

William Silas Woodhams - 17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers

In 1915 William followed his younger brother Eric and enlisted in the Army in support of the war effort.

Regiment 17th (SERVICE) BATTAL
WHYTELEAFE
SURREY
"THE SMALL-BOOK"
OF William Silas Woodhams
No. 1678

Every Entry in this Book (after the necessary particulars from the Attestation have been inserted) is to be made under the superintendence of the Officer Commanding the Squadron, Troop, Battery, or Company to which the man belongs.

LONDON:
PRINTED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF HIS MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
By WILLIAM BRENDON AND SON, LTD., PLYMOUTH.
1915.

SOLDIER'S NAME AND DESCRIPTION ON ATTESTATION.
(REGULAR FORCES.)
Name William Silas Woodhams
Enlisted at Whyteleafe, Surrey
in the County of Surrey
on the 20 February 1915
at the age of 21 years 16 months
for the 17th Bn Royal Fusiliers
Born in the Parish of Croydon
in or near the Town of Croydon
in the County of Surrey
Trade or calling Dividers Unit Post
Last permanent residence 15, Broad Street, Croydon
Height 5 feet 8 inches
Complexion Fair
Eyes Grey Hair Light Brown
Marks Mole under left eye
* Religion Non-Communist
† Signature of Soldier W S Woodhams

* This should be described under one of the following denominations, viz.—"Church of England," "Presbyterian," "Wesleyan," "Baptist," or "Congregational," or other Protestant denomination (name of denomination to be added), "Roman Catholic," or "Jew."
† Whenever a Soldier who cannot write makes his mark in acknowledgment of service received pay or allowances, etc., such mark is to be witnessed by the signature of a witness (other than the pay-sergeant).

THE SOLDIER'S NEXT-OF-KIN NOW LIVING.
Any change becoming known is to be duly noted, with the date of such change.
Note.—No entry on this page has any legal effect as a Will.

Nearest degree of relationship.	NAMES.	Latest known address to be given in full.
1st.	Wife.	
	Children.	
2nd.	Father.	<u>Frank Woodhams, 131 Handcroft Rd, Croydon</u>
	Mother.	
3rd.	Brothers and Sisters.	
	Nephews and nieces, if children of deceased brothers or sisters.	
4th.	Other relations.	

Signature of Soldier. W S Woodhams
Regimental number. 1678
Signature of Pay-sergeant. W S Woodhams
Date of Signature. 23. 6. 15.
Capt.

† If any other brothers are younger or older.

Unfortunately William's war service records appear to have been one of the ones which were destroyed in a fire in the Second World War. So, unlike his brothers Eric and Clement, we only have what William kept by way of records to find out what he did and where he went in the war. As far as I know he rarely, if ever, spoke about his experience. Once or twice I went to stay with him in Croydon during the school holidays and only once did I hear him say anything about the war. That was just, "...like bayoneting stinking rats in the trenches." I didn't think to ask him more about it, a comment like that is hardly encouragement to start a conversation!

From "The Small Book" we know that he joined the same battalion and regiment as his brother Eric, the 17th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers at Whyteleafe in Surrey. Ordinarily I wouldn't have thought of my grandfather as a superstitious person but it's interesting to note that 'The Small Book' contains very desiccated pieces of heather and shamrock, both considered to be good luck charms.

We can get an overview of his time as a soldier in the war from the record which defined William's eligibility for the British War and Victory Medals. I'll refer to this throughout as his Medal Roll for simplicity. From this we can see that he was in active service, in other words he was involved with the fighting, three times and each time with a different battalion.

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(To be rendered in duplicate.)

ROYAL FUSILIERS. REGIMENT OR CORPS.

SHEET. 2308.
"B" ROLL.

256 & 301 of 1919.

ROLL OF INDIVIDUALS entitled to the Victory Medal and/or British War Medal granted under Army Orders

