

Ernest Pelling: A Broadbridge Heath boy



[Image from author's collection]

By

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Early Life and Family

This is the story of an ordinary country man from Broadbridge Heath who gave his life for his country like millions of others around him. I believe that until he enlisted he almost certainly hadn't travelled more than a few miles from his home and family in and around Horsham. Few records remain of his life but from these I have tried to piece together as much information as possible as a tribute to his sacrifice.

Ernest Pelling was my Great Uncle, older brother to my maternal Grandmother, Lucy Pelling and I recall her talking with affection of her brother 'Ern'. She gave me the few documents she had which provided me with a start and a prompt to finding out more about him.

Ernest Alfred Pelling was born on 26 July 1892 in Broadbridge Heath, the fourth child of Harry and Betsy Pelling. The Pellings were a large family and when their last child Eunice was born in 1905, Ernest had 2 brothers and 8 sisters.

The 1911 census shows Ernest living at 1 Sunnyside Cottages, Broadbridge Heath. At 18 years of age he was working with his father as a Carter Boy on Strood Park Farm in nearby Warnham. Coming from an extended family of farm labourers he might have expected to continue in the same occupation for the rest of his life.



[Photo Courtesy of Jonathan England]

This photograph shows his mother and some of his brothers and sisters outside what were described as New Post Office Cottages in Broadbridge Heath where they lived before moving to Sunnyside.

Enlistment

In 1914, one of the first to respond to local appeals, Ernest enlisted in the 7th Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment. His name was included in a list published in the West Sussex Gazette in December 'For King and Country – Local men at the front.

