

19) 7973 Sergeant Herbert William **SMITH**  
(St Mary's Aldermaston)

**Dow** 24/07/16  
2nd Bn Royal Berkshire Regiment

**Born** East Hendred  
**Enlisted** Reading  
**Residence** Dover

**Awarded:** 1914 Star (without date clasp)  
British War Medal  
Victory Medal

**Date arrived in theatre of war:** France, 6/11/1914

Herbert Smith (then as a Lance Corporal) would have been a pre-war Regular soldier with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire and was stationed out in India when war broke out in August 1914. The battalion returned to England and arrived at Liverpool on the HT '*Dogola*' on 22/10/14, before moved to a camp near Winchester to complete the mobilisation of the new 8<sup>th</sup> Division before going out to France on the '*Kingstonian*' on 4/11/14. This latter date, by one day, would become crucial for his (along with other members of 8<sup>th</sup> Division) award of the 1914 Campaign Star as opposed to the more common 1914-15 Campaign Star. However he would not receive the date clasp to this medal as he would not be located in a front line position on this crucial date.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire were sent to the Bethune sector of the Western Front, a mining area, flat but noted for its towering slag heaps that became key observation posts in this area. Remarkably, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire and the 8<sup>th</sup> Division would spend well over a year in this sector, never once being posted to the Ypres Salient to the north.

After the front had settled down by Christmas 1914, the British GOC, John French, considered that the Bethune area was the most favourable part of the line to stage offensives to break through the German lines and win the war. In the trenches themselves, the first winter had been dreadful with many cases of 'trench foot' occurring as a result of standing for long periods in near freezing water/mud, getting little chance to remove boots and puttees to rub life back into their feet. For the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, their trenches became so waterlogged they were forced to abandon them to build breastworks of sandbags at ground level to avoid the flooding. Living conditions were beyond miserable.

In the months leading up to March 1915, Herbert Smith (possibly now a Sergeant) would have spent his time either in the front line trenches at Fauquissart, or behind the lines at Estaires/Laventie or other similar villages as circumstances dictated. By the end of February 1915, the battalion had suffered only 29 fatalities and had had a pretty 'quiet' time of it. This was soon to change.

They were pulled out of the line in the first week of March 1915 for final training before entering the front line trenches before the village of Neuve Chapelle on the evening of the 9<sup>th</sup>. The following morning and for the next four days, Herbert Smith and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire would be involved in the Battle of Neuve Chapelle. Their casualties in this rather confused battle amounted to 112 killed or died of wounds, 357 wounded and 27 missing. This would amount to more than half the fighting strength of the battalion. Although the village of Neuve Chapelle had been captured, there had been no decisive breakthrough.

Herbert Smith and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire stayed in the same area following the battle. On May 9-10<sup>th</sup>, they were again in action at the Battle of Aubers Ridge. This would cost a further 45 fatalities, 206 wounded and 42 missing. Herbert Smith would also fortunately survive this forgotten battle. Again there would be no breakthrough and the British losses in total would amount to 11,000 men. Again, following this action, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire

remained in the same area, slowly building their numbers back up with replacements from England, until they were back up to full strength once more.

Although not part of the main attack at the Battle of Loos in September-October 1915, they took part in a subsidiary attack in the Bois Grenier sector as a diversion to ensure the Germans could not bring up reserves from this nearby sector. Although a 'demonstration', this action still cost the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire 38 killed, 221 wounded and 143 missing...but, once again, Herbert Smith had got through. The battalion remained in the same area until December when they were brought out of the line to Sercus for a well-deserved long rest and refit. They, at least, had Christmas out of the line.

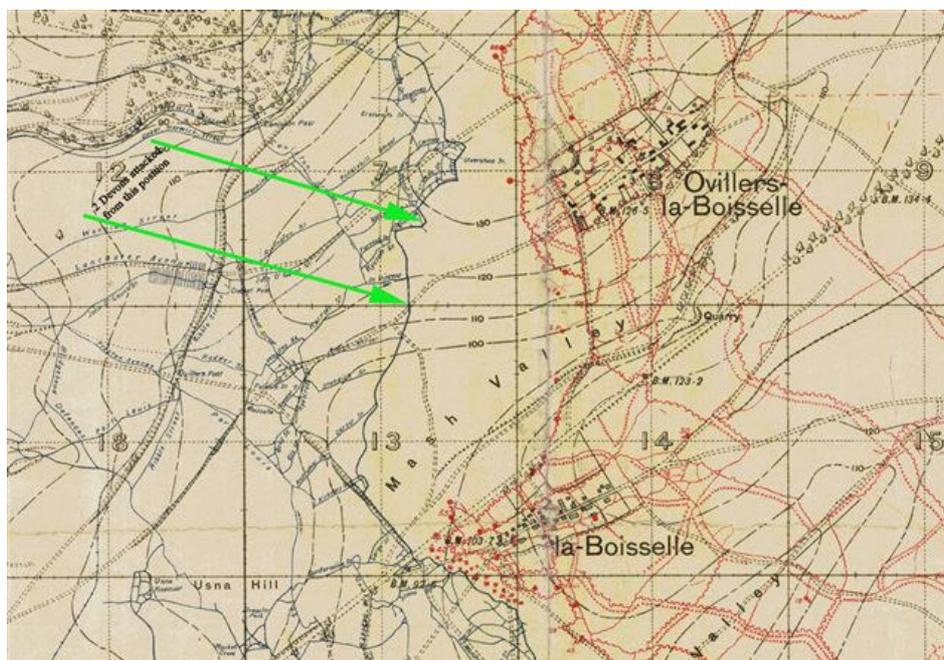
January 1916 saw Herbert Smith and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire back in the lines near Fleurbaix. After the actions of 1915, this sector was 'quiet' and would remain so until the last months of the war. However, at the end of March 1916, they were moved down to the Somme area to become part of the main offensive for July 1916. In this time, the battalion trained behind the lines for their part in the offensive and took turns in the front lines between the German-held fortified villages of Thiepval and Ovillers la Boisselle.

The battalion war diary provides the original operation orders for the attack of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916. In fact they would be in the very first actions of this battle, going 'over the top' at 7.30am that very morning. The orders for the attack are 'upbeat' and clearly had made the assumption that German resistance would be minimal, if any. There were more orders about preventing looting by the advancing troops and that no soldier was to assist a wounded comrade back to a Dressing Station than what might be done if the enemy had survived in numbers and put up a fight...

The war diary entry for 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 is given below; Herbert Smith took part in this attack and would again somehow survive...

### **1<sup>st</sup> July 1916**

*Attack on Ovillers. The Battalion took up assembly position in accordance with Brigade Operation Order 100 – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Lincolnshire Regt. was on the left and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn Devonshire on right.*



**Positions at Ovillers la Boisselle 1/7/16 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire attacked just above 2<sup>nd</sup> Devonshire (green arrows)**

*Our own wire was not sufficiently cut and parties were immediately sent out by Companies to clear it. At 6.25am the intensive bombardment began as scheduled. At about 7.15am, the enemy opened fire rifle and machine-gun fire on our line; this fire was probably drawn by 2<sup>nd</sup> Devon Regt which at about this time attempted to line up in front of their parapet [if there had been question that any enemy could have survived this week long bombardment, such doubt was now gone, they had survived, in numbers and were certainly going to make a fight of it – in those last 15 minutes what must have gone through the minds of the men waiting to go ‘over the top’ now knowing it wasn’t going to be the promised ‘walkover’ after all...?]*

*At 7.20am Companies began filing down trenches and getting ready for the assault.*



**Photograph taken shortly after 7.30am 1/7/16 – here is the second wave waiting to go, they each have just 10 minutes to live – and they know it...**

*At 7.30am the three assaulting companies advanced to attack the German line. They were met by intense rifle and machine-gun fire which prevented any of the waves reaching the enemy lines. A little group on the left of the Battalion succeeded in getting in, but were eventually bombed out.*



**Familiar 'Over the Top' on the Somme – a faked image for the official film..**



**Genuine photograph 7.30am 1/7/16, confident of success, the troops attack with rifles  
'at the slope', within minutes most of these men would become casualties**

*At about 7.45am, the Commanding Officer and Second in Command were wounded on the sap on the left of our front. The Commdg Officer handed over command to the Acting Adjutant. By this time the parapet was swept by rifle and machine-gun fire which prevented any exit from our trenches. The enemy replied to our intensive bombardment by barraging the front line from about 6.35am onwards. No message was received from other battalions in immediate vicinity [they were suffering the same fate..., the attack had lasted just 15 minutes]*



**Reality 1/7/16 – bringing in wounded under fire – this man died 30 minutes later**

*At about 11am the order came from Bde Headquarters to 'stand by' and await further orders. About 200 men of the battalion [all that remained unwounded] were collected on the right of the front line and in Assembly trenches. At about 12.30pm news was received that the Brigade would be relieved.*



