

Harry Mitchell

Lance Corporal 23910, 6th Battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

Harry Mitchell was born 6 August 1880 in London. He was baptised on 27 August 1881 at Bloomsbury St George. He is listed in the 1881 Census aged 8 months. His parents were Harry and Emma Mitchell. They lived at 4 Devonline Street, Finsbury, and Harry senior gave his occupation as a harness maker.

By the time of the 1891 Census the family had moved to Peckham. His father was still a harness maker and they had a home consisting of three rooms at 61 Furley Street. Harry was aged 10 by then, and three more children had been added to the family: Flora (8), Ernest (4) and William (1).

The family were still living at 61 Furley Street at the time of the 1901 Census, but Harry was not living with them. Ernest was working as a wood yard boy and William (11) was still living at home. The family had grown again and Tom (7) and Isabella (4) were listed. Isabella was the only child living at home at 61 Furley Street, Peckham in the 1911 Census.

Harry can not be found on the 1901 Census but he is listed in the 1911 Census, living at The Bungalow, Station Road, Amersham, aged 30. He married Alice Zilpah Knowles at Amersham in 1908. They had a daughter Patricia, born in Brixton in 1909. Harry's occupation is stated as ship's steward. The reason for his move to Amersham is not known, but it seems a strange location for anyone involved in maritime activity. It would appear that he moved again, to Watford, as that was his last known address.

Harry Mitchell joined the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (OBLI) in 1916 at Aylesbury. He was 35 years old and married, and was conscripted into the army. He enlisted as a Private and was promoted to Lance Corporal at a later unknown date. Harry embarked for France as a member of the 2nd Battalion, but was later transferred to the 6th Btn, presumably as the remains of battalions were amalgamated. The date of transfer is not known.

The 6th (Service) Battalion of the OBLI was involved in the **Somme offensive** in the summer of 1916. When the offensive opened on 1 July the Btn was in the trenches at Zillebeke, Flanders, and continued to take tours of duty there in the neighbourhood of Ypres for the following three weeks. It then moved south to the Somme area and took its share of the fighting.¹

The 6th Battalion was involved in the attack on **Guillemont** and was later detached from the 60th Brigade and attached to the 59th Brigade. It was also involved in the attack of 7 October 1916 (also part of the Somme battles). Here the battalion fought in inclement weather and the consequent mud. It attacked along the line of Le Transloy-Thillois-Warlencourt-Faucourt. The attack was fairly successful, forcing the Germans back to their second line of trenches, but there were heavy losses.

The German retreat to the Hindenburg Line – 14 March to 5 April 1917

In March 1917, the German armies on the Somme carried out a strategic withdrawal known as Operation Alberich. They destroyed everything on the ground that they left: flattening villages, poisoning wells, cutting down trees, blowing craters on roads and crossroads, booby-trapping ruins and dugouts. The withdrawal was to an immensely powerful and shorter line, positioned to take every tactical advantage of ground. The construction of this line - or rather, series of lines - had been spotted by British and French aviators in late 1916. British patrols began to detect the withdrawal of German infantry from the Somme in mid February 1917 and a cautious pursuit began, halted only as the Hindenburg Line itself was approached. The front had now moved several miles, leaving the devastated 1916 Somme battlefield and the razed ground of Alberich behind the British

¹ *Chronicle of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry 1916-17*, page 335 onwards.

front. New place names began to appear in British news ... they would soon assume as sinister an air as the villages and woods of the Somme.²

The advance continued throughout the month of April. On 1 April the battalion moved from Barastre up to the outpost line. (Barastre is 6 kms south-east of the town of Bapaume). There was not much fighting along the front at this time but a number of casualties were incurred as a result of sniper shots. Three officers died and two men of the ranks were killed and eight wounded that month. One of the men who lost his life, on the 3 April 1917, was Lance Corporal Harry Mitchell. It was unusual that the body of a soldier, killed singly in an incident and not in the confusion of battle, would not be identified, but this is what happened in the case of Harry Mitchell. He has no known grave and is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial. He was 37 years old.

He was awarded The British War Medal, 1914-18 and the Allied Victory Medal.

Harry Mitchell is remembered with Honour on the Thiepval Memorial,
Somme (Pier and Face 10A and 10D)³

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



The Badge of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

² *Soldiers of Oxfordshire* - Information provided by Kevin Tobin, Research Volunteer and Web Master

³ For details of the memorial and engraving, see the chapter on Memorials to the Missing