with his wife, he had established a drapery and millinery business with shops in four major cities. In 1893, Oliver left the north of England and settled in Birmingham, which became the headquarters of his business.ⁱⁱ Oliver ran his business from 60/62

Figure 1

(Top) St Joseph's College, Dumfries

(Right) Obituary of Oliver Haynes Duffell

FUNERAL OF THE LATE MR. O. H. DUFFELL.

The funeral of the late Mr. O. H. Duffell, formerly of Newcastle and Jarrow, who died at Handsworth, near Birmingham, last Thursday, took place at Handsworth, yesterday. The late Mr. Duffell was born at West Bromwich in 1831, and at the age of 9 was sent into John Dawes and Sons' Bromford Iron Works, where he worked as a moulder. Subsequently he travelled for a firm in the West of England and South Wales. In 1863 he returned to his old trade, securing a situation at Jarrow. A great industrial conflict threatened about this time, eventuating in what is now known as the great lock-out. Mr. Duffell was the representative of the Jarrow men during the crisis, and the late Sir Charles Mark Palmer, Bart., on several occasions publicly complimented him for his work as representative of the ironworkers during the great strike. Mr. Duffell was afterwards elected a member of the Jarrow Town Council by a large majority, and sat on that body for 16 years as a Councillor. In 1880 he was elected Mayor of the town. The outstanding events of his Mayoralty were the Stephenson Centenary and the Durham County Cattle Show. Owing to increasing deafness Mr. Duffell was obliged to resign his seat in the Council, and removed to Newcastle. In the meantime he had, in conjunction with his wife, established a drapery and millinery business at Jarrow and Newcastle which was rapidly extended, and in 1893 he left the North of England, and settled down in Birmingham, which became the headquarters of the business. At the time of his death he had shops in Birmingham, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Newcastle. He leaves a widow and two sons.

Corporation Street in Birmingham city centre. When he died he left an estate of £12,189 10s 0d, equivalent to £1,389,603 in today's money. His grandson, James, was one of three executors. At the time of his death Oliver was living at 2 Park Avenue, Handsworth.ⁱⁱⁱ

By 1911 Mildred had brought the family south to Birmingham and were resident at 33 Lansdowne Road, Handsworth. At that time, James aged 17 was listed as a Bank Clerk.

Shortly after the outbreak of war, James answered the call to duty. He enlisted as a Private in the 15th Royal Warwickshire Regiment (2nd Birmingham Pals) on Sept 17th 1914 in Sutton Coldfield as Private, No 654. After a period of training, which included a minor offence for which he was confined to barracks for 3 days, James and his colleagues arrived in France on November 21st 1915.

On arrival, the Battalion were allocated to the 95th Brigade (32nd Division), but were soon transferred to the 14th Brigade (5th Division). After a period of training and acclimatisation to trench warfare, the Brigade took over part of the line between St Laurent and Vimy Ridge near Arras. It was a lively sector where there was constant action in terms of raids, skirmishes and artillery duels. James obviously got involved here, as his records show he was wounded in June 1916 and after treatment at CCS 37 and Hospital in Rouen, he rejoined the Battalion on July 21st. By this time they were heavily involved in the Somme campaign and saw fierce action around High Wood, Guillemont etc. James was wounded once again in September and had treatment in Le Havre and Rouen before rejoining his unit on October 6th. Thereafter, his Brigade was moved to the Festubert area which was relatively "quiet" after the turmoil of the ongoing Somme campaign.

Circumstances then changed for him. James had been a private soldier for nearly two and a half years and had been given a certain amount of responsibility at times. It is clear from official records that he applied for a commission, and after acceptance, found himself back in England on December 29th. He reported to No 2 Cadet Battalion at Pirbright for officer training on February 1st 1917.



Figure 2: Tank training area on the Norfolk/Suffolk border in WW1

After a training spell of around 6 months, James was accepted as a temporary 2nd Lieutenant with effect from July 27th 1917 and posted to the 5th Tank Corps. This was the date that the Tank Corps was inaugurated from what was previously known as the Heavy Machine Gun Branch of the Machine Gun Corps.

The Corps were then involved in a lot of actions with differing amounts of success. They participated in the 3rd Battle of Ypres but were mostly ineffective due to the horrendous ground conditions which bogged them down.

Later, on November 20th, there was a rather radical attack on the Hindenberg Line at Cambrai that was successful in punching a hole in the German line. As a result of slow, indecisive leadership, this success was not exploited and the breakthrough was lost. However, that operation revolutionised the Corps's tactics thereafter.

