

WILLIAM JAMES BARBER
1st Battalion, Suffolk Regiment
Serial Number 5824391

William was born 20 December 1905 in Syleham but by the time the 1911 census was completed the family had moved the short distance to Chickering where his father, James, worked as a labourer on the Saunders family farm at Chickering Hall. The Barber's were a local family, James being born in Weybread, Mildred, his wife, at Wingfield as were William's siblings, George and Ellen. By the 1921 the family were still living at Chickering and William was also employed by the Saunders family as a cowman. There had also been additions to the family, two more daughters, Rose and Ellen and two more sons John and George.

In 1935 at the age of 30, William married Bessie Potter. Like the Barbers the Potters were a family of agricultural workers. Bessie was born on the 14 October 1910 in Wickham Skeith where her father, William Potter, worked as a Horseman at Mill Farm. Ten years later the family had moved the short distance to White Farm, Stoke Ash where William, still a Horseman, was recorded working for the Aldous family.

On the 14 September 1938 William and Bessie had a son, Raymond James, and little more than a year after his birth William would be mobilised and Bessie and Raymond living with her parents and Raymond and numerous siblings who had moved to Red House Farm, South Green, Hoxne.

We do not know when William joined the Territorial Army but as a reservist in the Suffolk Regiment he was called up on the 1 September 1939. It is probable that his first destination was the Suffolk Regiments Depot at Gibraltar Barracks, Bury St Edmunds and a week later he was part of a draft joining the 1st Battalion based at Axminster, Devon. The 1st Battalion, having returned from a tour of duty in Malta in July 1939, now formed part of the 8th Infantry Brigade in the 3rd Division (The Iron Division) commanded by Major-General Bernard Montgomery. Montgomery implemented a regime of strenuous training and realistic exercises during September to bring the Division onto a war footing.

In the first week of October 1939 the Battalion embarked on the S.S. Bruges at Southampton and disembarked at Cherbourg. The Battalions transport echelon embarked at Plymouth and landed at Brest. Once ashore the Battalion was transported to the Second Army Corps base near St Ouen about 120 miles south-west of Paris. With the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) allocated to take over the defence of north eastern France the BEF was quickly moved on to take up its positions. On October 12th the Battalion was transported to the area in the Hauts-de-France around the industrial town of Lille with the Battalion Headquarters based in Perrone, a town that would have been well known to any soldier serving in the BEF during the First World War.

Taking up positions on the French frontier near the River Saar close to Lille the Battalion continued training. Many reservists had never seen standard infantry weapons such the Bren light machine gun or Boys anti tank rifle. In the coming weeks the Battalion was visited by numerous dignitaries including the King. The winter of

1939/1940 was a very hard one with intense cold and much snow and little action other than digging.

In January 1940 the 8th Brigade took over French positions behind the evacuated village of Halstroff near the German and Luxembourg border. These positions were outpost forward of the main Maginot Line Fortifications in this sector and were considered quite inadequate but were an introduction to the reality of war with some artillery shelling and patrolling towards the German border.

By the end of February the Battalion found itself back in the Bouvines area where the main activity became the construction of a new defensive line, essentially a northern extension of the Maginot Line to cover the Franco/ Belgium border as Belgium together with Holland had declared their neutrality. The men of the BEF put a great deal of effort into building these defensive field works, which were named the The Gort Line after the BEF commander. A member of the Battalion recorded his feelings:

“by this time all the troops should be able to go back into “civi street” as qualified navvies owing to the fact that we have already dug up half of France”

Despite all the efforts of the men of the BEF the “Gort Line” line was only used for the briefest of time and never for its main purpose, the defence of Frances northern border.

The "phoney war" ended abruptly in the early hours of the 10 May 1940 when the German Army Group B, studiously ignoring Belgium and Holland's neutrality, tore into the Low Countries. By 6 am the Governments of Belgium and Holland had contacted the Allies requesting military assistance. Whilst there had been no collaboration with Belgium and Holland the Allies were prepared for this eventuality and put into operation Plans “Dyle” and “Breda”. Within an hour of the request the Allies were advancing into Belgium and heading for Holland with the intention of offering a continuous front hinged on Sedan and the Maginot Line to the south, essentially the Allies intended to swing east to stop Army Group B's advance. The Allied line consisted of the French Seventh Army on the coast, next to them the Belgian Army then the BEF and the French First and Ninth Armies to the South. Speed was of the essence but in the event this did not matter.

