

James Rufus 'Jim' Davies (1885-1945)

WW1 service in the Middle East

My maternal grandfather, James Davies, who died before I was born was held in high regard by my mother and all who knew him. She told me what she knew about his service in the Middle East in WW1. The rest I have worked out from photos and research.

First name(s)	James R
Last name	Davies
Service number	T/277, 448041
Rank	Driver
Corps	Royal Engineers
Service record	Soldier Number: T/277, Rank: Driver, Corps: Royal Engineers
Service record 2	Soldier Number: 448041, Rank: Driver, Corps: Royal Engineers
Archive reference	WO372/5
Archive reference description	Campaign Medal Index Cards and Silver War Badge Cards
Country	Great Britain
Image link	http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/SearchUI/Details?uri=D2109321
Record set	World War One British Army medal index cards
Category	Armed forces & conflict
Subcategory	First World War
Collections from	United Kingdom

Medal Index Card Transcription (Imperial War Museum)

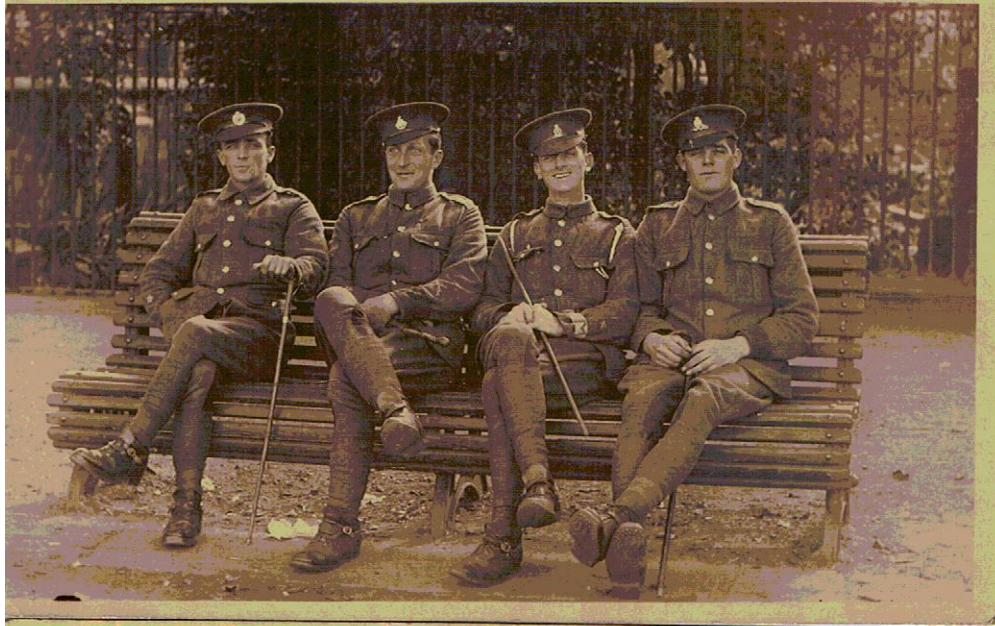
He was born 11 December 1885 in Carmarthen and later added the middle name Rufus by deed poll although he was known as Jim. He served with the Volunteers from 1905 and this became part of the Territorial Force in 1908. The *volunteers* were under no obligation to serve overseas however in 1910 when asked to nominate for Imperial Service overseas in the event of mobilisation, less than 10% of the force chose to do so.

Here are some postcards of life in Territorial Army camp:



In top photo Jim is sitting on the ground on the left hand side relaxing.

In the bottom photo Jim is standing on the Right hand side



In the top photo Jim is sitting on the left hand side.

In the bottom photo Jim is standing on the right hand side.

Jim married a local Carmarthen girl in June 1913 aged 27.

<http://www.1914-1918.net/53div.htm>

gives much of the detailed information used below relating to the 53rd (Welsh)Signal Squadron (Volunteers).

1914

Jim had a **son in June 1914** before war broke out.

When the Great War came he joined the Royal Engineers. He belonged to the 53rd (Welsh) Signal Squadron (Volunteers). In **August** the territorial units were given the option of serving in France and by 25 August more than 70 battalions had volunteered. Since more divisions were not available Lord Kitchener raised the New Army separately. Other territorial divisions including Jim's saw service in Egypt.

