

HEDLEY FOSTER 1892-1917

Hedley was a local boy who attended Sir William Borlase School between 1902 and 1908. He was also a member of Marlow Rowing Club before the War. He initially served in France from November 1914 with the London Rifle Brigade. He was commissioned as an officer in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry in 1915, promoted to Captain in June 1917 and was killed during the Battle of Passchendaele on 22nd August 1917. A number of his letters home from the front were published in the South Bucks Free Press during the War. Here is a selection.



25 Dec 1914 – letter to his stepfather, John Langley.

‘I got all your letters and the parcel on Friday night on our return from the trenches, and they quite bucked me up for we were wet through and had spent three of the worst days and nights I have ever had. All our Battalion went into the trenches as reliefs and practically the whole time we were there it rained. In some places our fellows were up to their knees in water, but we had to be content with about a foot of it. Sleep was impossible as we were baling out the water and building up the sides of the trenches which fell in day and night.

The land round about is very low and swampy, and we have the satisfaction of knowing that the Germans are as badly off as we are, if not worse. We were only about 70 yards away from them and could see them baling out all day, although they

did not show their heads very much. They do not seem to have much spirit left in them. On the 9th they attacked on our right and we have heard unofficially that they lost 300 and our people only had one killed and seven wounded.

I have received the parcel every week so far and am very thankful for the chocolate and cigarettes. Plenty of the latter are served out but they are not 'Three Castles'. As far as money goes I have not had cause to spend more than a few shillings so I am not in need at present.

We have so far had only one casualty in my Company, and the battalion has lost about 30 men but the fighting is not what it was at the beginning of the War. I am writing this in a barn where we are lodged for the time being – it is one of the few places in the village which has not been knocked about by shells'.

21 May 1915 - letter to his sister.

Hedley explains that they had been in action for a fortnight 'during which time they suffered from all the vilest interventions of our barbarous enemy, including the poisonous gases, which are really terrible'. He goes on to tell his sister that he had lost all his possessions in a house fire which was shelled and asks her to send him 'in the next parcel a change of underclothing, a razor and some tobacco'.

He states that he had the 'pleasure' of being buried by a shell which burst a few feet away. He was dug out by friends over 10 minutes and was 'very shaken'.

28 May 1915 - letter to his mother, Mrs Langley of Bridge House.

'Glad to say I have come through a most terrible time but unfortunately most of the friends I had left have gone. We are now a little way back in reserve and expect to be sent back further. Such a few of us left that I do not know what they will do with us.

It is really horrible, but it was glorious to see how our brave boys hung on to their positions during the most awful shelling I think it is possible to have. Our trenches were absolutely blown to pieces but our regiment did not lose an inch of ground; in fact a few took over a trench which had been left and where the Germans attempted to advance they were stopped. The bombardment lasted 12 hours and thousands of shells of all sizes must have fallen round about us. Of course everyone's nerves were upset, but otherwise I am feeling fairly fit, although a little bit uncomfortable from the fact that for the last six weeks we have had very little opportunity to wash, and consequently we have collected a few little animals to keep us company. They are difficult to find and you can imagine how much I would give for a nice hot bath. I hope to be able to get one before too long. The parcel arrived safely and I was delighted to see the change of clothes, but I dare not put them on until I have a good wash'.

Report from the South Bucks Free Press 12 April 1918

Capt Hedley Roy Foster who was officially reported missing after the engagement fought by the Battalion in France on Aug 22nd 1917 is now officially reported as presumed killed on that date. All efforts to secure definite news of the fate of this gallant young officer failed but men of his battalion believe that he was killed by a shell. He was last seen leading his men with the utmost bravery under very heavy fire. He had just previously walked back, under heavy fire to fetch a Tank to silence a machine gun which was holding up his Company. He had previously been mentioned for specially gallant conduct on the field. He made a splendid officer and was exceedingly popular in the battalion.