

ARTHUR JACK STEVENS

Acting Corporal, D Coy, 10th Battalion, Queens (Royal West Surrey) Regiment

**Died on Friday, 15th September 1916 of wounds received on the first day of action
at the Battle of Flers-Courcelette on the Somme, France, age 22.**

As a child born into a blacksmith's family in a quiet country village, Arthur could never have envisaged that he would, later in life, be taking part in an historic battle in an appalling war that would change the world forever.

Not that his childhood would have been easy. His mother, Susannah died in 1901, when he was only seven years old. Father Arthur Charles Stevens was a shoeing smith at what was then Woodbine Cottage, now Wayside, on Dawney Hill. With eight children to bring up, the youngest only three, it was hardly surprising that the following year he would remarry, to Lizzie Davis, a widow with three children of her own, but two years later he too was dead, leaving her with what must have been a mighty struggle to bring them all up. At the time, with the exception of the oldest, Richard Charles, all the children were still at school, so she took in a 30 year-old lodger, John Daborn.



In the 1911 census, it was a complicated family living at Woodbine Cottage. Widow Lizzie Stevens, deaf John Daborn (who she would marry in 1912) and eight children from three fathers and two mothers. Three of those children would be dead as a result of the Great War; Arthur

Jack Stevens, his older brother Richard Charles, who was discharged in September 1918 and died in July the next year and half-brother Frederick Davis in July 1917.

Arthur Jack joined up at Stoughton Barracks, Guildford on the 15th October 1915, aged 21 years 3 months. He was of slight build, only 5ft 6ins tall and with a 34in chest. His initial posting was to the 9th Battalion, The Queens (Royal West Surrey Regt.) as a Private. After completing his training at Aldershot he was transferred on 5th January 1916 to the 10th Battalion, The Queens, which was part of 124th Brigade, 41st Division. Arthur must have impressed his training officers as, on 19th January 1916, he was appointed as an Acting Lance Corporal and he was further promoted on 13th March 1916 to an Acting Corporal.

The Division left for France in early May 1916 and it was initially concentrated between Hazebrouk and Bailleul. Over the next few months they would have been busily preparing for their part in what would become the 3rd phase of the Somme offensive.

After his arrival in France on 10th May 1916 Arthur immediately reverted to Private at his own request; however, because of his talent he must have been persuaded to reconsider his position as he was appointed as an (unpaid) Lance Corporal on 26th May 1916. Perhaps it is a tribute to Arthur's loyalty to his contemporaries that he would only accept this promotion if it was an unpaid position.

The earlier phases of the Battle of the Somme started on the 1st July 1916 and had proved to be the bloodiest battles of the war with a dreadful number of casualties. The 3rd phase commenced on the 15th September with the offensive that would be known as the 'Battle of Flers-Courcelette'. This battle is significant as it was the first time in the history of warfare that tanks were used in combat.



Main Street, Flers after the attack on September 16th.
A British tank was reported to have driven along here,
followed by cheering Tommies (IWM)

At dawn on the 15th September 1916 our 11 Divisions supported by 25 of these novel machines advanced gallantly over a seven mile front into "No Man's Land," astonishing our soldiers and terrifying the enemy. The 41st Division, including the 10th Queens, had the objective on that fateful day to capture the village of Flers and with the support of these new tanks, slow and unreliable as they were, this was successfully achieved. The Division sustained 3,000 casualties in the week-long battle and unfortunately for poor Arthur he was mortally wounded in action on the first day and after removal to the 36th Casualty Clearing Station at Heilly he later died of his wounds. His final resting place is in the CWGC cemetery at Heilly Station, Mericourt-l'Abbe, Somme, France.



Evacuating the wounded, Flers 1916 (IWM)

"On the 15th September 1916, the French villages of Flers and Courcellette witnessed a momentous event – it was the very first time in history of warfare that tanks were used in combat! The idea to develop armoured combat vehicles, or 'land battleships' as it were, came as a response to the rigid World War I reality of trench warfare. The British Landships Committee wanted a vehicle capable of breaking through fortified positions and trenches. The outcome of the development process initiated in the summer of 1915 was the Gun Carrier Mark I. Even though the plans were to utilise the tanks in a mass scale attack on the opening day of the Battle of Somme, the manufacturers were not able to prepare the required number of vehicles in time. As a result, the unleashing of this new weapon had to be postponed for an additional 10 weeks, so the decision was made to use the total of 49 available vehicles in a combined attack with infantry and artillery in an attempt to break the German defence lines. Even though no breakthrough had been achieved, the operation resulted in the capture of the villages of Courcellette, Martinpuich and Flers, and pushed the frontline forward by over 2,300 metres."

Of the thirty six men of the 11th Battalion who died on that Friday, September 15th, two-thirds were unidentified and recorded on the massive Thiepval Memorial; one was buried in Horsell churchyard and the remaining eleven were interred in a number of Somme cemeteries, including Lt. Col. Arthur Hamilton and, of course, Arthur Jack Stevens.

It must have been while he was on compassionate leave that he married Ellen Lavinia Sutton at Pirbright Church on August 1st 1916. She was a 25-year-old girl, Hampshire-born, and her father was a waggoner. It would have been a terrible shock to be widowed not two months after being married, with a meagre pension of 13s 9d per week to live on. There was no child from this marriage, yet her story would turn out to have a happier ending, as she emigrated to Canada in September 1920, married a Canadian, Robert Alexander Tyner at York, Ontario in October that year and the couple went on to have three children, with descendants who are still living.