

## Lance Serjeant William Rowberry MM

7906

10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment

57<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 19<sup>th</sup> (Western) Division

died 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916



William Rowberry was born in the summer of 1876 in Stone and baptised at St Mary's on 17<sup>th</sup> September. He was the son of John, born around 1843 in Broome, and of Emma (née Jones), born around 1842 in Ombersley. John was a farm labourer and the couple had ten other children during their marriage; Thomas, born around 1863, George Edward (1865), Ellen Mary (1868), Harriet (1871), Harry (1873), Herbert (1879), female twins who were born and died in 1881, Emily (1882) and Elizabeth (1885). Thomas, who died in 1911, was a farm labourer who, on 31<sup>st</sup> August 1881, enlisted in the Scots Guards in London and served on campaigns in Egypt and Sudan in the 1880s. After leaving the army, Thomas was a police constable in Wythall for a short while before moving to Aston.

William's family lived at Stone Green in 1881 and his parents stayed in Stone throughout their lives; in 1911 their address was 2 Stone Hill. John died in 1919 followed by Emma in 1923 and they were both interred at St Mary's, Stone. William had moved to Birmingham by 1901, when he was living with his older brother and sister-in-law Thomas and Harriet at 193, Inkerman Street in Aston, and was working as a haulier carter. In 1911 he was a lodger with Arthur and Alice Phillips at 273, Lawley Street and working as a general carter.<sup>1</sup>

Although we don't know the exact date William enlisted, evidence suggests that it was around October 1914. He enlisted in Birmingham and joined the local Royal Warwickshire Regiment serving in the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion with the service number 7906.

William arrived in France on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1915. The latter stages of his training had taken place at Tidworth Camp on Salisbury Plain, and on 18<sup>th</sup> July the men travelled to Folkestone and then on the *Invicta* to Boulogne. The Battalion then regrouped near St Omer before travelling, over several days, to Merville in between Béthune and Armentières, where they were to spend the next year.

Life over this period consisted of a mixture of time in front line trenches or in reserve. There was also training, route marches, bathing, kit cleaning and rest. Although there is little sign in the war diary of William's Battalion being involved in a major offensive, men were killed and wounded on a regular basis due to snipers or other enemy action. In late September, when the Battle of Loos was being fought about 35 miles to the east, bombardments could be heard but the 10<sup>th</sup> Warks were not directly involved.

The weather seems to be the most interesting thing that the Commanding Officer had to report and nearly every day he mentions this. At the end of October:

"Raining. Everything flooded and falling in owing to water".

A few days later:

"trenches almost impassable due to mud and water"

By the end of November it had turned very cold:

"48 hours in the front line is about all the men can stand [ ] they can neither sleep nor get warm"

Christmas 1915 was spent in the trenches with additional shelling of the enemy:

"to wish the Germans a Merry Christmas"

However, a few days later on 1<sup>st</sup> January, the men were given their Christmas dinner. During their next spell in the trenches the men were specifically praised for having filled and laid 20,000 sandbags. Later, towards the end of February, a rare attempt at an artillery attack caused casualties but did result in damage to the enemy parapet. Easter Day was observed as a holiday and two weeks later, on 7<sup>th</sup> May, William's Battalion travelled south by train to their destination of Vignacourt, north-west of Amiens.

Training and route marching continued but there was also time for recreation. Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> May was observed as a holiday and Brigade sports were held and the 10<sup>th</sup> Warks won the individual bombing, team bombing and digging competitions. A week later they played football versus the 28<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance – the score was 3-3! All of this was a prelude for some serious training in June 1916. Although men at William's level would probably not be aware of the overall plan for the coming offensives, they would almost certainly have known that something was about to happen.

When the attack that we now know as the Battle of the Somme began on 1<sup>st</sup> July, William was in reserve but his Battalion was soon involved and the men moved to the front line on 2<sup>nd</sup>. They were involved in the attack to take the village of La Boisselle (scene of one of the huge mine explosions on the first day of the battle) and once their objective had been reached, they consolidated their line before being relieved on 5<sup>th</sup> July.