After the attritional Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), and the missed opportunity at Cambrai, both sides in the conflict were content to lick their wounds and wait out the 1917/18 winter. This was significant for Germany as vast numbers of troops were released from the Eastern Front, following the collapse of Russia. These troops were battle-hardened and experienced in their new infantry tactics. It was obvious that Germany needed to try a deal a decisive blow against the Allies before the United States' forces were ready for action. The Allies were expecting an attack in the spring of 1918, but nevertheless, were taken completely by surprise when the attack, Operation Michael, came in early in the morning of March 21st. Their new tactics overwhelmed the Allies' defenders who were forced to retreat in confusion.

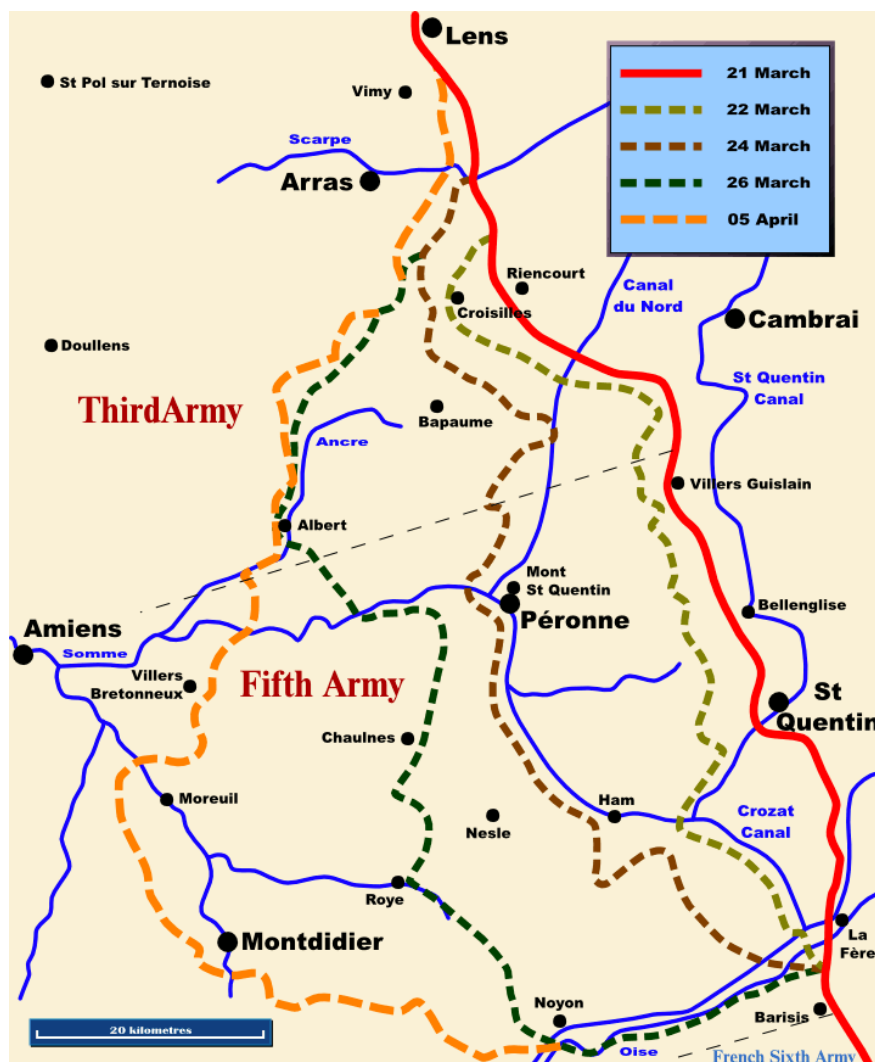


Figure 3: Map showing the advance of the German Army in the breakthrough of the British Lines on 21st March in Operation Michael



Figure 4
(Above) James was the commander of a Mark IV tank which required two drivers
(Right) Inside a Mark IV tank

What happened next to James and his command we only know about as a result of an eye-witness account from Lance-Corporal Ivor Green who was 1st Driver and NCO of James's tank. This was only discovered after the War as Ivor was captured on March 22nd and became a POW. The Moseley Society History Group has a copy of his letter to James's mother.

