

Herbert Leslie Stevens

17 March 1887 –
30 October 1914
Lance-Corporal No. L/8159,
2ND Battalion, Royal Sussex
Regiment

By Julia Westgate

Summary

This is the story of Herbert Leslie Stevens, his family and his connection with the people he left behind along with his experiences in the early days of the First World War.

Introduction

Herbert Leslie Stevens was my grandmother's brother on my mother's side. She was two years older than him so in a family of 13 children whose births spanned the years 1873-1897 she was the nearest in age to him.

Background

Herbert was born on 17 March 1887 at Plumpton in East Sussex to David and Sarah Jane (nee Ashdown) Stevens. He was the ninth of thirteen siblings born to these parents. His mother died in 1897 thirteen days after the birth of the thirteenth child. She was 47 years old. His father later remarried. On the 1881 census the family is listed at Knowlands Farm, Plumpton, where David Stevens is a farmer of 30 acres. By 1891 they have moved to Combers Farm, Streat, East Sussex, where Herbert spends his early years. His father is still a farmer. The *Kelly's directory of Sussex* for both 1882 and 1899 tells us that Plumpton and Streat at this time are parishes one and a half miles apart, a few miles from Lewes. Plumpton in 1881 has a population of 466. It has a railway station on the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway line and employment consists of some shopkeepers, a post office, farmers, brickmakers and two millers. It also has three public houses. The Earl of Chichester is lord of the manor and chief landowner.¹ Streat, also a parish, has a population of 208 in 1891. Apart from a wheelwright and a blacksmith, the other occupations listed in the 1899 directory are farmers, David Stevens being one of them. One of the farmers also acts as the post office. Both parishes have their own schools. Although we know the family is still living in Streat in 1897 (the last child having been born there), by 1901 the census lists the family at 20 Sussex Terrace, Mill Road, Burgess Hill. The father's occupation is listed as a farmer and an employer. He is by now a widower. David, his eldest son, is listed as a farmer's son and a worker. Herbert is now 14 years old and his occupation is listed as a harness maker (worker). The *Kelly's directory* for 1899 lists a harness maker trading at 5, Bank Buildings in Burgess Hill. Burgess Hill at this time is classed as a town and with a population of around 5,000 would have been quite a change for the family. Burgess Hill has amenities of gas, police station, railway station and its own urban district council. The eldest living daughter, Miriam, 24, is not in occupation, presumably looking after the family. Another sister, Emily, is a dressmaker and in fact both she and her older sister, Laura, followed this occupation throughout their working lives. The 1911 census shows Laura, Emily, David and another brother Lester living at Chelwood House, Church Road, Burgess Hill, where both Laura and Emily are listed as dressmakers working on "own account". Family memories believe this was a shop. Lester is listed

as a farmer's son working on a farm and in fact he followed this occupation all his life in East Sussex.

On the 1911 census, the father David, is listed at Balsdean Farm, Rottingdean. He is now 60 years old and employed as a farm labourer. He has re-married and has two further children.

By 1911 Herbert is in the army being included on the census in the list of "Return of all Commissioned Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-commissioned Officers, Trumpeters, Drummers and Rank and File" as:

Herbert Stevens, Lance-Corporal, 25, single, 1st Royal Sussex Regiment.
Born Plumpton, Lewes.