In **the summer of 1914** units of the Division were on their way for the annual summer camp when emergency orders recalled **them to base**. **All units were mobilised for full time war service on 5 August 1914** and moved to their allotted positions at Shrewsbury, Wellington, Oswestry and Fort Scoveston by 11 **August 1914**. Which of these Jim went to is unknown. At the end of the month the entire Division moved to **Northampton**. Jim saved many postcards of Northampton.

Since Jim's son was born in **June 1914** he had little time to see him although enough to have a family photograph taken.

The Welsh Division moved to **Cambridge** in **December**. In fact Jim was sent to **Great Shelford** in Cambridgeshire and whilst there learnt of his **son's death from diphtheria in March 1915** and his landlady kindly invited his wife to come and stay with him. He stayed at The Plough with the How family, who were bakers and also ran the public house. He saved many postcards of Great Shelford including **this photograph showing troops marching through the street:**



1915

King George V inspected the Division on 11 February 1915. The Division moved to **Bedford** in **May**.

This is a postcard of Bedford, sent from Carmarthen by his wife, is dated 28 May 1915, was addressed to Jim as **Driver J R Davies Welsh Field Coy RE Bedford**. She was naturally very miserable after her visit to see him in Great Shelford:



<http://familiesofthepast.blogspot.co.uk/>

gave following definition of a **driver in WW1**:

*“Drivers rode on a team of horses, which pulled wagons, guns, ambulances and equipment. Usually a wagon had a team of 6 horses, 3 pairs of 2. Each driver was responsible for 2 horses (feeding, shoeing, veterinary care etc (and he teamed up with 2 other drivers to pull a wagon. Drivers were usually privates in rank but designated “Driver” to distinguish them from infantry. Drivers were essential in getting supplies, food, ammunition and equipment to the men at the front and bringing wounded back to medical stations. It was a dangerous job as they were targeted by machine guns and artillery to prevent them getting supplies through. Their uniforms were very similar to the Light Horse except they wore **peaked caps** instead of slouch hats. They wore **leather putties** instead of canvas and spurs.”*

*The T/277 to which he belonged was a **railway company** and we see later that he was probably near Homs mending the railway as depicted in a watercolour by James McBay at the Imperial War Museum dated **18 March 1918**. After WWI he worked for the GWR as a railwayman.*

Fortunately Jim did not go with the division who went to Gallipoli in July 1915 and suffered tremendous casualties reducing it to 15% of full strength.

1916

Jim had a daughter, my mother, in **January** 1916, when he was aged 30, and he was given leave to see her leaving when she was 2 days old setting sail 19 January 1916. He did not have enough time to have a family photograph taken so the one of her as a baby is just taken with her mother however a rather sad photograph was taken with his wife just before he left for active service.

The Gallipoli campaign had ended by 8th January 1916. “The **53rd Divisional Train ASC** did **not** embark for Gallipoli, and **was transferred to [11th Division](#) in June 1916.**” Thus he did not arrive in Egypt for 5 months and presumably spent time in England training and then went to Egypt via France since a postcard of his is entitled “Somewhere in France”. He is in **front of the middleman on the back row in a waistcoat.** They seem to be off duty and suffering from the heat. It is possible they went to Shorncliffe army camp near Folkestone and they were sent to Egypt via France on troop ships from Folkestone harbour.





Assembly of troops after 19th January 1916 – place uncertain but somewhere in England I presume.



Photo on postcard probably taken in Middle East in WW1 before he fell ill (1916-1918) or before he left England in 1916.

What battles he was involved in is unknown however likely ones can be found on the website quoted earlier. They involved Romani in (4-5 August) 1916 part of the Palestine campaign and this battle was the last ground attack on the Suez Canal at the beginning of the Sinai and Palestine Campaign.

1917

The 53rd Division was commanded by Major-General S. F. Mott, C.B., p.s.c. They were involved in the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

Jim was transferred to the 11th Division in June 1916 to take over from the 11th who left for France 3rd July and took part in the Battle of Romani. Between 1915 and 1917 the Senussi campaign was fought. Jim did not take part until 1916. *“1/1st Welsh Field Company (53rd Division) built a road between El Alamein and Moghara complete with blockhouses”* but when exactly this was is unknown so Jim may not have been involved in this. It is said that:

“The Royal Engineers contributed in no small measure to the removal of the threat to Egypt's security from the west. Throughout these operations they were confronted with the problems of inadequate supplies and inexperienced troops all of which had to be administrated over vast areas.”

