

A short story about the life of Samuel Bedford

I grew up with a sketchy story about my mother's brother Sammy Bedford. The story goes that at the tender age of 16 he ran off to join the army and was sent to France to fight in the great war of 1914.

When his mother found out what he had done she wrote to his regiment and demanded that her son was sent home because he was under age to join the army.

Apparently she was sent a letter saying that he had already been posted to France.

Later she received a telegram saying that he had been killed in action at the battle of the Somme on the 1st July 1916.

The search for the truth about Sammy's life started at several family gatherings, the last one being at the 19240 Shrouds of the Somme project which remembered all 19,240 allied soldiers who died on the 1st July 1916.

Artist Rob Heard created 19,240 hand stitched shrouded figures to represent each one of the brave men who fell on that day, an awe inspiring and incredible feat which helped motivate me further to complete my research.

The project was unveiled in the Exeter's Northernhay Gardens on the 1st July 2016 for seven days. Below is a photo of some of the 19240 shrouds laid out for people to visit and pay their respects.



Robin Chambers Chairman of Devon SSAFA the Armed Forces Charity were organizing the event and looking for volunteers to help interact with the visitors during the exhibition.

I volunteered to help and found out that they were going to read out the name, rank, age and regiment of every soldier who died on the 1st July, during the seven days of the exhibition in blocks of approximately 40 names. I was very fortunate to have been able to read out the name of Samuel Bedford, a Private aged 17 of the York and Lancaster Regiment.

It has been a sad, but memorable journey with lots of effort from family members and cooperation from various organizations. The story of Sammy is now complete. Finding a photograph of him along with his service record has enabled us to learn about his army career and how and where he died. I have discovered that although his life was short, he and his pals travelled and saw some of the world together on what must have seemed like an adventure of a lifetime and a world away from the industrial area where they grew up. Although his life was short lived, he died living his dream and as a family we are immensely proud of him, we will never forget the ultimate sacrifice that he and countless others made to make our country the great place it is to live in today.

Richard Ward - Sammy's Nephew



Private Samuel Bedford

Service No: 14/363

1898 - 1916

14th Battalion (2nd Barnsley Pals)

York and Lancaster Regiment

"Your Country Needs You"

At the outbreak of WW1 on the 4th August 1914, the British Army had 700,000 enlisted men, whereas Germany's wartime army was 3.7 million. When a campaign for volunteers was launched, thousands answered the call to fight. Among them were tens of thousands of boys and young men under the age of 19. This is the story of one of those young men my uncle, Sammy Bedford.

Barnsley 1914

The Barnsley Town Council successfully recruited the 1st Barnsley Pals Battalion of just over 1,000 men in a little over three weeks, which became the 13th Battalion York and Lancaster. The council voted on the 27th November 1914 to make an offer to the war office to raise a second battalion which was to become the 14th Battalion

York and Lancaster Regiment (2nd Barnsley Pals). The minimum age for recruitment into Pal's Battalions was 19.

Recruitment

Official government policy was that you had to be 18 years of age to sign up and 19 years of age to fight overseas. In the early twentieth century most people didn't have birth certificates, so it was easy to lie about your age.

The recruitment process included medical checks, to make sure a potential recruit was fit enough to fight rather than if he was old enough to enlist. The minimum height requirement was originally five feet, six inches but this was later reduced to five feet three inches on the 5th November, with a minimum chest size of thirty five and a half inches, so a strapping 16 year old, was very likely to be let through.

The rule of thumb seemed to be if the volunteer wanted to fight for his country and was physically fit enough to do so, why stop him?

It didn't help that recruitment officers were paid one shilling (about £4.00 in today's money) for each new recruit, and they would often turn a blind eye to any concerns they had about age.

At the same time though, some officers thought the fresh air and good food of the army would do some of the more under-nourished boys a bit of good.

It was also assumed that the war would be over by the time the boys were ready to go overseas.

The miners and other workers from Yorkshire towns were lured by the offer of regular pay, three meals a day and the adventure of a lifetime with their best mates.

One of these miners was Samuel Bedford, one of nine children born to Philip and Rose Bedford of New Street Darfield near Barnsley.

