

# Cecil James Mills

Acting Bombardier

116323

59<sup>th</sup> Brigade Royal Field Artillery



Cecil James Mills was born in Kington in early 1897. He was the son of John and Margaret Mills who at one time lived at Heywood Common Farm on the outskirts of Kington. John was a farmer from Llanbadarn Fawr, a tiny little area to the south of Crossgates on the A44. In the 1891 census he was managing a farm called Brynllifayth and living with him on the farm was a servant, Margaret Probert and farm hand, Edward Lloyd. In 1892 Rhayader marriage records show that John married Margaret Probert and for Margaret that meant a life as an itinerant farmers' wife had begun. Marriage was swiftly followed by the birth of their first child, Susie, in 1893. Sometime between 1893 and 1895 the fledgling Mill's family first entered the environs of Kington when they moved into Lilwall Cottage on the road to Eardisley. It was here in 1895 that John, their first son, was born. He was followed by Cecil in 1897, Annie 1898, Henry 1900, Frank 1903, Maggie 1906, Mary 1908 and finally Christiane in 1910. Living in Kington, John and Cecil attended Kington Boy's School on Gravel Hill. By 1911 John senior had once again moved his burgeoning family and taken up residence at Oakcroft Farm in the rather idyllic setting of Gorsty Dole, a tiny hamlet in the hills above Titley. Here he was employed as farm Bailiff for the Eywood Estate, John junior was working on the farm and Cecil, at the age of 14, was working as a gardener on the estate. The 1911 census required mothers to inform as to how long they had been married and how many children they had conceived, how many were alive in 1911 or had died previously. This in itself is not exceptional however, what is unusual is that Margaret informs that she had delivered nine children and all survived. Quite an achievement in such hard times.

Young Cecil must have done well working in the Eywood gardens because the next time we hear of him he has moved away from Titley and taken a job as second gardener to Sir Henry and Lady Maddens of Bacup, Lancashire. Why he should move so far from his

family is unknown, but none the less very brave. Unexpected sadness hit the family in early 1914 when Cecil's father died at the age of just 51, leaving Margaret to parent all her children up at Gorsty Dole. When war broke out in August 1914 Cecil was still quite young, just seventeen and as such was not in the first rush of volunteers to sign up for Kitchener's New Army. He did however enlist on the 4<sup>th</sup> January 1916, in Bacup, into the Royal Field Artillery. Gunner 116323 Mills was to form part of team of men who operated a 4.5" Quick Firing Howitzer. Many allied countries operated this machine and the one pictured here is a survivor of World War One from the Australian Army.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Cecil's Howitzer formed part of the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, attached to the 11th (Northern) Division. Artillery Brigades were the mobile punching power of a Division and worked independent of infantry. In the early stages of the war these guns were horse drawn and were reasonably manoeuvrable, being despatched at short notice as required. Each Brigade comprised four Batteries, A, B, C and D. A, B and C Batteries utilized the 18 pounder field gun while D Battery used the larger and longer ranged 4.5" Howitzer. From this information we know that Cecil was in D Battery of the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade, attached to the 11<sup>th</sup> Division.



4.5" Howitzer in action 1916

A Battery contained six guns; three sections of two guns, each gun being referred to as a half section. Each gun or half section was manned by a team of ten men, with a Sergeant in overall control and a Bombardier his second in command. At the time of his death Cecil had reached the rank of Acting Bombardier which would indicate that he was 2<sup>nd</sup> i/c of his Howitzer. We also know that Cecil had taken and passed, signalling exams which would also qualify him for advancement to Bombardier. It is understood that Cecil

was in charge of communications for his gun, passing targeting orders from Command and liaising with spotter aircraft and balloons. Controlled by Division, the howitzer's primary role was to bombard targets beyond the range of the smaller 18 pounders. It was also used to fire accurately targeted gas shells following a general bombardment, bombarding weaker defences, often behind enemy front lines, enfilading communications trenches and targeted barrage work for cutting wire in places where the 18 pounders could not reach. They were however, not generally used in the familiar 'creeping barrage', this being provided by the shorter range 18 pounder batteries. The

