

George Percy Lane

Private 18418, 5th Battalion

Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

George Percy Lane's birth was registered in the April - June quarter of 1897 in Amersham. It is likely that George was born in the Amersham Union Workhouse. He is listed as being resident there in the 1901 Census, aged 3, along with his siblings, Lilian Grace (6), Gertrude Mary (8), Flora [recorded elsewhere as Florence and Florrie] (12) and their mother Ellen (36) described as 'single' and a straw plaiter. In the 1891 Census she was already in the Workhouse with her eldest daughter and two sons, Albert (5) and Charles (7).

The family continued to be housed within the Workhouse, being listed there in the 1911 Census, with mother Ellen still described as "single" and a "field worker on farm" and siblings Violet Maude (10) and Lilian Grace (15), a nursemaid. George, now 13, and Violet were recorded as attending school. By then Albert had enlisted in the 1st Battalion of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) and was in Ahmednagar, India.

According to *Soldiers Died in the Great War 1914-1919*, George signed his attestation papers in Huntingdon at the age of 18. Like his brother he became a soldier in the OBLI, but as part of the 5th Battalion, he would fight on the Western Front. His date of entry into that theatre of war is recorded as 5 October 1915.

One of the first of Kitchener's Army, the 5th (Service) Battalion of the OBLI was formed at Aldershot on 21 August 1914, from a cadre of 2 Officers and 150 men from Cowley Barracks, Oxford. It was placed in the 42nd Infantry Brigade, together with 5th Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry (5 KSLI), 9th Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corp (9 KRRC) and 9th Battalion, Rifle Brigade (9 RB) as part of the 14th (Light) Division and was destined to fight all of its war on the Western Front having landed at Boulogne on the 21 May 1915. George, therefore, was not part of the original intake, but must have been sent out once his training was complete as part of a draft. He was one of the 651 other ranks and 41 officers posted to the 5th Battalion between 1 Aug 1915 and 30 June 1916. Not all would have been new faces as the number included some who had recovered from their wounds.

He would have missed the Battalion's attack in September 1915 on **Bellewaarde Farm**, which they captured but were unable to hold. They were badly mauled. At the end of October they reckoned their losses in the 5 months since their arrival amounted to 29 officers and 978 other ranks, about half of those being sustained at Bellewaarde.

November was spent in miserably wet and cold conditions on the **Ypres** salient, rotating in and out of trenches which lacked both connecting lines and communications trenches and were so narrow and twisting that it was almost impossible to bring back stretcher cases.

In January they received a draft of 20 men and moved to Arras where conditions were much better. A raid on **Beaurains** trenches was carried out in June at a cost of 2 killed and 3 wounded.

In August they were on the **Somme** and faced with the daunting task of taking **Delville Wood** from the Germans, a task 5 other Divisions had failed to accomplish. They succeeded in clearing the wood, but at the cost of 10 officers and 160 other ranks.

In September they were again in action attacking towards **Guedecourt** as part of the battle of **Fliers-Courcelette** and managed to hold the ground they had taken despite their flanks being exposed. They then saw out the year rotating in and out of trenches in a quiet sector of the front near Arras. March 1917 was spent in training and in preparation for their part in another big offensive, this time on a 10-mile front from south of Arras to south of Lens, which was to begin on 9 April.

On 4 April they moved into Dunedin and Christchurch Caves close to Arras. Taking advantage of the shelter and concealment the caves and tunnels offered, the final preparations were made for the assault. On the 8th they left the caves at 9 p.m. and had taken up their positions by midnight. From 0530 for two hours the assembly trenches suffered 'slight' shelling, resulting in the death of 1 officer and 1 other rank, then at 0734 the advance began. The battalion reached its objective within 20 minutes and then had to endure half an hour's heavy shelling, but they had captured 100 prisoners and 3 machine-guns. George was killed that day, 9 April 1917, aged 19 or 20. By 5 p.m. the battlefield had been cleared of all casualties.¹

George gave his life in an action crucial to the outcome of this battle. '**The Harp**' was a formidable position some 1000 yards long and 500 yards wide and full of tangled field defences near the village of **Tilloy-lès-Mofflaines**, 3 km south-east of Arras. Along with Telegraph Hill to its immediate south, its dominant position enabled German defenders to fire in enfilade northwards up Observation Ridge and southwards to Neuville Vitasse; thus its capture was absolutely critical. The 5th Battalion casualties were 5 officers and 180 other ranks.

The Commander-in Chief of the 14th (light) Division, Major-General V Couper sent a despatch the following day expressing his "high opinion of the excellent fighting qualities shown by the Division".

George's brother, Albert, was named as his next of kin in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission records. His address was given as London Road, Amersham. George Percy Lane was also the brother of Charles William Lane.

George was awarded The Allied Victory Medal, The British War Medal 1914-18 and The 1914-15 Star.



George Percy Lane is remembered with Honour at
Tilloy British Cemetery, Tilloy-lès-Mofflaines , grave IV.E.23
and also on the Roll of Honour in the
Methodist Church, High Street, Amersham

¹ A very full account of the history of the 5th (Service) Battalion OBLI can be found on the website www.lightbobs.com from which much of the above has been drawn.