The men moved to billets in Albert, a few miles behind the line but still within earshot, and a period of rest followed. Despite the battle raging a short distance away, there was time for entertainment with the Divisional Follies and Band entertaining the troops. On 20<sup>th</sup> July the Battalion moved into trenches again, this time at Mametz Wood, and the men were due to take part in an attack at nearby High Wood on 22<sup>nd</sup> July. This was unsuccessful and the Germans shelled the area heavily. The men were ordered to hold their trench at all costs and there were significant casualties – 12 men killed, 87 wounded and 31 missing. Later in July, the battalion were again in the thick of fighting and they were the only unit in the Brigade to reach their objective during the assault on the line in front of Bazentin-le-Petit. The cost of this action was also heavy - 20 men killed, 123 wounded and 15 missing.

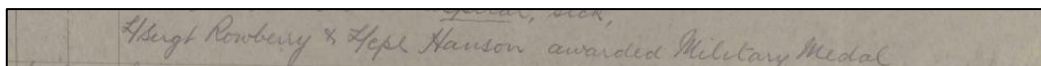
On 3<sup>rd</sup> August, William was on the move again – this time to area south west of Ypres near Kemmel. Although this was not a busy sector, the men were soon in trenches again. On 15<sup>th</sup> September, there was an operation along the whole Front in conjunction with the main offensive on the Somme which started with an intense bombardment by all guns at 10pm. A week later the Battalion was on the move again to Borre just over the border into France. On 3<sup>rd</sup> October the men were inspected by HM King of the Belgians who was:

“much impressed with the soldierly appearance, steadiness in parade, cleanliness and obviously fine spirit of all ranks”

The King sent gifts of cigarettes and tobacco which were issued the following day. Soon, however, the men were on the move back to the Somme, seeing front line duty in the trenches from 24<sup>th</sup> October.

Over the next three weeks, the men alternated between the trenches and billets. They worked on the trenches which were in a bad condition, they bathed, some of them went to a performance of the Follies and towards mid-November there was specific training for an operation. There was also a constant stream of casualties throughout the month.

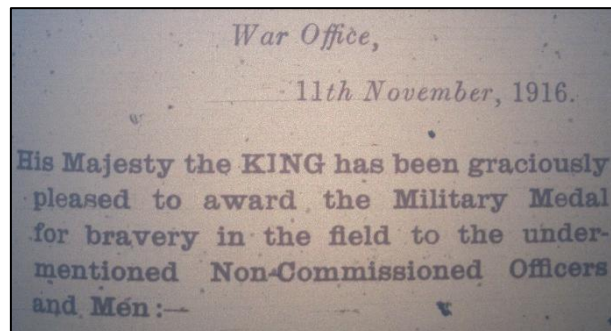
On 15<sup>th</sup> November 1916, William is mentioned by name in the War Diary for the first time – he was awarded the Military Medal.



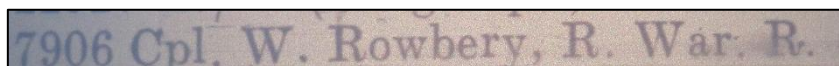
Sgt Rowbery & Sgt Hanson awarded Military Medal

**Extract from War Diary for 15<sup>th</sup> November 1916<sup>2</sup>**

William's name had appeared in the London Gazette on the 11<sup>th</sup> November



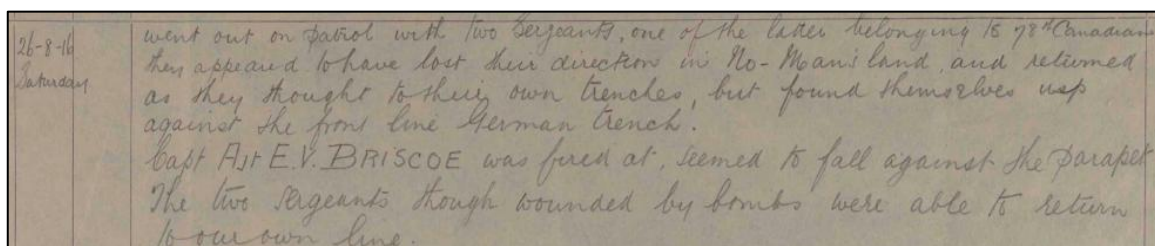
War Office,  
11th November, 1916.  
His Majesty the KING has been graciously pleased to award the Military Medal for bravery in the field to the under-mentioned Non-Commissioned Officers and Men:—



