



A Burial Service for

Serjeant John Smith

&

Gunner Charles Lightfoot

29 Battery, Royal Field Artillery

10:00 hours Wednesday 12 June 2024

CWGC Vendresse British Cemetery, France

Service conducted by Reverend (Major) Roger Grafton CF

Chaplain to 14th Regiment, Royal Artillery

Déroulement de la Cérémonie présidé par

le Reverend Roger Grafton



A sketch of the gun emplacements in September 1914, by Leonard Theobald, a comrade of Gnr Lightfoot and Sgt Smith



Serjeant John Smith
20 May 1884 – 13/14 September 1914

John Smith was born in Taynton, Gloucestershire in 1884, the oldest of seven children born to John and Emily Smith. John senior was involved in farming, and by the time of the 1891 census the family had moved to Frocester near Stroud. By 1901 John junior had moved away from his parents and was boarding in a house at Stapleton, Bristol whilst working as a carter. At some point after this, but before joining the military, he progressed from carter to groom.

Whilst no service record survives for John Smith, we know that by 1911 he was already a serjeant in the Royal Field Artillery, as the census records him as an unmarried man living at Bulford Camp in Wiltshire, and serving with 137th Battery.



Gunner Charles Lightfoot
20 March 1893 – 13/14 September 1914

Charles Lightfoot was born in Edinburgh in 1893, the seventh of ten children of Henry Lightfoot and his wife Jeannie Welsh. Henry was a mattress maker, and the family lived at the Royal Blind Asylum. In 1901 Charles was attending school in Edinburgh. By 1911 he was employed as a labourer at the gasworks, and in February 1912 he enlisted in the Royal Field Artillery for 3 years in the regular army and 9 in the reserve. At this point he was sent to No. 6 Depot (Maryhill Barracks, Glasgow).

In October 1912, Charles was posted to Exeter, to Topsham Barracks. A postcard home mentioned the 20-hour journey and the imminent riding drill. In those days the barracks were surrounded by buttercup fields, and Topsham Road led into the

city past Holloway Street, where cattle and sheep were taken to market, and where Janet Eliza (Nettie) Forse lived with her father and Scottish mother, who ran a small grocery shop. Charles and Nettie met, fell in love, and were married in 1914.

On the 8th August 1914, the local Exeter newspaper reported that

'The two batteries of Regular Artillery from Topsham Barracks left the city on Wednesday evening.....The men marched through the city to Queen Street Station for Salisbury plain. They were heartily cheered.'

Gunner Charles Lightfoot, and his comrades, Serjeant Smith, Gunner Frederick Blyth, and Gunner John Adams were among these men. Nettie walked beside Charles the whole way to the station, passing their home in Holloway Street along the way. By this time Charles and Nettie were expecting a baby.

After Nettie's death in old age, among her few treasured keepsakes, was a small yellowed press cutting. It read :-

"Lest We Forget. To the glorious and imperishable memory of the Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men of the first seven divisions who, fighting against uncounted odds by their courage and devotion saved Europe and civilisation.

*Tell them O guns that we have heard their call,
That we have sworn and will not turn aside
That we will onward till we win or fall
That we will keep the faith for which they died."*

Nettie never forgot. After the war, she married again, to Leonard Theobald MM, Charles' comrade both in Exeter and in France, who was to serve for a total of 33 years in the army. About 1943/44 they moved back to Exeter, to Topsham Road, almost opposite the barracks, where they created a beautiful garden. Leonard tended the perfect lawn, with military precision, while Nettie grew flowers and fruit.

There was one deep red heavenly scented rose among the others. Surely it was in memory of Charles, remembering the Robbie Burns poem. Leonard knew, understood and shared Nettie's grief.

Seventy year later, Charles' daughter Jean wrote about her earliest memories. She concluded that

"There are not many of us left - we who were born as our fathers died - in a seemingly distant land at that time - but in this age so close to shore.

No grave to visit, just a name upon a stone memorial, recording so many young men who died for family and country. Were they afraid? Who knows, but valour walked with them into the unknown.