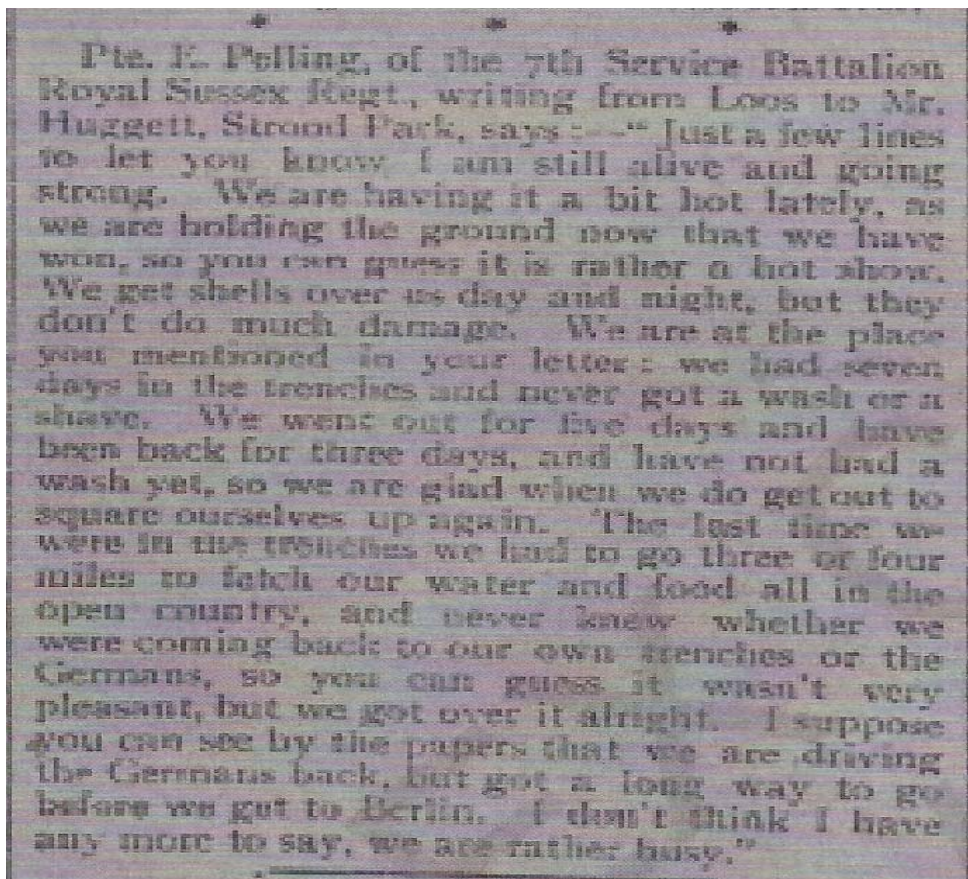
The Gazette noted

'Broadbridge Heath has sent 52 of its sons to the colours all but 5 of these going to the land forces. A subscription list under the charge of Miss Richardson at the Post Office has been opened for the purpose of sending every local man at the front a card of greeting and a packet containing a handkerchief, a supply of note paper and envelopes, a pencil, boot laces and – happiest thought of all - a cake of soap. If the amount collected will allow it, cigarettes will be added to this compendium'.

The 7th Battalion was the first Service Battalion to be formed in the Royal Sussex Regiment. It began recruiting at Chichester on 12th August 1914.

All the original recruits were given a 'G' prefix to their regimental number, which began at 1, through to around 1200. Ernest's number was G/922.

Like many thousands of other men, it has not been possible to trace the precise journey that Ernest took over the next two years. However in October 1915 he wrote to his friend, Mr Huggett of Strood Park as follows:



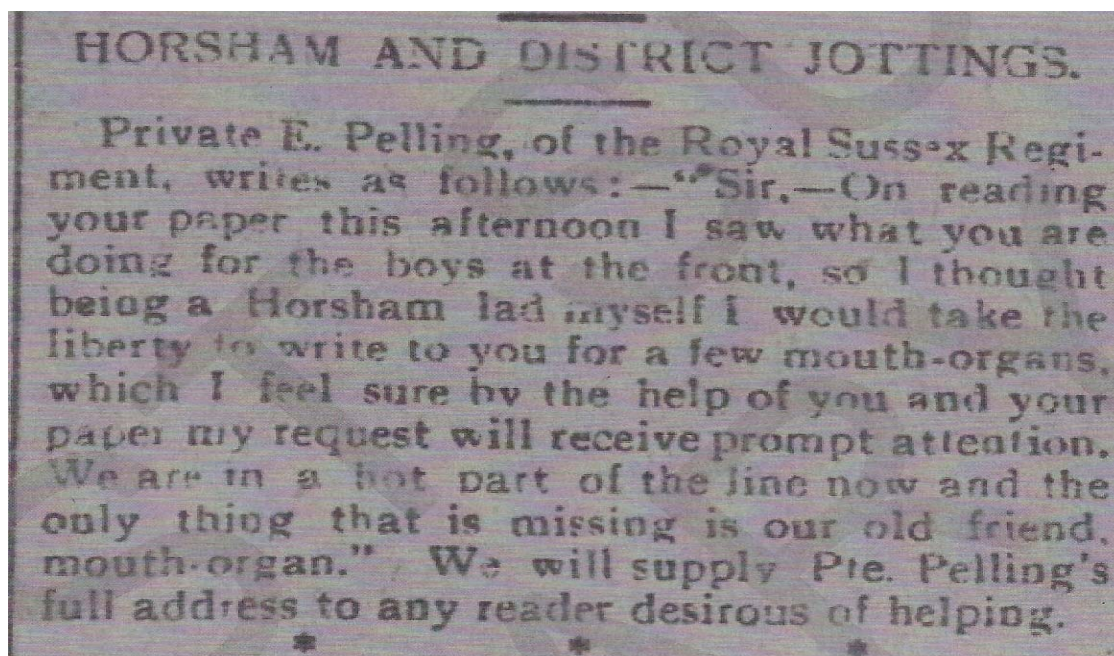
Pte. E. Pelling, of the 7th Service Battalion Royal Sussex Regt., writing from Loos to Mr. Huggett, Strood Park, says: -- "Just a few lines to let you know I am still alive and going strong. We are having it a bit hot lately, as we are holding the ground now that we have won, so you can guess it is rather a hot show. We get shells over us day and night, but they don't do much damage. We are at the place you mentioned in your letter: we had seven days in the trenches and never got a wash or a shave. We went out for five days and have been back for three days, and have not had a wash yet, so we are glad when we do get out to square ourselves up again. The last time we were in the trenches we had to go three or four miles to fetch our water and food all in the open country, and never know whether we were coming back to our own trenches or the Germans, so you can guess it wasn't very pleasant, but we got over it alright. I suppose you can see by the papers that we are driving the Germans back, but got a long way to go before we get to Berlin. I don't think I have any more to say, we are rather busy."

