

# William Smith

Sergeant  
235424  
1st Battalion, Herefordshire Regiment

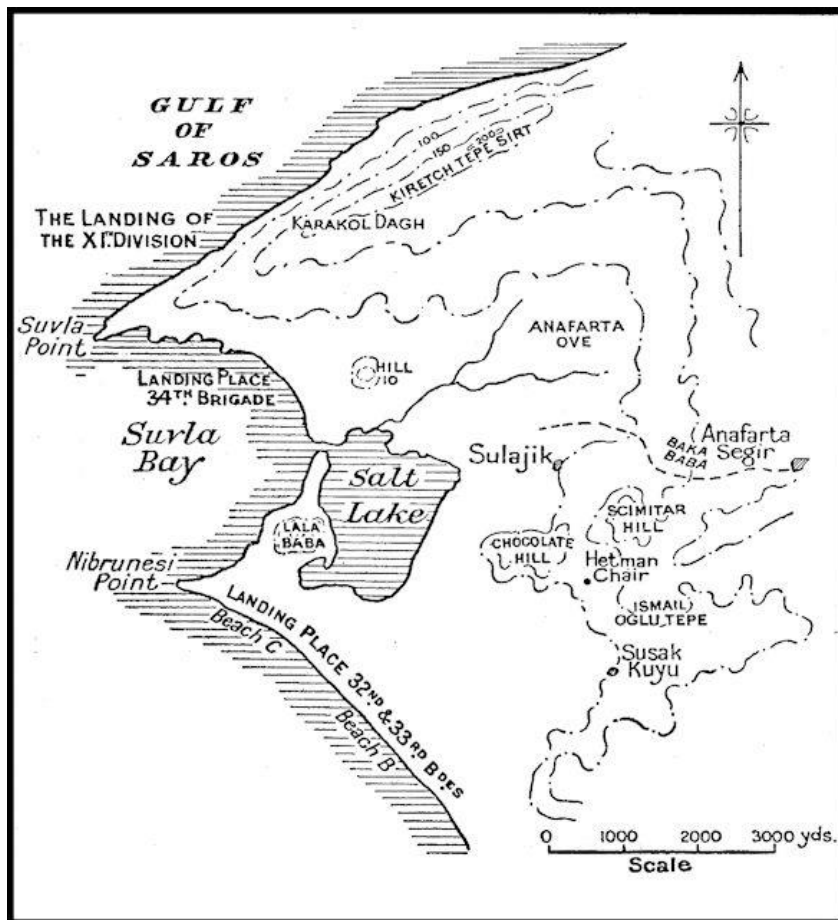


Born to Thomas and Anne Smith in mid-1887 William was their first son having been preceded by three daughters, Mary (1875), Anne (1877) and Elizabeth (1881). However, William was not destined to be the baby of the family for long and luckily for him a brother, John, arrived in 1890. Thomas, who came from Kingsland, was a farm labourer working mainly in the Marston area just outside Pembridge. It was in Marston in 1887 that William made his grand entrance. But just a couple of years after the birth of John, in 1892, tragedy was to strike the family when their mother Anne passed away at the age of just 43. William was just five years old. In 1895 Thomas remarried in Pembridge to Mary Price, a woman once previously married and considerably older than her new beau. The 1901 census reveals that Thomas had taken a new job and had moved his new wife and family into Kington where they were living in Recreation Ground Cottage on Kington Rec. Here he was responsible for maintaining the recreation ground for the Kington Urban Council. William attended Kington Boy's School on Gravel Hill and when his schooling was over left home and escaped into the big wide world. The 1911 census tells us that he had found work as a Grocer's Porter and that he was living in lodgings at 35 Broad Street, Leominster, his landlord being a stonemason called George Millward.

Regrettably, very few of Williams service records survive so this biography is primarily researched from the excellent **Manu Forti, A History of the Herefordshire**

**Regiment**, by Lieutenant-Colonel T.J.B. Hill. From the Kington Times we learn that William was one of the first volunteers from Kington to sign up, in September 1914. The paper also reveals that in 1914 William was back living in Kington, to be precise Duke Street. He enlisted in Hereford into 'D' Company the Herefordshire Regiment and answered to the title, Private 1756 Smith. 'D' Company was predominantly manned by men from the Kington area, not truly a 'Pals Company' but as good as. By the end of 1914 those early volunteers had been inoculated, had passed a fitness test and were considered ready for overseas service.

