

Herbert Smith - Private 18793
Age 32
1/4th (Hallamshire Territorial Battalion)
York and Lancaster Regiment

Buried - Marpent Communal Cemetery, France.
Commemorated - Harthill and Barlborough War Memorials



Herbert was a coal miner, and the son of William and Charlotte Smith of Firvale, Harthill. However, at the time of his enlistment, in February 1915, he was living at High Street, Barlborough.

News was sent from the Records Office at York stating that he had died in the Infirmary on October 18th 1918, from cardiac weakness. However, this was untrue. He died in Marpent camp, when, according to E.H. Davies one of his fellow prisoners.

...He was unconscious.. We put him on a hand cart and were going to take him to the doctor at any cost , as the doctor would not come to him, but before we had set off the poor lad died. His death was directly due to starvation..."

Herbert enlisted in February 1915. He was initially fought in the Dardanelles Campaign (The Battle of Gallipoli), and suffered severely from frostbitten feet.

He also contracted malaria, and for some time was in hospital in Malta. On recovering, he was sent to France where during the fighting he ended up in hospital for several weeks with septic legs. He was officially reported missing on 15th April 1918, and later designated as a prisoner of the Germans.

Whilst held prisoner Herbert had very little opportunity to write home, so he kept a diary, the following are extracts from it:

61 DAYS A PRISONER OF WAR

Captured in Belgium April 15th 1918

70 Men captured and marched 30 kilometres without food and water and made to carry 14 Lewis Guns. We were forced to sleep on the floor in weaving sheds after being given just dry bread and coffee.

Continued...

Breakfast was black bread and jam followed by cabbage water stew for dinner. It was not until 12 days later that we had our first wash.

Our thoughts air with home.

Awakened at 2.20am for a working party to go towards the German line.

Sent without anything to eat or drink. Our job was to empty trucks of shells (for our own lads, rotten.) We got back at 2pm with nothing to eat, in all that time after walking 10 kilometre.

It was like coming home. We thanked God for our beds of shavings. Next day breakfast was at 3am followed by 3 hours of walking.

Managed a shave, the first in 10 days. After several days, we were marched off to the train station. We were on the train for 24 hours into Germany as we went through Belgian villages' bread and cigs were thrown into the wagons. However, I had no luck! Most days it was just dry bread on the menu. Me and my chums had a boiling of nettles we cooked the night before, which we had for breakfast with a slice of bread We also made nettle tea.

Roll on Peace.

Went to work on the railway A thick plank fell on my toe, went to the doctor to have it bandaged.

Not enough stew to go round Igor short issue.

Next day was Saturday thinking of the Saturdays when we used to come home to a good tea after playing cricket in the Park.

Continued...

May 12th Sunday Morning. I and 7 others volunteered for work and I thought we may get a bit extra food Ah we did we got less.

May 13th Stew for tea and it would have been God help stew if had not saved a bit of bread to put in it.

We have been prisoners for over a month now I hardly know what I am doing I've got wrong with the dates.

My chum flogged his overcoat for cigs and with the cigs came potato peelings so we had potato peelings for supper.

May 15th fish stew for dinner, there was supposed to be fish in it. We saw the fish before it was cooked and it told us it was going to have a bathe in the stew and so forgot themselves and took it out but the taste was there. Oh dear, pleased to say I am alive after it.

We are only just existing.

Sa far we have not been given the chance of writing home and still no change of clothing.

I am bad on my feet today and as weak as a bairn. Told to stay off.

Swept the yard today my foot pained me very much.

Had toe dressed again. Fed up. Told to bathe toe at midday and 5pm in cold water. What a dog's home is ours. Roll on Peace.

Could not get any kip due to heat and lice.

May 21st flogged my jersey for 13 cogs. Wish I could write home. Had toe dressed again.

May 22nd boiling hot day Just a little think of Barlbro "So I wonder if you miss me sometimes."

Continued...

Went back to work emptying trucks of timber but foot not quite better.

Monday night dreaming of home. Short of paper. It is so monotonous.

Today dinner came at 12 00 o' clock. Good Lord Deliver Us, stew made either of bull rushes or seaweed Some fellows threw it away others (I was one) was too hungry to throw it way the gravy was pure salt water, Everybody was thirsty and running to the Latrine.

Flogged my pants for 6 cigs.

It is now 8 weeks since we have been taken prisoner and my foot is far from being well since I trapped it. Hotted up some water and washed my feet, swelling on instep and sore heel.

Went to see Doctor in village. Could not understand what German Doctor said though, I was excused work again.

When I got back to camp, Camp doctor man pulled my toenail clean off they an rough sods. I was detained in hospital at Dogs Home. Managed a hot bath but no soap and a bit of a rag for a towel Had foot bandaged and told to stay in bed.

For my birthday, I managed a smoke of tea leaves! Dinnertime 12.30pm and it was ROTTEN, just cabbage stew with a few lights cut up and a few spuds. I have seen our pigs have a lot better stuff.

Went sick again (look like losing my foot) , Jerry laughed when he saw me: gave me light duty but ought to have had no duty.

The lads went to work, I helped to clean barrack yard and odd jobs. Dinnertime 12.30 pm bean and meal.

That was the last entry. Herbert had died of heart failure brought on by starvation.

On the 1st January 1919 Herbert's Mother received the following letter from E.H. Davies, a friend of Herbert's and a fellow prisoner:

"Dear Mrs Smith,

Seeing an account in the paper about your son's death as a prisoner of war, I feel it is my duty to inform you that I was one of his fellow prisoners and actually saw him die.

We were at Marpent camp on the Franco-Belgian frontier and were treated most brutally. Your son had been ill some time with a bad foot and as a result of the lack of medical attention and want of food he rapidly became almost too weak to walk about and on the...(words missing) was the matter with him as he had not got up for his "soup". He was unconscious.. We put him on a hand cart and were going to take him to the doctor at any cost , as the doctor would not come to him, but before we had set off the poor lad died. His death was directly due to starvation. I, Myself was almost as bad as he was, and we were both in the same "unfit squad". I may say that your son, along with us all never received a letter or parcel from home all the time we were at Marpent. Shortly after his death, the rest of us were sent to Altdamm Camp in January. This saved my life as we got parcels of food from Copenhagen. I am very weak yet but am getting over the awful result of German cruelty.

As we both came from Chesterfield District and were in the same battalion we had an agreement if either of us managed to get home ...(words missing)

If there is anything else I should be likely to know about him I shall be glad to inform you.

Please accept my deepest sympathy with you in your great trouble.

With kind regards,

Yours sincerely

(Pte) E.H. Davies

1/4th (Hallamshire) Bat

York and Lancs Regt."