To the south German Army Group A, ignoring the Maginot Line, advanced through the Ardennes reaching the River Meuse on the 12 May. By the 14 May German Engineers had constructed bridges across Meuse and the bridgeheads began to expand. Within 48 hours the French had been routed and a gap forty miles wide had been created in the French defences through which the Panzer Divisions now poured. The Allied counterattacks were uncoordinated and unsuccessful and on the 19 May the Germans reached the French coast at Abbeyville effectively cutting off the Allied Armies in the North from those to the South.

The Germans success on the Meuse totally unravelled the Allied plans to confront Army Group B in Belgium or Holland. On the 10 May the Suffolks had advanced into Belgium with the rest of the BEF passing through Brussels to take up positions during the night of the 13/14 May near the town of Louvain. The sounds of battle could be

clearly heard to the front but no sooner had the Battalion dug in then news of the German success in the Ardennes reached the BEF and the 8th Brigade was ordered to withdraw behind Brussels.

By the 18 May the Battalion reached Leuwe Brusse on the River Dendre with the Germans following closely. Shelling and snipers encouraged William and his comrades to keep their heads down and not to make unnecessary movement. The positions on the Dendre were only held until the morning of the 19th, when the withdrawal continued to the River Scheldt which was reached in the early evening of the 20th near the town of Pecq.

Again, the Germans response was rapid keeping the BEF off balance and taking any opportunity to hinder the BEF's withdrawal. Occupying the eastern bank of the River they quickly brought Pecq under artillery fire which caused extensive damage to the town. As the Suffolks prepared defences their Commanding Officer, Lieutenant Colonel E. G. Fraser, was wounded twice by a sniper when coming back from the front line positions. He was evacuated to the rear but subsequently died at sea on the 23 May whilst en route to England.

Although the Suffolks defensive positions were situated on an 80 foot escarpment above the Scheldt the ground on the eastern bank gave the German good cover which enabled them to place snipers and machine guns to harass the defenders. With no artillery support the Suffolks sustained casualties although the only member of the Battalion to be buried at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (C.W.G.C.) cemetery was another officer, Captain John Walter Trelawny. The Suffolks held their positions above the Scheldt from the 20 to the 23 May when the Battalion successfully withdrew to Wattlelos on the Franco/Belgium border where they occupied defensive positions prepared by the French in 1937.

Once they the Suffolks had established themselves in the fairly rudimentary defences the entire 8th Brigade was ordered to mount an attack to extend the front line to a railway embankment a mile or so in front of their current positions. With "D" Company leading and "A" Company in support the Suffolks took the right flank, the 4th Battalion Royal Berkshire Regiment in the centre and the 2nd Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment on the left flank the attack went ahead without any artillery support as the BEF had been placed on half rations on the 23rd May and this meant that artillery shells were being conserved. Both the Suffolks and the Royal Berkshires met considerable opposition from well placed machine guns and mortars and the attack ground to a halt. The Yorks managed to get to the railway embankment but could not exploit this success. Pinned down for most of the day the survivors of the attack could only withdraw when night fell. The Suffolks casualties were heavy, three officers and four other ranks are buried at the C.W.G.C. cemetery at Cretinier, Wattlelos.

On the 26 May the 8th Brigade were told to prepare to withdraw to the coast where preparations were being made to evacuate the BEF back to the United Kingdom. The withdrawal was not easy, the landscape was one of dykes, ditches and water courses, the roads were congested and German artillery shelling continuous. With possible salvation so near the Suffolks lost another officer, 2nd Lieutenant Frank Arthur Victor Roberts and another two hundred other ranks killed or wounded. Roberts and nine

other ranks are buried in Zuidchoote Churchyard along with thirty five men from the 4th Battalion Royal Berkshires.

William managed get through the confusion but died, probably as a result of artillery fire, as the Battalion withdrew to Furnes and the evacuation beaches. William is buried in Noordschote Churchyard which is 5 km from Zuidschote. There are three more Suffolks buried in the Churchyard together with seven members of the East Yorkshire Regiment.

Bessie and Raymond moved into No 10 Nuttery Vale, Hoxne and in July 1965 Raymond married Isobel Brown whilst in 1966 Bessie also remarried.