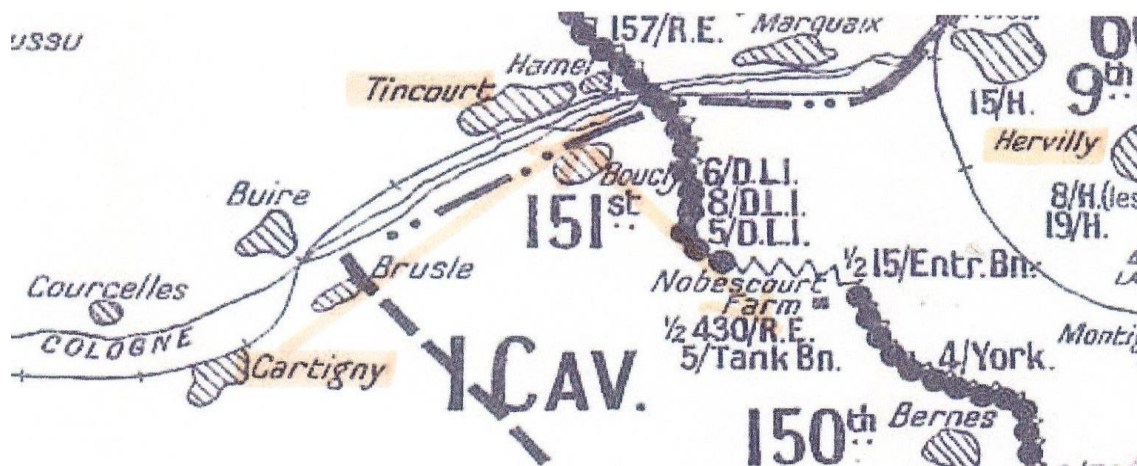


Figure 5: Area mentioned in the letter by Corporal Ivor Green. The circle line was the line the German's had advanced to by the end of the 22nd March 1918.

James was at this pivotal time near Cartigny with his tank and his crew. Tanks were in essence an offensive, rather than a defensive weapon. But despite his tank being in a poor fighting condition, James was determined to do all he could to cover the infantry's retreat. Very late in the night of the 21st, they set off from Tincourt towards the front line and came into contact with the enemy around noon on the 22nd March near Hervilly. James, however, in order to do his utmost to check the German advance and protect the retreating forces, continued to fight his tank until around 4.30. It was then hit and finally disabled, by which time one of the crew, Gunner Horne had been killed and most of the others slightly wounded. The infantry had by this time retired and the tank was surrounded by the enemy. James moved his Lewis guns and his remaining crew to nearby rifle butts and continued the fight as best he could. L/C Green then describes their final moments when James and most of his men were killed and the rest, including himself, were wounded and captured.

This information was only garnered many months after the event as James was officially listed as ‘missing’. His family were, quite naturally desperate for information and entered into extensive correspondence with the War Office. Eventually, the family were contacted by a Lieutenant Rees who told them that when he was in a POW camp at Le Cateau, he had spoken briefly to the surviving members of the tank's crew who told him that James had been killed on the 22nd. The family were then able, via the War Office, to identify and write to these survivors. This resulted in Ivor Green's eye-witness account which confirmed their worst fears.

Ivor Green's letter to James's mother went on to praise James for his bravery. In his words “He met his death like a hero. At one period he was exposed to heavy machine gun fire but during the action, he greatly encouraged his men by his fine example.”^{iv}

James was never found in the aftermath of the battle, but his name is inscribed on the Allied War Memorial in Pozieres. He was 23 years old.



Figure 6

(Above) Pozieres Allied War memorial

(Right) London joint City and Midland Bank Memorial, Canary Wharf, London



James is also commemorated at the London and Midland Bank memorial at Canary Wharf, London. He is also named on the Roll of Honour at Birmingham’s Hall of Memory.

By 1930, James’s mother Mildred had moved to live in Moseley, firstly at 49 Station Road and then, in 1932, at 49 Reddings Road.^v

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**(Illustrations, National Archive material and newspaper research
contributed by Edwina Rees)**

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Endnotes

- i National Probate Calendar, date of death of Frederick Duffell 8th June 1898
- iii *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 17th December 1908
United Grand Lodge of England, Freemason Membership Register, 1751-1921, refers to Oliver as a forge man. Initiation date to St Bede's Lodge, Jarrow 31st August 1870
- iii National Probate Calendar 1908
1896 Kelly's Directory of Birmingham
- iv Information on 2nd Lt Duffell obtained from the National Archives, Officers after 1913, Ref WO 339/87625
- v Midland Electoral Registers 1832-1955
Kelly's Directory for Birmingham 1932

Illustrations

- Figure 1 St Joseph's College
https://www.stjosephscollege.co.uk/s/cc_images/cache_2472302731.jpg?t=1487156440
Obituary for Oliver Haynes Duffell
Newcastle Evening Chronicle, 17th December 1908
- Figure 2 *Eastern Daily Press*, article 'The book that revealed how East Anglia played a pivotal part in the First World War', published 8.11.2014
<https://www.edp24.co.uk/features/the-book-that-revealed-how-east-anglia-played-a-vital-role-in-the-first-world-war-1-3839399>
- Figure 3 Operation Michael map
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Michael
- Figure 4 Mark IV tank
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_IV_tank

Figure 5 Great War Forum, Lieutenant-General Croonaert
<https://www.greatwarforum.org/topic/32194-21st-march-1918/>

Figure 6 London and Midland Bank memorial
<https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/1620>
Commonwealth War Graves Commission