

Tribute to Private William Horwill

King's Royal Rifle Corps

Died of his wounds on 21st March 1918, aged 40

When we look back to World War One, it is like looking through a telescope from the wrong end. We know that it ended in Victory in November 1918, and it is easy to fool ourselves that this was an inevitable conclusion.

The truth is rather different. For most of the war it was being fought to a vicious stalemate. The front line only moved by 50 miles over 4 years. There were times when it seemed a German victory was the more likely outcome.

In March 1918 the German High Command threw everything into a major push for victory. Called the Kaiser's Schlacht (Which translates as Kaiser's battle) or the Ludendorff Offensive, it had the nature of a last desperate throw of the dice to snatch victory before too many fresh American troops arrived on the front.

Ludendorff was the Quartermaster General of the German Army, and as the name suggests the Architect of this offensive. He had given up hope that Germany could win the war of attrition that had staggered along on the Western Front since 1914, and resolved to win the war with a dramatic breakthrough using troops released by the recent victory against Russia on the Eastern Front.

For the first time we hear a term that has become ominous in history – the storm trooper – the very best of the German army, tasked with making an aggressive burst through the Allied lines, with the intention of creating salients that would in time force the flank of the enemy army, and eventually drive them back towards the Channel ports.

We meet today to remember a young man from Dawlish whose life was lost amongst the madness of the first day of this desperate gamble. His name was William Horwill.

William was born in 1877 in Morchard Bishop, and by the time of the 1901 census was living in Dawlish aged 23. We do not know what had brought him from Mid Devon to be living by the sea side. All we can say with certainty is that he was employed as a carter by the Mill on Brunswick Place.

He enlisted in the Army, and by March 1918 was posted with his brigade in the vicinity of Offoy, which is about 14 miles south west of Saint Quentin.

In a life that was barely documented, we know this of his last day on earth from the regiment's war diary:

21st March

"The Battn 'stood by' in billets all morning and at last at 2.30 p.m. the order came round "Man Battle Stations". We marched off at 3.15 p.m. via SANCOURT, VILLERS ST CHRISTOPHE and across the fields to DOUCHY, or rather, to a sunken road about 500 yards N.W. of DOUCHY. DOUCHY was being heavily shelled.

Here, a mounted officer from Brigade found the Battn. We were to remain where we were until we received further orders. Sentries were therefore posted and the Battn waited. At midnight the order came through to move to the original Battle Stations.

A peculiarly dense mist had fallen making movement extremely difficult, especially over open country."

Amongst these strange circumstances, William Horwill was shot and mortally wounded.

He is buried in the beautiful war cemetery at Pozieres, and his estate of £56 6s was paid to his sister, his parents having predeceased him.

The German offensive that had cost him his life petered out as their soldiers overstretched their supply lines, and within months the final victory was won – too late for the man we remember here today.