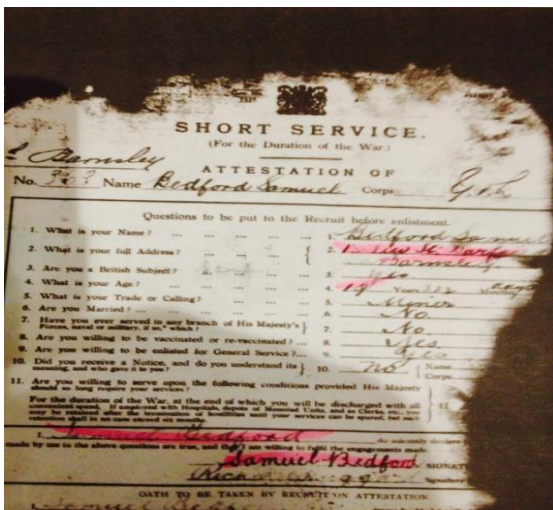
The Bedford family were no strangers to Army life Sammy's late father was a sergeant instructor in the 42nd Black Watch, his brother Philip a Corporal in the Kings Own Yorkshire Light Infantry serving in France, and brother Henry was in the Royal Horse Guards Artillery serving in Egypt.

All three brothers previously worked at the Houghton Main Colliery where they left to join the army to fight for King and Country.

Sammy's Army Career

On Saturday 30th January 1915 at the tender age of 16, Samuel Bedford walked into the recruitment office and said that he wanted to join the Army to fight for King and Country.

He completed the Short Service Army Record form (fire damaged but still survives) where he declared himself as being:-



- a British Subject
- 19 years and 322 days old
- a Miner

His medical history states:

- he was 5ft 5in tall
- he had a 33in chest expanding a further 3in
- he agreed to be vaccinated at the infirmary
- his vision was normal and he was in good health

Sammy was now one of 1,117 men who had enlisted in the 14th York and Lancaster Regiment (2nd Barnsley Pals)

He joined his pals and work mates at the local Newhall Training Camp near Silkstone Barnsley for basic army training.

On the 13th May 1915 the Battalion moved to Penkridge Camp on Cannock Chase Stafford, then onto Ripon and finally to Hurdcott Camp on Salisbury Plain, where they finally stayed and trained for war. On the 23rd December instructions came through for them to move to Suez to strengthen British Forces.

Suez 1914

Soon after the outbreak of WW1, Britain declared Egypt a protectorate and British and Indian forces were sent to protect the Suez Canal.

Turkey, who had entered the war as Germany's ally in 1914, sent troops to seize the canal in January 1915.

Bon Voyage

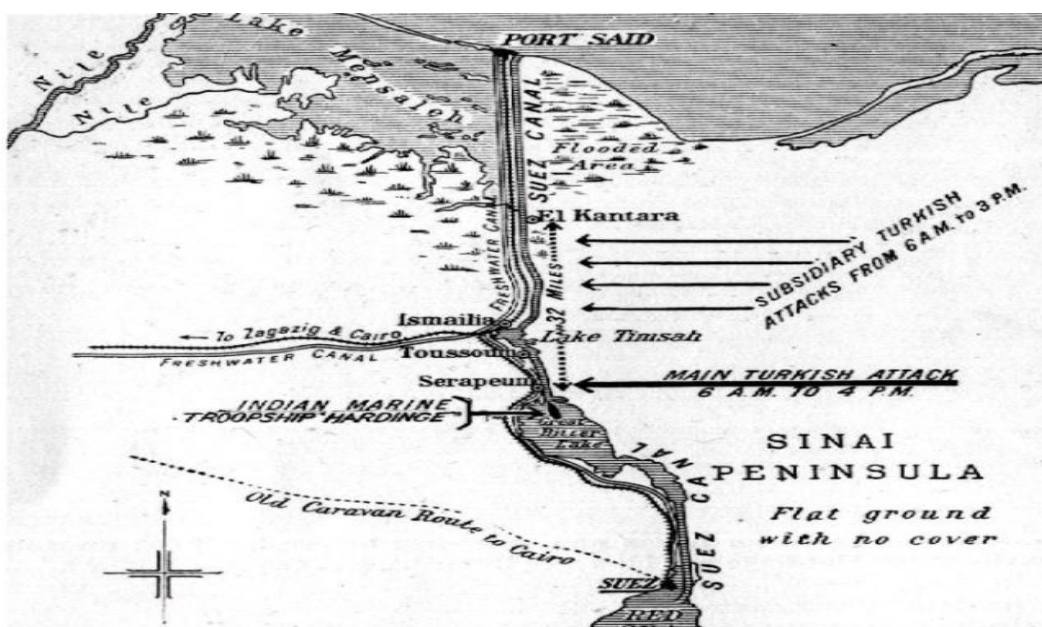
The Battalion travelled by train to Devonport Plymouth, where they boarded the RMS Andania a cruise ship which was commissioned by the government as a troop ship which set sail for the Mediterranean on the 28th December 1915.

