

ROBERT LEACH PETTY



31st August 1918

1896-1918 Aged 22



Lieutenant 3rd (Special Reserve) Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment, attached 7th (Service) Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment.

The Petty family business was drapery, in the sense of outfitters, starting in Crosshills village between Keighley and Skipton. Robert's father Walter Webster Petty worked in his father's shop in Crosshills. In 1895 he married Isabelle Leach at St. Andrews parish church, Listerhills, Bradford. William and Isabelle had two children, both born in Crosshills, Robert in 1896 and Kathleen in 1898. This may have been a very advantageous marriage for William, for by 1901 the family lived in the Daisy Hill area of Bradford, occupying a substantial house on Hazelhurst Road and then on Cranbourne Road. William was in business with Gibson, Boyce & Co. of Darley Street, Bradford and at his death in 1942 his effects were valued at half a million pounds in modern terms.

Robert started at the Bradford Grammar School Junior school in September 1907 aged eleven. For two years he was a successful pupil, coming twelfth and seventh in his form, and in 1909 he started in Senior School Form Third Modern. Part of the way through the year he was sent to board at Dollar Academy in Scotland with two cousins. His mother may already have been in poor health and she died in November 1910 while he was away. He remained at Dollar until 1913 where he was in the School O.T.C. In his obituary the School magazine commented, 'fellow-pupils will remember him as a boy of gentle, lovable disposition'. From school he was apprenticed to a dyer in Bradford, but when the war began in 1914 he was eager to enlist. He tried five times to volunteer, but each time was rejected for defective eyesight until in May 1915 he was accepted for the Public Schools' Rifles (19th Battalion Royal Fusiliers) at Dewsbury. He was nineteen. Robert spent six months training before joining the battalion in France in November. The Public Schools Battalion was a nursery for officers, and after a winter in the trenches near Bethune the men were gradually dispersed to Officer Training Battalions. Robert's turn came in May 1916, when he was sent

to 6th Officer Cadet Battalion at Balliol College, Oxford. He was commissioned into his preferred regiment, the West Yorkshires, in September but when his posting came it was an attachment to 7th Battalion North Staffordshire Regiment which had been at Gallipoli and then in Egypt. Robert embarked at Devonport on Boxing Day and landed at Basra in Iraq in February 1917.

Over the next twelve months Robert was hospitalized in Baghdad suffering from several ailments. In July 1918, 7/North Staffordshire was sent north into Persia by train and by road in lorries and Ford vans. It was part of 39th Brigade which was to join 'Dunsterforce', a 'special operations' column which was to prevent the Turks and Germans from taking control of the oil-fields at Baku on the Caspian Sea. In August 7/North Staffordshire manned the defence line outside of Baku with Russian and Armenian auxiliary forces. The Turkish assault began on 26th August. Petty, who had been promoted to Lieutenant in March, was killed early on the morning of 31st August while defending West Trench on Stafford Hill. 'Dunsterforce' had to evacuate Baku in September and Petty's body with those of eight other men of his battalion was left behind. They are commemorated on the Memorial to the Missing in Tehran in Iran.



Acknowledgements:

This photo is labelled 'R.L.Petty' in the School memorial book courtesy of the O.B.A. and B.G.S. However, it shows the an officer wearing the badge of the Royal Fusiliers, whereas Petty was commissioned into the West Yorkshire Regiment. Consequently there must be some doubt regarding the identification. The family was researched using Ancestry.com. His years at B.G.S. are recorded in the Annual Reports for 1907 to 1909. For the 1911 Scottish census, <https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/view-image/nrs_census/28659924?image=15>, and for his Dollar Academy obituary, <http://www.worldwar1schoolarchives.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/1918_12.pdf>.

A Top Shop in Bradford: Gibson Boyce & Co., Drapers of Darley Street, and the Petty Family of Crosshills', *Bradford Antiquary* Number 19 (2015).

I consulted the 19/Royal Fusiliers War Diary (T.N.A. WO 95-2427-3) through Ancestry. Petty's Officer Personal Record was copied from T.N.A., WO 339/63698. I downloaded 7/North Staffs War Diary for 1918 from T.N.A., WO 95-5158-5. For Dunsterforce, see e.g. <<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/dunsterforce-caucasus>> (accessed 25.8.2018), and the remarkable film shot at Baku, <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1060008178>>.

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