

FORGET ME NOT

GEORGE ANTHONY ACKERLEY

RICHARD ACKERLEY'S GRANDFATHER



My grandfather, George Anthony Ackerley, was born in 1896 and joined the Royal Fusiliers, City of London Regiment in 1915. During his life, he was very reticent about recalling his wartime experiences which were clearly quite traumatic at times. I have recently looked into his time during the war and using a little information passed on to me and some historical research I have built up a picture of his experiences.

I have a collection of letters that my grandmother Ethel Edge (his girlfriend) received from him and other family members during this time, which have offered a very poignant insight into some of the things he went through. His letters are sometimes vague or euphemistic, in line with the censorship of the period, but I have been able to piece together much of the action he saw using internet resources to fill in missing details.

George Ackerley was a student at Cheltenham Teacher Training College when he joined the 28th Battalion at the age of 19, together with fellow students, referred to in his letters as 'The Chelts'. In a letter to his 'dear Effie', he explained his feelings about having enlisted and being stationed at Oxford:

'At last I am with my regiment ... I fully expected to get pitched to Epsom, but the Batt left there 14 days ago. The billet I am in is A1 ...'

He also reflected:

'but I am only one in thousands who have placed their lives in the hands of his country.'

Ethel's two brothers also joined the army in 1915 and were posted to France; both survived the war.

George underwent training with his battalion in Edinburgh where there was a delay in their posting to France due to a Scarlet Fever outbreak. A letter dated May 1916 describes how he was fed up with having to remain in Scotland, but there were clearly moments of excitement during his boredom:

'For the last ten days I have been, along with several others, on a bombing course, throwing live bombs in trenches dug for the purpose - that was certainly a little exciting! I have no great desire to become a bomber although it promises to be rather sporty besides being slightly dangerous.'

He went to France in the summer of 1916, I think in time for the Somme offensive. In a letter from France in September 1916, he comments on an acquaintance's views and expresses his own opinions about the enemy:

'I wonder whether he's changed his opinions. I'll bet it would not take him long if he came out here and saw a little of their work and a few of their dastardly tricks.'

He transferred to Machine Gun Corps, joining the 36th Company and saw action near Arras.

A letter from 9th February 1917 describes conditions in the trenches:

'Judging by the way we have to thaw bread - in fact all eatables - before we can have a meal, I guess the temp out here is about twenty degrees below zero.'

Also in this letter, he talks about the fate of some of his fellow Cheltenham College volunteers:

'It's very queer but up to the present I've not seen any of the Chelts out here, except the few I was with and now they are minus.'



In July 1917, on his 21st birthday, he wrote:

'By the by, today is your humble's anniversary of his arrival on this desolate and wicked world. To think that I should be transformed from a youth to a man on French soil! Still, I may get a leave someday.'

In November 1917 his Company was involved in The Battle of Cambrai where the first mass tank attacks by the Allied Forces took place. After spectacular initial gains by the tanks, the German counter-attack nullified them completely and over the two week period from November 20th to December 4th 44,000 Allied Troops and 45,000 Germans were either killed, wounded or lost in action.

George was the gunner in a Vickers machine gun section during this battle. He sustained a shrapnel wound at La Vacquerie and therefore was sent back hospital in England (his first and only leave). Unfortunately, he was sent in error to a hospital in Newcastle on Tyne rather than Newcastle under Lyme, his home town in Staffordshire.

By 1918, he was back in France and was again wounded (gassed) at Nieppe Bois in April.

He originally joined as a private; like many of his colleagues, he was offered officer training but preferred to join the ranks. He finished the war as Acting Sergeant and after demobilisation returned to his studies at Cheltenham. He became a successful teacher and Headmaster until he retired in the late 1950s.

He married 'Effie'; they were married for well over 60 years and died within 2 weeks of each other aged 90 and 92.

