

LT ARTHUR EDWIN STEARN MC (K1905-07)

He was born on 2 January 1892 and was a farmer.

During WW1 he served in the Suffolk Yeomanry (1914-1917) and 5th Battalion North Staffs Territorials (1917-1918), finally followed by the Royal Air Force in 1918.

He was awarded the Military Cross on 26 July 1918 "For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. When sent up to the front line to get information he ran into large parties of the enemy, owing to the heavy mist, which prevailed and came under close fire. Returning to Battalion Headquarters with the information he gained, he next collected men of various units and held a communication trench protecting the right flank of the Division."

The following account has been written by his grandson, based on research, relatives memories, letters written at the time, regimental records and history books :-



Arthur joined up in the first week of the war along with his brother Frank. Brother Horace was a huge man and no uniform would fit him, so he avoided the war. Brother Jack joined up at the end of the first week after having been persuaded by his brothers. He joined the medical corps and spent the duration of the war at a hospital in Alexandria. Arthur obtained a horse and joined the Suffolk Yeomanry. He was never to use his horse abroad or his cavalry skills. Frank appeared to spend the duration of the war in France and avoided any injury despite being in the trenches for 4 years. The Suffolk Yeomanry were given orders to assemble on the cricket ground at Ipswich by August 7th. On the 12th they left Ipswich and proceeded to their war station at Woodbridge, where the headquarters of the brigade were already established in the Bull Hotel. The early days of the war were taken up with preliminary troop training, completing requirements as regards horses, and enlisting recruits, who kept flocking in until in a short time the regiment was 250 over establishment. The regiment then settled down to intensive training, being fortunate in having an ideal drill ground for cavalry at Martlesham Heath. Later on in the war, when the battalion was in the trenches, one Suffolk boy was heard to call out to his neighbour, 'Dew you keep yar hid down Bor, dew you'll niver see Martlesham Lion agin!' In July 1915 the brigade were moved nearer to the coast at Leiston, where the men remained under canvas and the horses picketed in lines. All yeomanry regiments were now being asked to volunteer for service overseas as dismounted troops and as a result of the appeal the Suffolk Yeomanry were soon instructed to hold themselves in readiness for active service. Orders to proceed to Galipoli arrived at the beginning of September and then came the sad disappointment of parting with their horses for the duration of the war. Early in the morning of September 23rd the regiment entrained for Liverpool where they embarked in the White Star liner Olympic. Arthur sent a letter card from Liverpool on this day, "Just going on Olympic. The total number of troops on board ship was 8000, the Suffolks making up 500 of these. Amongst the Suffolk men were 12 MPs and 24 Masters of Hounds, they were a fairly wealthy group of soldiers! After remaining at anchor in the Mersey for a day, the Olympic sailed on September 25th, the voyage being uneventful as far as the Mediterranean. Where a French ship with 35 survivors of a submarine attack was picked up. The Olympic fired on the Sub but it dived and escaped. The liner changed course, as it was an easy target. After a record voyage of under 8 days the Olympic arrived at Mudros, apparently to the surprise of the authorities who seemed uncertain as to the disposal of the troops. On 3rd October Arthur writes, "Arrived safely, it is not where Jack is. We took a week from port to port, we are still on board. (He mentions zig-zagging to avoid a 'terror of the deep'). He doesn't know how many more letters he will be able to send as all his envelopes are stuck together. On the 17th October he writes; have arrived and done 2 days in the trenches- my cold is better and I feel fairly fit. The first few days on Turkish soil were spent in constructing dug-outs in New Bedford Road gully, the rest camp of the regiment when not in line. All units, short of both officers and men, eagerly welcomed the newly arrived regiments, and soon the Suffolk Yeomanry were allotted a considerable sector of the line. During the daytime things were generally quiet except for the sniping and shelling, the latter occurring with almost time-table regularity, so that the regiment soon came to know when to expect such displays of activity. During the night, rifle fire was incessant. Arthur writes in an undated letter from this time, "By day it is only possible to look through a periscope. There is always firing going on but we soon got used to it. I imagined it would take me a long time to get used to it. When not in the trenches we live in little dug-outs on the side of the hills. That is what they are called, but they are not proper ones, only a little scraped away. Flies are the biggest nuisance here. I reckon there is more now round my little bit of trench than in all Suffolk. I have a rotten cold, which I think I caught on board. The grub is improving, bread, jam, tea, onions and bacon. But water is the worst job.

