

# **SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL**

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## **The Somme Anniversary**

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On 1st July 1916 began the longest and most costly land battle in British history – the battle of the Somme. On the first day alone British casualties were 19,240 killed; 35,494 wounded; 2,152 missing – a total for one day of 57,470, a figure never exceeded before or since.

Four men from Saffron Walden were among the dead of the first day: Pte. Charles E. Andrews, Pte George Cornell, Pte. Sydney Barker and Cpl. James J. Halls. To remember and honour the sacrifice and memory of these men and the countless thousands from all sides who suffered, here is James Halls' story. James Halls attended the Boys' British School. On leaving he became a telegraph messenger for a short time before enlisting in the Regular Army in London before the war. One of five children, James' father had been a former local postman, dying of enteric fever whilst with the 2nd Norfolk Regiment in the South African war. His mother, Elizabeth lived at 13 Museum Street, but James was now married and lived in Johnson's Yard.

The 1st Rifle Brigade were mobilised at Colchester and spent a few days preparation at Harrow School before being rushed to France at the end of August 1914. In late December James had been slightly wounded in the foot, but in May 1915 he was in trenches near Mousetrap Farm in the Ypres Salient. It was a group of buildings surrounded by water on high ground north of Wieltje overlooking St Julien and the valley of the Steenbeck. On the 13th there was intense bombardment and the enemy attacked bidding for control of the remainder of the Frezenberg Ridge. The Regimental History states: 'Halls of B Company (and another corporal) were cut off from the company for nine hours by the destruction of our trenches. They had held out in their post and by their accurate shooting had defeated all attempts by the enemy to dig in on the right front.' In a letter home, James wrote more modestly and graphically:

We were in position with a farm on the right known as 'Shell-trap'. We were shelled heavily from dawn till 3 pm receiving heavy losses, resulting in me and Corporal 'Sonie' (Sunnuck), a Canadian, not killed or wounded. When the shelling stopped the Germans started coming up. 'Sonie' and I crept up the trench and fired on them. Three times this happened. During the day we lost 170 men.

For this action both James and Cpl. H.E. Sunnuck were awarded the DCM. The *London Gazette* 5 August 1915 states: 'For conspicuous gallantry on 13th May 1915, east of Ypres. When the end of his trench had been blown in, Rifleman Halls remained on the spot with an N.C.O. under heavy fire for nine hours firing on the enemy.' On receipt of the DCM, James was promoted to corporal. A further letter of August 1915 to his mother shows the character of the man:

We are now back from the trenches for ten days rest, the first time we have been out of the sound of the guns during nine months I have been out here. This is Sunday and quite a treat to hear the old French bells ringing in the village church, which is about half a mile away. Since I last wrote we have taken part in a charge and captured a length of German trenches and eighty prisoners. Last Sunday we had orders to attack the German trench in front of us, but I hadn't the heart to write and let you know, and I am glad I didn't now, as, thank God, I came out of it quite safe, all but a cut on the face with a small piece of shrapnel, but I scarcely felt that in the excitement. Our artillery started the bombardment at 5 o'clock on Tuesday morning and it only lasted an hour, but it was terrible, and at one minute past six we gave a yell, jumped out of our trenches and rushed towards the Germans. By five minutes past six there wasn't a German in their first line trench, except prisoners who were begging for mercy, no doubt thinking we would shoot them straight away, as perhaps they deserved, but that is not our way. We made them work to build up the trench instead, which they were only too eager to do. We lost heavily, especially by bombs and grenades, but our shells must have done terrible work, for the Germans were lying in heaps blown to pieces, but I will not try to explain how horrible it was. I'd like to be able to forget. They left everything behind them, scores of rifles, helmets and equipment etc, and you ought to have seen our boys smoking their cigars, of which we found plenty. They shelled us pretty heavily during the day and tried hard to rush us out of it again, but we stuck it until we were relieved at night very tired and parched, but glad we had done what was wanted of us. They put some gas shells over during the night, the only way of revenge they can get, but it was no go. It was a sad roll call the morning after we were relieved, but it would have been a lot worse hadn't it been for our artillery keeping them back and stopping them from massing. Don't worry about sending me parcels as long as I can get a smoke nothing else matters. P.S. I know you will congratulate me, Mother, on having won the D.C.M for something I did in May. I shall probably get a furlough, so look out and cheer up.

Soon after this James got his home leave, but not in the way he would have wished. He was wounded in the foot and was in hospital in Folkestone for two months, before convalescing at home for three more weeks. He was back in France for the 'Big Push'. His battalion were to attack the Redan Ridge. They moved off at 7.29 am and were immediately held up by intense fire front the Ridge and the Quadrilateral. Also the enemy wire was uncut, but by 10 am they had entered the German lines. B Company was in the first wave that rushed these trenches and engaged

the enemy in close-quarter fighting and bombing, but they were steadily driven back. Meanwhile, Mrs Halls had received a postcard from James saying he was all right. Tragically as she read it he was already dead. On entering the German trenches he had been shot in the chest. On 21 July his family received official confirmation of this from the regimental headquarters. James Halls is buried in the cemetery where during the days before the battle mass graves had been dug to receive the casualties. Little did they envisage the terrible numbers there would be. It is quite possible that he and his battalion had marched past these very graves on their way up to the front-line. Today he lies with over 1,100 of his comrades. The inscription chosen by his family reads: 'His memory is as dear today as in the year he passed away'.



**Corporal James John Halls, D.C.M. (5093) 1st Rifle Brigade, killed in action 1st July 1916, aged 20 and buried in Sucrerie Military Cemetery, Colincamps, France, Plot 1 Row Grave 16. Photograph Robert Pike.**

As dusk fell on the first day of the greatest battle the world had ever witnessed, the countless dead and dying lay out in no man's land. Few realised that the battle would continue until winter set in on 18 November 1916. Ninety years later in France, on the same day as the start of the battle, at the huge Monument to the Missing at Thiepval, in the presence of the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, these men and their

former enemies were remembered. I laid a wreath on James Halls' grave and remembered him and his comrades.

**Note: Robert Pike is author of *The Victor Heroes*, the story of the Saffron Walden casualties of WW1. The book has recently been reprinted and can be purchased from the author or Tourist Information in Saffron Walden.**

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