Throughout 1914 the regiment were training around Britain serving as home defence in Pembroke Dock, Oswestry, Northampton, Colchester and Rusden. When fully worked up, on 16th July 1915 the battalion embarked aboard the SS Euripides at Devonport and sailed to join the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. The ultimate destination of the battalion was kept a secret but the men on Euripides had no doubt where they were headed, Gallipoli. The Gallipoli campaign of 1915 was fought in an attempt to force Turkey out of the war and to open a supply route to Russia through the Dardanelles and into The Black Sea. Allied forces initially landed on the peninsula on 25th and 26th April but the advance up the peninsular was soon bogged down with bitter trench warfare ensuing.



warfare ensuing. To relieve the stalemate a plan was devised to land troops at Suvla Bay on the north side of the peninsula and to isolate the Turkish Army on the peninsula thus enabling the Allied Army to encircle them, defeat them and then proceed further up into Turkey.

At 7:20am on the 9th August 1915 the 1/1st Herefordshire Regiment landed at beach 'C' just below Nibrunesi Point on Suvla Bay. Communications between invading forces was poor, the distribution of Turkish forces was unknown, the terrain was appalling and heat oppressive. The regiment soon became disorientated but fought

on gallantly. Sir Ian Hamilton, the Commander in Chief of the landings later wrote. *"Some of the units which took part in this engagement acquitted themselves very bravely"*. The Divisional Commander speaks with appreciation of one freshly-landed battalion of the 53rd Division, a Hereford battalion, *"which attacked with impetuosity*

*and courage between Hetman Chair and Kaslar Chair, about Asmak Dere, on the extreme right of the line".* For their part in the landings at Suvla Bay on the 9th August 1915 the regiment was mentioned in dispatches and forever immortalised in a painting by Charles Dixon which for many years hung on the wall of the stairway in the Shire Hall, Hereford. This painting is now in the safe hands of the Regimental Museum at Suvla Barracks in Hereford and is proudly displayed in the Regimental Drill Hall.



Herefordshire Regiment Landing at Suvla Bay, 9th August 1915

The Gallipoli campaign rumbled on throughout 1915 and the planned encirclement of Turkish troops never happened. What did in fact happen was that the Suvla landings became just another theatre of trench warfare. Five Kington men lost their lives at Gallipoli, Ivor Boucher who died on the first day of the assault at Suvla Bay, Thomas Cook who died the following day and Ernest Meredith, who was fighting for the Royal Buckingham Hussars, toward the end of August. These three were sadly followed by Wilfred Cooke who died in November 1915 and Harry Homer, also killed in November. Harry's family had emigrated from England in 1910 to Australia and at the time of his death Harry was serving with the Australian Army Medical Corps. By the end of 1915 the Gallipoli campaign had ground to a halt. However well conceived, expectations were not met and it was in fact a failure. The Herefordshire Regiment had suffered terribly. On the 9<sup>th</sup> August, a sunny bright day, the battalion landed at Suvla Bay with 750 fit and strong men. By the time they were evacuated on the 12<sup>th</sup> December their number were decimated and they could muster no more that 100 fighting men. What remained of the Herefordshire Regiment was evacuated to Alexandria in Egypt where they arrived on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December. Their final destination was to be Wardan, some 40 miles north of Cairo. While there they were able to recuperate and regroup with new drafts of men arriving all the time to replenish their depleted numbers. The regiment was based in Wardan for six months and formed an integral part of the Suez Canal Defence Force.



The first half of 1916 was spent in relative peace and quiet on the West Bank of the River Nile, but by July it became evident that The Ottoman army, supported and advised by Germans, was making its way across the Sinai Desert toward the Nile. This advance had to be halted and British forces, including the Herefordshire's, were sent to confront them. The two opposing forces met at a place on the Mediterranean coast called Rumani. William would have been in the forefront of this fighting as were other Kington men. Sadly, it was here on the 4th August 1916 that nineteen-year-old Fred Morgan of Crooked Well lost his life, following a huge Turkish bombardment. Sergeant William Smith was at the heart of this fighting and saw many of his men, sixteen in fact, perish on that fateful day. On the 12th August the battalion were relieved and fell back to the relative safety of El Ferdan on the eastern side of the Suez Canal. They were to be based at El Ferdan for the next three months, training and regrouping. Reinforcements arrived and preparations were made for an advance across the Sinai Desert toward Palestine, Gaza and ultimately Jerusalem.



The photograph above shows men of the Herefordshire Regiment working with camels and their drivers. How strange this scene must have been to the men of rural Herefordshire, but these bizarre animals were vital to the regiments survival. Each camel carried two fanatis, receptacles for carrying scarce water. Without them the

Egyptian Expeditionary Force would not have survived the rigours of the Egyptian desert.

Due to activities on the Western Front Britain's resources were thinly stretched and by 1916 three major objectives were perceived. Maintaining maritime supremacy in the Mediterranean Sea, preserving the balance of power in Europe and the security of Egypt, India, and the Persian Gulf. The latter could be achieved by an advance into Palestine and the capture of Jerusalem with a further advance ultimately cutting off Ottoman forces in Mesopotamia from those on the Arabian Peninsula, thus securing the region.



