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Lest we Forget

World War I



18872 LANCE CORPORAL

A. F. JOHNSON

WILTSHIRE REGIMENT

16TH NOVEMBER, 1918

Albert Frank JOHNSON

Albert Frank Johnson was born at Chilmark, Wiltshire in 1897 to parents William Frederick & Matilda Jane Johnson (nee Macey). His birth was registered in the December quarter, 1897 in the district of Tisbury, Wiltshire. William Frederick Johnson had married Matilda Jane Macey in 1896 at St Edward's Church, Teffont Magna, Wiltshire.

The 1901 Census recorded Albert as a 3 year old living with his family at Teffont Street, Teffont Magna, Wiltshire. His parents were listed as William Johnson (Yard Man on Farm, aged 30, born Fovant) & Matilda Jane Johnson (aged 24, born Chilmark). Albert was the eldest of 3 children listed on this Census – Edward (aged 2, born Chilmark) & Hilda (aged 5 months, born Teffont Magna).

The 1911 Census recorded Albert Frank Johnson as a 14 year old Farm Labourer living with his family at 2 Park View Row, Gas Lane, Salisbury in a 4 roomed dwelling. His parents were listed as William Fk. Johnson (Farm Labourer, aged 41, born Fovant) & Matilda Jane Johnson (aged 36, born Chilmark). William & Matilda had been married for 16 years & had 8 children, 2 children having died. Albert was the eldest of 5 children listed on this Census – Hilda May (aged 10, born Teffont Magna), Reginald (aged 9, born Compton Chamberlayne), Walter (aged 6, born Wishford) & Frederick (aged 5, born Odstock).

Albert Frank Johnson enlisted at Devizes, Wiltshire. He was residing at Codford St. Mary at the time he enlisted (UK Soldiers of the Great War).

According to his Medal Index Card, Pte Albert Frank Johnson first entered a Theatre of War in France on 30th September, 1915.

Lance Corporal Albert Frank Johnson died on 16th November, 1918 at Mesopotamia. He was attached to 5th Battalion, Wiltshire Regiment at the time of his death.

Lance Corporal Albert Frank Johnson was buried in Basra War Cemetery, Iraq - Grave Reference I. S. 21. His death is acknowledged by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission lists Lance Corporal A. F. Johnson, 18872, of 5th Bn., Wiltshire Regiment. No family details are listed.

5th Battalion, Wiltshire Regiment

1914

The 5th (Service) Battalion was raised at Assaye Barracks in Tidworth in August 1914. The numbers raised were too large so the 6th (Service) battalion was also raised from the 5th Battalion overspill of manpower.

1915

In July 1915 the 5th (Service) Battalion set sail for the Dardanelles and by the 17th were all ashore at Cape Helles, on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Two days later they were in the trenches facing the Turkish Army. On the 6th August they took part in a night attack to capture a ridge of hills to assist the British landing at Suvla bay. The following day they took part in the attack at Sari Bair. This was a successful attack, but the response was fast and very violent. They were attacked by a Turkish Division led by Mustapha Kemal. The battalion was overrun with half the battalion never being seen again. The battalion was reorganised, returning to trench warfare with the main enemy being dysentery and jaundice. On the 18th December they embarked for Mudros returning ten days later in a blizzard, here they saw in 1916.

1916

The 5th (Service) Battalion evacuated from Cape Helles in January going to Port Said where they were reinforced with 750 men. In February they went to Kuwait and in March to Amara via the Tigris River. They then relieved the Lahore Division south of Kut. In April they took part in the attempt to relieve Kut and attacked the Turkish Trenches at Hannah, followed by an attack on Sanna-I-Yat. All the efforts to relive Kut failed and eventually the garrison was forced

to surrender. (*Many men who had been transferred from the 1st and 2nd/4th Regiments in India were captured with units besieged in Kut*) May was spent in defensive positions after which they returned to the Amara area where they remained until the end of December when they crossed the Hai River ready to move North to Kut.

