

Arthur Darvell MM

Private 28266, 5th Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

Arthur Darvell was born in Chesham, his birth being registered in the Amersham District in the first quarter of 1882, to George and Mary (Matilda) Darvell of Waterside, Chesham. In the 1891 Census, George's occupation was shown as a general labourer. Sarah, their oldest daughter (18), was a straw plaiter. Also living at home were Mary (17), George (11), Arthur (9) and Annie (5). The last three were at school in Chesham; and there was an infant, Minnie (3). By the time of the 1901 Census, George Darvell senior had changed his job and become a timber carter. His son George (20) was also a timber carter. Arthur (18) was a boot finisher in one of the boot and shoe workshops in the town. The family had moved to 6-7 Lord's Mill Cottages in Chesham. There were additional children; Ernest, Fred and Rose. In all, seven children were living at home.

Arthur Darvell's marriage to May East (born in Stoke Poges) was registered in the July - September quarter of 1906 in Amersham. The couple had at least two children: Harold Herbert Darvell (b. 4/4/1907 in Amersham) and Edgar Herbert Darvell (b.1909, also in Amersham). In the 1911 Census, the family's name is recorded as Darvill. Arthur, May and their two sons were living with May's mother, Sarah East (aged 62), a widow of private means, in a four-roomed house in Boot and Slipper Road, Amersham Common. Arthur described his occupation as jobbing gardener. Later, Arthur, May and the two boys moved to Woodside Lane, Amersham Common. Harold H Darvell married Doris Emily Dover in Amersham in 1938 and died in June 1982. Edgar Darvell married Marjorie E Dell in 1938.

Enlistment in the Army

By the time war broke out in 1914, Arthur was in his thirties. He did not rush to join the colours. However, as casualties mounted, the army required more men. In 1916 the government introduced the Military Service Bill on 5 January. This meant that men between the ages of 18 and 41 could be conscripted into the Armed Forces. Married men up to the age of 41 were being called up before the year's end.

In June that year, Arthur Darvell, 32, married, of Amersham Common, iron and metal dealer, appeared before the Amersham Appeals Tribunal asking for temporary exemption to sort and dispose of his stock. He said that he had three brothers on service (George, Ernest and Frederick) and he was the only one left at home. Two months' exemption was given.¹

Arthur enlisted in the army in 1916 in Aylesbury. After training, which usually lasted for four months, he was posted to the 2nd Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI). They were on the Western Front around Courcelles and receiving frequent reinforcements. Battalions needed bringing up to strength after losses and in December 1916 Pte. Darvell was transferred to the 5th Battalion. He was placed in B Company.²

Action on the Western Front 1917

The first couple of months of 1917 were quiet as the battalion was preparing to take part in the great advance near **Arras**. They spent time training and rehearsing attacks; then, on 9 April 1917, the army attacked on a ten-mile front. After fierce fighting the objectives were achieved, but the battalion suffered 192 casualties. After further training, they moved again to the Arras area where they were preparing for another advance on a twelve-mile front. The battalion was 'topped up' and had 25 officers and 905 other ranks. The next objective was Hillside Work at Vis-en-Artois with the attack set for 3 May 1917. Again the casualties were heavy. The numbers of the battalion taking part in the attack were 12 officers and 523 men, and casualties were 8 officers and 291 men. (B Company lost

¹ *Buckinghamshire Examiner*, 2 June 1916, p6.

² Information provided by Soldiers of Oxfordshire Trust Museum, The Old Tannery, Hensington Road, Woodstock.

57 out of 123). The ground gained was considered important tactically and on 24 August the Germans launched a bombing (grenades) attack on the lines held by the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry; B Company went forward to assist.

It was for his part in this action that Private Arthur Darvell was awarded his Military Medal (MM). The award was announced in the *London Gazette*, and also, on 16 November 1917, in the *Bucks Examiner*. The citation for the medal was not published.



The Military Medal (MM) was instituted by Royal Warrant on 25 March 1916. It was to be awarded for **“acts of gallantry and devotion to duty performed by non-commissioned officers and men of our army in the field”**. The vast majority of these medals were awarded for acts of bravery during the First World War. The name of the recipient was engraved around the edge of the medal. The ribbon had navy-blue stripes down each side and two red stripes and three white stripes down the centre.

Christmas on the Western Front, 1917

The battalion spent the following months in and out of the trenches (usually in for 3 to 4 days then rest). Every day there was shelling and sniping, but the casualties were not heavy. Late in November 1917 the battalion moved back to the Ypres area, again carrying out trench duty. In the *Regimental Chronicles*³ there are descriptions of what happened on a daily basis. These notes come from the *5th Battalion Diary*:

“December 22nd: The battalion was relieved and the soldiers sent out to camps. *Dec 24th*: The cold weather continued and baths on the canal bank were allotted to the Battalion. *Dec. 25th*: There were frequent snowstorms all day. At 12.40pm the Battalion left St Jean by train for the St Omer area. They arrived at Wizernes at 5.00pm and thence marched 4 miles to St Martin-au-Laërt where they found very comfortable billets. *Dec 26th* was spent clearing up and settling down in the billets. The French inhabitants were not keen to have either officers or men billeted on them, owing to their having been treated previously none too well by English troops. *On Dec. 27th* they had a great snow fight with the 7th R.B. [Rifle Brigade] and defeated them. *Dec. 28th*: The Battalion route-marched in the morning; roads a bit slippery, but conditions for marching otherwise perfect. *Dec. 29th*: The officers had a very successful Christmas dinner in the village school. *On 30th Dec.* there was a slight thaw. The men had their Christmas dinners, under very good arrangements by all Companies. The dinner consisted of roast pork, three kinds of vegetables, plum pudding, and a good quantity of beer and stout, as well as cigarettes.”

³ *The Chronicles of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, 5th Battalion Record 1914-18*, pages 276-277.

The Ludendorff Spring Offensive, 1918 – “*The Greatest battle of all time*” (*Daily Mail*); “*A 40 mile holocaust*”; “*The most concentrated artillery bombardment the world has yet known*” were some of the headlines in the newspapers of the time.

The 5th Battalion was sent back to the **Somme region** on New Year's Day 1918 and spent most of January in training. During February, the battalion was in the trenches near Bois d'Urville with rest periods in Montescourt. Early March was quiet and then on 21 March came the major German attack. “...the Germans, having liquidated the Russian front, were able to pour reinforcements and armaments into the Western Front for an all-out effort to win the war before the Americans could restore the balance.”³

On 21 March “the enemy opened a colossal bombardment penetrating deep into the rear areas; thus started Ludendorff's bid for victory which took the British army back right across the old Somme battlefield to the 1916 line on the Ancre.” On 23 March, B Company was sent up to reinforce near **Flavy** station and was entirely overwhelmed. Between 21 and 25 March 1918, the B.E.F. suffered about 75,000 casualties. The 5th Battalion took many casualties, among them Private Arthur Darvell, aged 35. He was awarded The British War Medal, 1914-18 and the Allied Victory Medal.

Arthur Darvell MM is remembered with Honour on the
Pozières Memorial, Somme, France, Panel 50 & 51



The Pozières Cemetery is found about 6 kms N-E of the town of Albert. The Memorial encloses the British Cemetery. **THE POZIÈRES MEMORIAL** relates to the period of crisis in March and April 1918 when the Allied 5th Army was driven back by overwhelming numbers across the former Somme Battlefields. The Memorial commemorates over 14,000 casualties of the United Kingdom.



³ Philip Booth, *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry*, 1971, Ch 8, p 104 in the series *Famous Regiments* edited by Lt General Sir Brian Horrocks.