

Percy Harris

Sergeant

2718

1st/6th Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment



Percy Harris was born in Kington in early 1894, the youngest son of James and Fanny Harris. James had married Fanny Bennet in 1875 and soon after started raising what was to be a large family. In the 1881 census the young family were living at No.1 Caines Lane, Caines just outside Droitwich and James was working as a Coachman. By 1887 the family had settled in Kington and when Percy made his grand entrance in 1894 he had four older brothers, William, Victor, Gilbert and Robert, and three older sisters, Fanny, Nellie and Agnes. The 1891 census reveals the family were living at 21 Old Kington, up at the Wych, and James was still employed as a Coachman. Sometime after Percy's birth James moved his large family to Presteigne and the 1901 census tells us he had changed his profession and was then the landlord of the Barley Mow Inn on Hereford Street, Presteigne. Many of Percy's older siblings had moved away by this time and only his mother, father and brother Robert were there to keep him company. Percy was just seven years old and I feel sure living in a public house was an exciting time for such a young and energetic boy. We next find Percy in the 1911 census which reveals that major changes had again happened in the Harris family. James, Percy's father, was recorded as living in Bishop's Frome just south of Bromyard, as a boarder of Miss Sarah Jones and was employed as a labourer. Meanwhile Fanny had moved to 20 Charles Street in Aston, Birmingham, where she appears to be living with four of her five sons. Victor, one of her older sons, is employed as a Grocery Manager and is recorded as the head of the family. Gilbert is employed as an engineering tool

setter and young brothers Robert and Percy are employed as Clerks, Robert in manufacturing and Percy in the shipping industry. It is unclear why the family are separated but, as was required in the 1911 census, Fanny declares that she is still married and has been so for seventeen years. Why James is separated from his family is unclear but Fanny also declares that two of her eight children had passed away by the time of the 1911 census. Sadly, a not uncommon occurrence at this time.

So, that was 1911, the next time we see Percy's name recorded is when he enlisted in Birmingham, into the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, 1/6th Battalion Territorials as Private 2718 Harris in August 1914. The 1/6th Warwickshire regiment was one of many raised following the declaration of war on 4th August 1914 and started life in Thorpe Street, Birmingham as part of the Warwickshire Brigade, South Midlands Division. Four Warwickshire Territorial battalions made up the Warwickshire Brigade, the 1/5th, 1/6th, 1/7th and 1/8th battalions. We now turn to the regimental war diary of the 1/6th to discover how Percy and his regiment were employed on the Western Front. In March 1915 the battalion were based at

Kelvedon in Essex with the Brigade Headquarters at Felix Hall, Kelvedon. Here the men of the Warwickshire Brigade were trained and prepared for service at the front. On the 22nd March the whole Brigade boarded nine trains and moved to Southampton ready to embark for France. 29 officers and 997 other ranks of the



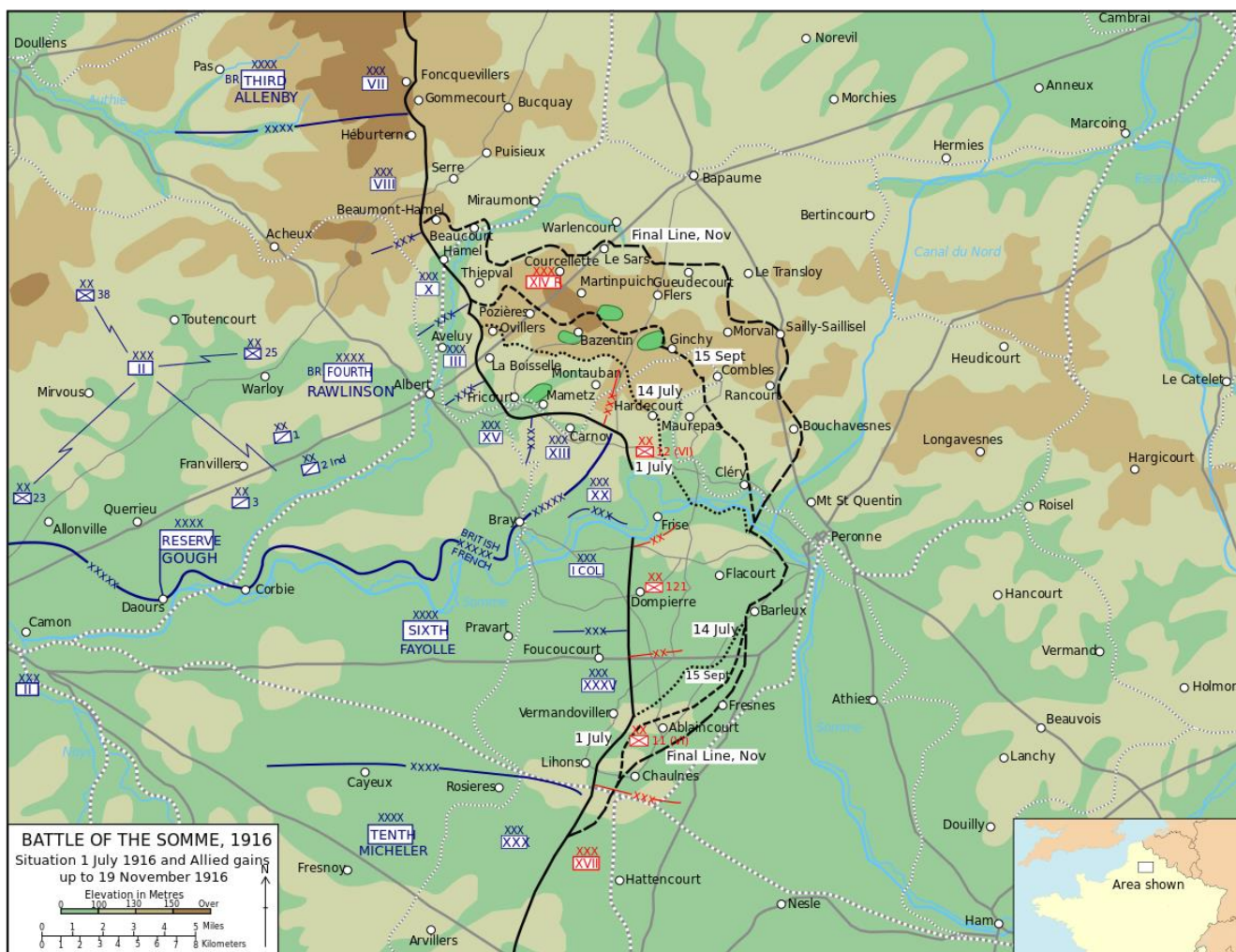
Felix Hall, Kelvedon
Warwickshire Brigade HQ 1914