1917

The 5th (Service) battalion were in action on the 25th January 1917 when they assaulted the Turkish front line, one flank of which rested on the Hai River which they had crossed only a month before. They took heavy casualties in this action. On the 25th of February they crossed the River Tigris and by the end of the month after hard marching they were 40 miles short of Baghdad. On the 10th March they made a night river crossing over the Diala River establishing a bridgehead and taking 120 prisoners in the process. The way to Baghdad was open and the battalion was the first to enter the city. At the end of March the battalion advanced on Turkish positions 35 miles north of Baghdad near Daltawa. They sustained heavy casualties in this attack. In April and May they continued the advance up the line of the River Adhaim with contact being made with the Russians operating from the Caspian Sea. They then took up defensive positions between the rivers Tigris and Adhaim, East of Samara. In early December they advanced towards Kara Tepe, with the battalion pursuing the Turks through Sakaltutan Pass. They paused at this point and ended the year reorganizing and training.

1918

The 5th (Service) Battalion spent from January to April in training and road building, and reconnaissance in the North – west of the Jebel Hamrin. On the 24th April they moved North to take part in operations on the Kifri front, and on the 29th drove the enemy from the hills near Tuzkurmati, which was captured with 1800 Turks. They remained as part of the garrison of Tuzkurmati till September. For the next two months they took part in operations to push back the Turks in areas such as Kirkuk and Mosul. On the 1st November, Turkey signed an armistice, and the battalion returned to Kirkuk. They were demobilized at Amara, with the Regimental Cadre going to the North West Frontier of India as part of a composite Battalion. They reached Devizes in September 1919 where they were disbanded.

(Information from [The Wardrobe](#) – Home of the Infantry Regiments of Berkshire and Wiltshire)

Lance Corporal Albert Frank Johnson was entitled to 1915 Star, British War Medal & Victory Medal.



1915 Star, British War Medal & Victory Medal

(An "A. Johnson" is remembered in Casualties of WW1 from the Diocese of Salisbury Memorial book for the parish of Salisbury St. Paul, Wiltshire)



Basra War Cemetery, Iraq

Basra is a town on the west bank of the Shatt-al-Arab, 90 kilometres from its mouth in the Persian Gulf. The cemetery is about 8 kilometres north-west of Basra.

During the First World War, Basra was occupied by the 6th (Poona) Division in November 1914, from which date the town became the base of the Mesopotamian Expeditionary Force. A number of cemeteries were used by the MEF in and around Basra; Makina Masul Old Cemetery was used from December 1914 to October 1916 and the Makina Masul New Extension was begun alongside the old cemetery in August 1917. These two sites, enlarged later when more than 1,000 graves were brought in from other burial grounds, now form Basra War Cemetery.

The cemetery now contains 2,551 burials of the First World War, 74 of them unidentified. The headstones marking these graves were removed in 1935 when it was discovered that salts in the soil were causing them to deteriorate. The names of those buried in the graves affected are now recorded on a screen wall.

The cemetery also contains the Basra (Tanooma Chinese) Memorial, commemorating 227 unidentified casualties of the Chinese Labour Corps who were attached to the Inland Water Transport during the First World War. A panel in their memory was added to the screen wall when it became evident that their graves in Tanooma Chinese Cemetery could no longer be maintained.

During the Second World War, Basra was the scene of fighting from 2 - 7 May 1941 when Iraqi forces were driven from the town, which then became a base for Commonwealth forces. Basra War Cemetery was used once again and after the war, further graves were brought in from other burials grounds in Iraq and Iran.

There are now 365 Second World War burials in the cemetery. In addition, there are 36 war graves of other nationalities, many of them Polish, and 16 non-war burials.

(Information from CWGC)



Iraq cemetery containing graves of British servicemen is destroyed

A First and Second World War cemetery in Basra has been destroyed by vandals and looters



By [Colin Freeman](#), Chief Foreign Correspondent

A cemetery in Iraq that contains the graves of thousands of British servicemen who died in the two World Wars has been completely destroyed.

