

Signalman Leslie Stephen WITT

Service number 2372338
Royal Corps of Signals
6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group Signals
Killed in action on 6 April 1943, aged 33

Born in Devon, Leslie came to Wells in 1917 when his father became cashier at Lloyds Bank. Leslie went to Wells Cathedral School and in his final year was Captain of Rugby and Head Boy. He then worked for Lloyds Bank, first in Taunton and then in Shepton Mallet, where he met his future wife. He joined the Royal Corps of Signals in 1942 and served with the 6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group Signals in Burma. He died during the first Arakan Campaign.



Leslie and Winifred on their wedding day
Photograph courtesy of Mr Ian Hoble, Winifred's great nephew

Leslie was born in Branksome in Dorset on 6 February 1910 to William Stephen and Edith Witt, and was baptised in nearby Parkstone on 14 April 1910. In 1911, the family lived at Devonia, Craven Road, Poole, and his father was a bank cashier. He had one brother.

The family moved to Wells in 1917, where his father worked as a cashier for Lloyds Bank. Initially they lived in Wick House, Coxley, and then in 1920 they moved to Dunedin, Portway, Wells.

Leslie went to Wells Cathedral School from September 1919 to December 1927. He was very successful there. He won a number of prizes and was successful in the sports days. In 1927 he was Captain of Rugby and Head Boy, and gained his School Certificate.

After leaving school, Leslie, like his father, worked for Lloyds Bank as a cashier. In 1928, he was appointed to their Taunton branch, but by the mid-1930s he was working for Lloyds in their Shepton Mallet High Street branch.



Leslie in a school photograph taken in 1923
© Wells Cathedral School

Outside of work Leslie sang in choruses of the Wells and the Shepton Mallet Operatic Societies. On the sporting side, he played for Wells City Hockey Club and was an active member and office holder of the Shepton Mallet Bowls, Croquet and Tennis Club.

On 29 April 1939, Leslie married Winifred Maud Hobley (always known as Winnie) in the Parish Church of St Peter and St Paul, Shepton Mallet. Her father was Ernest Hobley, a farmer's son from Banbury, who started the hardware store 'E. Hobley and Son' in Shepton in about 1900. Leslie and Winifred lived in Sunnymount, Ham Lane, Bowlish, Shepton Mallet. Winifred was a member of the local detachment of the Red Cross Society.

Leslie joined the Royal Corps of Signals in the second half of 1942. At the time of his death in Burma he belonged to the 6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group Signals.¹

The 6th Infantry Brigade was part of the 2nd Division. After Japan invaded Burma the 2nd Division was sent from the UK to India. The 6th Brigade left in April 1942 and arrived in June. In October 1942, the 6th Infantry Brigade was detached from 2nd Division and reorganised as an 'independent brigade group', with its own supporting units, in order to take part in the Arakan Campaign in Burma.

The campaign started on 17 December 1942. Its aim was to clear the Japanese from the Mayu Peninsula and take Akyab Island. The campaign started well but was stopped by the Japanese defences at the end of the peninsula. On 18 March, the 6th Brigade were used for one last attempt to break through the defences but failed. The allied forces were then forced to retreat when the Japanese received reinforcements and counter-attacked.

On the night of 5 April the Japanese struck the rear of the 6th Brigade and overran its headquarters, killing most of the staff. "Everywhere the units of 6 Brigade found Japanese in between them, behind

¹ The CWGC say the 6th Indian Infantry Brigade but that unit was destroyed fighting the Japanese in Malaysia before Singapore fell. The 6th Independent Infantry Brigade Group fought in Burma which is where Leslie died.

them, and round them.”² The brigade rallied and fell back, and Leslie was killed in the fighting on the 6th.

Leslie has no known grave but is remembered in Myanmar (what was then Burma) on the Rangoon Memorial, Face 4, which is in the Taukkyan War Cemetery. He is also remembered on the Shepton Mallet War Memorial, and on the rolls of honour at Wells Cathedral School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery. His brother Arthur served as a Sergeant in the 8th Army in Italy, and Winifred’s brother, Frank, served in the Royal Navy. In 1946 Winifred bought Sunnymount and lived there alone until her death in 1975.

In 1947, Leslie’s mother gave the Cathedral School a cup for a competition in his memory.

We would like to thank Ian Hobley (Winifred’s great nephew), Darshill and Bowlish Conservation Society, and George Bunting (Chairman, The Wellensian Association) for their help with this article.

² Defeat into Victory. Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942-1945 by Field-Marshal Viscount Slim (New York, 1972).