

# **Alfred James Lee**

## **Private 10136, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion**

### **Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry**

**Alfred James Lee** was born in the October - December registration quarter of 1895 in Amersham and baptised on 23 February 1896. He was the son of Harry Lee, who had been born in Stokenchurch, and Edith née Shrimpton, from Amersham. In the 1901 Census Alfred, aged 5, lived at Norwoods Yard, Amersham with his sister Rosetta, aged 7. Harry, his father, then aged 32, is recorded as being a carman for a builder. A carman was the 19<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of a modern-day van driver.

The 1911 Census showed Alfred as a farmer's labourer, still living with his parents Harry (then a contractor's labourer) and Edith, together with his three surviving siblings: Rosetta aged 17, William George aged 9 and Ernest Harry aged 1. Harry and Edith had been married for 18 years and lost 2 children.

Alfred enlisted at High Wycombe with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI). The regiment was formed as a consequence of the Childers reforms, a continuation of the Cardwell reforms, by the amalgamation of the 43rd (Monmouthshire) Regiment of Foot (Light Infantry) and the 52nd (Oxfordshire) Regiment of Foot (Light Infantry), forming the 1st and 2nd Battalions, the Oxfordshire Light Infantry on 1 July 1881. In 1908, as part of the Haldane Reforms, the regiment's title was altered to become the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, commonly shortened to the 'Ox and Bucks', or OBLI.

We know from the Medal Rolls Index card that Private Alfred James Lee entered the theatre of war in France on 26 May 1915. This date was important as it qualified him for the 1915 Star. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion OBLI was involved in the **Battle of Loos** from 29 September to 13 October 1915. The Chronicle of the OBLI for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion describes the battle:

*"It was a battle of giants and in no previous battle had more men engaged or suffered greater casualties."*<sup>1</sup>

The battle could not be described as a great success, but the soldiers fought well. The assault was preceded by a gas attack, clearly foreseen by the enemy and delivered in dead calm, which hindered the British soldiers as well as the enemy. Captain Owen got to the German line with his company, but uncut wire and large mine craters stopped any further progress, and there was not much to show for the regiment's 263 casualties.<sup>2</sup> Private Alfred James Lee survived this action.

From October 1915 until the **battle of the Somme** in July 1916, there was very little activity along that part of the Western Front. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion were in and out of the trenches according to the system of rotation adopted by the Brigade and described in the Chronicle. *"They were in the trenches for 16 days, each battalion being 4 days in and 4 days out, a pair of battalions relieving each other twice – then the whole brigade went back away from the trenches for 8 days."*

The first half of 1916 was uneventful. The Battalion had spent its second winter in the trenches and had learnt to cope better with the weather conditions and to care for their own health. The line held by the British during the winter was virtually the same as that which was held the winter before, from north of Ypres to south of Albert.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Chronicle – 1915–1916, Record of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion* (Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd.)

<sup>2</sup> *Famous Regiments*, edited by Lt. General Sir Brian Horrocks; *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry* by Philip Booth.

*The Chronicle* describes the movements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion during the early part of 1916:

*"For the first half of January [1916] the 52<sup>nd</sup>, which still belonged to the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, was in rest at St Hilaire, and then went to Bethune, whence before the end of the month, it moved into Festubert trenches for a tour of duty. A month later it railed south and took over from the French, a sector of trenches opposite Lens, in which and in other sectors it remained, with occasional periods of rest and training until the end of June [1916]."*

In preparation for the **Battle of the Somme** the 2<sup>nd</sup> Btn OBLI travelled by train from Pernes station to Saleux, south of Amiens. On 28 July 1916 the 2nd Battalion moved to front-line trenches near Waterlot farm, moving via Bernafray Wood, Trones Wood and Delville Wood, all places already drenched in the blood of wholesale slaughter. Major Owen described the move into the line as "a horrible walk, the ground being strewn with dead in all positions and much decomposed."<sup>3</sup>

On 29 July, the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade gave orders for the attack, in which the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion OBLI was to take Guillemont station. According to Major Owen writing in the *Chronicle*:

*"July 30<sup>th</sup> – Zero hour was at 4.45 a.m., i.e daylight and much too late. The attack... on Guillemont station failed after repeated attempts."*

Some men reached Guillemont Station but not many survived the deadly machine-gun fire. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion OBLI sustained heavy casualties. It is thought that Alfred James Lee, aged 20, was amongst the 200 men killed at Guillemont.

Alfred was awarded The Allied Victory Medal, The British War Medal, 1914-18 and The 1914-15 Star. The medals were often known affectionately as Pip, Squeak and Wilfred. As his body was not identified, his name was recorded on the Thiepval Memorial to the missing, along with the other 72,000 unidentified men who fell on the battlefields of the Somme.



Alfred James Lee is remembered with Honour  
The Thiepval Memorial, Somme – (Pier and Face 10A and 10D)<sup>4</sup>

He is also remembered on the Roll of Honour in St Mary's Church, Amersham and in the Methodist Church, High Street, Amersham.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry Chronicle 1916 -1917, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Record*, pages 113 -114, Eyre and Spottiswoode Ltd.

<sup>4</sup> For details of the memorial and engraving , see the chapter on Memorials to the Missing.