Jim would have been involved with the Suez Canal Defences and probably with operations against the Sultan of Darfur and in March 1917.

From March 1917 to November 1917 what he did is unknown.

Jim took part in the advance into Palestine and subsequent capture of Jerusalem in December 1917 and then continued to fight in Palestine and in operations in the Jordan Valley.

In **November 1917** 53rd they were involved in **fighting around Gaza** prior to the Battle of Mughar Ridge. They were involved in the Third Battle of Gaza on 1 November and on 3 November were at **Tel el Khuweilfe** and **Ras en Naqb**. It was in this area that they had **trouble with water supplies**. Although I have found no mention of this on websites Jim said the Turks often poisoned the wells before leaving. Information about water, relief and evacuation problems can be found online showing the problems of finding enough water for the men and horses with severe rationing required.

This is an extract from “The Battle for Palestine” by John D. Grainger in which one infantry officer described the conditions:

“Hard days these. Very little water, never enough for a wash; bully beef and biscuits unvaried, no mails, officers; kits only 30 pounds and often miles behind, dust and heat. We wore tin hats, and the intense heat of the sun on them made our heads feel like poached eggs.”

<http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/3346189> shows that:

The 53rd (Welsh) Infantry Division commanded by Major General S. F. **Mott** and corps cavalry, together with the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade, were deployed in the front line near Tel el Khuweilfe, in the Judean Hills north of Beersheba.

Mott's detachment was involved in the **capture of Jerusalem in December 1917**

The Palestine campaign comprised: Battles in Gaza (26 March-7 Nov) including Capture of Beersheba (31 October) and the Capture of Tell Khuweilfe (3-7 November) and the Capture of Jerusalem (7-9 December). The Defence of Jerusalem was in 27-30 December.

1918

The Palestine campaign continued with the battle of Tell'Asur (8-12 March), the battle of Nablus (18-21 September, part of the Battles of Megiddo).

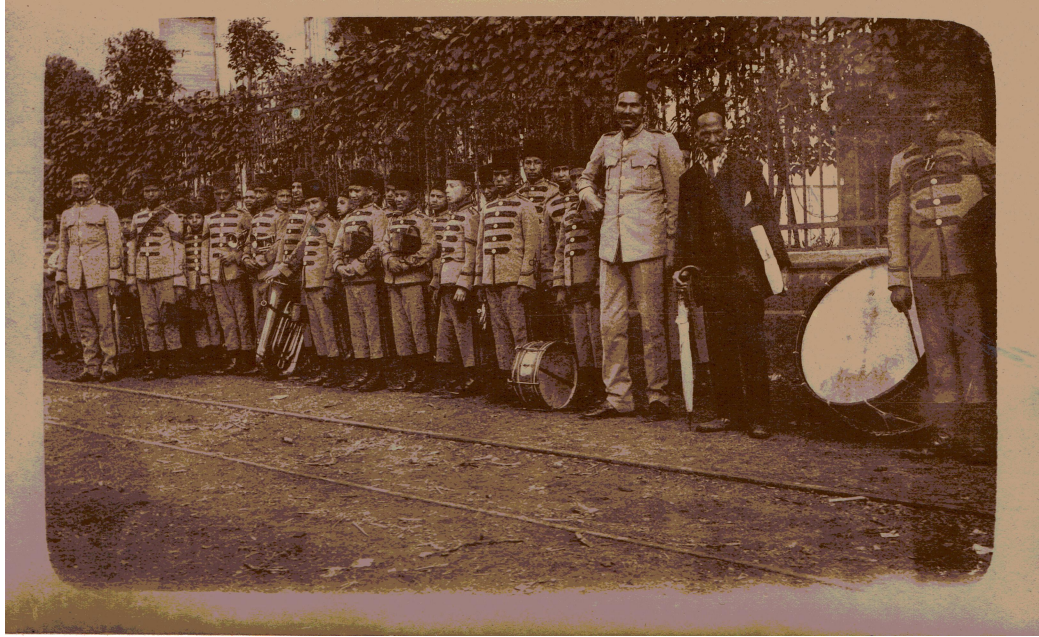
On 26 September the Division was withdrawn for rest and moved back to Tell'Asur. By 12 October it had moved to Ramle, and on 27 October began entraining for Alexandria. It was there when the **Armistice with Turkey** took effect on **31 October**.