Battle of Loos and the Defence of Monchy

It seems likely therefore that Ernest was involved in the Battle of Loos which opened on 25th September. Part of the attempt by the French to break through the German defences in Artois and Champagne, the battle marked the first British use of poison gas. British forces were able to break through the weaker German defences and capture the town of Loos, but supply and communications problems meant that despite several further offensives, by the middle of October the position was lost.

Through the course of the battle British losses amounted to nearly 60,000. Ernest survived but may have been injured as in the photograph he sent home to his family, he is standing next to a friend, and is using a walking stick.

In April 1916 Ernest wrote to The West Sussex County Times to appeal for mouth organs to help improve morale.



The appeal bore fruit as in May 1916 the editor was able to report that several mouth organs had been sent to Private Pelling.

I have found no further record of Ernest until his death in July 1917, reported in The West Sussex County Times in September 1917 as follows.

' Lance Corporal Ernest Pelling of the Royal Sussex Regiment, son of Mr and Mrs Harry Pelling of Sunnyside, has we regret to hear been killed in action on the French front, the sad event taking place on the 27th July, the eve of his 25th birthday. News came from the War Office at the beginning of last week that he was missing and on Saturday morning his sister (Mrs E Baker) received the following letter from Private W Colburn, who belongs to the deceased's company:- It is with great regret that I have to tell you of the death of your brother, Lance Corporal Ernest Pelling. He was my chum and like a brother to me, and I feel it is my duty to write and let

you know of his sad death. We were always together and I am sure we shall all miss him very much. He was very much liked by all in his Company. We were in our advanced trench which was counter attacked by the Germans and your brother had just said to me 'we shall have to get out of here or we shall all be wiped out' when he was shot outright by the Germans. It may be some consolation to you to know that death was instantaneous. Please accept the sincere sympathies of myself and his comrades.'