Regt. No.	Rank	NAME	In sequence Units and Corps previously served with by each individual and Regt. Nos. therein; the highest rank, whether substantive, acting or temporary, recorded as having been held for any period in a theatre of War, unless reversed for misconduct, being shown against the name of the regiment or Corps which it is to be inscribed on the medal.	Theatres of war in which served	Clasps awarded (to be left blank)	Record of disposal of decorations			REMARKS
						(a) Presented	(b) Despatched by Post	(c) Taken into Stock	
GS/71748	CSM	MERCER Walter	7.R.Fus.WO/CE.GS/71748	1(a) 2-1-18	8-4-18				D/W 8-4-18
		Charles							
GS/71749	Pte	WOODHAMS William	17.R.Fus.Pte E/1648	1(a) 18-11-15	9-3-16				
		Silas	7. " GS/71749	1(a) 2-1-18	14-1-18				
			24. " "	1(a) 18-8-16	1-4-19				
GS/71751	Pte	MELTON John Byford	17.R.Fus.Pte E/1002	1(a) 18-11-15	6-5-16				
			7.R.Fus. GS/71751	1(a) 2-1-18	27-1-18				
GS/71755	Cpl	MARTINA Ernest	22.R.Fus.Pte K/274	1(a) 19-11-15	4-3-16				
			23. " GS/71755	1(a) 2-1-18	18-11-18				
GS/71756	Cpl	MORE Albert Edward	7.R.Fus.Cpl GS/71756	1(a) 2-1-18	6-3-18				
GS/71760	Pte	LOBB Claude Albert	7.R.Fus.Pte GS/71760	1(a) 2-1-18	25-1-18				Died. 17-8-19
GS/71761	Pte	LOVNS William Oscar	7.R.Fus.Pte GS/71761	1(a) 2-1-18	24-3-18				

I certify that according to the Official Records the individuals named in this ROLL are entitled to the Medal or Medals as detailed above.

Place 19b, Tavistock Sq. W.C.1.

Date 12 APR 1923

Signature and rank of Officer certifying.

Lieut. for Colonel.
i/o Infantry Records London.

William Silas Woodhams Active War Service Record

So there are 6 distinct phases to his army service:

1. From when he enlisted on 25th February until 15th November 1915 he was involved in basic training at various camps in England
2. From 16th November 1915 to 8th March 1916 he was serving on the Western Front in Northern France, mainly around the B  thune area.
3. From 9th March 1916 to 1st January 1918 he was back in the UK, mainly in Scotland, attached to the Training Reserve either being trained or training new recruits.
4. For a very short period from 2nd to 14th January 1918 he was back on the Western Front in France attached to the 7th Battalion Royal Fusiliers. This time he was in the area to the west of Cambrai.
5. On 10th January 1918 he was wounded by shrapnel and after being treated locally he returned to England on 14th January and was treated at the Abbey Manor Hospital in Evesham.
6. On 16th June 1918 he returned to France attached to the 24th Battalion Royal Fusiliers. Once again in the Cambrai area but this time he was involved in the final advance which led to the Germans surrender. The 24th was one of the battalions designated as part of the occupying army. So at the end of the war William marched across Belgium and into Germany, spending several months billeted at Dormagen, on the Rhine between Dusseldorf and Cologne.

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William Silas Woodhams
17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers 1915

Initially William was based at a camp near Whyteleafe which had been erected on land commandeered from Warlingham Court Farm. The following extract from the website 'Surrey in the Great War' gives a flavour of the impact of the camp on the local population.

"Families would travel down from London by rail, alighting at Upper Warlingham station, and trek up The Dobbin to enjoy a day out in the Surrey countryside and sample the refreshments and fairground rides at Warlingham Court Farm. It wasn't so enjoyable for Mr Waterson (the school's headmaster): shortly before the start of the war, on 10th July 1914 he wrote in his log book "London children visiting Court Farm a real nuisance, half bushel of large stones thrown onto the playground. Wrote to Court Farm."

Just a couple of months later Warlingham Court Farm was commandeered as an army camp and training ground. In September 1914 the 17th Empire Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers arrived at the farm. Mr Waterson now had more than stones on his playground to worry about. The log book entry for 16th October 1914 states "Children are very restless and disinclined to pay attention to work – to concentrate, they are obsessed by war excitement. 1200 Empire Fusiliers are quartered at Court Farm and who throng the village at night have absorbed their attention for some weeks past." On October 23rd he wrote "Children restless – novelty of military in their midst and many calls for little jobs of work". Then on the 26th October he wrote "Fusiliers – a good many passing, they are very happy in their marching and tactics but rather distracting to 1st Class."

On 25th June 1915 the Royal Fusiliers left Court Farm to move on to Clipstone training camp in Nottinghamshire. The headmaster wrote "Royal Fusiliers left Court Farm, assembly in the playground, flags to cheer two train loads as they passed. The soldiers responded. Excellent conduct."

As this article records the battalion moved to Clipstone Camp on 25th June 1915. This is confirmed by the well-worn, crumpled photo from William's possessions. I believe the person at bottom left is him. I'm sure it's not coincidence that a soldier looking very much like him appears in several other photos in his possessions. This is based not just on the fact that it looks like him but in life my memory of him, when he was going out anywhere, was that he was always smartly dressed, boots shone so that you could see your face in them and wearing a bowler hat. In this and the other photos he is wearing his cap with the peak down over his eyes.

