Herbert George Pearsall M.C. M.A. LL.B.



Mr. H. G. PEARSALL.



Herbert George was born in Smethwick, Birmingham on 17 July 1888, the son of George and Mary Ellen Pearsall nee Hughes. His brother Charles Frederick was born in 1892 and his sister Lucy Ellen in 1894. His father was a Clerk of Works to the local School Board. In 1901 the family lived at 237, Bearwood Road, West Bromwich George Pearsall had originally been a printer machine minder but he had retired before he was 37 years old. Herbert was a pupil at King Edward's Five Ways School, Birmingham and went to the Smethwick Pupil Teacher's Centre from 1904-06 and was awarded a Toynbee Hall scholarship to Emmanuel College, Cambridge in 1907 to study mathematics. In 1911 he graduated with a B.A. in mathematics and a LL. B. He would probably have been one of the earliest lower middle-class students at Cambridge.

On 1 August 1912 he was appointed mathematics teacher at Batley Grammar School and was acknowledged as a thorough and caring teacher with a keen interest in sport. He lived at 43, Timothy Lane, Batley with his mother but when his father died in 1913, he moved to Transvaal Terrace, just below the school.

Herbert was an Assistant Scout Leader at the 5th Batley Scout Group (Batley Grammar School).

He enlisted at Dewsbury on 6 April 1915 and went into the "Motor Machine Gun Service" which was part of the Royal Artillery. He was 5'7" tall and weighed 124lbs. Herbert was quickly made a sergeant and applied for a commission whilst serving at Bisley on 8 January 1916. He was accepted at Number 5 Officer Cadet Battalion and was ordered to join his unit on 14 March 1916. His commission was granted on 26 April 1916. His references were from a Fellow at Emmanuel College at Cambridge and the Deputy Mayor of Smethwick who said he had known him for 20 years.

In October 1916 he joined the newly formed tank regiment as a Temporary 2nd Lieutenant. He was awarded the Military Cross for "*conspicuous gallantry in action on September 15 1916"*

The war diary for 4th Battalion records: -

"When this tank reached Flers and failed to find any Germans the officer reported to a New Zealand officer who asked that "tank" might protect his flank. Lt Pearsall took up this position and remained there until 7.45 pm. "Tank" was then asked to go forward to meet expected counter attack and remained forward until 6am the next day (16 September). "Tank" advanced with infantry at 9 am and carried on until hit by HE shell which burst under belly of the car, blowing in the gear box. Lt. Pearsall remained in tank for some while using his Vickers guns on enemy and also took one Vickers gun into the trenches when he had to abandon the tank."

The citation in the London Gazette for 14 September 1916:

"Temporary 2nd Lt. Herbert Pearsall MGC. He fought his Tank with great gallantry, protecting the flank of the infantry and repulsing a counter-attack. Later, when his Tank was disabled, he fired a machine gun from the trenches, displaying great coolness and initiative."

On 25 September 1916 his unit was based at Guedecourt , France and the details were:-

"**On this date, Lt Storey with three other tanks were sent to Guedecourt on a "mopping up"** ***operation which was perhaps the most successful minor operation. Lt. Storey reached his objective which was a strongly held trench on a ridge and did a wonderful execution with his machine guns. Further, by holding up the enemy he was instrumental in capturing 300 prisoners. The following officers have since been awarded the Military Cross."***

Herbert was promoted to Temporary Captain on 12 April 1917 and Acting Captain on 5 June 1917. He was second in command of his company in actions in November 1917 at Fesquieres, when his company commander was captured and at Bourlon Wood, during the Battle of Cambrai. He was promoted to acting major in December 1917 and given command of a Company in January 1918. Herbert was promoted twice in the field as a 'brevet major' once in January 1918 and again in June 1918.

After the Armistice Herbert served as an educational officer before embarking from Le Havre for England on January 20 1919. He was awarded his M.A. in January 1919.

He returned to live at 4, Transvaal Terrace and began his career again, teaching at Batley Grammar School. Sadly, Herbert died from Spanish influenza or from pneumonia aged 30 years on 19 March 1919.

Mr. Frazer, the Headmaster at the time of his joining the school noted that:

" Since he left in 1915, I have heard from him regularly and seen him several times. I do not believe that he was never so happy as when he was sergeant in the Motor Machine Gun Corps. The open life at Bisley and the comradeship of the army both appealed to him. He wrote in high spirits and enjoyed every moment. Later, when he got his commission in the tanks and went to France his letters were just as cheery, but were far fuller of the men under him than himself. I remember, just after he won the M.C. for conspicuous gallantry for handling his tank but that incident was not mentioned, nor could he be persuaded to speak about it. With his proved capacity for leadership and command he was certain of rapid promotion in a profession which he had entered from choice and for which he was admirably suited. I speak to his colleagues, his pupils, his friends. This was a happy warrior –a gallant and Christian gentleman, a servant of God."

His brother wrote to the War Office: -

"I regret to inform you that my brother Captain Herbert George Pearsall, late 1st Battalion Tank Corps, died of pneumonia on 19th inst. at Batley. Yorks."

A Colonel in the records department of the War Office gave a callous reply: -

"We understand Captain Pearsall was demobilized on January 18th last and therefore not concerned."

They were not interested although his efforts during the war would have had some effect on his health.

Thanks to Philip Wheeler.

In his book 'Batley Lads' Philip Wheeler states that Herbert Pearsall is on neither the Batley Grammar School Roll of Honour or the Batley War Memorial. His constitution and health were probably badly damaged by his action in the tanks and at the Front. He suggests there is a very strong case for his inclusion as there is a precedent of another teacher R.S. Hawkridge and at least two soldiers who are on the Batley Grammar School Roll of Honour who had never seen active service, like Pearsall had. He is buried at Smethwick cemetery near to where his family came from.

