

Lance Corporal Jesse Pratt

4500

2nd/7th Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment
183rd (2nd Gloucester & Worcester) Brigade, 61st (2nd South Midland) Division
died 19th July 1916



Jesse Pratt was born in the summer of 1889 in Stone. He was the son of Thomas William Pratt, born around 1861 in Lighthorne, south of Leamington Spa in Warwickshire and of Elizabeth, born around 1861 in Hartlebury. Jesse had four siblings, Thomas born in 1887, William (1888), George (1890) and Gertrude (1892). Another sibling died in childhood.¹ Jesse is the first of our casualties to be the second man from his family to die – George as we know died in April 1916. The other two Pratt brothers, Thomas and William, also served in the forces.

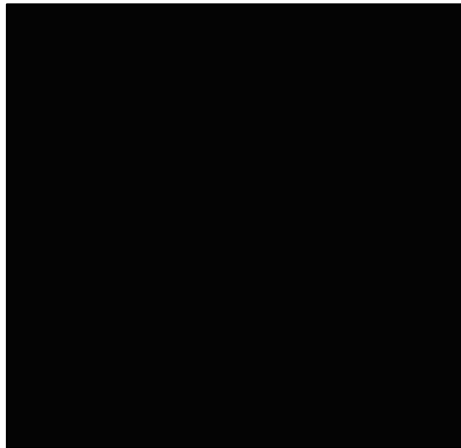
Jesse was a gardener and, for the eight years before he went to war, he had worked for Lt. Col Howard of Stone House as second gardener. According to his obituary in the Kidderminster Shuttle he was well-known locally because of his keen interest in Oddfellowship and had passed through all the offices in the local organisation.² The Oddfellows is still one of the largest and oldest friendly societies in the UK having been formed in 1810.³

In November 1915 Jesse joined the Worcestershire Regiment and was posted to the 2nd/7th Battalion with the service number 4500. This Battalion was formed in Kidderminster in September 1914 and by the Spring of 1916 it was based at Tidworth on Salisbury Plain. It is likely, therefore, that Jesse did his training in that area. The Battalion originally left for France on 23rd May 1916 as part of the 183rd (2nd Gloucester & Worcester) Brigade, 61st (2nd South Midland) Division.⁴ The unit war diary describes an eventful journey: three hours after leaving from Southampton their ship, the *Casarea*, had to return to port after warnings of a submarine when just outside Le Havre. They finally arrived in the early morning on 25th May and over the next few days travelled by train and on foot to Vieille Chapelle, in between Armentières and Béthune.⁵

For the next few weeks the men were instructed in trench warfare. This came to an end on 10th June and after that the Division took over a sector of the line at Neuve Chapelle. Jesse's Brigade took over the line by the Moated Grange but his Battalion was in support at Pont-du-Hem. For the rest of June Jesse would have seen a mixture of front line trench duty, time in the support line and rest in billets.

On 1st July, further to the south, the Battle of the Somme started. Although Jesse's unit was not part of this, the 61st Division was chosen to take part in a subsidiary attack. The aim was to

destabilise the German front line and lead to an enemy retreat. The attack on Aubers Ridge, planned on 9th July, was to be four kilometres wide. The allies would, it was hoped, take the high ground of the ridge and break through to the rear of the heavily defended German lines. There would be a heavy preliminary bombardment before an infantry attack.⁶



Map of the Fromelles area⁷

Alongside Jesse's Division was the Australian 5th Division. Both these units were new to France and had no combat experience. As they gathered at Fromelles, just north of the ridge, they faced experienced German soldiers of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division, who had been victorious at a battle in the same area the year before. (Adolf Hitler, then a corporal in the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, probably took part in the battle). Even worse, the preliminary bombardment, which lasted eleven hours, was very badly executed so that when the main infantry attack was launched at 6am on 19th July, men were immediately subjected to intense machine gun fire and shelling.

Four waves of infantry were mown down; some men did succeed in reaching German lines but they were quickly isolated and counter-attacks followed. No man's land filled with the bodies of dead and wounded. A second attack followed without any breakthrough and many survivors of the 19th July were killed by enemy machine guns as they tried to regain their lines the following morning. In just one day the Australians lost 5,533 men and the British 1,400 with nothing to show for it.⁸

Jesse Pratt died sometime during the late evening of 19th July, or possibly the early morning of 20th July. His Battalion had not been involved at the start of the battle but relieved another unit at 10pm. The war diary notes that amongst the first tasks was bringing in the dead and wounded – see the extract below - and it seems that Jesse volunteered for this task. He is likely to be the "ORK1" (Other Ranks Killed – 1) mentioned at the end of the penultimate line.

