

Private Harry Snell©
Regimental number: 46347
1st Rifle Brigade

born: 1899 – died: 21 April 1918

Harry was just 18 years old when he died in France,¹ leaving behind his bereaved parents and younger brother, William. The brothers were born to Henry Snell, born about 1856 in Sidbury, Devon, England, and Mary Austen, born about 1865 in Plaxtol, Kent.² They had been married on 12 September 1898 in Plaxtol.³ Harry was born in the summer of 1899 in Caterham, Surrey,⁴ and William was born two years later, in 1901, also in Caterham.⁵

In 1911 the family was living in Rodmell, Sussex. Henry was a wheelwright and Harry, then 11, and William, then 9, were attending school.⁶

Because Harry received a war gratuity of £3,⁷ he must have enlisted shortly after his 18th birthday in the summer of 1917.⁸ The war gratuity was introduced in December 1918 as a payment to be made to those men who had served in WW I for a period of at least six months, or for home service for any length of time if the man had served overseas.⁹

Regrettably, only about 30% of UK service records still exist due to a fire resulting from a 1940 air raid on the Army Records Office in Walworth, London,¹⁰ and it appears that Harry's records were not saved. As a result, certain specifics of Harry's military experience were not obtainable.

What is known is that Harry served with the 1st Battalion, Rifle Brigade. This regiment had a long history, back to 1800, drawing recruits from various British regiments to train as sharpshooters, scouts and skirmishers. They were originally equipped with the Baker Rifle, which was more accurate and had a longer range than muskets. They wore natural-coloured uniforms rather than the traditional red, worked in pairs and were trained to think for themselves to harass the enemy.¹¹

When Harry joined the Rifle Brigade, it was already at the Front in France. The war diary for the Rifle Brigade (The Prince Consort's Own) 1st Battalion, 4th Division described the events that Harry lived through, in particular in April 1918. On 12 April, the Battalion marched from their billets in Haute Avesnes to Gonnehem, taking over as advanced and flank guards on the line on the La Basse Canal banks. It was quiet that day, although on the next day the support line was lightly shelled and one heavy gun was employed. On 14 April German airplanes strafed the battalion but no injuries were noted. The battalion took over responsibility for the defence of the canal. On 16 April the battalion was returned to billets in Busnettes but kept ready to be recalled in case of an emergency. On the 18th they were ordered to move up to provide support. The 10th and 12th Brigades had been forced to withdraw all posts to the southern banks of the canal. All bridges in the area were blown up and the battalion was ordered back to Lannoy where they billeted for the night. The battalion rested on the 19th during the day, but returned to the Front to Avelette Bridge that evening. The day of the 20th was quiet, but in the evening A Company attempted to establish a post in a farm but found the enemy strong in the area. About 60 Germans attacked the patrol, which had to withdraw.¹²

It is unknown exactly what Harry experienced, but it is possible he was part of the patrol attacked that evening of 20 April, as it was on that day he was admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station at Pernes suffering from gunshot wounds to his thigh and shrapnel wounds penetrating his



Grave marker for Private Harry Snell at Pernes British Cemetery.

Source: *Find A Grave* (www.findagrave.com)

chest. Sadly, young Harry died and was buried 21 April in Plot 1, Row C, Grave 5 of the Pernes British Cemetery.¹³ Harry's gravestone bears the additional inscription:¹⁴

IS IT WELL WITH THEE?

Pernes British Cemetery was not opened until April 1918, when the 1st and 4th Canadian Casualty Clearing Stations pulled back to Pernes, driven back by the German advance in Flanders. There are 1,098 First World War burials in Pernes.¹⁵

Harry was posthumously awarded both the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre).¹⁶

Harry's brother William married Winifred Florence Polley in London on 31 July 1926.¹⁷ He had at least one child, Robert, and in 1939 he was working as a caretaker at a mortuary.¹⁸ Harry's mother died in late 1933 at the age of 70 at Lewes, Sussex, where the family had been living in 1911.¹⁹

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¹ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 13 July 2018), entry for Snell, H.

² "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 13 July 2018), entry for Henry Snell, Registration district: Newhaven, Registration district number: 78, Sub-registration district: Newhaven, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 12, Household schedule number: 12, Piece: 5084

³ "England, Select Marriages, 1538–1973," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 13 July 2018), entry for Henry Snell, FHL film number: 1473701, Reference ID: 215

⁴ "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 13 July 2018) entry for Snell, Harry, Registration district: Godstone, Volume 02A, Page 204

⁵ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 13 July 2018), entry for William Snell, Registration district: Godstone, Inferred county: Surrey, Volume: 2a, Page: 208

⁶ "See Endnote 2

⁷ "UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.com: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for Harry Snell

⁸ "Gratuity Calculator," *The war gratuities of WWI* (<https://wargratitude.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/gratuity-calculator/>: accessed 13 July 2018)

⁹ "What was the war gratuity?" *The war gratuities of WWI* (<https://wargratitude.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/what-was-the-war-gratuity/>: accessed 13 July 2018)

¹⁰ "How to research a soldier," *The Long, Long Trail, The British Army in the Great War of 1914–1918* (<http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/how-to-research-a-soldier/>: accessed 20 July 2018)

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- ¹¹ "Unit History: Rifle Brigade," *Forces War Records* (<https://www.forces-war-records.co.uk/units/297/rifle-brigade>: accessed 20 July 2018)
- ¹² "UK, WWI War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 20 July 2018) Regiment or Unit: Rifle Brigade (The Prince Consort's Own), Sub-unit: 1st Battalion, Division: 4th Division, Diary entry start date: 1918, Diary dates: 1918 Jan–1919 Mar, Piece description: Piece 1497/1: 1 Battalion Rifles Brigade (1918 Jan–1919 Mar), Piece number 1497
- ¹³ *Find a Grave* (<https://www.findagrave.com/>: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for Harry Snell
- ¹⁴ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for Snell, Harry Service No: 46347
- ¹⁵ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for Pernes British Cemetery
- ¹⁶ "British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for Harry Snell
- ¹⁷ "London, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754–1931," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for William Snell
- ¹⁸ "1939 England and Wales Register," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.ca: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for William Snell, Schedule Number: 124; Sub Schedule Number: 1; Enumeration District: CMHE; Registration district: 31/2
- ¹⁹ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 20 July 2018), entry for Mary Snell, Registration district: Lewes, Inferred county: Sussex, Volume: 2b, Page: 245