William Colbeck





Rank: - Sapper

Regiment: - 264th Railway Company, Royal Engineers

Number: - WR/271620 (formerly 269648)

Date of Death: - 6 November 1918

Cemetery: - Bretonneux Military Cemetery, Somme, France

William was born in Batley on 26 October 1887. His parents David Colbeck and Catherine Garner married at St. Mary of the Angels, Batley on 7 February 1885. His brother, John was born in 1886. The family lived in Mill Lane in 1891. Belvedere Road in 1901, and Talbot Street in 1911. At the time of William's death, they resided in Field Lane.

William's father worked in the woollen industry. His employers were Messrs. J. Newsome and Sons, Batley Carr and then Messrs. G. and J. Stubley Ltd. Batley. In later years he assisted his son, John, who ran a drapery business in Field Lane.

William initially followed his father's trade, being a woollen spinner in the 1911 census. Before he enlisted, he was working as a platelayer, employed by Batley Great Northern Railway Station. This job determined the direction of his army service. William enlisted in March 1916, and joined the Royal Engineers (RE) as a sapper.

The RE helped the army to fight, move and live and by 1918 numbered 315,000 men. They were behind the construction and maintenance of everything from field fortifications, to roads, camps, water supplies, waterways and trenches, from laying and taking care of cable for telephone and telegraph, to mapping, tunnelling, mining and maintaining transport, from developing responses to chemical warfare, maintain guns and other weapons and constructing the railways which were essential for moving men, munitions and supplies

Longmoor in Hampshire was the centre for all RE railway and road personnel training, and this was where William was assigned. They embarked for France in May 1917, though it is unclear whether William was with this initial tranche.

Once the Labour companies had prepared the ground, the plate-laying sappers stepped in working round the clock constructing and maintaining miles of temporary tracks, often close to the Front with constant threat of being targeted by enemy artillery.

The latter weeks of the war the emphasis had changed. An extract from the 264th Railway Company Unit War Diary gives a flavour of the work they were now undertaking in October 1918. Based at Camp Bray, just north of Bray-sur-Somme the 26 October read:

Maintenance and salvaging work on Chemin Vert Plateau Line. Lifting and packing and draining track. Patrolling lines. Collecting, loading, unloading and stacking rails and fittings.

Chemin Vert Yard water supply – Concreting reservoir and straightening expanded metal.

Froissy-Foy Line—Dismantling track, loading rails, sleepers and fastenings.

6 ORs admitted to hospital, 1 ORs proceeded on leave to United Kingdom.

By the end of October, they had moved further south in the Somme region, to a camp at La Plaque (just south of Proyart). It was more of the same type of railway dismantling. The influenza pandemic, not shellfire, was now taking its toll and a steady number of men were being admitted to hospital daily, recorded as 'sick'. William was admitted to the 41st Stationary Hospital, France. Based in the Somme region in the Pont-Remy area, they were struggling to cope with the number of patients, especially as the pandemic was also striking down staff. An entry in the Unit War Diary of 13 October 19918 read: -

,...This leaves only 14 sisters to run the hospital—597 patients—It is not nearly enough. The work of the Hospital is now very heavy.

By 16 October an entry read they were only equipped for 400 beds, and now generally had 600-800 patients and often 1,000 patients.

On 4 November 1918 the hospital's entry read:

Routine work—Influenza Routine work —- Influenza and Br[oncho] Pneumonia still raging.
9 & 10 deaths often in a day.[10]

Two days after this entry, Williiam Colbeck was one of those who died as a result of pneumonia.

On November 1918 there were number of tributes in the Batley News including the following:

COLBECK. — In loving memory of Sapper Williiam Colbeck, Royal Engineers, who died from pneumonia in the 41st Stationary Hospital, France November 6th 1918.

No one knows how much I miss him,

None but aching hearts can tell;

Forget him, no, I never will,

I loved him here; I love him still.

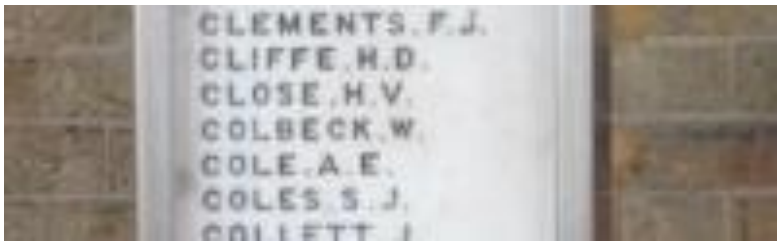
Ever in my thoughts,

From his loving fiancée, Elsie

William was awarded the Victory and British War Medals.

He is remembered on the St. Mary's War Memorial, Batley War Memorial and on the re-designed Memorial at Kings Cross Station, which was unveiled in

October 2013. The Memorial was originally erected in 1920 by the Great Northern Railway in memory of employees who fell in World War One.





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