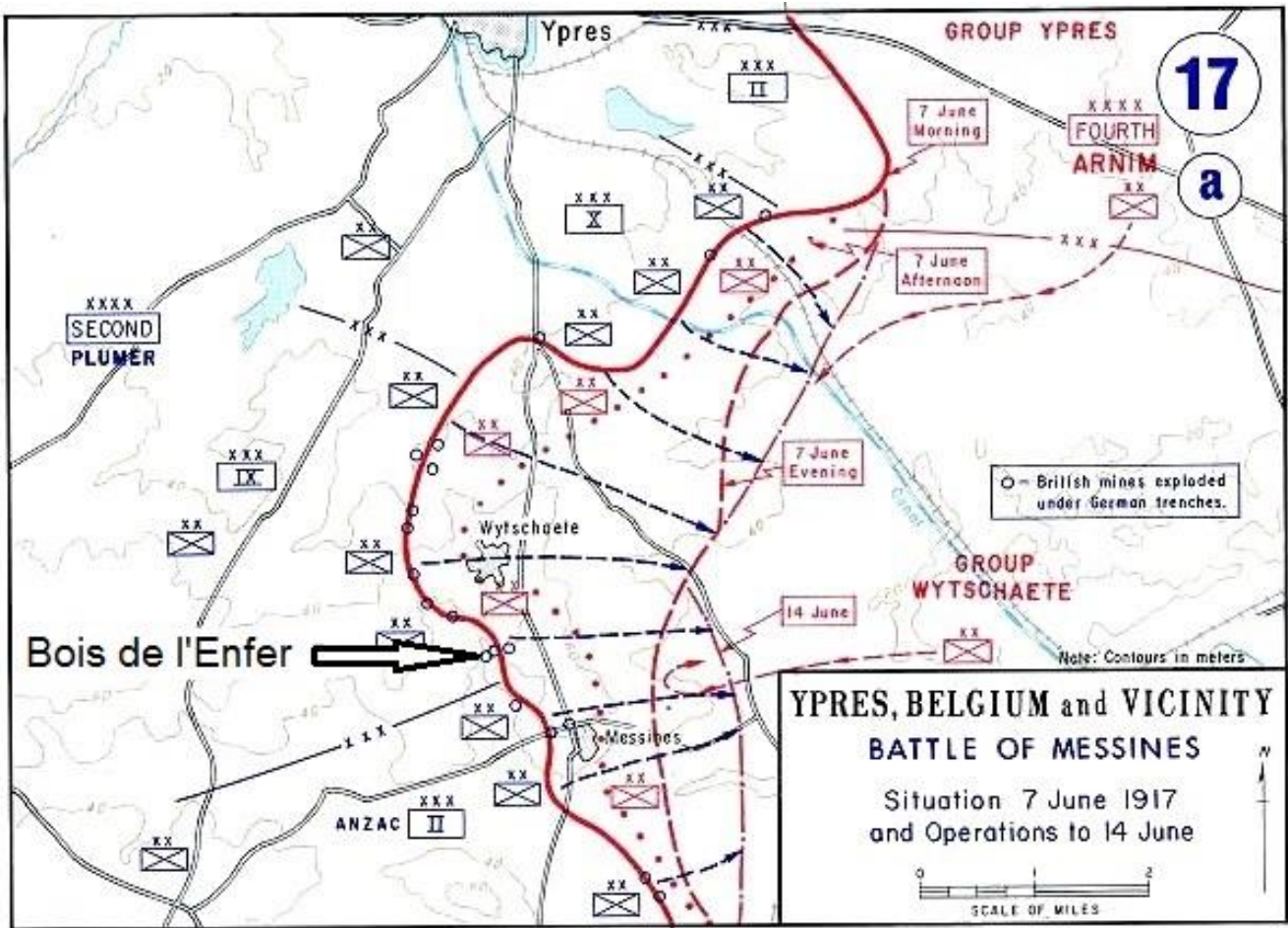
combination of 18 pounders and howitzers formed formidable, adaptable fire power which Divisional Commanders used to ruthless effect.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Division had fought at Gallipoli in 1915 and been active in the defence of the Suez Canal in early 1916. In July 1916 the whole Division embarked at Alexandria in Egypt and sailed for France and service on the Western Front. Sadly, few of Cecil's service records survive but we do know that he first travelled abroad in June 1916, which might suggest he joined the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Egypt and travelled shortly after to France. By scrutinising the war diary of the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade we are able to discover what happened to Cecil and his mighty artillery piece.