19	Battalion standing to until we commenced relieving 2/4 + 2/6 GLOUCESTERS at 10pm on left sector of FAUQUISSART SECTION N14.8.N 13.7.
20	Completed relief of 2/4 + 2/6 GLOUCESTERS at 2am. Repaired parapets, fetched in wounded + dead from NO MAN'S LAND & collected dead + salvage in trenches ORK1 wounded 6. notified from base adjacent crumpled side to ENGLAND.

Extract from 2/7th Worcestershire Regiment War Diary for July 1916⁹

His family received two letters about his death from officers. His Lieutenant wrote:

"We had just come into the trenches after the battalion before us had made an attack, and the dead and wounded were laying in front of our lines. Your son volunteered to go out after dark and look for wounded with an officer. They were detected and a machine gun opened fire on them; your son was hit through the head and killed instantly. Your son gave his life for others that night. He volunteered to go out, and ran the risk of his own free will, so we deplore the loss all the more as it was one of gallant self-sacrifice."

His Captain also wrote:

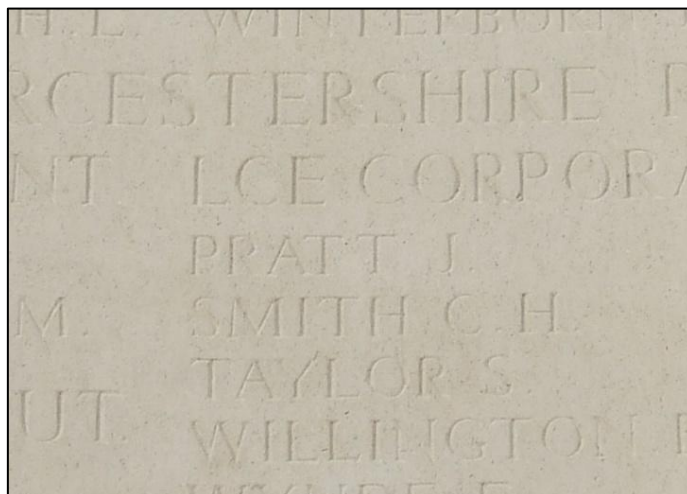
"I feel his loss personally very acutely; knowing you and your family for so many years, I took a special interest in him, and endeavoured to help him along all I could. I can only say my confidence in him was never misplaced. He was always brave, cheerful and willing, and a good soldier."¹⁰

After his death, Jesse's father received a payment of £5 5s 9d, which was the final balance of pay owed, and later, in 1919, a war gratuity of £3.¹¹

Jesse's body was never found and he is commemorated on stone 64A of the Loos Memorial which is in Dud Corner Cemetery, so named because of the large number of unexploded shells found in the vicinity at the end of the war. The memorial lists the names of over 20,000 officers and men who have no known grave, who fell in the area from September 1915 to the end of the war. It was designed by Sir Herbert Baker with sculpture by Charles Wheeler and was unveiled in August 1930.¹²



Loos Memorial / Dud Corner Cemetery



Close up of panel from Loos Memorial with Jesse Pratt's name¹³

An interesting postscript to Jesse's story is that in 2009 a team of archeologists located a number of mass graves behind nearby Pheasant Wood. These graves contained the bodies of 250 Australian and British soldiers buried by the Germans following the battle. Following painstaking work by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 154 of the men were identified and on 19th July 2010 all of the bodies were buried in the first new war cemetery to be built by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in fifty years - Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery. Perhaps Jesse is one of the unidentified soldiers.¹⁴



Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery¹³

References

Please note that these references refer to all information in the preceding paragraphs since the previous reference, not just to the immediate sentence in which the reference number appears.

1. Census documents: <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>
2. The Kidderminster Shuttle, 5th August 1916
3. <https://www.oddfellows.co.uk/about/>
4. <http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/regiments-and-corps/the-british-infantry-regiments-of-1914-1918/worcestershire-regiment>
5. <http://www.the-curates-line.com/resources/Worcestershire%20Regiment.pdf>
6. http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/bat_2_7_1916.php
7. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Fromelles#/media/File:NYTMapNeuveChapelle1915.png
8. <http://www.remembrancetrails-northernfrance.com/history/battles/the-battle-of-fromelles-19-july-1916.html>
9. War Diary: The National Archives - WO 95/3060/3
10. The Kidderminster Shuttle, 5th August 1916
11. Register of soldiers' effects: <http://home.ancestry.co.uk/>
12. <https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/79500/loos-memorial/>
13. Cemetery and panel photos: <http://www.britishwargraves.co.uk/>
14. [https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/5001073/FROMELLES%20\(PHEASANT%20WOOD\)%20MILITARY%20CEMETERY](https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/5001073/FROMELLES%20(PHEASANT%20WOOD)%20MILITARY%20CEMETERY)