

Private Joseph Quinn

18890

C Company, 1st Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment
24th Brigade, 8th Division / 23rd Division
died 13th July 1916



Joseph Henry Quinn was born in the summer of 1892 in Shenstone. He was the son of Martin, born around 1866 in Co Cork, Ireland and Ellen née Bayes, born around 1869 in Hartlebury. Joseph was the third of eleven children. His siblings were Arthur Martin born in 1889, Albert Thomas (1891), Alice Elizabeth (1894), Francis Harold (1896), Esther Louisa (1898), Florence Beatrice (1899), Bernard Edward (1901), Clifford Victor (1904), Ida (1908) and Cyril (1911). The family were based in Shenstone throughout and Martin was an Agricultural labourer in 1891 and 1901 but by 1911 was a roadman for the county council. In the same year, Arthur, Albert and Francis were agricultural labourers.¹

According to his obituary in the Kidderminster Shuttle, Joseph was a scholar at Stone School, was a member of the Stone Church choir and worked as assistant gardener for Mr Henry Howard of Stone House before the war. He enlisted just after war was declared and joined the 1st Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment.²

Sadly, Joseph's service record does not survive but we know from his medal index card that he went to France on 3rd May 1915 and spent over a year in the trenches.

On 11th May 1915, his unit war diary noted that a draft of 92 men joined the Battalion and it is possible that Joseph was amongst these men.³ Very quickly Joseph's battalion went into action in the area around Neuve Chapelle and stayed there for some time, moving later in the year to the area between Armentières and Bois Grenier.⁴ In the beginning his unit was part of the 8th Division but from 18th October 1915 the 1st Worcesters was attached to the 23rd Division.

During the early months of 1916, Joseph's battalion was billeted near Sercus near Hazebrouck, west of Armentières. They then moved to the mining village of Bruay in February and later to trenches on the slope of the northern end of the Vimy Ridge, site of the famous 1917 battle, and later to Beugin all in the area around Lens. While there, on March 18th, the new Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig, visited the billets of the Battalion. During the spring, the battalion was near to but not directly involved with various skirmishes in this area as well as training. Joseph had a week's leave in May 1916 and in June, orders were received to move south to prepare for the Battle of the

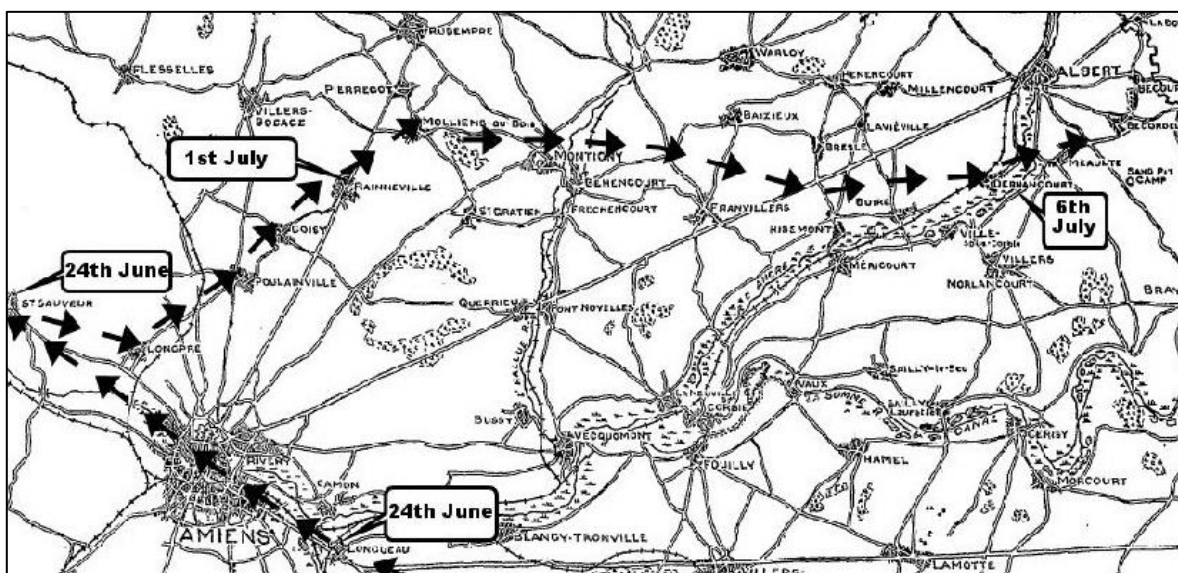
Somme. They arrived on 24th June and went into billets near Amiens. Everyone knew that something big was about to happen and enthusiasm was running high with all ranks in high spirits and confident of victory. One officer wrote:

Camps wherever the eye rested. No attempt at concealment or fear of the consequences. Many sausage balloons in the air. Countless aeroplanes all day. 9.2-inch and 12-inch batteries at work. A most heartening and inspiring spectacle—rather suggesting a Bank Holiday on a gargantuan scale. (2/Lieut. E. P. Bennett)⁵

The Battle of the Somme had been first planned at the Chantilly Conference in November 1915 when the Allies had decided to launch a joint offensive on the Western Front during 1916. In the event, the French were not able to participate fully due to their defence of Verdun and therefore British Divisions bore the brunt of the fighting. The timing of the assault was in part chosen in an attempt to relieve pressure on the French by diverting some of the German troops away from Verdun.

