

James Smith M.M.



Rank: - Warrant Officer Class 2 (CSM)

Number: - 3593710

Regiment: - The Border Regt (1st Airborne Bn.)

Died: - Killed in Action, 25 October 1944 aged 38 years

Cemetery: - Ghent City Cemetery 18.B.4.

James was born on 10 February 1906 the son of James and Ellen Smith nee Robinson who had married at St. Mary's of the Angels, Batley on 2 February 1906. Joseph was born in 1907 but sadly died in August 1908 followed by Henry 1909-1922, Helen 1910-1910, Elizabeth 1911, Martha 1913-1913 and Margaret 1915.

James had previously married Mary Robinson at St. Mary's of the Angels, Batley on 18 June 1898 and twins George and Mary were born on 31 December 1898 but he only survived three weeks. They were followed by John 1901 and Elizabeth 1902-1904. Mary died in December 1904.

In 1911 the family was living in a two roomed home at 41, Brownhill, Batley. James became a miner like many others in the family but after a pit accident when he was about 18 years old, where he was injured, he joined the army because he thought it was a safer option. He became a full-time soldier and joined the 1st Border Regiment and visited China, Palestine and India amongst many other countries. Family papers state he returned safely from Dunkirk in 1940. He trained at Holywood near Belfast where he met Elizabeth Cairns, who worked in the NAFFI.

Ellen died in March 1925 and his father, James, died on 22 September 1930 aged 53 years when he lived at 83, Gelderd Road, Birstall.

On 17 February 1940 James married Elizabeth Cairns (Kearns) who came from Drumkellan, Derrylin, Co. Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. She was an Irish Catholic and came to Yorkshire to marry and live. Marlene was born in 1943 and Diane in 1944.

The 1st Airborne Division was an airborne infantry division of the British Army during the Second World War. The division was formed in late 1941 during the Second World War, after the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, demanded an airborne force, and was initially under command of Major-General Frederick A.M. Browning. The division was one of two airborne divisions raised by the British Army during the war, with the other being the 6th Airborne Division, created in May 1943, using former units of the 1st Airborne Division.

The division's first two missions—Operation Biting, a parachute landing in France, and Operation Freshman, a glider mission in Norway—were both raids. Part of the division was sent to North Africa at the end of 1942, where it fought in the Tunisian Campaign, and when brigade sized landings. The first, Operation Ladbroke, carried out by glider infantry of the 1st Air-landing Brigade and the second, Operation Fustian, by the 1st Parachute Brigade were far from completely successful.

James was awarded the Military Medal and this was the citation: -

"Sicily 9/10 July 1943 CQMS Smith's glider landed away from the main body of the Bn. The glider load moved off under the command of the Coy. Comd. On the move up an Italian position was encountered. This was attacked and captured.

During the action the Coy Comd was very severely wounded and Smith received injuries in the hand and the head. He had his wounds dressed but insisted on accompanying the party to Bn H.Q. Throughout the remainder of the day he displayed great courage and devotion to duty organising the defence of his Coy under fire. He did not proceed to hospital until the embarkation of his unit took place from Syracuse. His presence and unfailing cheerfulness in the face of adversity contributed largely to the spirit of optimism which remained with his unit throughout the battle."

The 1st Airborne Division then took part in a mostly diversionary amphibious landing, codenamed Operation Slapstick, as part of the Allied invasion of Italy in September 1943.

In December, most of the 1st Airborne Division (minus the 2nd Parachute Brigade) returned to England, and began training and preparing for the Allied Invasion of Normandy. It was not involved in the Normandy landings in June 1944, being held in reserve. In September 1944 the 1st Airborne took part in Operation Market Garden. The division, with the Polish 1st Parachute Brigade temporarily attached, landed 60 miles (97 km) behind German lines, to capture crossings on the River Rhine, and fought in the Battle of Arnhem. After failing to achieve its objectives, the division was surrounded and took very heavy casualties, but held out for nine days before the survivors were evacuated.

Because of the injuries James had received in Sicily he was down-graded fitness wise and worked in the office part of the army. With the September invasion of the Arnhem area, he was sent to just outside Ghent to a house /chateau which was being used as headquarters. A V1 bomb hit it directly although there were no other bombs in the area at that time. At first James was reported missing on Casualty List No.1604.

About 18 months after his death his wife Elizabeth returned to Northern Ireland to live with her father. She died without knowing exactly how her husband had died.

James is remembered with Honour at Batley and Birstall War Memorials.



Holyrood Barracks, Northern Ireland where James met his wife.



With thanks to Diane Antonis.