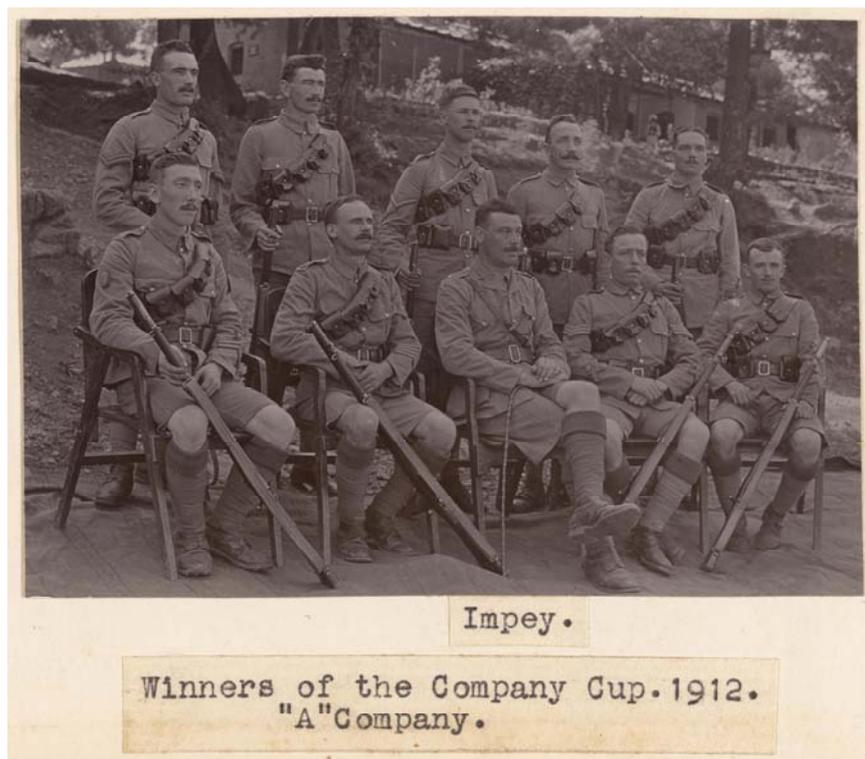
Herbert's life in the army

Unfortunately, Herbert's army service records are not available, presumably one of those lost in the bombing in the Second World War, but this entry in the *Mid-Sussex Times* newspaper for 8 December 1914 in the Sussex Casualties section (page 1 , column f) gives a clue to his service:

Corporal H L Stevens

We are sorry to hear today (Tuesday) that the relatives at Burgess Hill of Corporal Herbert Leslie Stevens, No.8159, a Reservist of the 1st Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment attached to the 2nd Battalion, have just received a notification from the War Office that he was killed in action at Ypres on October 30th. Corporal Stevens was the son of Mr David Stevens, of Rottingdean, formerly of Burgess Hill. He had been in the army about ten years, spending about six years in India and a short time in Crete. At the outbreak of the war he went to the Front, being among the first to arrive there, and his regiment saw a lot of terrible fighting. Corporal Stevens was about 27 years of age and was unmarried.

This evidence of his career corresponds with that of his friend and future brother-in-law, William Henry Boxall (also a Lance-Corporal in the same Battalion and the subject of case study *William Henry Boxall – "An Old Contemptible"*). They are both pictured in this photograph (Herbert is in the back row, first left):



RSR/PH/1/14 Photos principally 1st battalion Royal Sussex Regiment in India 1908-1919 at West Sussex Record Office

Herbert's time at war

Herbert was part of the British Expeditionary Force described by Robin Neillands in the introduction to his book *The Old Contemptibles: the British Expeditionary Force, 1914*: ²

- The British Expeditionary Force, the BEF, or, as the survivors liked to call themselves, the 'Old Contemptibles', that well-trained, highly skilled, professional army which left Britain in August 1914. In the next four months the BEF was almost totally destroyed in the battles of Mons and Le Cateau, in the fighting on the rivers Marne and Aisne and, last of all, in the ferocious battle of 'First Ypres' in October and November 1914, where this little army of professional soldiers stood and fought and died, doggedly keeping their faces to the foe.

He goes on to say that the original BEF of 1914 was a very small army – around 160,000 men, seven divisions, and the original force that sailed from Britain in early August numbered only half of that. He says it was far too small and quite inadequately equipped for the job it was sent to do "but it did it anyway, soldiering on all the way from Mons to Ypres". ³

Sixty per cent of the BEF soldiers that went to France in 1914 were reservists⁴ and Herbert was one of those that would have received a telegram recalling him to the 'Colours'. His memorial certificate (available to view on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission website) records that he was part of 'A' Company of the 2nd Battalion. This Battalion was part of the 1st Division, 2 Brigade. As a Lance-Corporal he would have been, along with a Section Corporal or Platoon Sergeant, one of those giving orders to the men in his Section.

