

WILLIAM ABERCROMBIE

Born June 11th 1878 in Saunderton Village, Buckinghamshire, England

Killed in action on May 15th 1917 in Salonika, Greece

Commemorated on the War Memorial in the graveyard of St Mary and St Nicholas parish church, Saunderton



William was born to William and Sarah Elizabeth Abercrombie (né Moor) on June 11th 1878, the second son of their seven children. He was baptised in St Mary and St Nicholas church, Saunderton, on September 1st 1878 by the Rector, the Reverend Oliver J Grace. William's father is listed as a labourer. His parents registered his birth during September 1878 at High Wycombe. The Abercrombie family is not recorded on the 1881 census. However, at the time of the April 1891 census, William is listed as being 12 years old and living with his parents and five siblings in Saunderton. His father is by then listed as working as a shepherd, and their last known address according to army records was Thatched Cottage, Saunderton, on the corner of Picts Lane (*below, right*).

At the time of the March 1901 census, William, now 22, was working as a domestic gardener and living in Westbourne Street in High Wycombe. He married Nellie Edith Wilson in High Wycombe in July 1905 and they had two children, Marjorie Violet born on October 9th 1906, and Frederick George born on November 19th 1907. At the time of the April 1911 census, William, Nellie and their two children are living at 6 Nutfield Lane (now a commercial area) in High Wycombe (Nellie's parents were living in the same street), and William is now listed as being an Oil Tank Wagon Driver.



William's enlistment records are not available; they were destroyed by fire during the Second World War. However, we know he joined the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, his local regiment. He joined the 7th Battalion as a private soldier with Regimental Number 27353. The regiment went to Greece in October 1915 at the request of the Greek Prime Minister, who was worried about a Bulgarian invasion. The Regiment's early time in Greece was mostly quiet; they experienced sporadic fighting, but it culminated in the repulse of

a Bulgarian invasion of Greece at Lake Doiran (*left*) in Macedonia between April and May 1917.

The battle for a breakthrough in the Bulgarian positions began on April 22nd 1917 and continued intermittently until May 9th 1917. The assault began with a bitter four-day artillery barrage in which the British fired about 100,000 shells. As a result, the earthworks and some wooden structures in the front positions were destroyed. The Bulgarians also opened fire from the batteries between Vardar and Doiran. The Bulgarian General, Vladimir Vazov, commanding the invasion ordered artillery fire day and night into the Allied positions.

The British infantry began its attack on the night of April 24th/25th 1917. 12 companies attacked the Bulgarian 2nd Brigade and after a bloody fight managed to take the 'Nerezov', 'Knyaz Boris' and 'Pazardzhik' positions. After a Bulgarian counter-attack, the British were repulsed with heavy casualties and by 8 pm on April 25th 1917 had retreated. The British assaults on the right and central fronts were also repulsed with heavy casualties, and further British attacks in the next two days were defeated by constant Bulgarian artillery fire and counter-attacks. Due to this fire, the British withdrew to their initial positions on April 27th 1917 and the Bulgarians immediately started to reconstruct their destroyed fortifications (*right*).



On May 8th 1917, after a long artillery barrage, the British began another attack. The main assault started at 9 pm with five waves of British troops attacking the Bulgarian positions. After four attacks during the night of May 8th/9th, the British withdrew to their initial positions having suffered enormous casualties. A London *Times* correspondent wrote that the British soldiers called Knyaz Boris point the 'valley of death'. The artillery duel continued until May 9th but due to heavy casualties the British had to abandon all further attacks. They had lost 12,000 men, either killed, wounded or captured. William died on May 15th 1917 from wounds sustained during this ferocious battle. He was 38 years old and left a wife and two children.

Like most serving men, he had been encouraged to write a will, and had done this on October 21st 1916. He left 'all his belongings' to his wife, Nellie, still living in Nutfield Lane, High Wycombe. He is buried in Grave 1028 in the Lembet Road Cemetery in Thessalonika. He was posthumously awarded two campaign medals, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. His widow, Nellie Edith, who never re-married, died at 94 in 1972, a great grandmother twice over.