I cry for my father - he who would have given me love and guidance - but not too long and I will meet him and know his arms will open wide to enfold me in comfort forever."



Nettie, in mourning dress, holding Jean in a Christening photo taken in early 1915

29th Battery, Royal Field Artillery

The War Diaries for the battalion show us that the battery were mobilised immediately when war broke out on 4th August, and were in France by 19th August. They initially made their way towards Villereau near the Belgian border, before moving gradually south towards the Aisne.

On 13th September the troops marched from Cerseuil to Braine. The Brigade was halted about 8.30am just north of Braine for about one hour. German shells were bursting on the road a little out of Braine, but they continued the march to Brenelle, and halted from about 12 noon 'til 5.30pm just off the road. The 29th Battery was brought into action but did not fire. They billeted the night September 13-14 in Brenelle.

On 14 September 29th Battery was brought into action just north of the Chassemy - Brenelle Road. They were heavily shelled and afterwards moved position slightly. At dusk the Brigade moved to bivouac east of the Braine - Brenelle Road.

The war diaries make no reference to casualties during these dates, but other records show that the 29th Battery only lost four men during the period from 13th - 14th September 1914.

Evidence held by the family of Gunner Lightfoot confirms that Gunner Lightfoot was killed in the same incident as Serjeant Smith - their gun emplacement was hit by a shell - on 13th September 1914. What happened next is unclear, but evidence found at the time their remains were recovered in 2015 indicates that they were likely buried with the two other Gunners who died that same day - Gunner Frederick Blyth and Gunner John Adams.

By the end of the war their resting place had been forgotten, and all four men were listed on the memorial to the missing at La Ferte-Sous-Jouarre.

The remains of Serjeant Smith and Gunner Lightfoot were recovered alongside a small number of artefacts, by a French archeological team conducting work in caves near Chassemy in 2015. An inscription on the cave wall

*15 Sept 1914
Here lies Sjt Smith and 3 Gnrs
29th Battery RFA*

gave a clue as to their identities, but DNA testing has allowed this to be proven and we can now lay them to rest alongside their comrades. Unfortunately Gunners Blyth and Adams remain missing at this time.

The Cemetery

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Vendresse British Cemetery is located within an area that saw heavy fighting in both 1914 and 1918. The cemetery was created after the Armistice by the concentration of graves from several other cemeteries and surrounding battlefields and there are now over 700 First World War casualties buried here. It is in this same area that Gunner Lightfoot and Serjeant Smith, who are being laid to rest today, were found.

Introduction

L'Introduction

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
All Amen

Jesus said, "This is indeed the will of my Father,
that all who see the Son and believe in him
may have eternal life;
and I will raise them up on the last day. (*John 6.40*)

May the Peace of the Lord be always with you,
All and also with you.

Bidding Prayer

Prière

We have come together in this place, in the spirit of solemn thanksgiving, to remember the life and service of Serjeant John Smith and Gunner Charles Lightfoot. To accord to them the dignity and respect that they are due, to commend them to the grace and mercy of Almighty God our maker and our redeemer and to commit their mortal remains to the ground. We do this dear Lord, in the sure and certain hope that whilst our bodies lie in the dust our souls live with thee, through the merits of Christ our Lord. Eternal God, grant to your servants Serjeant Smith and Gunner Lightfoot and to us who surround them with our prayers your peace beyond understanding. Give us faith, the comfort of your presence, and knowledge of your unending love, as we gather in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord.

All Amen.

Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes Chapter 3 v 1- 8, 11 (NIV)

Lecture des Écritures Saintes

Read by a representative of the British Embassy Paris

There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:

a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

Reading – No Man is an Island by John Donne

Lecture

Chosen by the family of Serjeant Smith and read by his great-nephew Andrew Smith

No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were.

Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

Reading – Three Postcards by Brian Bilston

Lecture

Read by Colonel Richard Harmer, The Royal Artillery

The first came from Weston-Super-Mare
With the Grand Pier – newly built – in view,
shining, stretching out into the distance,
and the sea, an unknowable blue.