Operations in the Middle East were secondary to those on the Western Front and despite General Sir Archibald Murray's desire to advance, his requests for reinforcements were initially denied. All he could do was to keep the enemy in check, pushing them back





masse toward Gaza. On the 25th they halted on the west bank of the Wadi el Ghazze, facing the enemy ranged out on the other side. A plan of attack was devised which saw the 53rd Division advancing across the Wadi el Ghazze and forming a bridgehead on the eastern side. The hand-drawn map above illustrates this plan of attack. And so, plan decided, on the 26th March 1917 the first Battle of Gaza commenced.

Once the bridgehead had been successfully consolidated the 5th Royal Welsh Fusiliers were set the task of advancing upon Ali Muntar just outside Gaza, supported by the Herefordshire Regiment. Although initially in reserve, when the 5th RWF found themselves pinned down by robust enemy fire it was not long before the Herefords and Sergeant William Smith were called into action. C and D Companies took up position either side of the 5th RWF and together they advanced to within 500 yards of the enemy positions at Ali Muntar. Turkish resistance was intense with the battalion coming under a murderous barrage of fire from machine guns and rifles. By 2pm all progress was stopped and as the afternoon wore on and dusk approached desperate attempts were made to break through the enemy lines. The battalion advanced again and more progress was made as nightfall came. The 53rd Division's initial gains meant that by sunset the town of Gaza was all but encircled and the allies were knocking at the door of this embattled town. However, communications in the fog of war were often difficult and the command party back in battle headquarters were unaware of the stoic advances made by the Hereford's and their comrades. With darkness falling and water in short supply command made the fateful decision to withdraw their army back to the original concentration points on the east bank of the Wadi el Ghazze. With hindsight this proved to be a tragic decision. Although disorganised and confused it was clear that the territory gained could have been held but alas all gains were lost and the enemy were given the opportunity to regroup.

The command team soon realised their error and in the early hours of the 27th March, the Herefords were once again ordered forward to try to retake the earlier gains. At 7am the men of the Herefordshire Regiment advanced and joined up with men from the Essex Regiment. But, the retreat of the previous day had given the Ottoman troops time to regroup and resistance was strong. The brave men of the Herefordshire and Essex Regiments advanced but eventually were forced to retire. The Herefords withdrew to their original concentration position at Mansura having suffered heavy losses. A total of seventeen out of twenty two officers were killed, wounded or missing and two hundred and eighteen other ranks were killed, wounded or missing. The fateful decision to withdraw the troops early had managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The First Battle of Gaza had ended in defeat. Gaza was heavily reinforced and a further two major assaults were made on the town which was not taken until early November 1917, following the loss of many more, good Herefordshire men.

The Kington Times of the 21st April 1917 reported that Sergeant William Smith of Duke Street had been reported as missing in battle. This message was repeated in the 5th May edition. It was not until much later that Williams death was officially recorded as



being on the **27th March 1917**. He died during the 1st Battle of Gaza, trying to retake ground relinquished the previous evening.

Sergeant William Smith has no grave, instead his death is commemorated upon the Jerusalem Memorial, panel 54. William shares this memorial with 3308 other casualties. Located in Jerusalem War Cemetery, the memorial is 4.5 kilometres north of the walled city and is situated on the neck of land at the north end of the Mount of Olives, to the west of Mount Scopus. The cemetery was started after the capture of Jerusalem in December 1917 and now contains 2514 burials in addition to those names on the memorial.



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As is ever the case, back home in Kington, life continued. In spite of the obvious grief of losing a son and brother life carried on. Mary, Williams oldest sister, married an Edward Cork

just shortly after Williams death in 1917 and in 1918 Williams younger brother married Eleanor Griffiths in Croydon. These two facts are evidenced in the 'List of Soldiers Effects' whereby, at the end of the war, William is presumed dead and his account stood at £6 8s 1d. On the 16<sup>th</sup> January 1919 £3 4s 1d was forwarded to his sister Mrs Mary Cork and on 22<sup>nd</sup> May that year a further £3 4s found its way to his sister-in-law Mrs. Eleanor Smith in Croydon. On the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1919 a War Gratuity of £15 was accepted by Williams brother John who was living at 34, Limes Rd., West Croydon.

William had suffered the horrors of Gallipoli and endured the privations of desert life. He had marched through the Sinai and fought at Rumania and confronted the enemy at close quarters at Gaza, where his life came to a premature end on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 1917. For his gallantry and sacrifice his nation posthumously awarded him the Victory and British War medals and the 1915 Star. He may have no grave but he is forever immortalised in both Jerusalem and Kington, a fitting tribute to this brave man.



Researched and developed by Mark Wheatland