

RIFLEMAN JOHN WALKER

2233, 5th Battalion, London Regiment (London Rifle Brigade)

Died aged 41 on 1 July 1916

Buried with honour in *Hebuterne Military Cemetery, France*; IV M 56

Commemorated in Tewkesbury in the Abbey only



*Hebuterne Military Cemetery,
France*



*London Regiment
(London Rifle Brigade)*

JOHN WALKER was born in 1877 in Tewkesbury to John Walker, a wood sawyer, and Anna Maria (formerly Sweet), both from Tewkesbury. John (junior) attended the Barton Road School and the Baptist Church. In 1891 he was working at the Eagle Shirt Factory (now the site of Elliot Court, Back of Avon) until he went to London in 1895. In 1901 he was living in the Bishopsgate area of the City, still working as a collar cutter. John (senior) died in 1899 and Anna Maria in 1906; both were buried in Tewkesbury according to their Baptist religion. John continued to live as a single man in the Holborn area of London in 1911, working as a shirt cutter. The *Register* reported that in 1916 John's sister, Mrs. Seymour, lived in High Street.

John was living in Hampstead in May 1915 when he enlisted in London at the age of 38 in the London Regiment; this was a completely Territorial regiment, comprising some 28 battalions of part-time volunteer soldiers only at the outbreak of war. John joined the 1st/5th (City of London) Battalion (London Rifle Brigade), which was affiliated to the Rifle Brigade, a Regular regiment. In August 1914 the battalion was part of the 1st London Division and landed at Le Havre on 5 November. When Rifleman Walker arrived in France on 7 February 1916 to join his battalion, it was then part of the 56th (1st London) Division.

In early 1916, after training near Arras, the battalion moved in early May to trenches near Hebuterne in readiness for the joint Anglo-French Somme offensive, later known as the *Battles of the Somme 1916* (1 July-18 Novem-

ber). The role of the 1st London Division was to carry out a diversionary attack on the opening day, in a pincer movement with the 46th Division, now known as the *Attack on the Gommecourt Salient*. The objective was to draw German reserves away from the main Somme offensive further south.

The Division's assault was initially successful: the leading waves of the London Rifle Brigade attacked from No Man's Land and reached Gommecourt village. The War Diary noted that *'the lines advanced in excellent order and the movement went like clockwork, so much so that by 7.50am, all our objectives were reached'*. However, the situation deteriorated significantly as the 46th Division attack failed and the Londoners were cut off by the strength of the German artillery. The battalion was subjected to counter-attacks all day and the survivors were eventually forced back to their original lines. Despite the early success, the attack was ultimately a complete failure. The War Diary reported a total of 588 casualties.

Rifleman John Walker was officially killed in action on 1 July 1916. His body was recovered and he was buried in *Hebuterne Military Cemetery*. As it was used by the Division's Field Ambulances, it is quite likely that he was initially wounded but died before evacuation. The local newspapers did not publish a detailed obituary for John Walker, probably because he no longer lived in Tewkesbury and perhaps because of the constant stream of casualties. The CWGC erred with his age – it was 39, as birth and census records state 1877 for his birth date.