**Reality 1/7/16 – just some of the 35,000 wounded this day**

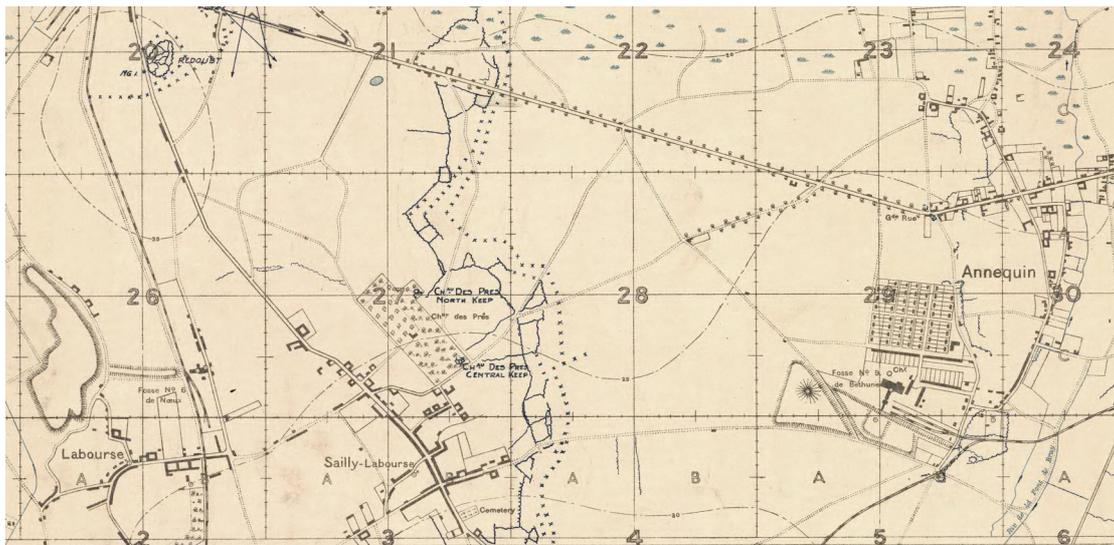
*At about 3pm...the 2<sup>nd</sup> Rifle Brigade managed to take over all the front line and with sanction of the Brigade, the battalion was withdrawn. On relief..., the battalion marched back to bivouacs in LONG VALLEY. Two Lewis guns were damaged; Steel helmets proved invaluable and in numberless cases saved lives.*

Casualties: 39 killed, 268 wounded and 127 missing, the vast majority of the 'missing' would actually have been 'killed inaction'. Of the 24 Officers taking part in the action, 20 had become casualties, well over 500 of the approximately 600 men taking part had fallen in just the amount of time it has taken the author to copy out this piece from the battalion war diary

and for the reader to read it – this is but a part of the story of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 on the Somme, the same story took place just about all along the line – 57,000 soldiers fell in but a single day.

The attack had been a disaster, the upbeat expectations of their original orders to break through the enemy lines and 'push on to Bapaume' had been forgotten in a just matter of minutes. The whole brigade, totally shattered, was pulled out of the fighting and was transferred by train back to very familiar surroundings at Bethune just days later. Survivors of 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916, including Sgt Herbert Smith, would never forget what happened this day.

By the end of July 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire, very much depleted were back in the trenches just in front of the village of Saily Labourse. This was familiar territory and the sector was quiet compared to the raging Battle of the Somme that could still be heard to the south.



**Lines in front of Saily Labourse July 1916, 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire positions**



**Aerial photograph of Saily Labourse – today, the scars of trenches can still be seen**

On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1916, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire entered the front line trenches. The war diary entries for the next few days (after omitting repetitive mentions of location of battalions to their left and right) are quite brief:

23/7/16: In trenches...1 man Killed, 1 Died of Wounds, 1 Wounded, 3 men to hospital

24/7/16: In trenches...1 man Killed, 4 men Wounded

The same is found for the remaining days of this 4-day tour in the trenches by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Royal Berkshire. The battalion, being a pre-war Regular unit, paid strict obedience to the official layout of its war diary – Officers were mentioned by name, other ranks by numbers thereof only. There are no details of how these 'other ranks' became casualties, when or where they were at the time...

...However, after surviving almost two years on the Western Front, four major attacks by his battalion where they had been practically wiped out, the nightmare that was 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 on the Somme, Sgt Herbert Smith's luck had finally ran out. By this stage, very few of the original battalion that had set out to France in November 1914 would still have been serving in it, most had by now become casualties.



**View over British lines at Sailly Labourse - today**

Sgt Herbert Smith was seriously wounded either on 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup> July 1916 whilst in the front line trenches before Sailly Labourse. From where he was buried, it is evident he was taken back to the Aid Post in the village of Sailly Labourse, itself just behind the front lines where he died of his wounds and was buried just outside this Aid Post.

Today, Sgt Herbert Smith is buried at:

**SAILLY-LABOURSE COMMUNAL CEMETERY, France, P. 2**

## SAILLY-LABOURSE COMMUNAL CEMETERY



### **Location Information**

Sully-Labourse is a village five kilometres south-east of Bethune on the main road to Lens (N43).

### **Historical Information**

The village of Sully-Labourse was used for rest billets and by field ambulances for much of the First World War. It was close to the battlefield of Loos, but from October 1915 to September 1918, no considerable advance or retirement took place in this sector.

SAILLY-LABOURSE COMMUNAL CEMETERY contains 126 Commonwealth burials of the First World War. Rows B to G and parts of H, J, O, P, Q and R contain French graves of 1914-15, and Rows H to R contain Commonwealth graves from August 1915 to April 1917. One Second World War airman is also buried in the cemetery.

The adjoining EXTENSION, begun by the 2/8th Manchesters in May 1917 and used until October 1918, contains 215 Commonwealth and two German burials.



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ROYAL BERKSHIRE REGIMENT  
24TH JULY 1916