

Stories of the Great War

Henry William Soul 1889 – 1917

A hundred years ago, in November 1917, one of the major battles of World War I was coming to an end. The Third Battle of Ypres, also known as Passchendaele, was bloody, slow-moving and ended in trenches made hideous by mud. It was here, on 22nd November 1917, that Henry Soul was killed in action. He is buried in The New British Cemetery at Passchendaele, made after the Armistice when graves were brought in from the battlefields of Passchendaele and Langemarck.



Henry was born when his parents were living at the wharf at Chalford, close to Christchurch, and he had an elder sister Edith. Both attended Brimscombe School; their mother Elizabeth had grown up there. His father, Mark, was a well-known omnibus proprietor who ran services from Cossack Square, Nailsworth to Stroud; he had an office with a telephone line in 1909 and lived with his wife at Scar Hill from 1901.

Henry did not join his father in what was already a prosperous business, choosing instead to join the 1st Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment, probably in about 1908. His attestation papers have not survived; most records dating from this period were lost during an air-raid in World War II. However, by 1911 he was living in barracks at Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight, with the rank of Private. As a regular soldier he had probably signed-on for seven years, but the events of 1914 would plunge him into a longer period of service.

From 1912 The 1st Battalion was to spend two pleasant years in Egypt - years of which the most notable events of military importance included minor riots at Alexandria, the organisation and training of successive Camel Corps troops at the Central School in Cairo, and the manoeuvres of the little British Army of Occupation in heat and dust across the desert near the Pyramids. Besides those events, the tour in Egypt was notable for much hospitality at Alexandria to the visiting warships of many nations, and for the great interest taken in the Battalion by Lord Kitchener. Henry was part of this deployment but as events gathered pace in Europe the Battalion sailed from Alexandria on board the troopship "Deseado" on 30th September 1914. Southampton had been the original destination, but a scare of German submarines caused the route to be changed, and it was at Liverpool that the Battalion arrived on the evening of 16th October. The night was spent in disembarking the troops and stores and at dawn next morning the Battalion entrained for Winchester.

After a short period on English soil the Battalion, now part of 24th Brigade of Infantry in the 8th Division, moved to France, landing at Le Havre on 6th November 1914. They were one of several Divisions of the Regular Army brought back from the Middle and Far East to be utilised on the Western Front, and in March joined the action at Neuve Chapelle, near to Bethune, which was the first large scale organised attack undertaken by the British Army during the war.

After a prolonged bombardment the Infantry advanced, pushing into the enemy's lines but there were delays in sending further orders and reinforcements forward. By nightfall the village had been captured, and the advanced units were in place; during the night the Germans reinforced their second and all further attempts over the next few days brought little material success. Henry, with the rest of his Battalion were sent rearward. Further actions in northern France were undertaken in 1915, interspersed with periods "in reserve" and it appears that Henry did not return to England during that time.

The next major engagement for the Battalion was in the Battle of the Somme in 1916. The official history shows the nature of trench warfare on the Transloy Ridges. In October *"the 1st Battalion were holding the front line, and had been suffering severely from cold and wet in the water-logged trenches. October 20th was a comparatively quiet day, but on the 21st — a day of bitter cold — the enemy's artillery woke to renewed activity and heavily bombarded the British positions round Gueudecourt. The British artillery fiercely replied ...the shelling on that day cost the Battalion over fifty casualties. The next day (October 22nd) passed without notable incident. That evening the Battalion was relieved and moved back into reserve positions along Needle Trench. The morning of October 23rd was damp and very foggy ...the 1st Worcestershire were in reserve throughout the day, but presently sent forward a company to support the East Lancashire. During October 24th, another day of thick mist, the position remained unchanged, and not until the evening of the next day did the 1st Worcestershire move forward. Then the Battalion relieved the East Lancashire in "Shine Trench" and in the captured "Mild Trench" and settled down to the work of consolidation.*

On the evening of October 27th, the 4th Battalion again came into the line ...both the 1st and the 4th Battalions of the Worcestershire Regiment were in the line together, barely a thousand yards apart, during the next two days. It was a very trying time, with much hard labour in deep mud under heavy shell-fire."

During the engagements of 1916 Henry was promoted from Private to Sergeant. During early 1917 the Germans retreated to the highly fortified Hindenburg Line, and trench warfare on the Western Front moved into Flanders. In July the Third Battle of Ypres commenced, with initial success for the Allies, but as the Autumn wore on, the familiar weather problems were encountered. In November, from positions to the south, the march to the Salient was begun, then a train journey to Ypres, a March to a camp near St. Jean. The official history continues *"Two days later (19th) the Battalion moved forward to the line. Leaving camp at 2 p.m. the companies trudged forwards along duckboards across the mud over the old front lines ... Long after dark the platoons of the 1st Worcestershire struggled through heavy mud past the ruins of Passchendaele, and relieved on the further slopes the Regiment's old comrades of the 2nd Lincolnshire. Dawn showed the devastated area in all its repulsiveness. The troops in the front line crouched in a series of muddy shell-holes roughly entrenched and partially connected. The enemy's gun-fire was heavy and unceasing, and casualties were frequent. Orders were to advance the line when opportunity occurred, and, in accordance with these orders the posts in the front line were pushed forward every night from shell-hole to shell-hole...."* On the 22nd, after three days of heavy fighting, Henry was among the 17 listed as killed or missing; that same night the Battalion was relieved and returned to the rear.

The experiences of Henry mirror those of thousands of troops on the Western Front throughout the war. By the time he was killed his parents were living in Tetbury Street and he is commemorated on the Town War Memorial.

Diana Wall