1/6th Regiment, along with the Brigade HQ, boarded the Empress Queen and at 18:00 sailed from Southampton arriving in Le Havre in the early hours of the 23rd March. By the end of March, they had made their way across France and were based in Bailleul, just to the north west of Armentieres. On the 1st April they marched from Bailleul heading for the trenches at Armentieres, which they entered on the 3rd and started familiarising themselves with trench warfare. The reality of war strikes home when the diary informs that their first casualty was the death of Private 2768, Croft on the 17th April 1915. The battalions first relief from trench duty was not until the middle of June when they were removed from the frontline and retired to Auchel for some well-deserved rest and recuperation. The 1/6th Warwickshire Regiment worked particularly closely with their brother regiment the 1/5th throughout 1915, moving around together and relieving each other frequently.

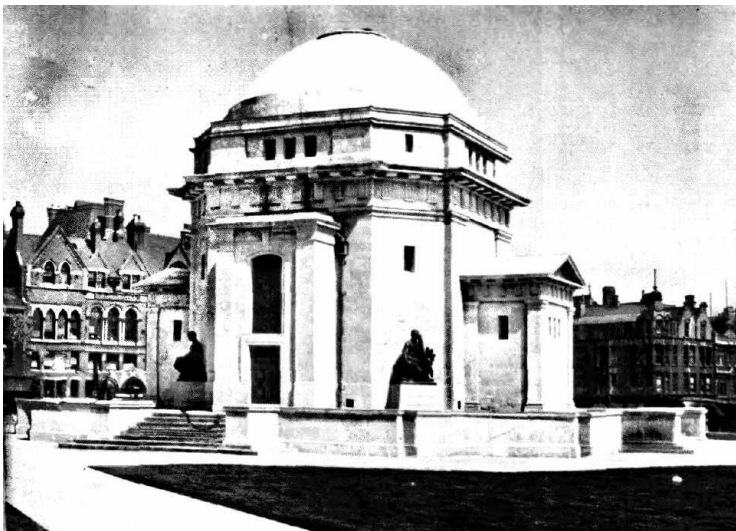
Christmas 1915 was spent in the trenches at Fonquevillers, just south of Arras and this was to be their area of operation throughout the first half of 1916. Toward the end of June 1916 a huge expansion of troops and materiel was centred upon the Somme area of France. A big push was planned for the 1st July and the 1/6th Warwickshire battalion were to be at the heart of the advance. On the 30th June 24 officers and 626 other ranks left Maily and marched for their assembly point on the front line. Their objective in this big push was to be a German strongpoint called the Heidenkopf sector to the northern end of the Redan Ridge, the British had named this area the quadrilateral. At 7.40am on 1st July the battalion left their assembly trenches and followed the 8th battalion Royal Warwickshire Regiment over the top. They immediately took casualties, the diary recording *'heavy casualties, about 80 before crossing our own lines, mingled with those casualties from the 1/8th Warwick's'*. Today we can only imagine the horrors those men went through but they pressed on and gained their first objective, the quadrilateral and frontline German trenches. Here they began the work of clearing the enemy trenches and prepared to advance to their next objective. The battalion were strafed by well positioned enemy machine gun posts, carnage ensued. Despite repeated German counter attacks they were able to consolidate their new position but were eventually forced to retreat back to their original objective, the quadrilateral. That evening, severely mauled, the battalion were sent back to Maily. Of 650 men who went over the top estimated casualties were 120 killed or missing and 316 wounded. The battalion had been reduced by more than half and the following day stragglers kept arriving at the battalion billets in Maily. At roll call on the 2nd July just 176 men answered as their name was read out, Percy Harris was one of them, he had survived the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Tragically nearly 20000 of his comrades were killed on that day and 65000 made casualties. The 1st July 1916, the first day of The Battle of the Somme, was and will always be remembered as, the worst single loss of life throughout the war, and since. Eventually the battalion were moved away from the front and back to relative safety at Couin. But respite was short lived and on the 13th July the battalion were moved west, to Albert and by the 16th the men were back in the trenches and again pushing forward. Much of the battalion's officer corps had been killed or wounded in those first desperate days of July and the rank and file decimated. Much needed reinforcements arrived daily and were immediately thrust into the fighting. On the 19th the battalion were relieved by the 1/5th Gloucester Regiment and only then were they able to retire to Bouzincourt to lick their wounds and regroup. Percy would have seen action throughout this period.

