

## PRIVATE ALBERT CHARLES PURSER

26738, 6th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry

Died aged 22 on 21 June 1918

Remembered with honour on *Pozières Memorial, France*; Panel 25 & 26

Commemorated in Tewkesbury on the War Memorial, in the Abbey, on the Congregational Chapel Memorial (now in the Methodist Church), and on the Yeovil War Memorial



*Pozières Memorial, France*



*Private Albert C. Purser*



*Somerset Light Infantry*

**ALBERT CHARLES PURSER** was born in 1895 in Tewkesbury, one of nine children and eldest son of Charles Purser, a Carpenter, and Eliza (formerly Collins). The family was living in Gravel Walk in 1901. In 1911 they had moved to Mill Bank and Albert was working as an Outfitter at Gannaway's store, 107 High Street. He was a member of the Congregational Chapel in Barton Street (in 2014 the Jehovah's Witness building) and is commemorated on their memorial.

Albert was living in Yeovil when he was called up on 31 July 1916. However, he chose to go 'absent without leave'; he was remanded to the Army as a proclaimed Conscientious Objector and fined £2 to be deducted from his future army pay. Appeals to two tribunals against his conscription were unsuccessful. In August 1916 he was drafted into the 6th (Service) Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry, originally formed at Taunton in August 1914, part of the 43rd Infantry Brigade, 14th (Light) Division. The battalion had landed at Boulogne on 21 May 1915 and Albert would probably have been a replacement draft during 1917.

In March 1918 the Division, as part of the Fifth Army, was holding the line near St. Quentin, opposite nearly four German divisions and directly in the path of *Operation Michael*, the first phase of the German Spring Offensive (or *Kaiserschlacht*, Kaiser's Battle). The Forward Zone was occupied by three battalions, including the 6th Somerset Light Infantry. During the opening phase, the *Battle of St. Quentin 1918*, the forward defences were overwhelmed forcing a retreat to more defensible positions.

The Somerset Archives comments: *'During the Battle of St. Quentin only four men from the 6th battalion made it back to Brigade Headquarters.'* As a result of the losses suffered in this battle and the *Battle of the Avre* (4 April 1918), the remnants of the battalion were formed on 14 April into a composite unit with the 5th Battalion, Ox & Bucks Light Infantry. On 18 June 1918 the battalion was transferred to 16th Division and returned to England for reconstruction. On 20 June 1918 it was reconstituted by absorbing the 13th Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry.

There is therefore some dispute over the date of Albert's death. The CWGC database fixes on 21 June 1918 whereas the *Register* reported on 11 May 1918 that he actually went missing on 21 March 1918, the first day of the German Spring Offensive.

The evidence suggests that the CWGC record is incorrect. The battalion returned to England three days before his official date of death, so the report in the *Register* is a much more likely scenario; the battalion was reduced to a skeleton in the fierce fighting at the start of the battle and it is most probable that Albert was killed in action on 21 March 1918 or thereabouts, although the actual date cannot be proven beyond all doubt. His parents appealed for information in the *Graphic* of 22 February 1919 but his death was eventually accepted; a memorial in the Chapel was unveiled by 28 May 1921.

**Private Albert Charles Purser's** body was never recovered or identified and he is remembered on the *Pozières Memorial* on the Somme.