The two main areas that Herbert saw action in were the Battles of Aisne (September 1914) and First Battle of Ypres (October 1914)). On its arrival the British Expeditionary Force along with the French Fifth Army were ordered to meet the advance of the German First, Second and Third Armies sweeping west and south-west into France. Following the Battle of Marne the German army crossed the Aisne on 13 September 1914. The French and British pursued and a stand-off battle was fought until 18 September. In mid-October the German armies moved towards Ypres with the intention of out-flanking the Allied French and British. At the same time the British moved north from the Aisne, arriving at the town of Ypres with the intention of outflanking the Germans. They fought hard but the Allies had to bring in fresh units. The Allied line steadied and held, but the Belgians could only hold their front by opening the sea sluice gates and flooding the battlefield. The French brought in strong reinforcements for a vain counterattack before heavy rain and snow ended the battle. The BEF lost 2,368 officers and 55,787 men. The German armies lost 130,000 men, the French 50,000 and the Belgians 32,000.⁵

The war diary for the Battalion⁶ says that they went by train from their depot in Woking to Southampton where they sail for Le Havre on 12 August. On arrival on 13 August they start their first of many marches to Bleville Camp. On the 14 August they are entrained for Etreux the Battalion being received in a "very friendly spirit" by the French public. They arrive at Etreux on 15 August, marching to Esqueheries on 16 August where they are billeted with the remainder of 2 Brigade (1st Northamptonshire Regiment, Loyal North Lancashire Regiment and Kent Royal Rifles). There follows days of marching, some of distances of 12 miles and upwards. On 22 August the Battalion marches to St Remimal Bati, a distance of 16 miles. They are billeted for two hours but then receive orders to move immediately having just unloaded and horses unharnessed. The Battalion is turned round in 20 minutes each man being issued with fifty additional rounds of ammunition in this time. They proceed to Villiers-sur-Nicole with the rest of the Brigade, D Company furnishing two piquets on roads north of the village.

On 23 August at 3.15 am they receive orders to move at once and bivouac at Rouvreoi, Belgium. They are placed in Divisional Reserve. At 3.00pm the Brigade moves into the village and in the evening they watch the Germans "opening a heavy artillery fire on Mons which could be plainly seen by us". The Battalion turns out billets and stands by until about 9.30pm when they advance towards Mons and bivouac by the roadside throughout the night. On 24 August the artillery duel resumes and the Battalion receives orders to march on Bonnet to take up a position

to the south where they “strongly entrenched themselves”. The Battalion is not called upon to assist those at the Front, but it does receive the congratulations of the Division for the trenches it has dug.

After this there are days of marching, again some very long distances, moving southwards. On one day the whole march is done on no rations. On 10 September they see action at Pretz where they experience a number of losses – 19 killed, 85 wounded and a number missing. The diary comments that the Germans would have been more successfully attacked if the Advance Guard had been covered by mounted troops. Only one troop of 15th Hussars arrived before the action commenced through some mistake and the preliminary reconnaissance was subsequently almost nil. Also the position of the guns in the column prevented their giving close assistance to the Battalion. It says “These are the lessons learnt from the day’s fighting”.

On 14 September the diary records ‘First Day – Battle Aisne’ and the Battalion sees a lot of action here with heavy losses and days of shellings and artillery bombardment. On 7 October the diary reports that the enemies machine guns open heavy fire on some dummy trenches that have been constructed, knocking out a number of dummies which have been made out of old clothing stuffed with straw. One “man” reading the Daily Mail has over 40 bullets in him. At 11.00am the enemy send some heavy shells named “BOLOS”. The diary explains that these are high explosive shells fired at quite short range by a gun that makes very little noise. The shell has a very high trajectory and falls almost vertically, and therefore, can search behind hills however steep, so their steep banks are no protection. The diary surmises that they are probably directed by aeroplanes – 12 flying over their position before 10.3am with the next round coming at 1.30pm and then at 5.00pm.

On 14 October orders are received to be in readiness to vacate their position on the following evening, all baggage being removed under cover of darkness. On 15 October the diary entry is headed ‘Troyon (our last day on the Aisne)’. There is the usual artillery duel but at about 8.00pm the first party of French troops arrives to relieve them. Unfortunately they are shelled while arriving and there are a number of casualties. At about midnight the Battalion is relieved and heavy mist about 1.00am on 16 October enables them to leave without being shelled. They reach Vauxcere at about 6.00am and are billeted. At about 10.00pm they march to Fismes Railway en route for Belgium. On the 17 October they remain on the train all day and the 18 October finds them travelling via Amiens, Boulogne and Calais. In the early hours of the 19 October they reach Cassel where they are billeted.