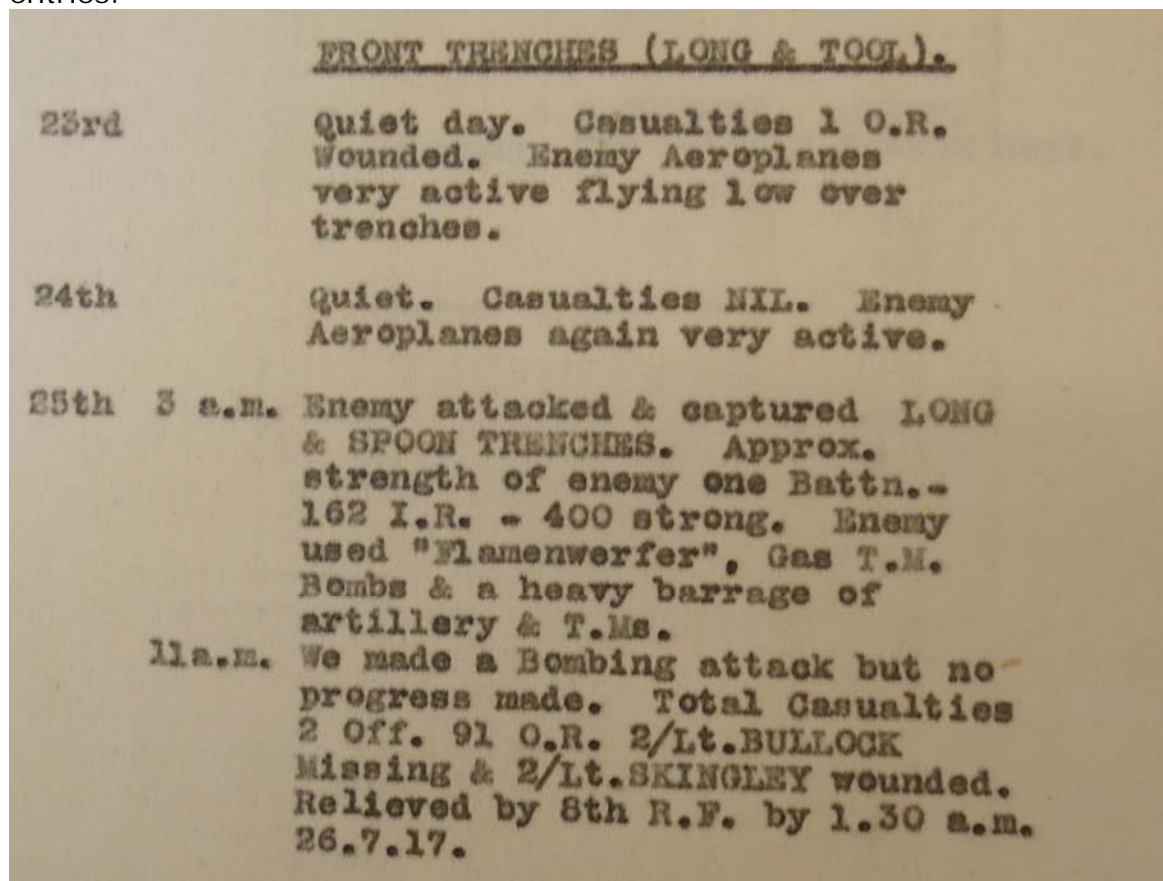
The deceased had several times tried to enter the army without success but he was at once accepted when the war broke out and all his soldiering was confined to the French front. Before the war Pelling was in the employ of Mr W M Strachan, of Stroud Park.'

In July 1917 the 7th Battalion were deployed at the Wancourt-Feuchy Line at Arras, part of the defence of Monchy following the Battle of Arras.

In his history of the 7th Service Battalion, Owen Rutter notes:

'The policy allotted to the division was to be one of active defence in order to cause a doubt in the mind of the enemy as to whether the Battle of Arras was to be further developed... the front line was disturbed by raids, artillery and trench mortar bombardments. '1

In the 7th Battalion field diary, Major G F Osborne made the following entries.



FRONT TRENCHES (LONG & TOOL.)

23rd quiet day. Casualties 1 O.R. Wounded. Enemy Aeroplanes very active flying low over trenches.

24th quiet. Casualties NIL. Enemy Aeroplanes again very active.

25th 3 a.m. Enemy attacked & captured LONG & SPOON TRENCHES. Approx. strength of enemy one Battn.- 162 I.R. - 400 strong. Enemy used "Flamenwerfer", Gas T.M. Bombs & a heavy barrage of artillery & T.Ms.

