

HAROLD ERNEST WHITWAM



8/9th October 1917

1890-1917 aged 27

Captain 1/7th Battalion Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment (Colne Valley Territorials).

Harold Whitwam was born into a wealthy family at Golcar, near Huddersfield. The family company was founded by Ben Whitwam and his brother John who were handloom weavers before they went into business on their own accounts as cloth manufacturers. When Ben died in 1888 he left a personal fortune of £22,000, worth around £1.5 million today. The business was continued by his three sons Joe, Herbert and Thomas, and their cousin Edward. Harold Ernest was the eldest son of Joe Whitwam and Annie Everett, born on 30th July 1890. He attended Bradford Grammar School for four years, starting in 1902 when he was twelve. He was on the Classical side of the School and did well in most subjects, particularly in French. He left when he was sixteen and went to work for the family firm, before he went to Leeds University to study for the City and Guilds qualifications in Woollen and Worsted Spinning and Weaving. On his eighteenth birthday Harold joined the newly-formed 7th Battalion West Riding Regiment, the Colne Valley Territorials. He was an effective soldier who was soon promoted to Corporal, and was commissioned Second Lieutenant before he was twenty. His younger brother Percy, who was also at B.G.S., joined at the age of fifteen with the rank of 'Boy', but he left after completing his four year term of service.

Harold was still a student at Leeds when war started in 1914. He had no hesitation in signing the overseas service obligation, and he landed in France on 14th April 1915 with 49th West Riding Division. Within days he went to the front line with other officers for instruction in trench warfare. After four months in France and Flanders, while serving near Ypres, Harold's company was struck with an outbreak of food poisoning attributed to bad meat and had to be relieved from the line. At the start of September, still suffering from diarrhoea, sickness and stomach pains, he was evacuated to hospital in



London. He was slow to recover and complained of being easily fatigued. In January 1916 he was passed fit for light duties and was posted as an instructor to the Northern Command School of Musketry near York. He remained there for over a year, and it was only on 17th September 1917 that he rejoined his battalion on the Belgian coast.

Returning to active service after so long in a camp at home must have been a shock for Harold. Moreover, he arrived in the midst of training in new tactics to use against German pill-boxes. After only two weeks, in early October, his battalion relieved New Zealand troops who had completed an advance of 1000 yards towards Passchendaele on 4th October. The area was a featureless wasteland of shell-holes, and on 5th October torrential rain began without respite. The positions occupied consisted of craters containing a foot of water. Although the 147th Infantry Brigade, which included 7/West Riding, were in support for the attack on 9th October, it proved impossible to relieve two companies which had to remain in the front line. Whitwam and another officer were killed, probably by random shellfire, on the night of 8th or the early hours of 9th October. His body could not be recovered for burial, and his name is on the Memorial to the Missing at Tyne Cot.



Acknowledgements:

Whitwam's photo is from the B.G.S. Memorial Book with thanks to the O.B.A. and the School. I used Ancestry.com to research the family history. Whitwam was a popular surname in Golcar! For B. & J. Whitwam and Sons, see <<https://undergroundhistories.wordpress.com/a-catalogue-of-the-textile-mills-and-factories-of-the-huddersfield-area-c-1790-1914-part-three/>> accessed 28-9-2017. The value of Ben's fortune is from the probate records, its value was calculated using <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency/results.asp#mid>>. Harold and Percy's school records are from the B.G.S. Annual Reports for 1903-1910. There are very brief records of Harold's war service at <<http://westernfrontassociation.com/great-war-people/memorials/1646-the-university-of-leeds-otc-and-roll-of-honour.html>> and <<http://www.whitwam.co.uk/war.htm>>. Harold's Officer Personal File is The National Archives WO374-74080. The National Probate Calendar gave his date of death as 8th October, as did the War Diary for the 7/West Riding (<https://www.ancestry.co.uk/interactive/60779/43112_2802_1-00004?pid=473043&backurl=http://search.ancestry.co.uk/cgi-bin/sse.dll?_phsrc%3DKih1688%26_phstart%3DsuccessSource%26usePUBJs%3Dtrue%26indiv%3D1%26db%3DUKWarDiariesWW1%26gss%3Dangs-d%26new%3D1%26rank%3D1%26msT%3D1%26_F0007CF4%3DDuke%2520of%2520Wellington%2527s%26_F00088EF%3D1/7th%26MSAV%3D1%26uidh%3D6n6%26pcat%3D39%26fh%3D3%26h%3D473043%26recoff%3D%26ml_rpos%3D4&treeid=&personid=&hintid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=Kih1688&_phstart=successSource&usePUBJs=true>, Piece 2802/1), but the War Office, CWGC and Soldiers Died in the Great War gave it as 9th. The confusion was doubtless caused by the dislocation between companies and battalion H.Q. in the terrible conditions of the night of 8/9th October. Harold's death was reported, with a record of his career, in the Yorkshire Post on Tuesday 16-10-1917 (accessed using findmypast.co.uk).

Harold's brother Percy attested for service in January 1916, but he was not mobilized until April 1917 as a lorry driver in the Army Service Corps. He survived the war. His Service Record is barely legible, but is available on Ancestry.com. Joe and Annie Whitwam moved to Bournemouth after the war, where they lived at 'Arcadia', Cecil Avenue, Richmond Park.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper in September/October 2017. For further information, contact Nhooper1956@googlemail.com or <http://www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/bradford-grammar-school-in-ww1/>.