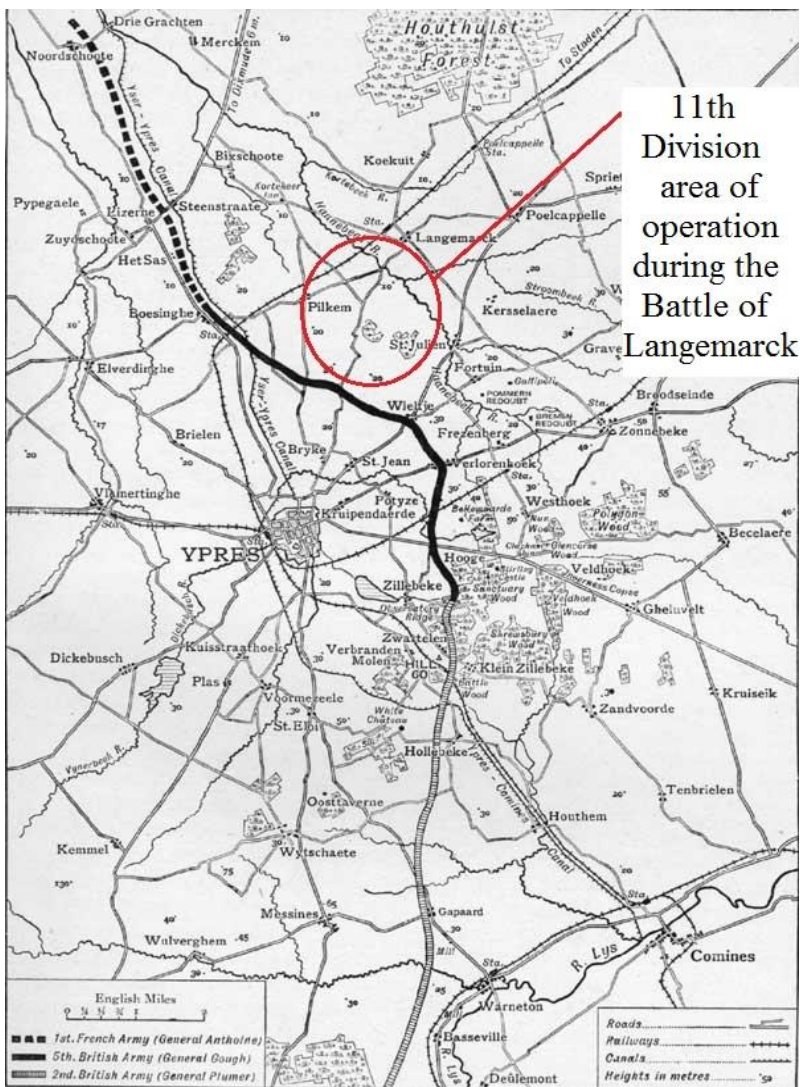
The official war diary starts with an entry on the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1916 which informs us that the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade had landed at Marseilles. For the next couple of weeks, the Division moved across France arriving in Arras on the 22<sup>nd</sup> July. D/59 was regularly utilized and gets numerous mentions in the diary. The Brigade stayed in Arras until the 28<sup>th</sup> August at which point they were moved to Mailly-Maillet just north of Albert. They spent the rest of the year in the area around Albert alternating between Owillers La Boiselle and Ferme du Mouquet, a small farm just to the east of Thiepval. This was the time of the Somme offensive and sadly, the fact the Brigade did not move far during this period only goes to illustrate what a painful, slow experience this major offensive turned out to be, with limited success and limited advancement. Christmas Day was spent at Owillers La Boiselle and appears to have been a day like any other. The diary reads:

