

LANCE CORPORAL ALBERT ERNEST WILKES

12128, 10th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment

Died aged 20 on 23 July 1916

Remembered with honour on *Thiepval Memorial*; Pier and Face 5A & 5B

Commemorated in Tewkesbury as an Abbey Volunteer and on Beckford War Memorial



Thiepval Memorial on the Somme



1914-15 Star Medal



Gloucestershire Regiment

ALBERT ERNEST WILKES was born in Tewkesbury in the summer of 1896, the son of Ernest Caleb Wilkes, a grocer's assistant of Trinity Street, and Maud (formerly Luker). Maud came from Overbury and Ernest was born in Birmingham, son of Caleb Wilkes, part of the brazier family after whom Wilkes Alley was named. The family stayed in Tewkesbury, adding two more children, but a third was born in 1910 in Rockland Cottage, Beckford. By this time Albert had left the Council School and was employed as a carter's boy on a farm, while his father was an insurance agent with Prudential Assurance.

In 1914 Albert was an early volunteer, being claimed by the Council School, Chance Street, and he was allocated into the 10th Battalion of the Gloucesters, the new Battalion formed at Bristol in September 1914 as part of Kitchener's Army. Having been billeted in Cheltenham over winter 1914-1915, the battalion was sent onto Salisbury Plain for divisional training where Lee Enfield rifles and khaki uniforms were issued in May 1915. It was one of the earliest Kitchener battalions sent to France on 8 August 1915, where it was attached to the 1st Infantry Brigade in the 1st Division.

The battalion was soon involved in the *Battle of Loos* (25 September-18 October 1915), in which it suffered significant losses: 459 men, including **L/Cpl. A. Harrison** [†], **Cpl. J. Simms** [†], **Pte. E. Nunney** [†] and **Sgt. T. Hall** [†]. It was the first battle in which poison gas was used by the British Army. Despite heavy casualties, there was considerable success on the first day in breaking into the deep enemy positions near Loos but the opportunities could

not be exploited, resulting in a costly stalemate. The official end of the battle brought little respite: the battalion then stayed in the trenches all winter, suffering deaths due to sniper fire and pneumonia. Albert was awarded the '1914-15 Star' medal for his participation in this battle.

The battalion did not see action again until July 1916 during the *Battles of the Somme 1916*. It did not participate on the opening day, 1 July, but was involved 10 days later in burying the dead from the initial assaults although, during that operation, four men were killed and 24 wounded through enemy shellfire. On 22 July the battalion was in the front line south of Martinpuich preparing for an attack the following day. At 12.30am on 23 July the battalion went over the top as part of an offensive led by Australian forces, supported by the British 1st and 48th Divisions, to capture the village of Pozières and the dominant Pozières Ridge to the north. The action was known as the *Battle of Pozières* (23 July-3 September 1916).

Lance Corporal Albert Ernest Wilkes was one of the fatal casualties on 23 July, when one officer and 11 other ranks from the battalion were killed, 61 were wounded and 74 were missing. Albert's body was never recovered nor identified and his name is one of nearly 73,000 commemorated on the *Thiepval Memorial to the Missing* at the heart of the Somme battlefield.

As the family had left Tewkesbury before the war, no obituary appeared in any of the local newspapers. Albert is commemorated in Tewkesbury Abbey as a Volunteer and on the Council Schools Roll of Honour. He is also remembered on Beckford War Memorial.