



Jack Dorrell

By Dan Hill



John 'Jack' Dorrell was born in Mortlake, West London to John and Carrie Dorrell, his father was a Postman who died of Tuberculosis when Jack was ten. He was brought up by his mother and stepfather, a gardener.

After school he joined the Civil Service which in Edwardian times offered opportunities for improvement by means of taking Civil Service exams. He passed Pitman's shorthand and typing exams at a time when secretarial work was a male employment.

He married Amy Roberts in 1912. His wedding certificate records his occupation as 'Second Division Clerk GPO'. At the outbreak of war, Amy was pregnant; their son John was born in March 1915. He did not, as a result, join the rush to sign up for service at the outbreak of war.

John attested under the Derby scheme in December 1915 and was mobilised in May 1916 as a signaller in the Royal Engineers.

In 1915, the Royal Engineers Signal Service training centre was established in Bedfordshire and North Herts. The Headquarters was in Bedford with Depots in Hitchin, Stevenage, Baldock, Biggleswade and Dunstable.

After basic training at Bedford and signal training at Dunstable, he was transferred to the Hitchin Depot based at Bearton Road in February 1916. Hitchin was the unit preparing troops for draft for overseas service and during this period he was prepared for life on the Western Front. New equipment, rifles and gas masks were issued and training for gas alert was given. He embarked for France on 18th March 1916 from Southampton and landed at Rouen to begin his war.

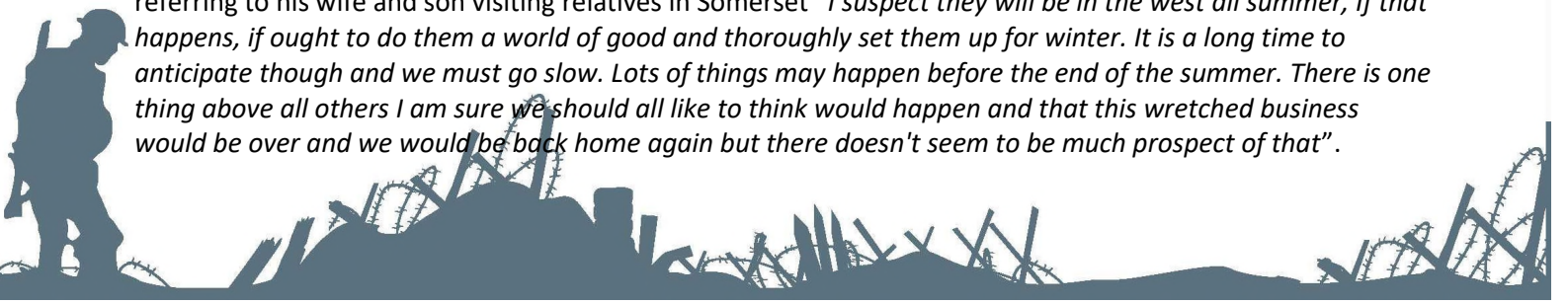
In France Jack underwent further advanced training for three weeks prior to drafting to the 31st Division near Arras. His first experience of the Western Front was a Signaller in an Infantry Brigade Headquarters. His duties as a signaller consisted both of signalling and as a 'linesman'. In the latter role he was expected to mend broken signal lines, damaged usually as a result of shellfire. As his diary entry for 3rd May 1917 records "*Big straffing stunt commenced at 3.45. Ruddy awkward at 4am. Out as linesman at 4.25. Hart 'very windy', repaired one quad then doubled back to headquarters - Left me to follow at Leisure*".


After six weeks he developed a flu-like illness, and, as a result of Trench Fever. Trench fever was a louse born infection which affected between a fifth and a third of British soldiers between 1915 and 1918. It caused a high fever that normally resolved in five days. However, as in Jack's case, it could be more prolonged and as a result he was transferred back to England.

After convalescence he returned to the signal depot in Biggleswade in July 1917 where he found '*a cushy number*' as a billeting clerk, being promoted to Acting Lance Corporal (paid). His response was '*such is greatness!*'.

He remained in this post until 25th April 1918 when, after the German Spring Offensive, he was told at 11pm that he was to embark to France the following morning for further active service.

After a five-day refresher course in France, he was posted to an artillery Brigade Headquarters near Arras. His role, as before, was as a signaller and linesman. In an extract from his last letter to his mother he wrote, referring to his wife and son visiting relatives in Somerset "*I suspect they will be in the west all summer, If that happens, if ought to do them a world of good and thoroughly set them up for winter. It is a long time to anticipate though and we must go slow. Lots of things may happen before the end of the summer. There is one thing above all others I am sure we should all like to think would happen and that this wretched business would be over and we would be back home again but there doesn't seem to be much prospect of that*".





On the same day he recorded that he relieved Corporal Stevens as duty signaller. Two days later both he and Corporal Stevens were killed, believe to be mending lines and today they lie side by side in Bienvillers Military Cemetery. Jack was 31 years old at the time of his death.

After his death, Jack's bloodstained wallet and shrapnel damaged photograph album were returned to his widow. Herts Ay War were lucky enough to be able to display them at our Hitchin exhibition in 2018.