What little we do get, all has to be boiled and then not very tasty and not advisable to drink much of. So I always keep a thirst by me. I have had two washes and shaves in about a teacup full of water. I have seen Ray Stearn and Claude Nunn, they both look thin and worn but they do not look bad. I am sorry to say that we had our first casualty today; W. Tuttle got a stray bullet through his arm. I do not think it is very bad; it did not touch a bone. I think the Navy enjoy themselves, they do send some big-uns over. It soon became evident that the ranks of the regiment would be seriously depleted, if not by enemy action at any rate by sickness, dysentery causing the numbers to rapidly dwindle. During the great blizzard of November 27th-28th, the Suffolk Yeomanry moved to Norfolk Street and Hill 60, and were more fortunate than their comrades holding the flats. The peninsula was evacuated in December, secretly so as not to alert the Turks. Many and ingenious devices were used to cover up the tracks of the departing troops. Blankets were laid along the communication trenches to prevent the tramp of feet being heard by the enemy and after they had gone the sounds of war continued to rise from the empty trenches. Bombs would be thrown from a catapult, the rubber being released by a time fuse. Rifles were fired by means of water dripping from one tin to another attached to the trigger. On December 21st the Suffolk Yeomanry sailed on the Anchises for Alexandria. A lot of the men were ill and had to recuperate at the hospital in Alexandria before joining up with the regiment at Sidi Bishr. Arthur suffered from a bad bout of dysentery and was unrecognisable to his brother Jack when they met in the hospital. On 23rd December Arthur wrote from the ship, "By the time you get this it will be all old news to you about us quitting. Everything went well and it was a wonderful piece of work carried out. We are bound for the place where Jack is. I am keeping fit. (he must have been suffering badly from the dysentery at this time) On 17th January 1916 he wrote from Alexandria; I spent my usual Sunday evening with Jack and so of course we compared notes a little. I had him beaten; I had the latest letter from home. You must have had a quiet Xmas dinner. On 19th February he wrote from Sidi Bishr, "It seems such a long way off getting our horses again and they are training us to pad the hoof against any infantry battalion. Our Major gave us a lecture on Egypt the other day from 1000bc to 1916ad. For a time the regiment were buoyed up with the hope of becoming cavalry again but in March they moved to El Kubri, on the Suez Canal, where employed as infantry they had to help dig defences. The troops used to work from 4am until 8am, resting through the heat of the day. On resuming work at 4pm it was generally found that most of the sand had been blown back into the trenches dug that morning. On 13th April Arthur writes from El Kubri; Well Frank has quitted, I wish him the best. We move from here to Suez on Saturday. I have been playing hockey, as it is too windy for football. -Some of the hottest days I have ever known and the flies are bad. I have had another stripe given me (on the back of the letter he writes); We are the Suffolk Infantry well known to everyone we cannot shoot, we cannot ride whatever good are we But when we get to Berlin the Kaiser he will say Hock! Hock! My Gott! What a damm fine lot are the Suffolk Yeomanry \par (this song was sung to the tune of 'our churches one foundation' and virtually each battalion had their own version) On 5th May he writes from El Herdane; Camp is on the bank of the canal above Ismalia 20-30 miles from Port Said. If I roll about much at night I am in danger of rolling out of my tent and into the canal. Hard training and bombs are to be used a lot. I am to give lectures on trench tactics and so I am swotting up. On 27th May he writes, "We are 8-10 miles out from E.K, helping another lot with some work to be done. We have to get up at dawn every morning, which is 4 O'clock, and stand to. The tent has just blown down, so am still writing this in the open. My place is near the door, so I was not buried like some of the chaps in it, and they refuse to come out! In July the brigade moved by rail to Alexandria and then to Dabaa. In December orders were received converting the Suffolk Yeomanry into infantry and immediately intensive training began in earnest. Their title was changed to the 15th Battalion of the Suffolk Regiment. On 3rd September Arthur writes from Dabaa; I am back from a weeks leave in Alexandria, I saw Jack, took some photos and visited the Nouza Gardens. On 28th September from Hamman, "I have today sent off 2 little parcels to yourself and Father, anklets, earrings, a helmet flash, scarab charms, rather awful brooches, 3 bullets with the powder taken out. My finger is still bandaged. On 14th October from Hamman, "We put on a concert for the Anzac landings anniversary. I was a sort of stage manager and worked hard with the lights and curtains. On 23rd October from Hamman again, "I am once again free from bandages, touch wood, I cast my last one this morning. On 11th December from Alexandria, "I have once more made Alex my abode. I have clicked rather a good job for a time as a ration corporal. I have to see all the rations dished out and loaded up for Hamman and Ammia, our two posts on the line. On 29th December from Alexandria; We were done very well for Christmas, being in a detail camp- turkey, pudding, beer and smokes, also a few of us clubbed round and got some fruit, white paper (for a tablecloth) and Hush! A bottle of Port! There have been 2 large fires on oil ships in the docks close by. I do not look forward to the Bay of Biscay. I shall never make a sailor. In the new year of 1917, Arthur was made a second lieutenant. He trained as an officer at the officer cadet battalion in Oxford from 5th April to 31st July. On 1st August he had a leave pass to Haughley station from Oxford and obviously had home leave pending his commission. On 9th October he received orders to proceed to Calais in order to join his unit at the front. He joined the 5th North staffs as you were rarely promoted above the men you had already served with. Arthur either wrote no letters at this time or they have been lost. This most have been a very difficult time for him, as he would be joining a group of men who were already used to the terrible trench conditions in France. He must

