

# GEOFFREY BARKER



22nd November 1917

1895-1917 Age 22

**Captain, 2/6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment.**

Geoffrey Barker was born in Otley on 6th November 1895. His father Robert managed the tannery owned by the family firm of William Barker & Sons Ltd. of Cross Green, Otley. In 1887 Robert married Mary Ellen Pullan, the daughter of an Otley joiner and cabinet maker. They had five children of whom Geoffrey was the third and their second son. He was educated at Selbourne School in Otley until he was fourteen, before he went to Bradford Grammar School at the start of 1910. At the end of his first full year in Fourth Classical he won the form prize. Among his class-mates were Harry Huby and Norman Smith who would also die in the Battle of Cambrai. Geoffrey was a talented cricketer who opened the batting for the First XI in the 1913 season. Although he was in the Remove, his average of 49.1 was the highest achieved for a season up to this point in the school's history. Geoffrey left the school in July 1913 a few months short of his eighteenth birthday. His elder brother Peter was learning the leather tanning business, but Geoffrey was articled to the Bradford solicitors' practice of Messrs. Gordon, Hunter, and Duncan of Piccadilly, Bradford.

Barker enlisted with the Bradford Territorials at Bellevue Barracks a fortnight after the outbreak of war, on 21st August 1914, together with John Briggs from the same office. Although he was only eighteen and entirely without military experience, three weeks later he received a commission in the Reserve of the 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment. Among the other officers there were at least a dozen Old Bradfordians. Geoffrey was an efficient officer and was promoted to Temporary Lieutenant in April 1915. Lieutenant-Colonel Hastings later described him as 'a fine and zealous officer, capable, very efficient and gallant ... always a pleasant, bright and cheerful companion.' In his absence his father did not forget Bradford Grammar School; in August 1916 he entertained the School O.T.C. to lunch at Cambridge House when they detrained at Otley *en route* to the summer camp at Huby. The N.C.O.s were treated to a tour of his leather works.

The Reserve Battalion, now known as the 2/6th West Yorkshire, finally went to France in January



1917. In the aftermath of its attack on Bullecourt on 3rd May, when the battalion was at one point reduced to seventy-six men, Barker was promoted to Acting Captain and took command of 'D' Company. On the first day of the Battle of Cambrai, 20th November, apart from one platoon Barker's company was in reserve so it largely escaped the casualties suffered in taking the Hindenburg Line at Havrincourt. The next night the battalion took over the captured line further north near Graincourt. At dawn it became clear that it occupied a salient of a single trench, exposed on both sides and overlooked by several spoil banks (from the nearby canal cutting) which the Germans held. At 6 a.m. on 22nd November the enemy attacked in strength. By 9 a.m. the battalion had exhausted its ammunition and fell back. Although it counter-attacked after replenishing its supplies, a renewed German assault threatened to work behind 'D' Company and forced it to retire once more. Barker was killed during this confused fighting and his body was not recovered.

His Commanding Officer Lieutenant-Colonel Hoare wrote: 'Your son set a splendid example to his company and remained perfectly cool in face of greatly superior numbers until he fell. He was my Senior Company Commander, and I shall miss him immensely both as a friend and soldier. He had improved his company out of all knowledge, and it did splendidly in very heavy fighting.'





## Acknowledgements:

Geoffrey Barker's photo is from the School memorial book courtesy of the O.B.A. and B.G.S. The family was researched using Ancestry.com. Geoffrey's years at B.G.S. are recorded in the Annual Reports for 1910 to 1913. There is a problem—there were two boys named G. Barker in the same year, one in the Classical and one in the Modern form. I have identified the Classical Barker (to coin a phrase) as our subject because his school years match those that he was known to be at B.G.S. For his cricketing prowess, *The Bradfordian*, xviii, no. 117, November 1917, 20-21, and Andrew Smith, *Cricket at Bradford Grammar School. An Illustrated History*, (2003), 13. The steam engine installed in 1907 at Barker's Cross Green tannery (which mysteriously burned to the ground in the 1990s) was saved and is now in operation at Ellenroad Steam Museum Society <<http://nick-myurbex.blogspot.co.uk/search?updated-max=2011-05-21T10:53:00%2B01:00&max-results=1&reverse-paginate=true>> accessed 16-11-2017.

The Otley Museum website <<http://www.otleymuseum.moonfruit.com/service-and-loss/4584654802>>, accessed 16-11-2017, has an interactive map of Otley's war dead, but I have not been able to identify a location marker and any details for Barker. In 1911 the family lived at Fern Bank, close to the Cross Green works. At some point before 1916 they had moved to Cambridge House, Gay Lane.

Barker's Officer Personal Record, T.N.A. WO374-3920, is a thin file concerned mainly with his father's attempt in 1926 to establish (wrongly) that Geoffrey was the last commander of D Company. Of greater value in researching his career was (1) the entry in De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour on Ancestry.com (2) the Leeds Mercury 1-12-1917 death notice. For the 2/6th West Yorkshires' actions in 1917, I used Captain E.C. Gregory, *History of the 6th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, vol.II*, (Percy Lund, Humphries, Bradford, 1923), especially 127, 143-4; also Fraser Skirrow, *Massacre on the Marne. The Life & Death of the 2/5th Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment in the Great War*, (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2007), 156-9.

For Cambrai see <<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/battles/battles-of-the-western-front-in-france-and-flanders/the-cambrai-operations-1917-battle-of-cambrai/>>.

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