Preparations for the offensive were meticulous. General Douglas Haig was in command of the offensive and an important part of his tactics was to have a massive artillery bombardment before the offensive was launched. This, it was believed, would cut enemy barbed wire and destroy trenches and dug-outs meaning that the infantry could simply walk across no-man's land and capture the destroyed German front-line and launch further offensives from there. Unfortunately, it was not quite as simple as that. The bombardment started on 24th June as Joseph's battalion arrived in the area but in the event the bombardment was not successful and, when the whistles blew at 7.30am on the 1st July and infantry regiments along the front line climbed out of their trenches, instead of facing no resistance, found the Germans ready and waiting. Machine guns literally mowed down men as they moved across the open ground and, at the end of the first day, 19,240 men were dead, 35,493 were wounded, 2,152 were missing and 585 had been taken prisoner. This gives a total of 57,470 casualties.⁶

Joseph's battalion was not involved in the first wave of fighting but over the early days of July, they moved forward towards the front line, heading for the village of Contalmaison.



1st Battalion Worcestershire Regiment route 24th June to 6th July 1916

At about 1.30am on 7th July, British artillery began to bombard the enemy positions near Contalmaison and a short time later, the Worcesters attacked. Fighting was fierce with counter-attacks by the Germans and by early morning it was clear that no significant gains had been made.

About 9.00am, orders were issued for the 24th Brigade to attack the southern end of the village. "B" and "C" Companies made their way forward through very heavy shellfire and prepared for attack, "B" Company in the front line and "C" Company, including Joseph, in support.

At about 10.00am "B" Company attacked against the southern end of the village. In spite of heavy fire from German machine-guns, the Worcestershire platoons reached the houses and fought their way in among the ruins. Fierce fighting followed but in half-an-hour the village had been cleared as far as the church and around 70 prisoners had been captured. About 11.00am "C" Company came up on the right of "B" Company. The enemy soon counter-attacked and hand-to-hand fighting continued almost without a break.

About midday German guns fired a very heavy barrage across the southern end of the village, heralding counterattack. An urgent message for help was written. "D" Company advanced through the barrage; their losses in crossing the open were very heavy, but the survivors reached the houses and reinforced the other two companies, just before the start of the German counterattack.

For the moment the enemy were checked, but it was clear that without further help the defence could not last much longer. All day a drizzling rain had fallen but in the early afternoon the rain became much heavier, resulting in knee-deep mud which made conditions very difficult.

At about 2.00pm the enemy, heavily reinforced, began a powerful attack. Artillery and machine-gun fire was directed on to the village and the enemy came down from higher ground. Fighting stubbornly from house to house, the survivors of the three companies were forced back, although resistance continued until ammunition was exhausted. This failure, due to an overwhelming combination of adverse circumstances, not least to the rain which had made reinforcement impossible, was bitterly disappointing to the Battalion. However, despite being under continual shell-fire the Worcesters reorganised in preparation for another attack.

This was attempted on 8th July but heavy German shellfire and the muddy conditions made it impossible to succeed and fortunately orders came through in the early evening not to continue the attack. "A" and "C" Companies were left to hold the forward position.

Another night and day of heavy shell-fire followed. No further attack was attempted, on the front held by the 24th Brigade, but the remaining officers and men of the 1st Worcestershire were utterly exhausted, and after dark on July 9th the Battalion was relieved. It was during this rest period that Contalmaison was finally taken by the 8th Green Howards



Wounded at Casualty Clearing Station, south of Albert (July 1916)⁷

The War Diary for July 1916 notes that from 6th – 10th July, 30 men had been killed, 243 wounded and 44 were missing.⁸ Joseph was one of the wounded and on 12th July 1916, his parents received a telegram to say that he had been brought to England after suffering a severe gunshot wound to the head. His mother travelled to the hospital (the Royal Victoria Hospital, also known as Netley hospital, in Southampton) but found him barely conscious and he died soon afterwards.⁹

His death certificate notes the cause of death to be "Gunshot wound of skull and brain and encephalitis". No post mortem examination was carried out.¹⁰

Joseph was buried in Stone Churchyard on the afternoon of Sunday 16th July.



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. 1881 – 1911 census documents: <http://home.ancestry.co.uk/>
2. The Kidderminster Shuttle, 22nd July 1916
3. War Diary for 1st Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment : <http://home.ancestry.co.uk/>
4. http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/bat_1_1915.php
5. http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/bat_1_1916.php
6. From the Official History of the Great War, quoted in Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, p263
7. http://www.worcestershireregiment.com/bat_1_1916.php
8. War Diary for 1st Battalion, Worcestershire Regiment : <http://home.ancestry.co.uk/>
9. The Kidderminster Shuttle, 22nd July 1916
10. Death Certificate for Joseph Quinn, GRO