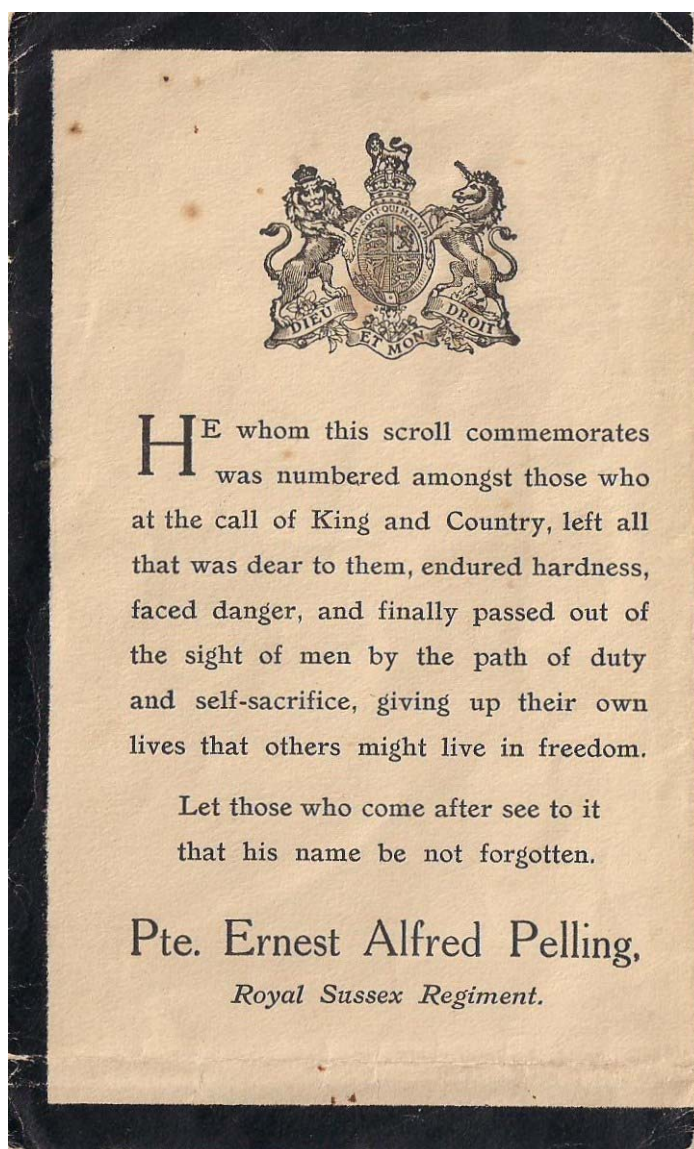
11a.m. We made a Bombing attack but no progress made. Total Casualties 2 Off. 91 O.R. 2/Lt.BULLOCK Missing & 2/Lt.SKINGLEY wounded. Relieved by 8th R.F. by 1.30 a.m. 26.7.17.

So it seems that Ernest died that day together with 90 other men and 2 officers, defending the trenches.

He is recorded on his death certificate and in the 'Royal Sussex Regiment Soldiers who died in the Great War' as Private E Pelling but in his letter, Private Colburn describes Ernest as Lance Corporal Pelling, so although it has been possible to piece together some of his history during the war, this one mystery remains. Was he promoted during the course of three years with the regiment?

On December 15th 1917 The West Sussex County Times reported a memorial service held at Horsham Parish Church where the vicar read a list of those who had laid down their lives since the last memorial service in May 1917, including Ernest Pelling.

In due course, his mother received this scroll to commemorate her son's sacrifice.



[image from authors collection]

Ernest somehow survived for three years fighting with his friends and comrades for a cause that he strongly believed in. He died on the eve of his 25th birthday.

His name appears on the Broadbridge Heath War Memorial which is sited just across the road from his family home in Billingshurst Road, near St John's Church.

His mother who for many years was a caretaker at the church, died in 1948. She had moved by then next door to 3 Sunnyside, and other family members also lived for many years in the surrounding roads.

Ernest Pelling was not forgotten by his sister Lucy, or by the rest of his family.



[Image from author's collection]

Bibliography

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(<http://battlefields1418.50megs.com/7sussex.htm>)

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RSR Royal Sussex Regiment 7th Battalion War Diary (typescript copy)
23rd - 25th July 1917 RSR MSS 7/11

Photo of Pelling family courtesy of Jonathan England.

With grateful thanks to the patient staff at Worthing Library reference section.

¹ O. Rutter, *The History of the Seventh Service Battalion 1914-1919* p. 137