Edmund Battye





Photo courtesy of Jane Roberts

Rank: - Private

Number: - 2067

Regiment: - King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry 1/4th Battalion

Death: - 19 February 1915

Cemetery: - Batley, Yorkshire, O 525

Edmund Battye was born in Bruntcliffe, Morley on 29 October 1892. His parents were John and Margaret Battye (nee Fitzpatrick). Edmund's birth certificate states his father worked as a coal miner. Margaret was born in Birstall and had a son John Thomas Fitzpatrick born 1883 and a daughter Ellen Fitzpatrick born February 1888 and the indication is that she married John Battye before the birth of son Henry (Harry) in 1890. John was born in Holmfirth but had moved to Batley, living with his parents in Birch Street, when the 1881 census was taken.

By 1901 John and Margaret had settled in Batley, living in Cobden Street. Now John earned his living as a mason's labourer. Their other children included Benjamin (born Mirfield in July 1895) and Ruth Hannah (born Barnsley in May 1898). Margaret Ann was born in July 1901 but her burial is recorded in April 1902. George born January 1903 only survived six months.

The family was in the Ward's Hill area in a two-roomed home at Sheard's Fold in 1911. It was 18-year-old Edmund who completed the census. By now he was working in a coal mine as a hurrier. The colliery is not named but when he enlisted, he was working at Howley Park Colliery.

Edmund's mother, Margaret died on 10 February 1913 and Edmund lived with his step-brother and sister-in-law in New Street, Batley whilst his father went to live at Wentworth Place, Fieldhead Lane, Birstall. He retained his links to St. Mary's, including being a member of the St Mary's Batley Branch of the National Catholic Benefit and Thrift Society.

Edmund joined the local "Terriers" of the 4th KOYLI in early 1914, mobilising with them in August 1914. Initially at Sanbach Park, Doncaster, in November 191 the battalion moved to Gainsborough, Lincolnshire for training.

On Friday 19 February, Captain Harold Hirst, of Dewsbury, was in command of "D" Company comprising of about 190 men. Half went for section drill in a field, whilst the other half, supervised by Captain Hirst, were taken to a neighbouring pond of water near the banks of the River Trent to learn about raft- building and gain experience in bridging. It was the first time the platoon had undertaken this type of work, and none of those involved knew the depth of the water. The KOYLI men had no say in the location, it being chosen for them. In fact, located next to a flat field and with no banks to speak of at the water's edge there was nothing to suggest any depth or danger attached to it, especially since other units had used the same pond for training purposes.

The place chosen for the practice was notorious locally notable for being the deepest piece of water in the district and described as "bottomless". The chosen water was the first in a series of gyms or pits by the side of the River Trent, the origins are unknown.

The raft the men built was composed of two waterproof tarpaulin sheets which were filled with a mixture of straw and hay to make them float. Posts and a boarded platform were fixed by ropes to these floats. The platform of the raft was about 12 feet by 7 feet and a12 to 14-foot-long pole was used to control the raft. Lance Corporal Edward Punyer was put in charge of the pole because he had experience of the sea although not of rafting. When the raft was only a yard from the bank it was impossible to touch the bottom of the pond with the pole. The exact number on board is not known but the men on board were all in fatigue dress without belts, only Captain Hirst was in full marching order. Immediately after pushing off Captain Hirst warned the men to keep still and steady and five minutes later gave the order to return. The men moved and the water washed across the raft. Twice more Captain Hirst told the men to stand still but there was further light movement, the raft started rocking and they were all thrown into the water. There was only one lifebuoy on the bank. It was about seven minutes past midday. Two of the men who lost their lives were good swimmers and it was thought they had been dragged down by struggling comrades. This was proved correct in the aftermath of the accident when three bodies were brought to shore clinging together and one man had his coat and waistcoat torn from his back. One of the youngest sergeants, Charles Frederick Hemingway, was a promising three –quarter back footballer who was very fit and he admitted he had great difficulty saving himself because of the weight of his clothing and boots and felt exhausted by the time he managed to clamber on the bank. Valiant efforts were made to rescue those in the water, some jumping into the icy cold water, others throwing poles and ropes.

Private William Barber who was to tragically lose his life just over a year later wrote home and said: -

“I was on the bank watching the raft, and saw the water was getting into the straw and thought it would sink. I took off my coat and got ready to go into the water, but the raft seemed to right itself and I put my coat on again. Then the raft started to sink and this time it went down. I took off my coat again and dived in and fetched out two men.”

Lance-Corporal George Sykes from “H” Company wrote of the events to his parents in Batley: -

"We went to learn pontoon building on a pond near the Trent. As luck would have it our platoon did not help- we did section drill in the next field.

The two platoons got to the bridge together and about 40 men were on it when it started rocking and all the lot went into the water. We were about 150 yards away at the time, and rushed up. I got my pack and my coat off, dived into the water and tried to save the poor chaps. It was awful! We could not tell who was drowning or who was wanting help, and we got two out only just in time. We had a job to get them round, but we succeeded after a time. Many of the men looked like dead, but the two referred to are going on fine. Seven poor chaps had to be got out with grappling irons and all the seven were dead. I had to leave about three o'clock, for I was getting bad with cramp through standing about in wet clothes. Seeing the chaps struggling in the water was awful. I pumped the chaps until I was simply fagged out, but we only got two rounds."

Private Edmund Battye was among the dead and the others were Private William Atherton (Wakefield), Private Alfred Bruce (Harrogate), Private Ernest Cockell (Wakefield), Private Fred Cooke (East Ardsley), Private William Robinson Dent (Churwell) and Private John Myers from Savile Town. It was noted that all their watches had stopped at 12.07 pm.

Private Ewart W. Mann from Batley Carr who was one of those on the pool bank and assisted in the rescue wrote to the Batley News describing Edmund as: -

"--a real friend of mine, and a very good-hearted lad too—so quiet, modest and true and a fine soldier. My heart, as well as those of my comrades, goes out to the parents of those who have departed this life under such tragic circumstances."

The inquest was held the following day and it was concluded that the men were accidently drowned. Captain Hirst was not to blame and he was killed in action on 2 June 1915.

Edmund's funeral took place in Batley on the afternoon of Tuesday 23 February. He was interred at Batley Cemetery with full military honours. The cortege left New Street, and large numbers lined the route to the cemetery through Wellington Street, Clerk Green and Woodwell to the cemetery. It was estimated there must have been thousands at the cemetery. The coffin was taken from the

hearse at the cemetery gates and carried shoulder high to the grave where Father Lea performed the burial service. At the conclusion the firing party fired three volleys over the grave and the bugler sounded “The Last Post”.

Edmund was not eligible for any campaign medals. He is remembered at St Mary’s Church and Batley War Memorial.



Thanks to Jane Roberts and for further information and references see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk