

Lance Corporal Geoffrey Ellis Rowland

Police Officer & Soldier



Image reproduced by permission of G E Rowland's niece

By Bill Matthews

Geoffrey Ellis Rowland

This case study evolved from my research into the deaths of 21 West Sussex Constabulary officers who were killed in the 1st World War.

I decided to concentrate on Geoffrey Ellis Rowland (one of the 21) in depth was because he was born in my home town of Horsham. West Sussex and has a living relative in the town.



21 Park Street (1)

He was born to Ellis and Alice Rowland of 21 Park Street in 1894

They moved house in 1907 to a property which was variously known as 5, Florence Villas, Wickersham Road and 18, Madeira Avenue, Horsham.



18 Madeira Avenue



His mother Alice was still living there until her death aged 81 on 17th November 1955. His father died aged 83 on 15th August 1945. They are both buried at Hills Cemetery, Horsham.

There was a sister Alice born 1893 and two brothers, Edgar who was born in 1896 and Charles in 1904. Edgar joined the Lancers in Ireland in January 1915 aged 20. (2)

Geoffrey was employed by a local business man, Mr J Glaysher who had premises in Middle Street and the Carfax and was working at Christ's Hospital where German prisoners were interned. He joined West Sussex Constabulary with a warrant number three on 11th August 1914 and began his police career in Worthing on 14th August 1914.

There were nine Police Officers who joined the Royal Sussex on the same day and Geoffrey was one of these. By the time of Geoffrey's death on 3rd September 1916 as a Lance Corporal three of these nine were dead and the others wounded.

He enlisted in the 11th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, which was originally raised in Bexhill on 7th September, on 20th September 1914 at Worthing, service number SD/725. (The SD prefix indicates that the holder had volunteered for service in the Sussex Pals and stood for South Downs Battalions, of which there were three, the 11th, 12th and 13th. The South Downers were also known as 'Lowthers Lambs' after Colonel Claude Lowther who had been instrumental in their formation and recruitment).

The battalion was sent to the western front as a unit of the 39th Division's 116th Brigade and disembarked at the French port of Le Havre in March 1916

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On July 19th 1916 the Rowlands were told that Geoffrey had been wounded but had returned to duty with his regiment.

On 23rd September 1916 it was reported that Mrs Rowland received the following letter from Private E J Loveland who enlisted in one of the Southdown Regiments from Worthing:

It is with much regret I write you these few lines as regards dear Geoff. I have made every inquiry amongst the boys of his own platoon, and the only information I could get was that he was killed whilst making an attempt to reach the German third line. We were all terribly cut up to lose him, he being a great favourite amongst us all. Every one of the boys join me in sending our most heartfelt sympathy.

PS. We received a parcel on the morning of the attack, which was served out amongst the remaining platoon at his wish should anything happen. (3)

In May 1917 the Royal Sussex Regiment casualty lists included Lance Corporal Geoffrey E Rowland (725) as "killed, previously missing" There had been some faint hope that he was a prisoner, but after a number of inquiries the War Office have at last been satisfied that the Lance Corporal was killed on the 3rd September and the parents received the formal notification to that effect on the 4th May.

According to a letter written by a Second Lieutenant on the 27th September 1916 the Battalion was attacking the German trenches near the Ancre on September 3rd and:

did gloriously well, although we were compelled to withdraw. As far as could be gathered Rowland was shot through the head whilst attempting to reach the German third lines. The opinion of all who knew him and came into contact with him was that he was an excellent and gallant soldier. It may be some comfort to know that his death was instantaneous and that he died fighting for the cause of honour and liberty. (4)

The Battalion War Diary records:

the attack commenced at 5.10am on 3rd September 1916 with the usual British artillery barrage, the battalion then went into action:

Companies left their assembly trenches to reassemble in No Man's Land. The first wave succeeded in entering the enemy front line but owing to the enemy's barrage across No Man's Land the second and third wave suffered many casualties especially among the officers. Temporary Captain Mitchell of the reserve company saw that some disorganisation would occur to these waves without leaders, quickly went forward and rallied them and took them forward. Second Lieutenant Cassels greatly assisted in this work.

Some of the party succeeded in entering the German 2nd line led by Temporary Captain Northcote and remained there throughout the day in spite of the great odds.