From a two up, two down terraced house in Darfield and a job down the local pit, to a berth on the cruise liner RMS Adania heading for the Mediterranean, must have been a world away for a young lad and his " Pals" from a Yorkshire mining town.

They reached Malta on the 6th January 1916 and then went onto Port Said, where they arrived on the morning of the 11th January.

The Battalion disembarked and proceeded to camp in the neighborhood of Suez canal, where they remained until the 21st January.

Map of the Suez conflict:



They then moved by train to El Ferdan where they pitched camp on the East side of the canal. After a couple of days, the battalion moved to a camp at the rail head to protect it from the advances of the Turkish Army.

The attacks on Suez by the Turks on the 29th January 1916 was short lived and they were beaten back by British forces and by mid February the defensive lines were pushed back deep into the Sinai desert to prevent any further attempts to take control of the Suez canal.

The Western Front

Orders came through that the York and Lancaster Battalions were now required on the Western Front, much to the pleasure of the Pals who were itching to get into the fight in France.

On the 2nd March the Battalions moved back by road to El Ferdan and then onto Port Said and prepared to leave Egypt for France.

The 12th and 13th Battalions embarked from Port Said on the 10th aboard the RMS Briton, the 14th Battalion embarked aboard the SS Megantic on the following day. They arrived in Malta on the 14th March and then onto Marseilles arriving in the morning of the 16th, where they disembarked and entrained the following day for Pont Remy from where the Battalion marched to billets at Fresne in the neighborhood of Abbeville Northern France.

The stay was brief and they moved on the 26th to Airaines and on the 27th to Vignacourt where they joined the service battalion of the Warwickshire Regiment for instructions in trench duties.

On the 3rd April the Battalion took over a portion of the front line trenches where they had their first baptism of trench warfare which lasted for 10 days incurring five fatalities and eight wounded

During May and June they occupied various trenches lines ending up on the front line in the Courcelles area just north of Albert.

Trench life

Trenches were typically 3 meters deep by 2 meters wide mostly filled with mud and water. Sanitary conditions were poor, Soldiers were unable to bathe for weeks at a time and found it difficult to rest and sleep, they lived in constant fear of being buried

alive by shell fire. The trenches were infested with rats, and many Soldiers suffered from cholera, gangrene, trench foot, and trench fever, if that wasn't enough, there was always the constant threat of gas attacks.

When it was finally time to go over the top they all knew that they were forbidden from turning back and had no choice but to advance even injured mates had to be left where they fell.

The Big Push

The Big Push covers the Battle of the Somme on the 1st July 1916 when British and French allies wanted to take the initiative away from the Germans at Verdun.

British and French commanders decided that their combined offensive must not be postponed beyond the end of June.

The Battle of the Somme Saturday 1st July 1916

The 14th Battalion was now part of the 31st Division who's main objective was to advance to the village of Serre five miles north of Albert.

At 7.15 pm on the evening of the 30th June the 14th Battalion comprising of A B C and D companies marched to the assembly trenches close to the German lines at Serre, where they came under heavy bombardment while preparing for the big push at Zero hour 07.30 on Saturday 1st July 1916.

Ten minutes before Zero hour a smoke screen was sent up from the British front line trenches, this was at once replied to by the enemy with machine-gun and rifle fire.

