

Private Gilbert Edward Smith

9063 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment



Gilbert Edward Smith was born in January 1894 and baptised on 4th February 1894 in Overton, Hampshire. He was the son Henry and Jane Smith of 4, London Road, Overton. He had two brothers Henry and William and three sisters Ivy, Annie and Olive.

Gilbert was a regular soldier, joining up before the war, and was with the 1st Battalion Hampshire Regiment at Colchester as part of the 4th Division 11th Brigade. On the 17th August, 1914, the Territorials were mobilised, thus freeing up the Division from its role of home defence duties. On the 21st / 22nd August, the 1st Battalion embarked on board the ship 'Braemar Castle' and set sail for France.



The B.E.F. (British Expeditionary Force) was already heavily entangled with the German Army when the 1st Hampshire's detrained at Le Cateau on the 24th August, at 4.00am. They then marched the six miles to Solsmes, to cover the retreat of the B.E.F. from Mons. They engaged the enemy and stopped his repeated attempt to maul the B.E.F.'s wing. Gilbert, in his first taste of action, had a bullet pass harmlessly through his cap. Perhaps this is why, later on in the war, his identity disc cord had a spent bullet on it, along with many, many lucky charms.

Throughout 1914, the Battalion saw action, and by the end of the year, they had just six serving Officers. Of the original Battalion strength, 366 other ranks were still fighting, 265 NCO's and men had been killed or missing, and 390 wounded. Of the Officers, 8 were dead, 6 were missing and 15 wounded. Gilbert certainly had been fortunate not to have been injured in his first action, but now the war wouldn't be over by Christmas, and he would have to take his chance like everyone else.

We know little of Gilbert in 1915, except that he fought at Ypres, Arras and Ancre, and was at some point in hospital. Why and for what we don't know. Maybe he had a fever, or had injured himself, but whatever it was, he was back in the Battalion by 1916, in time for the Battle of Albert, the name used for this part of the Battle of the Somme.

At 7.20am on 1st July 1916, 40,000lbs of Ammonal was detonated under Hawthorn Ridge Redoubt, lifting a huge amount of earth, chalk and stones high in the air and causing the instant dissolution of its many German defenders. The mine was blown 10 minutes before the initial attack of that long and bloody battle known to history as The Somme. To the north of the mine was the 1st Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment belonging to the British 4th Division.

Hawthorn Redoubt was blown up at 7.20am and all the other mines were blown at 7.28am. It was hoped that the British troops would capture the crater, and so prevent the Germans pouring enfilade fire into the side and rear of the advancing British forces as they crossed the Redan Ridge. Sadly, the Germans got there first, and all that happened was the Germans held part of the redoubt, and could still fire on the advancing troops and they now knew that the main assault was imminent. Gilbert was in the 2nd wave of the attack, which meant he would go over the top at 7.40am.

The East Lancashires went over first at 7.30am. They were cut down in swathes by machine gun fire, many of the wounded finding shelter in a sunken lane ahead of the lines, some in shell holes, but all at the mercy of the enfilade from Hawthorn Ridge. At 7.40am, Gilbert left the trenches and advanced into no-man's land. At some point, and probably within minutes, a machine gun bullet tore through his thigh, and he collapsed to the ground. He lay on the battlefield for 3 days, during which time he was hit in the foot by shrapnel. He was, according to family lore, brought in by a friend from Overton called Stubbington, who had seen him fall. If so, it was a very brave thing to do.

Gilbert would have been taken to a forward dressing station, assessed and stabilised, and sent on his journey back to England. Gilbert ended up in Netley Hospital, near Southampton, where it seems he was recovering well, but he then started to deteriorate. His parents were sent for, but he succumbed to his wounds before they could get there. He died on the 27th August. He was 22 years old.