*'Divisional Salvo's were fired throughout the morning – nothing unusual occurred and no attempts were made by the enemy to arrange an armistice. Work on positions went on as usual. Night firing by C & D on Baillescourt Farm. Lieutenant Richard Fitton was promoted acting Major'.*

The Brigade spent most of January at the front but toward the end of the month were moved toward the rear and safer billets at Bealcourt. The weather in February 1917 was appalling, cold, snowy and thoroughly unpleasant. Planned training at Bealcourt was abandoned due to the weather and before too long the Brigade was back in the firing line, billeted at their old haunt Mailly-Maillet. The Brigade stayed in or around the front line area of Beaumont-Hamel and Miraumont until the end of March at which point they were ordered back to the Arras area arriving on the 30<sup>th</sup> March in Montenescourt. At the beginning of April, the Brigade were involved in a huge barrage which lasted for five days. It transpired that this barrage was the precursor to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battle of Arras which commenced on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 1917 and lasted until the 16<sup>th</sup> May. During this battle the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade were in action around Wancourt to the east of Arras and supporting infantry attacks on Bullecourt. However, by the 17<sup>th</sup>, their Arras work complete and it was time for a change of scenery. They were marched to Avelny and on the 19<sup>th</sup> entrained and moved to 'The Second Army Area', Ypres. By the 21<sup>st</sup> May the whole Brigade found themselves in Belgium at a small village called Vierstraat, just south of Ypres, here they were affiliated to the 16<sup>th</sup> Division of the IX Army. The rest of the month the Brigade were bedding in and preparing for operations in the Vierstraat sector. On the 7<sup>th</sup> June the 2<sup>nd</sup> Army made a big push in an attempt to take the Messines



Ridge which was held by the enemy and enabled them to range down fire onto allied positions. It became vitally important that this strategically important ridge should be taken at all costs. This battle which ensued became known as the Battle of Messines and lasted from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> June. The Battle of Messines is particularly remembered for the way in which it was initiated. Nineteen huge mines, the locations of which can be seen indicated by small circles on the map above, were exploded under the German lines at the top of the ridge. This 'shock and awe' tactic was followed by a creeping barrage which protected the infantry advance. The 16<sup>th</sup> Division were involved in this advance, ably supported by the artillery of the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade. As the enemy were pushed back the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade advanced to provide continuing artillery support. On the 10<sup>th</sup> they were moved into a wood located between Wytschaete and Messines. On allied maps this wood was called the Bois de l'Enfer, to the men who fought there it was simply known by its English translation, 'Hell Wood'. The area around the wood had been heavily fortified by the enemy and, following heavy losses, the Cheshire Regiment had taken it in the earlier phases of the battle. Forced out of their protective encampment, the Germans proceeded to focus their enraged fire upon the British artillery hidden in the wood. But for the British this was an ideal location which enabled them to target the enemy's trenches, communications and support lines. It was essential that Hell Wood was held. The map above shows that by the 14<sup>th</sup> June a large bulge in the German defences had been eradicated and the ridge was in allied hands. The Brigade stayed in Hell Wood until the 27<sup>th</sup> when they were relieved and moved back to Bailleul for some well-earned rest.



It is at this point that a huge frustration develops in telling Cecil's story. The war diary inexplicably stops at the end of June and restarts in October 1917, but the period we are interested in is missing. The history of the 11<sup>th</sup> Division tells us that the Division was involved in the Battle of Langemarck and from this we can assume the 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade were involved in artillery support for their Division. Langemarck is located to the north of Ypres and the battle took place between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> August 1917. This struggle was a subsidiary confrontation of the Third Battle of Ypres and was designed to ease pressure upon the beleaguered city of Ypres. But even this does not tell us what happened to Cecil or what he was involved in at the time of his death. Cecil James Mills was 'killed in action' on the **25<sup>th</sup> August 1917**. From what we have learnt we know the dangers of being

in a field artillery battery, and therefore from this we can but speculate that Cecil's battery was targeted by enemy fire. Enemy fire which destroyed his life.