The graveyard in Basra has been left without a single one of its 4,000 headstones still standing after repeated vandalism and looting in the years since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

When British troops first took control of the city in 2003, wreaths were laid at the cemetery on Remembrance Sunday for the first time in decades.

Some soldiers even honoured the graves of relatives who had died in action during the Mesopotamian campaign of World War One.

But the growing insurgent threat soon made it impractical for British forces to protect it, and after their withdrawal from the city in 2007, it was too dangerous for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to send teams to repair the damage.

The scale of destruction dwarfs vandalism of graves in Libya last two years ago and may be the worst damage done to any Commonwealth cemetery - although finally, efforts have begun to bring it back to the immaculate standards of the Commission's estate.

Today, once again, there will be nobody there to mark Remembrance Sunday.

"It is an act of pure destruction," said Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, the executive chairman of the Iraq British Business Council, who visited the cemetery recently.

"We think this has been the work of militias over the years, although it's true to say that most of the people in Basra I have spoken to are rather ashamed of what has happened."

Unlike the main British war cemetery in Baghdad, which has remained largely intact, the one in Basra appears to have suffered deliberate sabotage.

Among the items missing from it are the both the Cross of Remembrance and the bronze plaques from the Wall of Remembrance, which carries the names of the fallen. While some of the gravestones have simply crumbled in Basra fierce heat, and some removed by a local caretaker for safekeeping, others are thought to have been stolen by looters and sold for use as building materials.

In one corner of the bare earth, a set of football goals has been erected.

A neighbouring plot, containing mainly Indian colonial servicemen who fought alongside the British, has also had many of its headstones destroyed.

The Basra war cemetery is one of several around southern Iraq that date back to the British Mesopotamian campaign of 1914, when Britain launched an ill-fated assault on what was then a corner of the Ottoman empire.

After initially securing Basra, troops pressed north towards a military disaster in the city of Kut, 100 miles south east of Baghdad, where they were besieged for five months by Turkish troops, with some 20,000 members of the British killed or wounded. Britain then invaded again with an Anglo-Indian army led by Lieutenant General Sir Stanley Maude, which took Baghdad on March 11, 1917.

In total, 2,551 casualties from the First World War and 365 from the Second are buried at the cemetery.

Among them is Corporal Ernest Gibbons, of the Royal Field Artillery, who died of pneumonia in October 1918, aged 29. A report from the time in the *Peterborough Advertiser*, his local newspaper, said he had joined up at the outbreak of war and had been drafted to India and then Mesopotamia.

It said Cpl Gibbons was “of a very quiet disposition, and was most popular and beloved by his comrades and friends”. Also buried in Basra is Private Alex Paterson, of the Army Ordnance Corps. Pte Paterson, from Arbroath, Scotland, had gone to India and was then a tailor in Mandalay before joining up in February 1917. He died, in May 1918, of dysentery, aged 33.

Across Iraq, Commonwealth war sites honour some 54,000 servicemen from both world wars, a figure that puts Britain’s modern-day military campaign there into perspective.

In Saddam’s time the cemeteries were still maintained by local caretakers, although around the time of the first Gulf War, the Iraqi dictator did order some war memorials to be moved out of Basra city to a new location in the desert.

A Commonwealth war grave in the city of Amarah, 100 miles north of Basra, is currently under threat from plans to build a fairground on part of it. Britain is pressing the local governor to halt the plan.

One source with knowledge of war graves said: “The war graves tend to be on prime land in the cities, and if we don’t do something about it, people will seek to develop on it.”

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has now started work to renovate the Basra cemetery, with Iraqi security forces guarding it.

Peter Hunt, director of HWH and Associates, a British engineering company based in Basra, which is involved in the work, said: “Work has started to refurbish it six months ago, and with the co-operation of the Basra governor, we hope to eventually restore it to its former glory.”

Peter Francis, a spokesman for the CWGC, said: “Work is ongoing and it is our intention to start restoring the headstones when the security situation permits.”

(The Telegraph, 10 November, 2013)

