

Reginald Abrams

1888 - 1917

Born in Oxford

Educated at Oxford Boys' High School and in St Catherine's Society Oxford

Bodleian Library senior assistant

Died at Gommecourt, aged 28, on 4 March 1917

Family and Education

Reginald Arthur Abrams was born in Oxford on 11 September 1888. His parents were Edward Arthur Abrams, also born in Oxford, and Elizabeth Bluring, born in West Berkshire. He was the second of four children, the youngest of whom was baptised at Walton Street Methodist Church. By 1891 the family lived in Walton Street and Edward was a bookseller's assistant.

From age 11 Reginald went to Oxford Boys' High School. He left when he was nearly 15 to become a junior assistant at the Bodleian Library. After two years he was promoted to Senior Assistant (Finance) but almost immediately he was admitted to the University of Oxford as a non-collegiate student in St Catherine's Society. This allowed him to continue living at home while he studied, and he also joined the Officers' Training Corps. He graduated in 1909, and continued as a senior assistant at the Bodleian. In 1910 he was also assistant librarian at Jesus College.

War Service: 8th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters (Notts and Derby Regiment)

Reginald left the Bodleian in 1915 and on 4 July he was appointed Second Lieutenant in the 8th Battalion of the Sherwood Foresters (Notts and Derby Regiment). His medal index card indicates that on 23 August he arrived in France, which the 8th Battalion had reached in March that year. He joined them in trenches near Ypres, where they had suffered heavy casualties in earlier action. Reginald's first major attack was at the Battle of the Hohenzollern Redoubt, where he was actively involved on the second day, 14 October. By this time it was clear that the German trenches had withstood the preliminary bombardment and the attackers were being met with strong resistance. Losses in the 8th Battalion were heavy although Reginald seems to have been less exposed than many of his colleagues. Overall nothing useful was achieved.

Afterwards the battalion had a period of rest and was reinforced with fresh troops. Many officers had been killed or wounded, including the captain commanding C Company, Reginald's unit: he was promoted to Lieutenant and given temporary charge of it. Then the battalion was moved to water-logged trenches near Richebourg, where they experienced some banter from nearby German troops. On 11 November Reginald had a close shave when a sniper's bullet passed through the peak of his cap and killed the officer beside him. At the end of November a previous captain of his company returned to run it, and Christmas that year "was a very cheery one".

The battalion spent the early months of 1916 in a variety of locations, including much training but with periods in front-line trenches. In May and June they were heavily involved in preparations for an attack on Gommecourt, to the north of the main Somme offensive: this involved deepening trenches and bringing up equipment, as well as strenuous training. Towards the end of June they held the front line as the preliminary British bombardment began, and suffered casualties as the Germans retaliated. Conditions deteriorated dramatically when a thunderstorm inundated the trenches, undoing much of the recent improvement work. However they were in reserve during the disastrous attack on 1 July, and after this they were sent to a relatively quiet part of the front line for several months.

In November, after the Somme battles had come to an end, the battalion were moved back to their old trenches near Gommecourt. Then in the middle of February 1917 they suffered a phosgene gas bombardment, with heavy casualties. At around this time the captain commanding Reginald's company was released due to poor health, and Reginald took command.

At the end of February unexpectedly the Germans began to withdraw, and the battalion was ordered to take over the old enemy trenches at Gommecourt and continue to follow the retreat. But on 4 March Reginald was reconnoitring on open ground with his batman when suddenly they were hit at close range by machine-gun fire and killed instantly. He was aged 28. He was buried at nearby Foncquevillers, close to the trenches where he had spent so much time. He had at least finally seen an advance.

Reginald is also remembered on the memorials of the Oxford Boys' High School, the St Catherine's Society, and at the British Library. His effects came to £322. His younger sister celebrated her hundredth birthday at Merton, Oxfordshire, in 1990.

This is the story of one of the men who appear on the war memorial of Walton Street Methodist Church, which can now be seen at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Oxford, UK. These stories were compiled in 2019 based on detailed research by Stephanie Jenkins

(http://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/war/walton_street_chapel/index.html), supplemented by information from a variety of military sources.

A particularly valuable source for Reginald Abrams was the 'History of the 1/8th Battalion, Sherwood Foresters in the Great War, 1914-1919', by WCC Weetman, which names him several times and is available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/20527/20527-h/20527-h.htm>