



Chesterfield's last fallen hero of the First World War

Paul Allonby

"PRESS ON, LADS!" The heroic story of Lt Harry Young, Chesterfield's last fallen warrior in the Great War.

This is the sad story of Sub-Lt Harry Young from New Whittington who was the last casualty from the Chesterfield area in the First World War. He was killed in action on November 10th 1918 near Mons. It is part of a feature for the 'Royal Navy News' which will be published in November 2022, but it has been amended to focus on Harry.



A photo of Harry Young, taken from the Derbyshire Times. (The National Archives, Crown copyright).

Sunday November 10th 1918.

THE attack had been arranged, by mutual consent. At 08.30, confirmation was received that the Anson Battalion of the Royal Navy Division, an infantry organisation within what was dubbed "Churchill's Little Army", were to take centre stage in an attack near the Belgian town of Mons.

With the Royal Irish Rifles to their left, and the First Londons on their right, the objective was to cut the Mons-Givry road and take the village of Villers St Ghislain. And, if fortune was with them, forage forward to grapple with the Germans holding Harmignies. After that, it depended on the resistance of the Kaiser's men. (For villages, read a collection of destroyed buildings, water-filled shell craters, shrouds of barbed wire, mud, defensive entrapments and the occasional mangled tree stump.)

The First Londons certainly knew this place - whether they'd recognise it or not is moot - as they'd been there in August 1914 and were here now, a day before the date the war ended.

The commanders conferred, and the advance was timed to begin at 12.15 with the Royal Marines giving the RND support by plugging any gaps caused as they moved towards the enemy. Artillery and machine-guns were to play their part, too.

The attackers massed in an area called Sunken Road, and were targetted by enemy artillery, snipers and mortars. Then they were off, striding forward, crouching, keeping moving, as

shells exploded around them and machine guns opened-up from the German lines.

One company became enmired in a swampy area of previously pulverised ground. Other units were also bogged down, and progress was slow. A plan for reinforcements to slip into place failed as the condition of the ground underfoot had not been properly taken into account.

But eventually progress was made and Villers St Ghislain fell at 7.30pm, Harmignies at 01.00 on November 11th. Then Givry, at 10.45am - 15-minutes before the war ended.

Lt-Commander William Arblaster MC took command of the Anson Battalion in time for the seizing of Givry. The attack on the 10th had been orchestrated by Lt-Commander Robert Shelton DSO, a pre-war London stockbroker, who was moved to a unit in the rear.

The casualties were: Killed in action: four officers, six other ranks; wounded: one officer, 63 other ranks, several of whom would succumb to their wounds in the days to come. The War Diary of the Battalion records "on strength for drawing rations November 10th 564 personnel"; "November 12th 481 personnel". The difference was due to several sailors injured on the 11th.

It was down to Lt-Commander Arblaster to record the unit's final action in the Battalion's four-year history since Winston Churchill established the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division as an infantry cadre with eight battalions who saw action on the Western Front and Gallipoli.

During four-years of combat the Division lost 10,797 killed and 26,095 wounded or taken prisoner, out of 47,000 personnel: 40% of the Royal Navy's casualties in the Great War.

Churchill was, at the time, Lord of the Admiralty and his brave sailors were nicknamed his "Little Army" - a fighting-force which punched above its weight.

And now we focus on one man, shot through the heart on November 10th as he rallied his men with the war cry: "Press on, lads!"

Sub-Lieutenant Harry Young was born at Chesterfield on October 31st 1894, the youngest of six children of train driver Charles Young and his wife Eleanor. Charlie worked for the Midland Railway Company at the Barrow Hill depot. He was from Maulden, Bedfordshire, and Eleanor from Trimdon, County Durham.

They lived in a terraced house in Wellington Street, New Whittington, Derbyshire before moving to a larger home just around the corner in Station Road.

Harry attended Netherthorpe Grammar School, Staveley, then worked as assistant primary school teacher in Brimington. Of his siblings, his older brother John was also a teacher while his brother Richard was a train stoker.

When war broke out Harry enlisted in the Royal Army Service Corps, and served in Salonika in the Balkan campaign. He then in March 1918 switched to the Royal Naval Division. After

training, he was appointed a firearms instructor at Aldershot then in July despatched to the Western Front. He was with the Battalion a month before being bayoneted through the foot in combat at Grevillers (France) when Anson suffered heavy casualties.

Harry was to spend the next six-weeks recuperating and then on October 10th was welcomed back to his unit.

His final fight saw his fellow officers killed: Sub-Lt Charles Richards MC, from Huddersfield, killed leading the charge. Sub-Lt Frank "Tommy" Brooks, a former Wiltshire Regiment NCO sniper, from Fulham, and Sub-Lt Fred Trenholm, from Stockton-on-Tees, twice previously seriously wounded, who gave up a place at Balliol College, Oxford, for the front-line.

They, and their colleagues, are at rest in Valenciennes St Roch Cemetery, where 885 Allied personnel from both World Wars are buried.

After Harry's death, his family moved again to a smaller house at 196 South Street, New Whittington to escape the cruel memories that their son had been the final serviceman from Chesterfield to die in the Great War.

SOURCES: UK National Archives (ADM files including Harry's personnel card 339/3/1868 and the War Diary of the Anson Battalion (WO-95-3111-1_2), the ever-helpful Western Front Association and Naval-History.net, and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Extracted from: "The Final Casualties" (submission to Royal Navy News for Armistice Day 2022).

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