William Silas Woodhams - 17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers



17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers, Clipstone Camp, Nottinghamshire

Another useful website is the Wartime Memories Project which gives an overview of the battalion's movements.

17th (Empire) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers

17th (Empire) Battalion, Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment) was raised in London on the 31st of August 1914 by the British Empire Committee. On the 26th of June 1915 they joined 99th Brigade, 33rd Division at Clipstone camp near Mansfield in Nottinghamshire in July 1915. In August they moved to Salisbury Plain for final training and firing practice. In November they received orders to prepare to proceed to France and the Divisional Artillery and Train were replaced by the units raised for the 54th (East Anglian) Division. By the 21st of November the 33rd Division had concentrated near Morbecque. On the 25th of November 1915 The Battalion transferred to 2nd Division as part of an exchange to strengthen the inexperienced 33rd Division. On the 13th of December 1915 the Battalion transferred to 5th Brigade, still in 2nd Division. In 1916 they fought in the Battles of the Somme and the Operations on the Ancre. In 1917 they were in action during The German retreat to the Hindenburg Line, the Battles of Arras and The Battle of Cambrai. In 1918 they transferred on the 6th of February to 6th Brigade in same Division and fought on the Somme, in the Battles of the Hindenburg Line and The Battle of the Selle. 2nd Division was selected to advance into Germany and formed part of the Occupation Force after the Armistice.

Extract from <https://www.wartimememoriesproject.com/greatwar/allied/battalion.php?pid=6904>

This indicates that they moved from Clipstone to Salisbury Plain in August to continue their training. Once they had completed their training the battalion started a war diary which gives a daily record of where they were and what they were doing. This is available to download from the National Archives at <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/browse/r/h/C7354404>.

The war diary tells us that they were based at Tidworth Camp on Salisbury Plain and on 16th November 1915 the main body of the battalion caught two special trains to take them to Folkestone where they boarded a boat which took them across the channel to Boulogne.

William Silas Woodhams - 17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers

Following is a transcript of the first entries in the war diary:

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events and Information
Tidworth, HANTS	15/11	4:15	Advance party 4 Officers 122 other ranks with all transport entrained for SOUTHAMPTON in order to proceed to HAVRE
TIDWORTH HANTS	16/11	7:15	Right half Battalion entrained for FOLKESTONE – Left half battalion entrained at 7:28 – Total battalion 27 officers 872 other ranks – Battalion complete less advance party & CSM Murphy “D” Coy left behind ill in hospital – Arrived FOLKESTONE 12:30 – embarked leaving 12:30 pm arrived BOULOGNE about 3 pm – marched to OSTROHOVE rest camp – went into canvas camp
BOULOGNE	17/11		At OSTROHOVE rest camp
ditto	18/11	12:00	Entrained at PONT des BRIQUES station – picking up transport at this point – arrived STEENBECQUE station 7:30pm – marched into billets at Gd HASARD (MORBECQUE NORD) strength 31 officers 994 other ranks; also 28 Divisional Band attached

From Boulogne the battalion travelled by train and foot towards the front line, reaching the Béthune area towards the end of November. The diary records that they received instruction in and practical experience of trench warfare from experienced battalions in this period. For some reason the diary for December is missing but in January the battalion seems to have been surplus to requirements as it just records them as being in billets in the area north of Béthune. The following transcript from the war diary demonstrates a typical day at the start of this period.

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events and Information
ANNEZIN, Nr BETHUNE	26/11		In billets at ANNEZIN – Major General MURRAY VC GOC 2 nd Division visited officers
ditto	27/11		In billets at ANNEZIN
ditto	28/11		Battalion marched to LE PREOL and was attached to the 5 th Brigade for instruction on trench warfare etc. – 4 officers and 8 NCOs each from A & B Companies went upon 24 hour tour of duty in trenches (attached 2 nd HLI* & 1 st Queen’s regiments) – 2 nd Division bombardment ordered from 10 am to 3:30 pm to be continued by RFA** during night – Battalion in billets at LE PREOL under instruction of officers & NCOs detailed from 2 nd HLI.
LE PREOL	29/11		Battalion in billets – Parties from A & B reported back – no casualties – Similar parties from C & D companies together with Lieut WOOTTON (transport officer) half the machine gunners & half the signallers proceeded on a tour in the trenches – Bombardment ordered by 2 nd Division from 10 am – 3:30 pm

