

ERIC WILKINSON KNOWLES



14th July 1917

1895-1917 Aged 21

Corporal 120586 Royal Engineers 'N' Special Company.

Eric was the only son of George Mason Knowles and Laura Williamson. Although George was born in Ipswich, when his father Joseph worked there as a wool sorter, the family were from Bradford. From humble origins, Joseph became a partner in the Bradford company of T.A. Firth, wool merchants, of Mill Street, Canal Road. His eldest son James Henry Knowles followed his father, while George, who was the second son, became a 'Wool Broker's Cashier' and very likely also worked for his father. In 1892, George married Laura Williamson from Shipley, whose father was also a wool dealer. Eric was born at Baildon on 6th December 1895, and there were three more children of whom the sisters Phyllis Maud and Barbara Knowles (sic) survived infancy. Eric went Bradford Grammar School in 1906 for only part of one year, in Junior School Form First Upper, when he was ten. He came sixth in the form in July 1906. By 1910 his parents lived at 'Ash Lea' on Wheatley Road, and possibly it was this move that led Eric to leave B.G.S. He completed his education at Ilkley Grammar School, after which he too went into the 'Wool trade', perhaps working for his father.

Eric was aged eighteen when the war began, and he did not at first volunteer. On 1st March 1915 he presented himself at Weetwood Hall, Leeds to enlist in the Royal Army Medical Corps, in the reserve unit of the 1st West Riding Field Ambulance, part of the Territorial Force. His height was recorded as 5 feet 4 1/2 inches. Six months later he was discharged from the R.A.M.C., and he re-enlisted in the Royal Engineers on 17th September at Chatham in Kent. He was immediately promoted to the rank of Corporal, and he was posted to the B.E.F. in France a few days later. Eric was what was known as a 'Chemical Corporal'. In July the War Office had written to all units asking men with 'experience in Chemistry' to volunteer (or to be nominated) for the new gas warfare companies which were being formed in response to the German use of poison gas. All were given the rank of Corporal with pay of 3 shillings a day. It must be presumed that Eric had knowledge of Chemistry from his schooldays which



qualified him for the newly-formed Special Companies. In reality, the work consisted of much heavy work man-handling unwieldy gas cylinders into position in the front line. Eric served in several different gas units throughout 1916. In August he was hospitalised for a week, and in January 1917 he was allowed home leave of ten days. It was the last time he saw his family.

In early 1917 the men of the company were trained in the use of the Livens Projector, a simple mortar which fired oil drums filled with liquid gas. In July, 'N' Company were based at MicMac Camp near Dickebusch in Belgium, preparing battery positions for a gas discharge against German positions at Hooge Chateau. On the night of the 10th-11th while the work of loading projectiles into the mortars continued, the Germans launched a raid on the British positions in the course of which Eric Knowles was wounded by a shell. He was taken to 3rd Canadian Casualty Clearing Station near Poperinge suffering from multiple shrapnel wounds to his left shoulder and arm. He died on 14th July and he was buried in Lijssenthoek cemetery.



Acknowledgements:

Eric Knowles' photo is from the School Memorial Book, thanks to the O.B.A. and School. The family history was researched using Ancestry.com. For his time at Bradford, *B.G.S. Annual Report 1906-7* where he is listed as E. Knowles; for Ilkley G.S., <<http://www.wharfedalefhg.org/index.php/places/war-memorials/322-ilkley-grammar-school>>.

For Joseph's partnership, *Yorkshire Post* 5-4-1910, <<http://search.findmypast.co.uk/bna/viewarticle?id=bl%2f0000687%2f19100405%2f111>>; also *Kelly's Directory of Bradford 1912*, 145, 610.

Eric's Service Records survive for both the R.A.M.C. and the R.E. 'N' Special Company (on Ancestry.com). The date of his wound is from <<http://www.lijssenthoek.be/en/address/4829/-eric-wilkinson-knowles.html>> - the Company War Diary (The National Archives, WO-95-402-2) does not record any casualties from the raid, only that it interrupted work. The wounds are described in the R.E. Service Record as 'G.S.W' (Gunshot Wounds), but are also attributed to a shell in the copy of the telegram received by his parents. The wounds were described as 'multi perf procolicas' (?), and he was reported dangerously wounded. He was buried in grave XVI.B.8.A.

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