



Wilfred Henry JACKSON Sergeant, 4246, 2nd Battalion Honourable Artillery Company (HAC)

Wilfred Henry Jackson in many respects can be seen as Queen Elizabeth Grammar School's favourite son. Throughout his service he kept in contact with the school, and perhaps because he had only left a year before the war started, his former teachers held him in high regard. He also proved his worth as a soldier, rising through the ranks to become a senior NCO, before being killed during a massive German counter-attack on 15th May 1917. QES had lost a bright and greatly loved son.

In May 1917 it was decided that a huge assault of the Hindenburg Line would take place, with the objective of capturing the village of Bullecourt. Jackson's unit, the 2nd Battalion Honourable Artillery Company (HAC) was involved in the assault on the village on the 3rd May but was unable to capture it. The 91st Brigade achieved this objective on the 7th May. However, the cost was extremely high, and the HAC in particular suffered huge casualties. Thus, on the 14th May, when the battalion was ordered to relieve some newly captured front line trenches, the fighting strength of the unit stood at just 250 men. Jackson was included in this number. The relief of the new trenches was undertaken without incident, but the battalion did not have time to get comfortable in the new positions. At 4 a.m. a massive enemy counter-attack was opened, and 'C' Company was almost entirely annihilated. Consequently 'B' Company was pushed back as far as Battalion Head Quarters (H.Q.) and there was a danger of the Germans enveloping several battalions. Jackson and the rest of 'D' Company, together with survivors of the other companies, were ordered to attack and clear Bullecourt of the Germans. As a sergeant of a Lewis Gun Section, Jackson took charge of his gun and it was reported by a corporal in his section that he had knocked out a German machine gun position as well as two German snipers. The counter-attack was checked and subsequently faded away. Unfortunately during the resistance Jackson was killed, however, his sacrifice was said to have made a real difference. His work had prevented 3 Battalions being enveloped, and afterwards the Divisional Commander had complemented all the gunners of 'D' Company, referring to Sergeant Jackson in particular, for their excellent work. Jackson, however, was not there to hear this praise, and he was not the only absent man. All that was left of the whole 2nd Battalion were 4 officers and 94 men.

The life of Jackson was, like many of the 'old boys', full of potential. He was born on 14th December 1895, the only son of John Warbrick Smith Jackson, Kirkby-Lonsdale's Blacksmith. Initially he was educated at the National School, and then went to Queen Elizabeth Grammar School for four years. At the school he became captain of the football team, and his sporting ability in both football and cricket was said to be unequalled. Moreover he was talented academically, particularly in mathematics and languages. In extra-circular activities he was an accomplished violinist, and he played in competitions at the Winter Gardens, Morecambe. Upon leaving school he began studying to gain entry into the Civil Service and successfully secured an appointment to the Inland Revenue, where he was described as having a promising business career. When war came he was employed as a Second Division Clerk at the Admiralty in London. This was a 'war job', meaning that Jackson had no need to join up, and for a year he was content in his administrative position. However, his patriotic flare got the better of him and on the 23rd August 1915 he joined the Honourable Artillery Company.

Jackson, at just 19 was now in the army. He spent over a year with his new unit on Home Service, which would have included a period of time training at Tadworth Training Camp, Surrey. On 2nd October 1916, however, he embarked at Southampton for Havre, France, by which time he had already been promoted to Lance Corporal. In a letter to the school he described his journey:

"We got aboard a transport on the Sunday night, but did not set sail as it was found to be rather dangerous, two of three neutrals [neutral ships] having been torpedoed the night before. So we marched back six miles through the dark to a rest camp where we stayed the night. The next night we sailed and after a seven hours pleasant voyage arrived in France. Followed a long, uphill, tedious march to a camp, and next morning a march back to the station, where we entrained in cattle-trucks for a railway journey of 21 hours."

After the Battalion arrived at the trenches Jackson received a baptism of fire. Within just a few days at the front Jackson had what he described as "one or two near squeaks." A German shell had exploded near him as he reconnoitred the front-line trench and he was buried in earth. A few days later another shell exploded near by, and it was only a section of sandbags that saved Jackson's life. Moreover there was constant threat from snipers. Nor were the Germans Jackson's only enemy. He describes in several of his letters to the school how poor weather conditions, rain and later frost, made his life uncomfortable. Additionally he refers to the danger of 'trench foot', which could result from the conditions. Despite such hardships and 'near misses' he kept in high spirits, often looking back at his QES days with a nostalgic eye. The headmaster cultivated this nostalgia by sending Jackson copies of the school magazine. Jackson wrote in one letter:

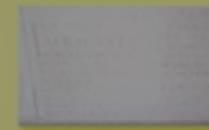
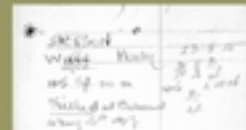
"It's a lot better here than I ever expected, even though we have come out at the worst time. I would prefer, however, to be back at the old school, but really I cannot grumble as I had a very good run. With best wishes for the success of the old school in every way."

As his service progressed so did Jackson. He was promoted to Corporal in February 1917, Lance-Sergeant in March and Sergeant in April. He also progressed from being simply a member of a Lewis Gun Team, to being in charge of one, training his own men and taking a great deal of pride in the task. In fact a corporal in his team described the last hour of Jackson life as follows:

"I feel sure that his last hour was the happiest of his whole life as he saw his gunners, the men he trained, working hard and standing like Old Guards"

Thus when Jackson died repelling the German counter attack on Bullecourt, his Lewis Gun Section, his Battalion, his Division, his family and his old school all grieved. Jackson's body was not recovered and he is remembered on the Arras Memorial

Click on the images below to enlarge and for more information



Links

Wilfred Henry Jackson's entry on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Website, http://www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=1574168

For more information on the Lewis Gun see the First World War.com, http://www.firstworldwar.com/atoz/mgun_lewis.htm

For Information on Machine-Gun warfare see <http://www.firstworldwar.com/weaponry/machineguns.htm>

A brief history of the HAC and research into a soldier who was killed at Bullecourt in May 1917 can be found by exploring this site, <http://www.catnaps.org/bulle/intro.html>

For a brief over-view of Trench Foot (complete with a picture of the condition) see, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWfoot.htm>

For a brief description of the Hindenburg Line please see, <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWhindenburgL.html>