Cecil's body lies at rest in Bard Cottage Cemetery, plot IV.D.39. For much of the First World War, the village of Boesinghe (now Boezinge) directly faced the German line across the Yser canal. Bard Cottage was a house a little set back from the line, close to a bridge called Bard's Causeway, and the cemetery was made nearby in a sheltered position under a high bank. Burials were made between June 1915 and October 1918 and reflect the presence of the 49<sup>th</sup> (West Riding), the 38<sup>th</sup> (Welsh) and other infantry divisions in the northern sectors of the Ypres Salient, as well as the advance of artillery to the area in the autumn of 1917.



Bard Cottage Cemetery

A simple search of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website reveals a story of unimaginable horror. In Bard Cottage Cemetery, on the 25<sup>th</sup> August 1917, nine men of the Royal Field Artillery died and are all buried alongside each other. Six were from 'C' Battery, 58<sup>th</sup> Brigade and three from Cecil's 'D' Battery, 59<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Buried on either side of Cecil are his pals Gunner Harry Wright and Driver F. Pawson. 58<sup>th</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> Brigades were working together on the 25<sup>th</sup> August hence it is not unreasonable to conclude they were targeted and for nine families, tragedy struck.

Cecil is remembered on Kington War Memorial but also the Kington Boy's School memorial scroll. This impressive scroll was unveiled on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1922, Empire Day. Originally the school desired to have a permanent memorial but the imminent closure of the school forced them to find a more suitable substitute. The Roll of Honour was designed and executed in black and white by Miss Lois Maxwell, a member of school staff.



At the base of the scroll are the words, *'Still stands His cross from that dread hour to this, like some bright star above the dark abyss'*. Above these imposing words are gothic pillars which hold aloft a star and cross. A central panel contains 39 names of boy's who attended the school and lost their lives in the Great War. Either side of this central panel are drawn the badges of the regiments to which the boys belonged and there are faithful representations of the fighting in the trenches, in the air, and on the sea and operations by a British "Blimp". This beautiful work of art forms a unique and worthy memorial to the fallen.

It is worth reflecting upon how the war, and indeed Cecil's death, affected the Mills family back in Titley. Records indicate that even after John senior's death in 1914 the family continued to live

in Gorsty Dole. This quite probably because John junior worked on Oakcroft Farm and had reluctantly become the oldest male in the family and a valuable resource for the farm, after all the family were intrinsically linked to the Eywood Estate. With the emergence of conscription in March 1916 John junior was required to go through the tribunals process. The 11<sup>th</sup> March edition of the Kington Times informs us that he was required to attend the Kington Rural Tribunal where his circumstances and reason for not being conscripted were put to the tribunal. He informed the tribunal that his father was deceased and it was he who maintained the home for his mother and considerable family. Investigations were made and a couple of months later it was confirmed that John should have a full exemption from serving in the forces. One would have thought that was final however, in December 1916 John was informed that his exemption was 'conditional dependent upon substitution'. For John this meant he had an exemption

but a condition of the exemption was that he was required to find someone to go in his place. An unbelievably invidious position to find himself in. No records exist to indicate that he served in the forces so we must assume that he found said substitute. The other boy's in the Mills family, Henry and Frank were too young for enlistment prior to wars end in 1918. As for Margaret, it appears she did not remarry and continued to live in the Kington area. It is recorded in the Kington death register that she died in the third quarter of 1964, at the venerable age of 91.

For his sacrifice Cecil James Mills, gardener of Titley and Bacup, was awarded the British War and Victory medals. On the 14<sup>th</sup> January 1918 Cecil's military account was finalised and a sum of £5 16s 4d was forwarded to his mother. Later, in November 1919, a further £7 was passed to Margaret, in recognition of her sons sacrifice, as a War Gratuity. To put this into some sort of context, £7 today would be worth about £148.