* Highland Light Infantry ** Royal Field Artillery

Then, on 28th January 1916, the battalion is ordered to occupy a section of the Village Line which was a defensive line about 3 to 4,000 metres behind the front line consisting of important works of fortification built around the ruins of ancient villages, with shelters for heavy machine guns and mortars. The battalion were in the section between Festubert and L’Epinette. Over the next few weeks they would provide working parties to work on the front line. In general though this section of the front seems to have been relatively quiet with the occasional “slight shelling by the enemy”, long range sniper fire and machine gun fire. One entry in the diary for 8th February says “*Our trench mortar battery fired a large number of bombs to which the enemy replied with whizzbangs. No casualties.*” (Whizzbangs were soldier’s slang for small calibre artillery, apparently the name is based on the whizzing noise they made when approaching, followed of course by a bang.)

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Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events and Information
ISLANDS FESTUBERT	Feb 1st		Dispositions: 2 Coys in front line and 1 Coy in support. Germany's snipers fairly active. 2 men on No 3 ISLAND wounded by long range rifle fire. One of our Lewis Guns claimed to have hit a German who exposed himself to fire at an airoplane. 2 patrols sent out last night. Enemy heard pumping out trenches.
do	2nd		Enemy MGs fairly active during night. A few whizzbangs fell between ISLAND LINE and OLD BRITISH LINE. Patrols from right and left report enemy's wire strong except opposite No 14 ISLAND. Hostile pumping heard.
do	3rd		Enemy quiet except for occasional sniping. Battalion was relieved by the Ox and Bucks LI as soon as it was dark, and proceeded to occupy the VILLAGE LINE. Weather fine throughout.
VILLAGE LINE FESTUBERT	4th		Battalion bathed at LE TOURET. Working party of 250 men supplied to Res. STAND TO abolished while in VILLAGE LINE except in case of alarm.

During the remainder of February the battalion moved further north and by the beginning of March they were back in the front line in the Calonne sector. Once again the front was relatively quiet with the main threat coming from the Germans use of rifle grenades which caused some casualties.

From his Medal Roll we can see that William left France on 9th March 1916 and we know that his brother Eric, who was also with the 17th battalion remained in France in this period and was wounded at Delville Wood on 26th July 1916. He was one of the 118 casualties mentioned in this extract from "Royal Fusiliers in the Great War", a very detailed and useful reference which can be found at <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=6TzNDWAAQBAJ&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA302>. I don't suppose he was the wounded soldier mentioned here but he probably had the same sentiment.

The 2nd Division had now been brought to the Somme area, and the first of its four Fusilier battalions to enter the battle zone was the 17th. It was also their first entrance into any battle zone when they took over the support line at Longueval Alley on July 25th. We have already seen that actual attack was not necessary for the suffering of casualties, and Lieutenant Richmond was the first to succumb. There was a heavy bombardment with tear shells, and he was gassed on the first day in the trenches. On the following day there was little intermission in the German shelling, and with every precaution 15 further casualties were suffered. On the 27th A and B Companies went to Delville Wood in the afternoon, and on this occasion there were 118 casualties.

But this was the day on which Delville Wood was again overrun. Four battalions of the Royal Fusiliers had their share in this memorable exploit, and the place of honour was given to the 23rd Battalion. They had had an uncomfortable time in Bernafay Wood previous to the attack.

Words fail to do justice to the situation at this moment. It was hot weather. The ground was pitted and torn by shell fire. Dead bodies lay about, and before the troops began to move up the Germans had indulged in a heavy bombardment with gas shells. Fortunately a welcome breeze made the wearing of masks unnecessary. The approach was covered by the British barrage, and near Longueval one shell fell close to the Fusiliers, badly wounding one man.

"It's hard lines," said the man when the C.O. went to him.

"I know it is," said the C.O., "but you'll soon be all right. The stretcher-bearers are coming."