The Hants and Berks Gazette of Saturday September 2nd 1916 recorded:

Death and funeral of Pte. Gilbert Smith. The sad news received on Sunday that Pte. Gilbert Smith, Hants Regt. had passed away in Netley Hospital from wounds received on 1st July came as a very painful surprise to his many friends in Overton, as up till Saturday last his parents had received favourable accounts of his progress towards recovery. His parents were wired for late on Saturday night and journeyed early on Sunday morning to Netley, but they were too late to see him alive, although they had previously visited Netley after his arrival there. Deceased had been in the fighting line from the earliest period in the war, but with the exception of having a bullet through his hat the first day in the trenches he had passed unscathed through it all till the day in question. Shot in the thigh early in the day on Saturday 1st July, he lay in a shell hole till late on the Monday night following before being discovered, receiving meantime another bad wound in the foot.

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The funeral took place at Overton on Thursday afternoon at 2pm amid every sign of sympathy and respect. The inhabitants desiring a military funeral, the Commanding Officer of the Depot acceded to the request and a bearer company, firing party and bugler were sent. In the unavoidable absence of the Rector, the Rev. L.B. Barnett of Ashe took the service. As the coffin was borne from the house the soldiers presented arms and subsequently headed the procession with reversed arms. The coffin, borne by soldiers of the Hants Regt. followed.

Neither brother was able to be present, the elder serving his country in the Rifle Brigade as wireless operator on an Indian transport and the younger is with the King's Royal Rifles at the Front.

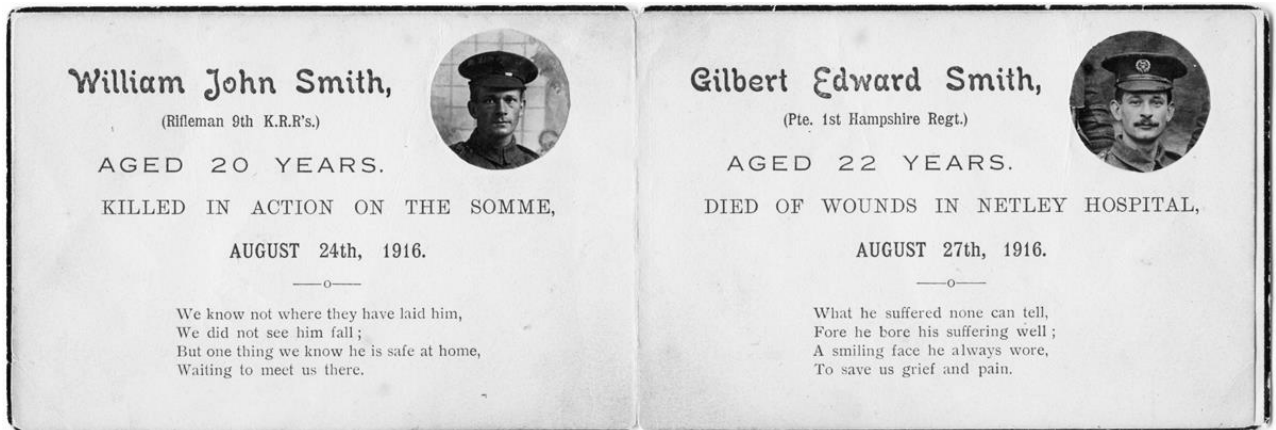
*To the strains of the Funeral March the body was conveyed to its last resting place, and at the conclusion of the service three volleys were fired over the grave and the "Last Post" was sounded by the bugler, both forming an impressive ending to a very solemn service. The coffin bore the inscription;
"Pte. G.Smith 1st Hants Regt. died 27th Aug 1916, aged 22 years."*



Gilbert is buried in St Mary's Churchyard, Overton. His brother, William, who was killed on the Somme 3 days before him is commemorated on the same headstone, along with their father, Henry, who died the following year.

Gilbert Edward Smith

Brothers William and Gilbert are both shown on the memorial card below.



Private Gilbert Edward Smith was awarded the Victory and British medals and the 14 Star.

Name.	Corps.	Rank.	Regtl. No.
SMITH	1/Hamp R.	Pte.	9063.
<i>Gilbert G.E.</i>			
Medal.	Roll.	Page.	Remarks.
VICTORY	6/103 B 26	2513	<i>D. of W.</i>
BRITISH	— do	do	
14 STAR	6/111	116.	
-62/2/2765.			
Theatre of War first served in			
Date of entry therein			
23/8/14			

K 1380.