

CECIL RAMSDEN SMITH



12th June 1917

1890-1917 Aged 27

Second Lieutenant Royal Engineers Special Brigade, 'M' Company.

Cecil Ramsden Smith was the youngest child of Joshua Smith by his second marriage to Sarah Maria Ramsden. Joshua Smith was a coal merchant whose business and residence were both in Great Horton, Bradford. His eldest son by his first marriage, Edward, worked for him in the coal business. He then had three daughters before Cecil was born on 9th June 1890. Cecil went to Bradford Grammar School when he was ten in September 1900, and he left shortly after his sixteenth birthday. He was on the Modern side of the School, and although his performance in different subjects fluctuated, he was competent in Maths, Physics, Chemistry and History. After leaving school he put his knowledge of Chemistry to work by taking employment as a 'Technical Chemist' at a dyeworks. He was a member of his local Rugby Union club, Horton (which later became Bradford R.F.C.). He became a student at Leeds University, and in October 1915 he joined the University Officer Training Corps. Being a university man and with a few weeks military training, he could now be classed as a 'temporary gentleman'. On 4th December Smith, who now styled himself 'C. Ramsden Smith', applied for an officer's commission, specifying that he wished to serve in the infantry. On Christmas Eve he was ordered to report to the 13th Reserve Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment at Tynemouth, near Newcastle, two weeks later. After six months' training he was transferred to the Royal Engineers on 3rd June 1916, and a day later he was sent to France.

The reason for his hasty despatch overseas was his knowledge of Chemistry. Since the Germans made the first use of chemical weapons in April 1915, the Royal Engineers had formed special companies of such men to respond in kind. Smith was appointed to Special Company 'M'. Initially the duties of the Special Companies were to position cylinders of poison gas in the front line to support attacks. 'M' Company escaped involvement in the Battle of the Somme as they were employed further north. On 1st March 1917 they released gas at Vimy Ridge in support of a Canadian raid, losing nine killed and thirty gassed and wounded when German fire shattered the tubes leading from the cylinders. In



March Smith went on a course to train in the use of the Livens Projector, a simple gas mortar, following which in April the Company supported the Canadian assault on Vimy Ridge by deluging the German positions with a huge cloud of gas. During May they were posted to the front held by the 49th West Riding Division near Neuve Chapelle where planned attempts to harass the Germans by firing hundreds of the projectors had to be cancelled owing to the contrary wind direction. In June 'M' Company returned to the use of cylinder gas, and by the night of 11th June they had positioned more than 800 cylinders in the front line near Armentieres ready for discharge. At 9.25 pm that night the Germans mounted a raid on the British line, and 'M' Company's personnel took part in driving them off. Smith was killed in this action. His death was entered in the Company War Diary for 11th June, and the telegram to his family also states he was killed in action on that date. However, for reasons which are unclear, his death was officially recorded as having occurred on 12th June.

While he was in training as an officer in early 1916, Smith married Gwladys May Edwards. Like Cecil, she had been born in Great Horton, but as the daughter of a Wesleyan Minister she had long since moved away (in 1911 she lived with her parents in Bournemouth). She was four years older than Cecil. How they met is unknown. After their marriage she lived with her husband's parents, on the west coast near Lancaster, before she performed war service in France. There were no children, and what happened to her after the War is unknown.



Acknowledgements:

This image of Cecil Ramsden Smith is from the Yorkshire R.F.U. roll of honour (<<http://www.ukphotoarchive.org.uk/p244106287/h7a62f0e6#h7a62f0e6>>). Cecil's family were researched using Ancestry.com. His school record is from the B.G.S. Annual Reports for 1901-1906. In *Yorkshire R.U.F.C. Commemoration Book 1914-19 and Official Handbook Season 1919-20*, on Smith's photo he is stated to have played for Bradford R.F.C., however he is not listed in the entry for 'Horton now Bradford' on p.320.

Smith's Medal Index Card dates his entry into France as 4th June 1916—as it bears the address of 'Mrs Ince' (?) it is possible his wife re-married in the early 1920s, but I have not been able to find a record if she did. His Officer Personal Record in The National Archives is WO 339/51908. It records his education as 'Bradford Grammar School and Leeds University', and his membership of the University O.T.C. However, his name is not on the Leeds University War Memorial (<<http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-people/memorials/1646-the-university-of-leeds-otc-and-roll-of-honour.html#sthash.bm8s1S01.dpbs>>). He was in the same company as G.O. Mitchell, the subject of Jeremy Mitchell, *Shrapnel and Whizzbangs* (The Memoir Club, Durham, 2008), see 65-6. The War Diary for 'M' Company March 1917-1918 (WO 95/549/5) explains Smith's activities from March to June and the circumstances of his death.

Smith's parents had moved to Silverdale, Lancashire, and so his name was placed on the village memorial and that in St. John's Church (<<http://lancasterwarmemorials.org.uk/memorials/silverdale.htm>>, <<https://greatwarnorthwest.wordpress.com/2017/05/10/silverdale-war-memorial/>>), although he appears to have remained in Bradford at the family home of 13 Cecil Avenue, Horton. He was buried at Cite Bonjean Military Cemetery, Armentieres, VII.D.33. In WO 339/51908 Smith's date of death is given as 11th June, corrected by hand to 12th. However, on the Graves Registration Report Form (<<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/277348/SMITH,%20CECIL%20RAMSDEN>>), 12th June was corrected to 11th June. 12th June is the date in the Cemetery Register and on his gravestone.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com).

O.B.s John G. Midgley, John R. Hill and Eric W. Knowles also served in the R.E. gas companies. Stephen L. Dawson took part in the disastrous Canadian raid on 4th March.