



Rifleman

# Sydney Watts

R/3102, 10th Bn., Kings Royal Rifle Corps  
who died on 4th April 1917, aged 26.

**Remembered with Honour**

Barrow Hill and Staveley Memorials  
Great Central Railway Memorial

**Thiepval Memorial Pier & Face 13 A & 13 B**

SIDNEY WATTS was born at 4, Chapel Place, Stretford, near Manchester in March 1891, the son of 24 year old railway porter, Albert Watts, and his 28 year old wife Elizabeth. Albert originally hailed from Cambridgeshire whilst his wife came from Northampton and it would have been his employment with the railway company that required Albert to move frequently. The couple already had a young daughter, 2 year old Henrietta who had been born in Cambridge. Living with the family were Harriet's mother, 53 year old Elizabeth Faulkner, and a lodger, 19 year old Charles Lant, who also worked as a railway porter.

Sydney was baptised at St Matthew's Church, Stretford on 19<sup>th</sup> April 1891.

By 1901, the family had moved to live at 38, Railway Cottages at Staveley from where Albert was working as a railway guard for the Great Central Railway Company at Staveley Town. 6 month old baby, Albert George, had recently completed the family.

Henrietta had left home by 1911, possibly to work in service. Still living at Railway Cottages, Albert had been promoted and was working as a Goods Guard on the railway whilst 20 year old Sidney was employed as a fitter's labourer at the local iron works owned by the Staveley Coal and Iron Company. Soon afterwards, Sidney followed in his father's footsteps and was working as a shunter on the Great Central Railway when war was declared.

Sydney enlisted at Sheffield as a Rifleman in the King's Royal Rifle Corps on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1914. He was posted to 10<sup>th</sup> (Service) Battalion two days later and, the following week, on 14<sup>th</sup> September, he was appointed Lance Corporal; a role he gave up on 6<sup>th</sup> October at his own request. 23 year old Rifleman Watts was 5'10 ½" tall and weighed 154lbs. He had a

*Researched and written by Ann Lucas as part of the Barrow Hill: A Community Remembers project*

fresh complexion, blue eyes and brown hair. He stated his religion as Church of England and it is likely that he attended the nearby Parish Church of St John the Baptist at Staveley.

*The 10th (Service) Battalion was formed at Winchester on 14 September 1914 as part of K2 and came under orders of 59th Brigade in 20th (Light) Division. Early days were somewhat chaotic, the new volunteers having very few trained officers and NCOs to command them, no organised billets or equipment. The units of the Division first assembled in the Aldershot area with brigades at Blackdown, Deepcut and Cowshott. Artillery was particularly hard to come by; 12 old guns arrived from India in February 1915! When in the same month the Division moved to Witley, Godalming and Guildford, the artillery had to go by train as there was insufficient harness for the horses. Another move was made, to Salisbury Plain, in April 1915.*

*The Division was inspected by King George V at Knighton Down on 24 June 1915, by which time all equipment had arrived and the Division was judged ready for war.*

Sidney Watts embarked at Folkestone on 20<sup>th</sup> July 1915, landing at Boulogne the following day.

*On 26 July 1915 the Division completed concentration in the Saint-Omer area, all units having crossed to France during the preceding few days. Early trench familiarisation and training took place in the Fleurbaix area.*

The Division was involved in a number of significant actions on the Somme during 1916 and Sidney Watts was in action from mid-July to mid-October at the Battles of Delville Wood, Guillemont, Flers-Courcelette, Morval and Le Transloy.

The only disciplinary action noted against Sidney Watts was on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1917 when he lost 7 days' pay for making an inappropriate remark to an N.C.O.

*German Retreat to the Hindenburg Line. Transport horses crossing an area flooded by the Germans*



***The German retreat to the Hindenburg Line:***

*In March 1917, the German armies on the Somme carried out a strategic withdrawal known as Operation Alberich. They destroyed everything on the ground that they left: flattening villages, poisoning wells, cutting down trees, blowing craters on roads and crossroads, booby-trapping ruins and dugouts. The withdrawal was to an immensely*

*powerful and shorter line, positioned to take every tactical advantage of ground. The construction of this line - or rather, series of lines - had been spotted by British and French aviators in late 1916. British patrols began to detect the withdrawal of German infantry from the Somme in mid February 1917 and a cautious pursuit began, halted only as the Hindenburg Line itself was approached.*

It was during this pursuit that Sidney Watts was killed in action on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1917. He had enlisted in 1914 with his friend, Sergeant A. Brearley and, *“a singular co-incidence is that he fell at the same time as himself.”* According to a local newspaper report, *“Rifleman Watts has seen a fair amount of service, but had escaped previously, although he had been in hospital with rheumatism. He always was of a bright and cheerful disposition, and a good sport.”*

The following letter was received on Wednesday morning by Mr and Mrs Watts from Captain W. Neilson. *“I am very sorry indeed to have to tell you of the death in action of Rifleman S. Watts on 4 April. He fell near his Captain in an attack and is buried near to his officer. He was universally liked by all and will be greatly missed by his comrades here.”*



Sidney Watts is remembered on the Thiepval Memorial, the Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, which bears the names of more than 72,000 officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African forces who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave.

He was posthumously awarded the 1915 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

Sidney Watts is also remembered on the Great Central Railway Memorial, and on the Roll of Honour, at Sheffield.

The only personal effects returned to his father, after his death, were some letters. Albert wrote to the authorities requesting a copy of Sidney's will so that he could claim some money which Sidney had paid into a club fund. His father also received



the Princess Mary Gift which was sent to all those 'wearing the King's uniform on Christmas Day 1914.'

*\*Sydney Watts signed his own name as Sidney*

*\*Although no positive connection with Barrow Hill has yet been discovered, there is only one Sydney Watts on the Staveley Parish Memorial which suggests that either he or a member of his family may have been lodging in the village at some time.*

**Sources include:**

1. *England Census 1881-1911*
2. *Manchester, England, Births and Baptisms, 1813-1915*
3. *UK, Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914-1919*
4. *UK, Commonwealth War Graves, 1914-1921 and 1939-1947*
5. *British Army WWI Service Records, 1914-1920*
6. *British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914-1920*
7. *The Long Long Trail*
8. *Great Central Railway Society*