On 20 October the Brigade moves off marching to Elverdinghe thus passing into Belgium. Heavy artillery fire can plainly be heard to their front. On 21 October they march to Boesinghe and on 22 and 23 October the Battalion remains in reserve in billets. On 24 October, after waiting all day to be relieved by French troops, they move off at 5.00pm and bivouac in a field just outside the village. On 25 October they move off at about 4.00am and reach Ypres at about 7.00am where they are billeted. On 26

October they move off in the direction of Menin. The Brigade is halted just outside Ypres and bivouacks near Haalte.

On 27 October the Brigade advances a few kilometres and entrenches in "Chateau " wood (the wood belonging to Herenthage Chateau). On 28 October they move again advancing about two kilometres with the enemy dropping shells in their vicinity during the advance. They are halted and entrench in Polygone wood over which a few of the enemy's high explosive shells burst. Three men are wounded, two horses killed and two wounded. On 29 October at about 5.30am an attack is made all along their line with several shells dropping on their position. The Brigade, after a while, moves back into "Chateau" wood and occupies its original trenches. They have received valuable information on the night before from a "spy who must have been on the German staff". He foretold that this attack would be made at 5.30am and the exact spot (crossroads near Ghelevult).

The diary entry for 30 and 31 October is headed 'Ypres (Chateau Wood "Coalbox Wood")'. It says about 10.00am, the enemy "who probably learnt by espionage" that the 1st Division HQ were in Chateau wood, begin to "coalbox" it with vigour. (Philip J. Haythornthwaite explains the term "coalbox" in the glossary of his book *The World War One Sourcebook* as a shellburst, generally from a heavy gun, causing a cloud of black smoke).⁷ Shells drop right among the men's dugouts and during the bombardment orders are received by 2 Brigade to move at once to Zandevoorde to restore the line. "Sussex" are in front of the march. Colonel Crispin endeavours to take a short cut across country. Headquarters and the leading company are just off the main road when the enemy opens a heavy shrapnel fire. Colonel Crispin's horse takes fright and takes him under this fire: he is shot and killed instantly. The Battalion then proceeds under Major Green along the main road. On reaching a point left at Hooge, with shelling by high explosive shrapnel, orders are received to attack and make good the line of a designated road. D Company advances and reaches a wood supported by B Company. They are unable to advance further because of very heavy rifle and machine gun fire. C Company holds the line of a hedge but are held up there owing to heavy enfilade rifle fire from the left. On their right they are in touch with the "Gordon Highlanders" and on the left with the "Staffords" of 22 Brigade who are not quite up in line with them. While these Companies hold the ground they have occupied, A Company assisted by the Royal Engineers prepare a position to hold that night. This line is held until midday on 31 October when the 22 Brigade reports that the centre has been broken near Ghelevult and they are forced to leave their position.

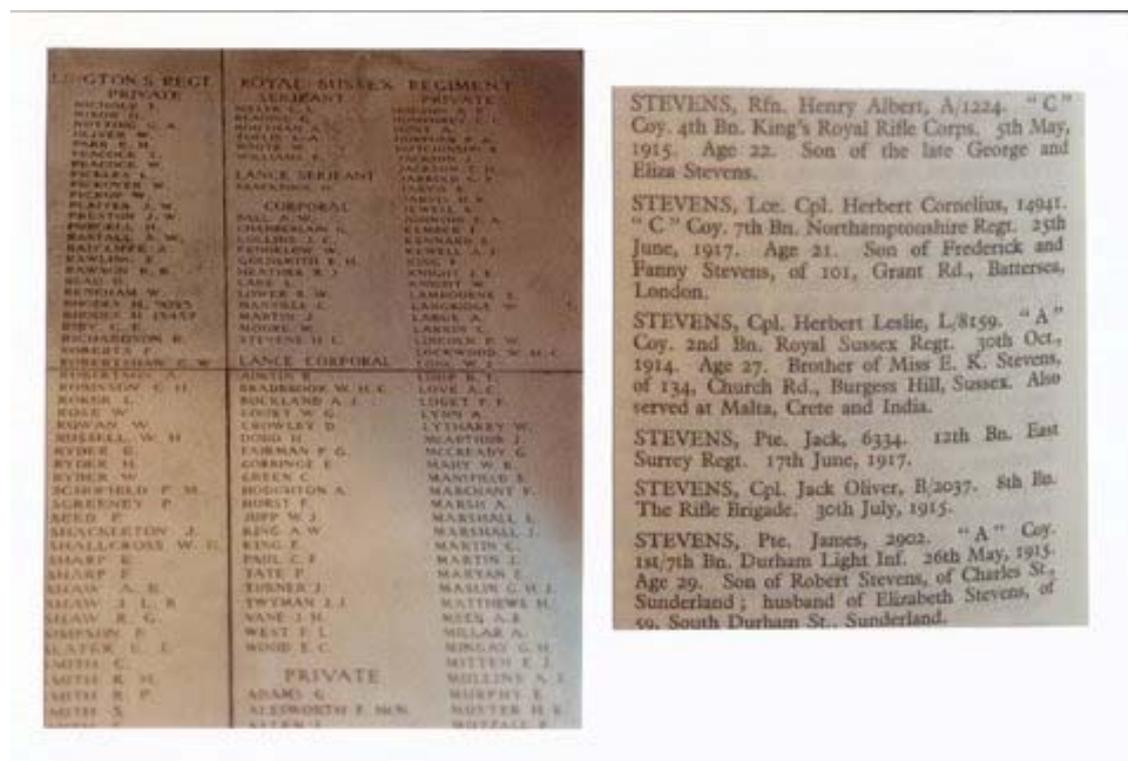
The diary gives the casualties over the two days: Colonel Crispin killed, Major Green wounded, one lieutenant and three second-lieutenants wounded. 394 other ranks killed, wounded and missing – most of these casualties occurring on the afternoon of 30 October.

