

The Lewton-Brain Memorial Brass

Introduction

I thought that you might like a change from obscure rectors and, when I was in the church recently, I came across the little brass memorial on the north wall of the chancel to Lt James Lewton-Brain, a soldier who died in the First World War. I had wondered for some time what was the background to his story and, with all the attention currently being paid to WWI, I thought that it might be appropriate to look a little further into this. The brass reads:

**In everlasting memory
of
James Andrew Lewton-Brain
(Lieut.) 8th Norfolks
Who died from Gas Poisoning and Wounds**

**Born March 25 1888
Swanton Morley**

**August 14th 1917
Poperinghe**

He was the second son of another James Lewton-Brain, who was the headmaster of Swanton Morley School, and of his wife Clare, who was headmistress of Toftwood Mixed Public Elementary School. He was baptised in Swanton Morley on 3rd June 1888 by the then rector, Edward Lombe. The family lived first at a house called "The Rookery" in Yaxham, later moving to South Green in Dereham, afterwards to "The Hollies", Theatre Street, Dereham, and finally to the Mill House in Toftwood.

He was educated at King Edward VII Grammar School King's Lynn, as was his younger brother, Charles, and his name is on their war memorial. On leaving school, he joined the Civil Service before he became a bank clerk with the London & Provincial Bank (Great Yarmouth branch), a post that he held for nearly five years. (This bank was taken over by Barclays in 1918.) During this time, he lived at 5 Britannia Road, Yarmouth and he served for over two years in a unit of the territorial forces, the 6th Bn. (cyclists), the Norfolk Regiment.

It may help you to know that, at full strength, an infantry battalion consisted of about 1,000 men. It comprised a Battalion Headquarters and four Companies. There was initially much enthusiasm for the formation of cyclist's battalions as a replacement for horses in reconnaissance and communications work. They were quieter and logistically much easier to manage than horses and, on the eve of the First World War, the Territorial Force had fourteen cyclists battalions. However, with the advent of trench warfare, it was recognised that cyclists were of little value

James was well known in the Yarmouth and Dereham districts as an enthusiastic footballer and cricketer, and he represented Norfolk at hockey, playing outside left.

James joined the Canadian Army on 5th Nov 1914

In late 1911, he went to Canada to join the Vancouver branch of the Bank of Montreal. Not long before war was declared, he had transferred to the Victoria B.C. branch and, when war was declared, he enlisted in Victoria as a private in the 30th Overseas Infantry Battalion on 5th November 1914. This was just after the 1st Contingent of the Canadian Expeditionary Force had sailed for France, and he joined the 2nd Contingent which sailed for England in the spring of 1915. During the summer of 1915, the 2nd Contingent trained at Shorncliffe in Kent, and in September 1915 they left for France as the 2nd Canadian Division.

James was selected for officer training in January 1916, but he transferred to the British Army and on the completion of his training he joined the Norfolk Regt.

In the list of those eligible for the British War & Victory Medal, James is shown as being a private in the 15th Battalion, Canadian Infantry on 23 Nov 1915. This was the 48th Highlanders of Canada, a kilted unit with very strong Scottish associations. However, the same list shows that by 7th Jan 1916 he was in the 30th Reserve Bn. It was then that he was recommended for officer training and he was transferred to the Canadian Training Division at Shorncliffe on 11th January 1916. However, he must have decided to transfer to the British Army at this time for he was commissioned as a Second Lieut. in the Norfolk Regiment on 23 January 1916.



He was initially sent to its 10th (Reserve) Battalion, which was in England, but he soon returned to France where he was allocated to the 8th (Service) Battalion and he was attached to its Battalion Headquarters. This battalion had been raised at Norwich in September 1914, and had been in France since July 1915. It would seem that James remained in this battalion from this time up to the time of his death.

The Somme

We know that, on 1st July 1916, the 8th (Service) Battalion fought in the Battle of Albert, which was the first day of the Battle of the Somme. On this first day the British Army suffered an incredible 57,470 casualties, of whom 19,240 were killed. In the subsequent fighting from 2nd to 13th July, the British lost a further 25,000 men. The 8th Norfolks later took part in the battles of Bazentin Ridge (13th to 15th July), Delville Wood (15th July- 3rd Sept) and Thiepval Ridge (26th - 28th Sept). They were also present at the battle of The Ancre (13th -18th Nov 1916), which was the final large British attack of the Somme. After this battle British attacks were stopped by the weather. During the rest of 1916 and early January 1917, military operations on both sides were mostly restricted to survival in the rain, snow, fog, mud-fields and waterlogged trenches.

The next information that I have found says that James was involved in 'carrying duties' (bringing supplies up to the front line) during the attack at Boom Ravine (near Miraumont) in February 1917. The battalion was also in action on 10th March at Irles, where James was transport Officer. He was promoted to Lieut. on 18th March 1917.

The 8th Battalion then fought during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line (March-April 1917) and the Third Battle of the Scarpe (3rd – 4th May, 1917) before moving to Flanders.

Next time I shall tell you about the role that the 8th Norfolks played in the Third Battle of Ypres, and about how James was killed when a phosgene shell penetrated the roof of his bunker.