Captain Mitchell took up a position between the enemy wire and the front line parapet and consolidated a line of shell holes there. They had many casualties from shrapnel and bombs but hung on until ordered to withdraw by the C.O. Captain Northcote hung on to his precarious position all day and withdrew at 6.30pm but was killed leading his party across No Man's Land.

From the original party of 40 only one survived and he returned wounded. (5)

The position between the enemy wire and front line was tenuously held until the battalion was withdrawn at 5.30pm, when it was eventually relieved by fresh replacement troops and, severely depleted, returned to Englebelmer. First estimation of casualties amounted to three officers wounded and eight missing, five men killed, 160 wounded and 123 missing (TNA.WO.95/2219) (6)

Battalion casualties for 3rd September 1916 eventually amounted to 299 killed and wounded, including 22 year old Lance Corporal Rowland.

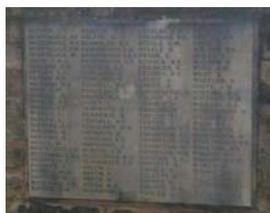
On the 1st July 1916, supported by a French attack to the south, 13 divisions of Commonwealth forces launched an offensive on a line from north of Gommecourt to Maricourt. Despite a preliminary bombardment lasting seven days, the German defences were barely touched and the attack met unexpectedly fierce resistance. Losses were catastrophic and with only minimal advances on the southern flank, the initial attack was a failure. In the following weeks, huge resources of manpower and equipment were deployed in an attempt to exploit the modest successes of the first day. However the German army resisted tenaciously and repeated attacks and counter attacks meant a major battle for every village, copse and farmhouse gained. At the end of September Thiepval was finally captured. Attacks north and east continued throughout October and into November in increasingly difficult weather conditions. The Battle of the Somme finally ended on 18th November with the onset of winter.

Having been killed in action his death is commemorated on Pier and Face 7C of Thiepval Memorial, Somme. France.



The Thiepval Memorial, the memorial to the missing of the Somme, bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South Africa who died in the Somme sector before 20th March 1918 and have no known grave. Over 90% of those commemorated died between July and

November 1916. The memorial also serves as an Anglo-French Battle Memorial in recognition of the joint venture of the 1916 offensive and the small cemetery containing equal numbers of Commonwealth and French graves lies at the foot of the memorial. (7)



Geoffrey's death is also commemorated on the War Memorial situated in the Carfax, Horsham. West Sussex and as he was a Constable in West Sussex Constabulary, on the plaque mounted on the wall of Horsham Police Station showing all 21 Officers who left the Police to fight for their country and subsequently died.



Geoffrey has a niece (the daughter of his brother Edgar) who still lives in Horsham and who supplied the photograph on the front page.

The 21 West Sussex Police Officers commemorated on the memorial at Horsham Police Station are:

- Corporal Sydney George Barnett 29yrs Royal Navy.
- Private Reginald Bashford 30yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
- Private George Albert Butters 29yrs 20th Hussars.
- Private William Carter 24yrs Coldstream Guards.
- Private William Chapman 28yrs Devonshire Regiment.
- Private James William Cudby 26yrs Welsh Regiment.
- Sergeant Albert Edward Cutler 24yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
- Lance Corporal Fleet 27yrs Coldstream Guards.
- 2nd Lieutenant Arthur Garton 30yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
- Company Quartermaster Sergeant George Lyons 35yrs Middlesex Regt.
- Private Leonard Henry Masters 26yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
- Corporal Albert William McGregor 31yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
- Corporal George William Porter 25yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
- Lance Sergeant Charles Rapley 27yrs Coldstream Guards.

Lance Corporal Geoffrey Ellis Rowland 23yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
Sergeant Ernest Squires 33yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
Private Arthur William Tilbury 27yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
Corporal Berkeley Thomas Tivey 21yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
Gunner Archibald Tutt 24yrs Royal Field Artillery.
Private Edwin Payne Upperton 24yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.
Sergeant Henry Sydney Wilkinson MM 23yrs Royal Sussex Regiment.

1. Horsham Museum Archive.
2. 1901 & 1911 www.Ancestry.co.uk
3. West Sussex County Times Saturday 23rd September 1916.
4. West Sussex County Times Saturday 19th September 1917.
5. Royal Sussex Regimental War Diaries RSR MS 7/23.
6. The National Archives WO.95/2219
7. Details & photo: War Graves Commission.