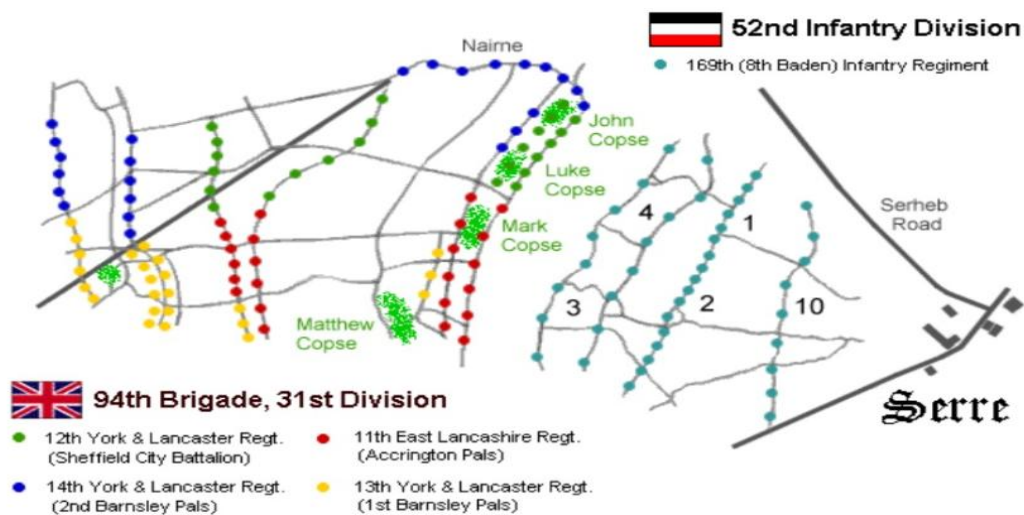
Two platoons of "A" company went over the parapet to the shrill of the trench whistles and made an excellent start, but the remaining two platoons were checked in a very exposed part of the trench by heavy bombardment; having waited some little time, a line of men left the trench, mounted the parapet and advanced across No-Man's Land.

No Man's Land



For some considerable time no reports from "A" and "B" Companies came back to the rear, but, from what was stated by wounded men, the casualties in these two companies were very heavy and only some twenty per cent of the attackers had reached the German Line.

Map showing British and German lines at Serre:



Platoons were now sent forward from the two supporting companies, with orders to consolidate and hold whatever ground "A" and "B" Companies might have gained.

They reported back that they could not find any sign whatsoever of any trenches and it could only be assumed that the trenches had been completely obliterated by enemy shell bombardment.

By 11.15am on the 1st July, 297men of the 2nd Barnsley Pals Battalion had been killed.

What was left of the Battalion held on until dark in the practically nonexistent front line trenches, parties were then sent out to search for, and bring in the wounded while under heavy German artillery fire.

Neither side displayed any special activity during the 2nd and 3rd of July and then on the night of the 3rd-4th the Battalion was relieved by the 6th Gloucester Regiment, and fell back to billets at Colonne-sur-la-Lys by way of Louvencourt and Gezaincourt.

One of the 297 Pals killed was Samuel Bedford who was in A company being described in letters received from his Regiment as one of the first "over the parapet" in the big advance on July 1 but unfortunately he was soon killed.

Send the boys home

In January 1916 conscription to the British Army was introduced. This meant that volunteers were no longer needed. The number of underage boys enlisting dropped dramatically ,but there were still many thousands still serving.

In 1916, the War Office agreed that if parents could prove their son's age with a birth certificate, they'd be removed from the front line. Until then, boys could stay if they wanted to, or commanding officers could keep them if they didn't want to let them go.

News of the huge casualties in the battle of the Somme in July brought a flood of letters to the war office from parents eager to get their boys home. But the process could be painfully slow. Some parents waiting many months for a reply.

One of those parents was Sammy's mother Rose, who's letter was received too late to save her son from his fate.

Tragic facts about the Somme:

The Battle of the Somme was fought from the 1st July to 18th November 1916 and described as being 141 days of horror. The first day of the Somme was the bloodiest and remains the worst in the British Army's history, a staggering 19,240 soldiers dying on the first day alone. The allied artillery bombardment of German defense lines prior to the battle failed dramatically, which meant that the advancing allied forces were cut down by machine gun and artillery fire, as they were crossing No Man's land. During the battle the British and French joint forces gained only 7.5 miles of ground into German territory over a 16 mile front, and it has been estimated that a soldier was killed every 4.5 seconds.