Unfamiliar, that neat hand of his, the black fountain pen.
But he was the one; she knew that even then.

The one after that she received two years on:
Tidworth Station, as viewed from Church Hill.
A row of thatched cottages in the foreground,
the barracks beyond, then the fields, silent, still.

She propped it against a vase on their mantelpiece,
a wedding present from her niece.

The last was a busy port scene from Boulogne,
a censor-passed, heaven-sent souvenir.
'Crossing rough, but I made it!' he'd written.
'When it's over, perhaps we can all come here!'

She pressed it to her stomach, the baby moved once more.
The telegram had arrived the day before.

Reading – Perhaps by Vera Brittain

Lecture

Chosen by the family of Gunner Lightfoot and read by his grand-daughter Sue Kruk

Perhaps some day the sun will shine again,
And I shall see that still the skies are blue.
And feel once more I do not live in vain,
Although bereft of You.

Perhaps the golden meadows at my feet
Will make the sunny hours of Spring seem gay.
And I shall find the white May blossoms sweet,
Though You have passed away.

Perhaps the summer woods will shimmer bright,
And crimson roses once again be fair,
And autumn harvest fields a rich delight,
Although You are not there.

Perhaps some day I shall not shrink in pain
To see the passing of the dying year,
And listen to Christmas songs again,
Although You cannot hear.

But, though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You
Was broken, long ago.

Address

Allocution

Blessing of the Grave

Bénédiction de la Tombe

O God, whose Son Jesus Christ was laid in a tomb: bless, we pray, this grave as the place where the bodies of your servants John and Charles may rest in peace, through your Son, who is the resurrection and the life; who died and is alive and reigns with you now and for ever.

All **Amen.**

Commendation

God our creator and redeemer, by your power Christ conquered death and returned to you in glory. Confident of your victory and claiming his promises, we entrust Serjeant John Smith and Gunner Charles Lightfoot into your keeping in the name of Jesus our Lord, who, though he died, is now alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever.

All **Amen.**

The Committal

L'Enterrement

We have entrusted our fallen comrades to God's mercy and now we commit their bodies to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust: in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body, who died, was buried, and rose again for us. To him be glory for ever.

All **Amen.**

The Exhortation

L'Exhortation

Read by WO1 James Lightfoot, The Royal Artillery

They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning,
We will remember them.

All **We will remember them.**

The Last Post

Sonnerie aux Morts

Played by Trumpet Major Adam Desborough, The King's Troop
Royal Horse Artillery

Silence

Reveille

Kohima Epitaph

L'Épitaphe de Kohima

Read by Gunner Caitlin Booth, The Royal Artillery

When you go home tell them of us and say:
'For your tomorrow, we gave our today.'

Laying of Wreaths

Dépôts des Gerbes

Collect of The Royal Regiment of Artillery

Récitation du Royal Artillery

Read by Colonel Richard Harmer, The Royal Artillery

O Lord Jesus Christ, who dost everywhere lead thy people in the way of righteousness their only glory, vouchsafe so to lead the Royal Regiment of Artillery that in every place we may win the glory of well doing for thee, who with the Father and the Holy Ghost art worshipped and glorified, one God, world without end.

The Lord's Prayer

Prière du Seigneur

Trusting in the compassion of God, let us pray with confidence as our Saviour has taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

Prayer

Prière

Lord God, creator of all, you have made us creatures of this earth, but have also promised us a share in life eternal. According to your promises, may all who have died in the peace of Christ share with your saints in the joy of heaven, where there is neither sorrow nor pain but life everlasting.

All Alleluia. Alleluia. Amen

The Blessing

Séparation de Dernière Bénédiction

God grant to the living, grace; to the departed, rest; to the Church, The King, the Commonwealth, and all humankind, peace and concord; and to us and all his servants, life everlasting; and may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, come down upon you and all those whom you love now and always.

All Amen.



The Ministry of Defence, through the Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre, is responsible for the research, identification and burial of all British casualties worldwide.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission cares for the graves, memorials, records and memory of the 1.7 million Commonwealth servicemen and women who died during the two World Wars.

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