

JAMES LESLIE SPEIGHT



9th October 1917

1896-1917 Aged 21

Captain 1/6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment.

Leslie Speight was born in Baildon on 17th March 1896, the youngest son of Charles Henry Speight. Charles's father John had established a cloth manufacturing business in Bowling in the 1850s. Following his death in 1877 Charles took over the company. In 1883 he married Fanny Tankard whose father's worsted spinning concern occupied the same premises as his own. They had seven children, of whom six survived. Leslie, the third son, went to Bradford Grammar School in 1904 when he was eight, and he was a student there until 1915. He went through the Classical side of the School, and he completed his studies by gaining three distinctions at Higher Certificate level, and was elected to a Classical Exhibition at St. John's College, Oxford. He was Honorary Secretary to the Debating Society, and although he did not represent the School in any sport, he was a member of Bradford Rowing Club. He joined the O.T.C. at its inception in October 1914, reaching the rank of sergeant by the time he left in July 1915. In the same month his father, who was a Major in the Territorials and for many years commanded the depot at Belle Vue, conducted the O.T.C.'s first parade in uniform.

Leslie never took up his place at Oxford and instead joined the 28th Battalion London Regiment, a senior O.T.C. unit. In January 1916 he received his commission in the 1/6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, in which his brother Henry, another Old Bradfordian, was already a Second Lieutenant. In June Leslie joined the battalion in France ready to take part in the Battle of the Somme, during which both brothers would be wounded, although they were able to return to duty. Leslie was promoted to Lieutenant, and then in July 1917 to Captain commanding 'C' Company. Although the year 1917 was one of almost unrelenting attacks for the B.E.F. on the Western Front, the 49th Division of which 1/6th West Yorkshire was part escaped serious action until October when they were committed to the offensive at Ypres. In late September the ground had dried out somewhat and by means of a series of



successful 'bite and hold' attacks the British line was brought by 7th October to the foot of the final ridge before Passchendaele village. 49th Division's objective on 9th October was Belle Vue Spur. Prior to the attack the men were in shell holes for three days under almost incessant rain. The 1/6th Battalion were in support at Zero hour at 5.20 a.m. At 9 a.m. Speight led his company forward through ground which was a morass and in the teeth of German machine-gun fire to attack the German pill-boxes at Belle Vue. Half his men became casualties. He was carrying out a personal reconnaissance to find a way to outflank a strongpoint when he was mortally wounded, and he died an hour later. The reactions to Leslie Speight's death are testimony to his qualities. The battalion adjutant wrote to his parents, 'Your loss will be our loss also, as he was loved alike by officers and men ... his devotion to duty ... was beyond all praise.' The School magazine printed a rare obituary: 'Soldier, scholar, gentleman—his loss is deeply mourned by all who knew him. Dulce et Decorum.' The author of the Battalion history, a schoolfellow, wrote that he 'had earned his rapid promotion by his steadiness and fearlessness. His death cut short a career of more than usual promise.' His body was not recovered for burial, so his name is on the Tyne Cot Memorial.



Acknowledgements:

Speight's photo is from an anonymous album of cuttings of Bradford officers' obituaries, from an unidentified newspaper, which is held in the Local Studies Collection, Margaret MacMillan House, Bradford. There is also an obituary from which I have quoted. My thanks to Jennie Kiff who brought it to my attention. There is no photo of Speight in the School memorial book.

There is a limited biography on <<http://www.shipleyww1.org.uk/People%20Speight,%20James%20Leslie.html>> accessed 30-8-2017. The Speight family history was researched using Ancestry.com—the name was occasionally spelled 'Spaight'. Leslie's school record is from the B.G.S. Annual Reports for 1905-1915 and *The Bradfordian*, *passim* 1913-1915. He appears as both J.L. and L.J. Speight—the *Leeds Mercury* 18-10-1914 reported that Leslie J Speight had been elected to a scholarship at Oxford. His obituary is in *The Bradfordian* November 1917 issue. His Officer Personal Record (The National Archives WO374-64348) contains very little useful information. The circumstances of his death were described by Capt. E.V. Tempest, *History of the Sixth Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment Vol. I—1/6th Battalion* (Percy Lund, Bradford, 1921), 190, 193. For his wound in 1916, see *Yorkshire Evening Post* 18-10-1917. He was remembered in the Bradford Rowing Club Memorial Book and on the club's Roll of Honour.

Leslie's brother Henry relinquished his commission in March 1917 on grounds of ill-health caused by his wounds (Tempest, *op. cit.* 349; *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* 6-3-1917).

This biography was researched and composed in September 2017 by Nick Hooper (Nhooper1956@googlemail.com).