Thiepval Memorial



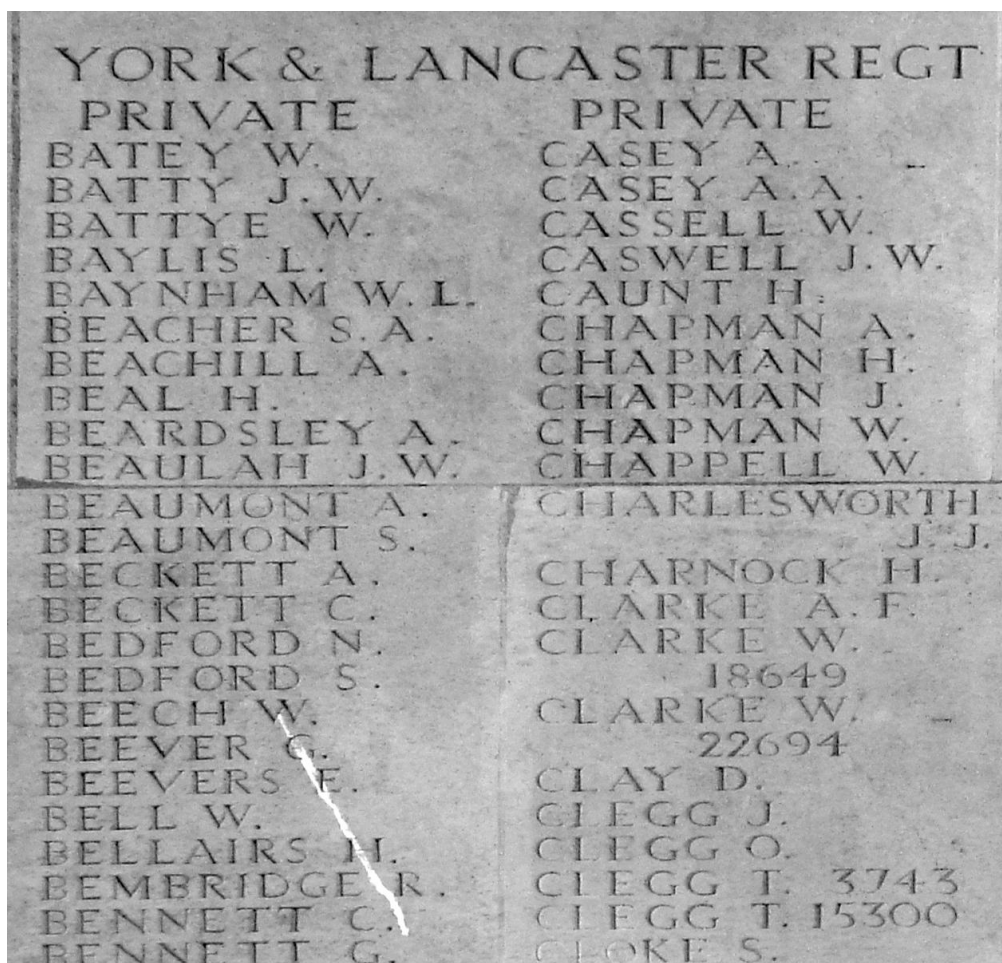
The village of Thiepval 4 miles north of Albert had been one of the original objectives on the 1 July and was finally captured at the end of September 1916.

The Thiepval Memorial bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20th March 1918 and have no known graves. Over 90% of those commemorated died between July and November 1916.

Even after 100 years the exact number of casualties commemorated at Thiepval varies from time-to-time as names are found to have been missed or graves are identified.

More than 72,000 names of the men missing in action on the battlefield of the Somme are inscribed on 54 huge stone panels.

On Pier 14, faces 14A and 14B you will find the names of the brave soldiers of the York and Lancaster Regiment, one of these being Private Samuel Bedford.



Thanks

I would like to thank the following for allowing me to use passages from some of their works, which helped inspire me to complete this nonprofit making story, of a brave soldier and his Pals from Barnsley. A story which has now been donated to his Regiment's Museum.

Andrew Jackson Barnsley Pals website

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BBC News website

The York and Lancaster Regimental Archives Rotherham

Rob Heard the Somme19240 website

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