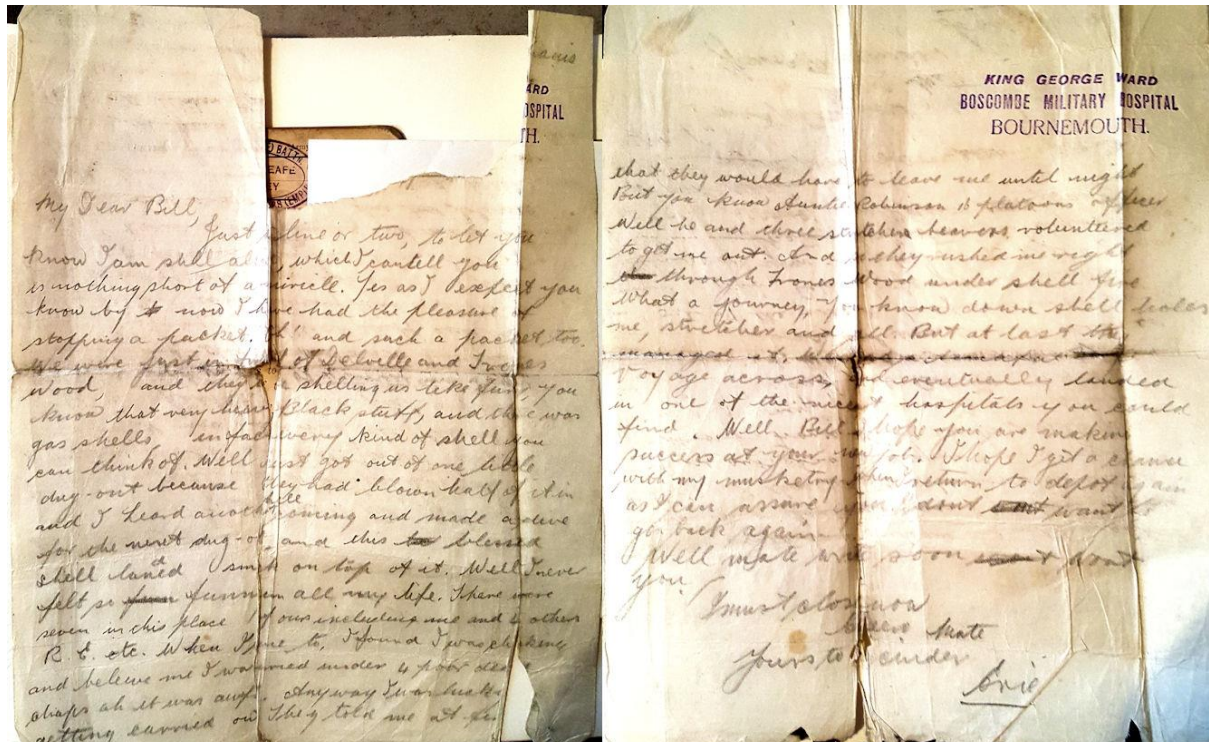
"Oh! it's not that," was the man's rejoinder. "It's being hit just now! Here have I been all this time in France without having a real go at the b——s, and now the chance has come, here I go and get knocked out." *

Extract from 'Royal Fusiliers in the Great War' by H. C. O'Neill

It's interesting to note that H C O'Neill says this was the 17th's first entrance into any battle zone which emphasizes the fact that their previous involvement in the B  thune area was a defensive one.

William Silas Woodhams - 17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers

This letter from Eric to his brother captures the atmosphere at the front so poignantly



Letter from Eric Potter Woodhams to his brother William Silas Woodhams
both from the 17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers

King George Ward

Boscombe Military Hospital

Bournemouth

My Dear Bill

Just a line or two to let you know I am still alive, which I can tell you is nothing short of a miracle. Yes as I expect you know by now I have had the pleasure of stopping a packet. Oh! And such a packet too. We were just in front of Delville and Trones Wood, and they were shelling us like fury, you know that very heavy black stuff, and there was gas shells, in fact every kind of shell you can think of. Well just got out of one little dug-out because they had blown half of it in and I heard another shell coming and made a dive for the next dug-out, and this blessed shell landed smack on top of it. Well I never felt so funny in all my life. There were seven in this place 3 of ours including me and 4 others R.E etc. When I came to, I found I was choking and believe me I was buried under 4 poor dead chaps ah it was awful. Anyway I was lucky in getting carried out. They told me at first that they would have to leave me until night. But you know Auntie Robinson 16 platoons officer. Well he and three stretcher bearers volunteered to get me out. And so they rushed me right through Trones Wood under shell fire. What a journey, you know down shell holes me, stretcher and all. But at last they managed it. We had a peaceful journey across, and eventually landed in one of the nicest hospitals you could find. Well, Bill I hope you are making a success at your new job. I hope I get a chance with my musketry when I return to the depot again as I can assure you I don't want to go back again.

Well mate write soon won't you.

I must close now

Cheers mate

Yours to a cinder

Eric

William Silas Woodhams - 17th Battalion Royal Fusiliers

It's interesting that Eric mentions William's 'new job'. They were obviously close as brothers and kept in touch. Unfortunately we don't have any more of their correspondence.