

## **Sergeant William Smith**

### **Military Medal and Bar**

William Smith was born on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1886 and by the age of 5 was living in Leicester with his parents, William and Elizabeth, at 45 Palmer Street; he was their oldest child. The family hailed from north-west England, with Census returns indicating Lancashire as the birthplace of both his parents and William's own as Cumberland. However, from at least 1891 they were firmly settled in Leicester and William's siblings were all born there.

By 1901 the family had moved to 217 Beaumanor Road, with William, now 15, and his father both working as farm labourers. They were still living there in 1911 when William's brother, John, aged 16, had joined them in working as a general labourer. Their sister Nanny Ellen, aged 18, was a sewing machinist and a younger sister Elizabeth Alice, 11, was still at school.

William's army service papers have not survived, but it seems likely that he volunteered with the Leicestershire Regiment in August 1915, becoming Private 20936.<sup>1</sup> His medal records indicate that he went on to serve with the Machine Gun Corps (MGC), with service number 12344. The MGC was formed in October 1915 and because it carried out such dangerous work it was always a prime target for the enemy. In all, 170,500 officers and men served in the Corps, of which 62,049 were killed, wounded or missing. Such heavy casualties led to it being nicknamed 'the suicide club'.

The first clear news of William is from July 1916 as a member of 100<sup>th</sup> Company MGC, which had arrived at Le Havre on 26<sup>th</sup> April and was then attached to the 100<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division. During the Somme Offensive of that month William's unit was engaged in fierce, ultimately unsuccessful, fighting to take High Wood, near Martinpuich. The 100<sup>th</sup> Company War Diary for 19<sup>th</sup> July records that for courageous actions on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> July one soldier was recommended for the Victoria Cross, two for the Distinguished Conduct Medal and two for the Military Medal, one of whom was Private William Smith. He was presented with his medal ribbon on 30<sup>th</sup> July by the Major General of the Division at a parade whilst the troops were in camp at Albert and the official announcement of the award was in the *London Gazette* on 1<sup>st</sup> September.

As fighting continued during August, William's Company was positioned in Savoy Trench to support the infantry in a further attack on High Wood. Throughout 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> they were engaged in delivering constant covering fire over a 12 hour period and were therefore under considerable pressure with the need to maintain the effectiveness of their machine guns in such extreme conditions. The War Diary entry for 25<sup>th</sup> August records:

Meanwhile at 6.45pm Cpl Smith proceeded to his objective, No 3 position. Cpl Smith chose this psycholological (*sic*) moment to advance almost on the heels of the first infantry. He had previously brought in a [machine] gun left out by a wounded man under very heavy fire. It was originally arranged that this gun should go with KRRC [King's Royal Rifle Corps] Group but owing to congestion in trenches, on his own initiative Cpl Smith chose to go out from CUPID'S POST. He ran on, carrying the gun himself advancing owing to his enormous strength in front of Worcesters and reached final objective, TEA TRENCH, with leading infantry, personally shooting one German and taking another prisoner. He then went back to our old

front line to bring up working party and ammunition. He accomplished all without casualties. This was a very difficult task. No 3 position held and consolidated.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of this courageous initiative William, now an Acting Corporal, was recommended for the Distinguished Conduct Medal. He was in fact awarded a Bar to his earlier Military Medal and the announcement appeared in the *London Gazette* on 21<sup>st</sup> October. Fighting in the Somme Offensive continued until 18<sup>th</sup> November and William was again recognised for brave conduct by being Mentioned in Despatches, announced in the *London Gazette* on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1917.

Still listed as an Acting Corporal in November 1916, by the Spring William had been promoted to Sergeant. Confirmation of this can be seen in a group photograph of the 100<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company, taken at Arras in March 1917, showing the Company officers, warrant officers and NCOs. Out of the group of 22 men, 17 of them are noted as having been awarded medals, William and one other man having been decorated twice.<sup>3</sup>

In 1917 William's Company was involved in action around La Clytte which lay within the Ypres Salient, an area which saw intense fighting in the Third Battles of Ypres between July and November. The War Diary records that casualties were heavy in the engagement of 25<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> September and it is likely that William was wounded in this period since he was posted as such in the War Office weekly list published on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1917. There is no record of the treatment he received or whether, and when, he returned to his unit.

William was demobilised and transferred to the army reserve on 6<sup>th</sup> March 1919 and his medal records confirm that he received the Victory Medal and British War Medal.

With over 300 Club members, including the other seven men who had won medals, William was present at the Belgrave Working Men's Club and Institute on the evening of Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> November 1919 at a supper and entertainment to welcome back all those members who had served in the war and to commemorate those who did not return. The Club's magnificent Roll of Honour was unveiled and each medal winner was presented with a framed photograph of the eight of them together.<sup>4</sup>

On his return to Leicester he had resumed living with his family who were now at Thay Cottage, Orton Road. They were still there in June 1921 when in the Census William listed his occupation as grave digger at Gilroes Cemetery. Five years later William married Lilley (or Lily) May Hancocks (or Hancox) and in 1927 a son was born. By the time of the 1939 Register the family was resident at 43 Station Road, Glenfield, and William described his job as sexton working for Leicester Corporation.

On 9<sup>th</sup> December 1946 William died suddenly whilst at work at Gilroes Cemetery and his funeral took place in Glenfield parish church 3 days later. A newspaper report of his death noted that he had been employed by the Corporation for 40 years and for most of that time had worked as sexton at Gilroes Cemetery.<sup>5</sup> William's wife Lily died in 1973, aged 81, and is also buried at Glenfield church.

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<sup>1</sup> His service number is close to those of two other soldiers (20930 and 20937) who both attested on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1915.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Archives WO 95/2431/3.

<sup>3</sup> <https://ia601904.us.archive.org/7/items/historymemoirof300unse/historymemoirof300unse.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> See *Leicester Evening Mail*, 12 November 1919, p2, and *Leicester Daily Post*, Weds 12 November 1919, p2.

<sup>5</sup> *Leicester Evening Mail*, 10<sup>th</sup> December 1946, p5.