

## LANCE CORPORAL WILLIAM HENRY HEWITT VC (1894-1900)

William Hewitt was born at Westhill Elm Lane in Copdock, near Ipswich, Suffolk on the 19th June 1884 and was educated at Framlingham College. He decided to emigrate to South Africa on 25 March 1905, joining the South Africa Constabulary for one year and then transferring to the Natal Police in which he served for three years (1906-09). In 1906/7 he was awarded the Natal Rebellion Medal. In 1909 he left the Natal Police to become a farmer.



After the outbreak of the First World War, Hewitt, although a good horseman, enlisted into the 2nd South Africa Light Infantry on 24th December 1915. His regiment arrived in France for active service in July 1916 and was involved in the Battle of the Somme, which lasted from July to September 1916. He was wounded in Delville Wood, which was the most costly action the South African Brigade fought on the Western

Front. On 14<sup>th</sup> July 3,153 men went into the wood and on 20th July only 778 emerged unscathed.

From May 1917 he was involved in the third battle of Ypres – Passchendaele, which lasted until November 1917. On 20 September 1917, the South African Brigade's task was far from easy. Their troops had to advance 1.5km from Frezenberg and reach a line beyond Bremen Redoubt. At the end of August and early September, this terrain had already been captured a number of times by British battalions, but had to be conceded each time after counter-attacks.

At 05.40 on 20 September, the attack was launched. After a preliminary artillery barrage, the 4rd and 3rd SAI advanced behind a smoke curtain and a creeping barrage. They successfully reached their objective, the Red Line, capturing Beck House, Borry Farm, Mitchell Farm and Vampir Farm. The troops displayed great courage by not just running behind the creeping barrage, but actually risking jinking through it, surprising the Germans who did not have the time to get out of their pillboxes to put their machine-guns on the roofs.

An hour later, the second stage of the attack began. On the right, the 1st SAI had to 'leapfrog' the 3rd SAI to reach the Green Line. The 2nd SAI had to 'leapfrog' the 4th SAI and advanced towards Bremen Redoubt. The 2nd SAI came under enfilading fire from Hill 37 and Tulip Cottages. In the meantime, the terrain became a quagmire, with men struggling waist deep in the mud. It was during this second stage in the battle that **L/Cpl William Henry Hewitt** captured a pillbox single-handedly. He threw a grenade into a doorway, but the Germans threw a stick-bomb that blew off Hewitt's gas-mask and knocked out four of his teeth. Furious because he was engaged to be married and now feared that his fiancée might no longer find him attractive, Hewitt reached the rear of the pillbox. He tried to lob a bomb through a loophole, but missed and had to dive for cover. With only one bomb remaining, Hewitt crept right up to the loophole and, from beneath it, pushed the grenade through, receiving a shot in the hand.

The South African Brigade reached all its objectives, but at a considerable cost. On most of the headstones of the South African graves, there is only one date, 20 September 1917.

He was awarded his VC near Ypres, Belgium on 20 September 1917 and his citation records :

*For most conspicuous bravery during operations. Lance Corporal Hewitt attacked a pill-box with his section and tried to rush the doorway. The enemy garrison, however, proved very stubborn, and in the attempt this non-commissioned officer received a severe wound. Nevertheless, he proceeded to the loophole of the pill-box where, in his attempts to put a bomb into it, he was again wounded in the arm. Undeterred, however, he eventually managed to get a bomb inside, which caused the occupants to dislodge, and they were successfully and speedily dealt with by the remainder of section.*



On 16 January 1918 he was invested with Victoria Cross by King George V at Buckingham Palace.

After the war he returned to S Africa with rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt and up until 1925 farmed in Natal, before moving to farm in Kenya until 1939.

During WW2 he was appointed a Major in Kenya, becoming Assistant Provost Marshal of Mombassa

In 1950 he retired to Greenway Cottage, Greenway Lane, Charlton Kings near Cheltenham.

He died on the 7th December 1966 in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, was cremated on the 10th December and his ashes scattered at sea off Hermanus Cliffs, forty miles East of Cape Town, South Africa on 2 January 1974.

In 1967 this VC was donated to Framlingham College by his widow, Mrs Lily Hewitt and on 23 April 2004 his VC and that of Flowerdew were presented on permanent loan to the Imperial War Museum, escorted by the College CCF Colour Party. His daughter Mrs Colvin, was present. Also see <http://www.oldframlinghamian.com/article.php?story=2004052911320598> for further information on his VC being presented to the Imperial War Museum.

This photo was taken of the medal display in the College Chapel



This later photograph of Hewitt is from the SOF archives.

