

William Jackson was born in Dudley, Worcestershire on 23rd December 1897. The third child and only son of bricklayer's labourer William Jackson senior and his wife Mary Ann.

Within four years of his birth, the family including William's elder sisters Esther Ann & Mary Ann, had moved the eight miles to Farringden Street in the Birchills area of Walsall, Staffordshire.

Over the next ten years, which saw the arrival of younger sister Lily in 1907, the Jacksons moved round the corner to 226, Green Lane, where the family had a shop. During this period William spent some time being educated at Croft Street Schools.

Probably around Christmas in 1911 or early 1912, fourteen year old William left school and started work for local builder, Thomas Steventon, following in his father trade as a bricklayer's labourer.



1914 was the year that changed the world and in particular the world of the Jackson family. On 28th June the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo created the spark that set in motion World War One. With Germany's invasion of Belgium on 4th August, and the Belgian King's appeal to Britain for assistance, Britain committed herself to Belgium's defence later that day. Like France, she was by extension also at war with Austria-Hungary.

Men and boys the length and breadth of Britain queued to enlist with the armed forces, amongst them sixteen year old William Jackson, who supplied false information to join the South Staffordshire Regiment Second Battalion at Darlaston, by adding two years to his age.



On 25th May 1915 after some six months or so basic training, Private 17154 William Jackson entered the theatre of war in France with his regiment.

The Battle of the Somme, also known as the Somme Offensive, fought from 1st July to 18th November 1916, was among the largest battles of the First World War. With more than 1.5 million casualties, it is also one of the bloodiest military operations recorded. The Allied forces attempted to break through the German lines along a 12-mile (19 km) front north and south of the River Somme in northern France. One purpose of the battle was to draw German forces away from the Battle of Verdun; however, by its end, the losses on the Somme had exceeded those at Verdun. By the end of the war, the Allied losses proved replaceable, the German losses less so.

During August and September 1916 the South Staffords were deployed on the front line in the Serre and later the Hebuterne sectors. Presumably during respite times the Second Battalion was on three occasions, moved back to Courcelles au Bois which is to the north west of Thiepval. On a similar number of occasions the battalion was moved to Bertrancourt just over a mile away.

On 16th October the Walsall Observer reported that Private William Jackson, of Green Lane, had been wounded. This is probably linked to another announcement a week later in the London Gazette:

Saturday 21st October 1916 War Office

His Majesty the King has been graciously pleased to award the Military Medal for bravery in the field to the undermentioned Non-Commissioned Officers and Men -

17154 Pte W. Jackson S. Staff R

On 7th November, the 2nd South Staffords moved to Mailly Maillet, in preparation for the renewal of the offensive on November 13th.....These assembly trenches were just South of Serre, and the 2nd South Staffords moved into them during the night of November 12th. After a preliminary bombardment, lasting from November 11th to the 13th, the attack was commenced in the darkness and heavy mist of a November morning, when at 5.45 a.m. the men went "over the top." The going was extremely heavy, but the 2nd South Staffords, guided by their Officers marching on compass bearings, went straight towards their objective, which, owing to the thick fog was invisible. The attack had been most carefully planned, but in that dense shroud it was hard for the best trained soldiers to keep direction. The 2nd South Staffords successfully crossed the German front line, and moving close on the fringe of our own barrage, assaulted the second German line wire, which was practically uncut. Here, they were held up, and to make matters worse for them, unfortunately, units from the 3rd Division on their left, having lost direction in the darkness, came across the South Staffords' front, breaking up their formation. All was confusion for a time, it was a regular mix up, and reorganisation was rendered difficult owing to the heavy mist, meanwhile our barrage had gone on ahead of the troops, widening the gap between it and the South Staffords.



The ground over which they had to advance was ploughed up into a sticky mud into which the men sank in places up to their waists. Gallant efforts were made by Officers and men to find a gap in the German wire through which they could advance, but it was found to be practically impassable.

Casualties among both Officers and men were very heavy, for the Germans, after the barrage had passed over their position, came up out of their dug-outs and opened a withering machine gun fire on the troops.....there was nothing left but for the South Staffords to fall back to the old defensive lines in Monk and Legend trenches. (Stafford's History—Jones)



It was during this carnage on November 13th that William Jackson made the ultimate sacrifice, just five days before the end of the Battle of the Somme.

The following months must have been a terrible and traumatic time for William's family back in Walsall. On 30th December the Walsall Observer reported William as missing 'since being in action with the South Staffords on 13th November....and his parents would be grateful for any information which comrades are able to supply'. This plea for news was repeated in the Walsall Pioneer on 20th January 1917 when it was also mentioned that William had been wounded twice and was perhaps the youngest Walsall soldier to have the Military Medal bestowed on him.

A year later on 26th January 1918, the Walsall Observer confirmed that William was presumed to have been 'killed in action' on or since 13th November 1916.

William's niece Lily remembered that her gran was bitter that they didn't check his age when he enlisted and that after he died she lost interest in life.

William's death is recorded on the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme is a major war memorial to 72,090 missing British and Commonwealth men who died in the Battle of the Somme of the First World War and who have no known grave. It is located in France near village of Thiepval, Picardie. The memorial, which dominates the rural scene, has sixteen piers of red brick, faced with Portland stone. It is 150 feet (46 m) high, with foundations 19 feet (6 m) thick; required due to extensive wartime tunneling beneath the structure. Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the memorial was built between 1928 and 1932 and is the biggest British battle memorial in the world. It was inaugurated by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) in the presence of Albert Lebrun, President of France, on 31 July 1932.

The memorial is reserved for those missing, or unidentified, soldiers who have no known grave. A large inscription on the memorial reads:

*Here are recorded names of officers and men of the British Armies who fell on the Somme battlefields July 1915 February 1918 but to whom the fortune of war denied the known and honoured burial given to their comrades in death.*

On the Portland Stone piers are engraved the names of over 72,000 men who were lost in the Somme battles between July 1916 and March 1918, most of whom died in the first Battle of the Somme between 1 July and 4 November 1916. Consequently, when the remains of a soldier listed on the memorial are found and identified, he is given a funeral with full military honours and his remains buried in the closest cemetery to his location; his name is then removed from the memorial. This has resulted in numerous gaps in the lists of names. (Wikipedia)

Other sources:

Tracing British Battalions on the Somme—R Westlake;

Honours & Awards The South Staffordshire Regiment—JCJ Elson