For the next month the battalion were in and out of the trenches with their numbers being increased all the time. On the 18th August, in conjunction with the 1/5th Warwickshire's, they were again involved in a significant advance and were successful in capturing enemy territory along with six German officers and 245 other ranks, including many N.C.O's. But, for all the gains, casualties were high with six officers killed and three wounded in addition to twenty-three other ranks killed, ninety wounded and ten missing. Percy again was in the thick of the fighting

and on the 19th August was one of those who consolidated their hard earned gains and must have felt relief when on the 20th the battalion handed over to the 1/7th Worcester Regiment and went into Divisional Reserve at Bouzincourt. But relief was short-lived and on the 23rd the battalion once again moved into the trenches, this time at Ovillers, to the north west of Albert and again at the heart of the fighting. Not until the end of August were the battalion moved well behind the lines and given the opportunity to fully regroup at a place called Bois de Warnemont. The whole of September was spent out of harm's way at Prouville where they were able to regroup, reinforce and reorganise. As September turned to October the battalion again started heading toward the front and on the 12th October re-entered trenches at Hebuterne. Immediately casualties started to rise. Toward the end of October, they were billeted in Mametz Wood to the south east of Albert and were heavily involved in supplying large working parties, particularly for the glamorous task of road rebuilding and refurbishment. Mid-November saw the battalion placed into Brigade Reserve at Fricourt where more working parties were prepared and sent wherever needed. But respite was again short lived and on the 9th November they were back in the trenches, this time at Martinpuich to the north east of Albert. In the closing phases of the Battle of the Somme, between 13th and 18th November, the battalion took part in the Battle of Ancre and were fighting at the northern end of the Allied line at Le Sars, just outside Martinpuich.



The Battle of the Somme had been a drawn out, bloody war of attrition made up of many smaller, but no less deadly, small engagements. The Battle of Ancre was the final largescale British attack of the Somme offensive before winter weather forced a pause in attacks until the new year. Political unrest was evident in London and the army needed a big success at the end of 1916 to quell the disquiet. The attack was preceded by seven days of bombardment. The towns of Beaumont Hamel, St. Pierre Divion and Beaucourt were all captured during the offensive giving the British a large tactical advantage at the close of 1916. German casualties were high and over 7000 German troops were taken prisoner. The 1/6th Warwickshire Regiment rotated in and out of the trenches around Le Sars for the next month with dead and wounded casualties incurred most days. At some point in this period of fighting Percy Harris was wounded in action. Where and when we will never know for sure but Percy succumbed on the **10th December 1916** when he 'died of injuries sustained'. Percy was buried in the nearby Martinpuich British Cemetery, grave ref: C2. At the time of his death Percy had attained the rank of Sergeant, had fought through the terrible Battle of the Somme and endured immeasurable hardship. For his bravery and sacrifice he was awarded the Victory and British War medals and the 1915 star.



Back home in Birmingham his family received his final effects with his mother and surviving siblings each receiving an equal share of the £10 15s 9d owed to him by the army. In August 1919 his mother received a further £13 war gratuity as recognition of her loss. Percy's father appears to have received nothing. Percy is not only remembered on the memorial of his birth place, Kington, he is also

remembered in Birmingham. As can be imagined the city of Birmingham lost many men, and women, during the First World War. To commemorate their sacrifice a Hall of Memory, located in what is now called Centenary Square, was opened on 4th July 1925. Inside was place a Roll of Honour naming 12320 men and women who lost their lives in the war. Included was the citation, 'when the cause of Justice and Civilization was at stake, they died that we might have freedom'. The sacrifices these brave men made are today just historical memories. We must never forget what these men, and in this case Percy Harris, sacrificed to gain the freedoms we take for granted today.



This biography has been developed by
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