Conclusion

Herbert is one of these casualties – killed in action on 30 October. He has no grave, but his life is commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial at Ypres and also on the war memorial in Burgess Hill, West Sussex. In 1913, his sister Fanny had married his friend, William Henry Boxall. When William and Fanny's first child was born in July 1914 he was given the name Herbert Leslie. Sadly, this Herbert Leslie, known as "Bert", was to die in the Second World War. He was a gunner with the Royal Artillery and was killed in action at sea on 7 January 1943 when the vessel he was travelling in was torpedoed. He, too, has no grave: his life is commemorated at the Brookwood Memorial in Surrey and on the war memorial in Haywards Heath, West Sussex.

As with other soldiers of the First World War, the British Army World War One Medal Roll Index Cards, 1914-1920 (viewed via Ancestry.co.uk) show Herbert was awarded the Victory and British War Medals. He was also awarded the 1914 Star given to those serving in France and Flanders between 5 August 1914 –23 November 1914. The whereabouts of these medals is not known.

There are now no family members with any personal memories handed down of Herbert.



Photograph of Herbert's name on the Menin Gate Memorial and the entry in the memorial book (Herbert is listed as a corporal here).
 From family collection

¹ *Kelly's directory of Sussex 1882.*

² Robin Neillands, *The Old Contemptibles: the British Expeditionary Force, 1914* (John Murray, 2004), p.2

³ Neillands, *The Old Contemptibles*, p.3

⁴ Neillands, *The Old Contemptibles*, p.82

⁵ John Laffin, *A western front companion 1914-18: A-Z source to the battles, weapons, people, places, air combat* (Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994), p.115

⁶ RSR MS 2/57 Royal Sussex Regiment 2nd Battalion War Diary 2 August 1914 - 12 April 1919 (typescript copy) at West Sussex Record Office

⁷ Philip J. Haythornthwaite, *The World War One sourcebook* (Arms and Armour, 1992), p.390

Source List

Books

Fowler, Simon. *Tracing your first world war ancestors* (Countryside, 2008)

Haythornthwaite, Philip J. *The World War One sourcebook* (Arms and Armour), 1992

Kelly's directory of Sussex 1882

Kelly's directory of Sussex 1899

Laffin, John. *A western front companion 1914-18: A-Z source to the battles, weapons, people, places, air combat* (Alan Sutton Publishing Limited, 1994)

Neillands, Robin. *The Old Contemptibles: the British Expeditionary Force, 1914* (John Murray , 2004)

Rawson, Andrew. *British Army handbook 1914-1918* (Sutton Publishing, 2006)

Original Records

RSR MS 2/57 Royal Sussex Regiment 2nd Battalion War Diary (typescript copy) 2 August 1914-12 April 1919

RSR PH 1/14 Photos principally 1st Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment in India 1908-1919

Websites

Commonwealth War Graves Commission www.cwgc.org

Long, long trail – The British Army in the Great War www.1914-1918.net