have been based somewhere near the Somme as he spent a days leave in Amiens in February 1918. As a new officer he was 'tried out ' by being sent out with a night party. He saw some startled partridges running along, and being a farmer's boy he knew that partridges do not run about at night without good reason. He ordered his men back into defensive positions and sure enough they were able to surprise a party of Germans and capture them. This gave him a good standing among the men as having very good hearing. On 12th January he writes from a location in France with the BEF, "Will you let Frank know my Div, please, I am now not so very far off him. I am getting on quite nicely at my farm billet. So you see that is how I get my milk and carrots etc, also my servant is a hot stuff cook, so I carry on well. On the 21st March 1918 he was involved in the Kaisers offensive. Following a five hour bombardment by over 6000 guns, one million German soldiers attacked along a front of nearly 50 miles opposite the British 3rd and 5th armies. Goughs 5th army, between Amiens and St Quentin, gave way and when the offensive was finally halted, Ludendorff had penetrated 40 miles into the allied lines, taken over 1000 guns and inflicted more than 200,000 casualties. On the morning of 21st March the 6th North Staffs were holding a railway embankment near the village of Ecoust. At about 4.50 am there was heavy bombardment. The shell-gas alarm was sounded and the men took their stations. All telephone communications with the front line battalions were cut. At 9.30 am they saw people coming up from the south west and took them to be their own men. They were Germans, however, with sandbags on their heads and firing equipment so arranged as to fool the British. There was also a mist that morning. The Staffs opened fire and they retired. At 11am troops were seen moving on Ecoust and they looked British so an officer was sent to get in touch with them. The Staffs then came under heavy enemy fire and were attacked by 2 aeroplanes, they suffered very heavy casualties. By 4.30pm they were completely surrounded and the 12 men that remained were taken prisoner. The officer who was sent off was probably Arthur, because this fits in with his accounts of being lost in no-mans land and also because he had heavily underlined this sentence in the book of the history of the North Staffs. Arthur said that he dropped his officer's revolver and picked up a fallen man's rifle, because he was more accurate with this and because a rifle labelled you as an ordinary Tommy rather than an officer and therefore less of a target. A bullet hit the rifle and a piece of wood struck Arthur in the cheek inflicting what was to be his only physical wound of the war. He kept alive until the end of that days fighting and then at night under cover of darkness he attempted to make his way back to the British trenches. The trenches that he came to had been taken by Germans and he was disheartened to hear German voices. He had to spend 3 days trying to find his way back to the British trenches, hiding in craters in no mans land during the day and moving about at night. Eventually he made his way back but was treated with great suspicion by the soldiers he met. They knew that virtually all his division had been killed and they could scarcely believe that he had survived. There was nobody to vouch for him as all the men who knew him had either been killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or sent quickly back away from the front line so as not to damage morale. The rumour circulated that he must be a German spy and Arthur was really afraid that he would be shot there and then. He was put under guard. The man guarding him kept staring at him and Arthur was terrified to catch his eye. Eventually this man said ' Did you used to play tennis with the Misses Ellis at Ixworth, I was their gardener and I recognise you Mr. Stearn ' Once someone could vouch for you there was no more danger of being taken for a spy. At this time he was awarded the Military cross on 26th July: ' When sent up the front line to get information he ran into large parties of the enemy, owing to the heavy mist which prevailed, and came under close fire. Returning to Battalion Headquarters with the information gained, he next collected men of various Units and held a communication trench, protecting the right flank of the division.' He told Roger that many men did brave and courageous things every day but in order to be decorated for it your deed needed to have been observed by an officer of superior rank. Arthur later ran into some trouble when he was under suspicion of ordering his men to retreat without direct orders to do so. He had put his head to the floor of a trench and claimed that he could hear the Germans digging tunnels below. He was not punished for this but he was sent back from the front line to help with training some Americans and became rather exasperated with their table manners! He was then sent to join the Royal Air Force as an observer although he passed the medical to be a pilot it was noted on his form that he had just returned from France. Grannie says that this was the time that he suffered some kind of nervous breakdown. In January 1919 he writes from the RAF base at Manston near Ramsgate: I expect that will be about my last flight here. I have handed in my papers for my ticket, sent Father's RCV form to the Ministry of Labour, the other I handed in here.

On 4th July 1919 he received a letter from the Officer's Dispersal unit, which approved his release from Military Service from 8th July 1919. He was invited to Buckingham Palace on 29th May 1919 to receive his Military Cross from the King (weather permitting).

See the grandson's website at <http://www.keme.net/~claydon/ww1.htm>