7906 Cpl. W. Rowbery, R. War. R.

**Extract from the London Gazette for 11<sup>th</sup> November 1916<sup>3</sup>**

There is no easy way of finding out exactly what William had done to be awarded this honour, but the listing in the Gazette was usually about three months after the act of bravery. The War Diary is unclear and the only event reported which may refer to William took place on 26<sup>th</sup> August.



26-8-16  
Saturday  
went out on patrol with two Sergeants, one of the latter belonging to 7<sup>th</sup> Canadian they appeared to have lost their direction in No-Man's land, and returned as they thought to their own trenches, but found themselves up against the front line German trench.  
Capt Asst E.V. BRISCOE was fired at, seemed to fall against the parapet  
The two Sergeants though wounded by bombs were able to return to our own line.

**Extract from War Diary for 26<sup>th</sup> August 1916**

However, it should be noted that William was only a Lance Serjeant so this may well not refer to him.

The operation which the 10<sup>th</sup> Warks were preparing for took place on 18<sup>th</sup> November 1916, the last day of the Battle of the Somme. The men started to form at 5.30am and were in an artillery formation of four waves of four platoons. The barrage started at 6.10am and the men advanced soon afterwards. It was dark and this was intensified by falling snow. Soon after 6.30am it was reported that some groups had lost direction and were unable to get through the wire. Casualties were heavy and reports were confused; it seems that some men did push through but were compelled to withdraw due to heavy fire. Finally, a bombing post was established and this was successful in capturing enemy ration parties. During the day 19 men were killed, 128 wounded and 68 reported as missing. William Rowberry was one of those killed.<sup>2</sup>

William's obituary in the Kidderminster Shuttle describes that he met his death by being shot through the head by a sniper.<sup>4</sup> A little more information comes from a published book of the War Diaries of Lt. Charles Herbert Lander of the Battalion, who describes how another officer, Mr Gott:

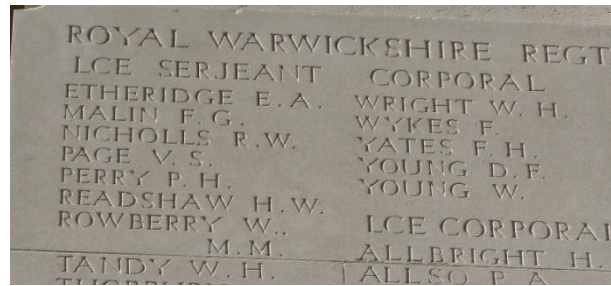
"had been sniped, shot through the brain, probably the same sniper who had potted at us both earlier in the morning."<sup>5</sup>

Following his death, William's father John received a payment of £22 10s 6d, which was the final balance of pay owed, and later, in 1919, his mother, Sarah, received a war gratuity of £10.<sup>6</sup> William's body was never recovered and he is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial. This stands on high ground overlooking the River Somme where some of the heaviest fighting of the Great War took place. It was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, is over 45 metres in height, dominating the landscape for miles around, and it is the largest Commonwealth memorial to the missing in the world. It commemorates 72,396 men who died in the Somme sector before 20<sup>th</sup> March 1918 and have no known grave.<sup>7</sup>

On the first anniversary of his death, William's family put a notice in the Kidderminster Shuttle. It ends:

"One in the great sacrifice, that England may endure."<sup>8</sup>





## 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/> with additional information from Paul Cooper and Polly Rubery
2. War diary: The National Archives - WO95/2085-3
3. <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/29819/supplement/10929>
4. The Kidderminster Shuttle, 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1916
5. Michael Harrison (Ed). 2010 *Lander's War - The War Diaries of Lt. Charles Herbert Lander 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment.*
6. Register of soldiers' effects: <http://home.ancestry.co.uk/>
7. <http://www.cwgc.org/>
8. The Kidderminster Shuttle, 24<sup>th</sup> November 1917