The first parties to be demobilised left for England on 22 December. The final cadres sailed home from Port Said on **15 June 1919**.

Here are some photos taken in the Middle East:



Jim is on the right with a fellow soldier by the pyramids whilst on leave in Cairo.



Egyptian Band awaiting train, Cairo



Jim is on the RHS bivouacking in the desert showing tents to the left and horses to the right behind them possibly near Homs. Note the peaked cap worn by Jim as Driver and slouched hat of Australian Light Horse.

Note the similarity of this photo to the two Imperial War Museum watercolours by James McBey on:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/18060>

of “The Citadel of Homs. Homs, a desert town between Damascus and Aleppo. The Australian Light Horse are bivouacked in the foreground.” **19 March 1918**

Also another watercolour

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/18069>

shows “Engineers repairing the Railway near Homs” **18 March 1918** “three **British engineers** are working on the right hand one of two railway tracks”

and there is another watercolour by James McBey **1 Nov 1918 Lebanon** however it is unknown whether Jim was in Lebanon. It is of:

“ a landscape view down a narrow gorge between mountains, crossed by a three-arched railway viaduct running across the composition. **British engineers** work on the tracks on the bridge, a group of labourers hauling lengths of track on the right. Scaffolding surrounds the tallest pillar of the bridge.”



Jim is in the middle second from left in a tent in the desert showing what poor conditions they lived in. It would appear to be on a rocky outcrop with one man sitting on a rock on the LHS.

After these photos were taken, possibly in March 1918, and probably during the advance on Damascus in October 1918, Jim contracted malaria. His wife was warned that he might die but luckily he was treated just in time with a new supply of quinine and responded quickly. He was evacuated to Egypt where he was treated in Alexandria.



Jim is here in 19th General Hospital, Alexandria, Egypt suffering from malaria – front row RHS.

The website http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Capture_of_Damascus_%281918%29 explains how serious this outbreak of “Malaria and Spanish Flu” was and how difficult it was to treat the men:

*“During the pursuit Desert Mounted Corps had travelled around the **malarial shores of the Sea of Galilee** and fought on the **malarial banks of the Jordan** between Jisr Benat Yakub and Lake Huleh. Within a few days of operations in Damascus area finishing, malaria and/or pneumonic influenza, then sweeping through the Near East, spread quickly infecting the regiments.*

*The spread of the epidemic spread quickly assumed **startling proportions** in Damascus, along the lines of communication south of the city, and also to the north. Virtually all sick in the early stages were serious cases. **Supplies of medical comforts quickly became short, supplies of suitable food for a light diet were inadequate and supplies of blankets and mattresses ran short as there were no facilities to disinfect them so, often they had to be destroyed.**”*

*“Due to a breakdown in evacuations on **10 October**, the only divisional receiving station in Damascus, the 5th Cavalry Division receiving station, had on **11 October** between **800 and 900 seriously ill patients mostly with broncho-pneumonia and malignant malaria.** “Deaths were numerous.” Some cases of malarial diarrhea were diagnosed as cholera; the malarial diagnosis station arrived the next day. The staff was exhausted and severely reduced; supplies of medical comforts and blankets ran low. “*

Jim was to die from bronchitis as a result of smoking and **recurrent malaria** in 1945, before WW2 ended, aged only 59, although he was lucky to have survived malaria when **more men died of malaria than in the fighting**.

Recollections passed on to my mother:

Although the details of his war service are unknown his daughter, my mother, said he mentioned his time in the desert, where one dreamt of water and food and then when they reached a well the Turks had often poisoned it. He also talked of the beautiful city of Alexandria where he spent his leave. He was also in Jerusalem having taken part in its capture and defence in December 1917 and brought home small candlesticks and an eggcup made from the olive wood from the Mount of Olives.

Jim would have arrived home in Carmarthen in the summer of 1919 when his daughter was three and a half years old and she looked from him to his photo and back again to make sure it was really he! Her mother and paternal grandmother had been raising her whilst he was away and, sadly, he thought her rather spoilt and sought to remedy this.

Like many men after WW1 Jim was involved in ensuring a fairer world for everyone and was active in the Labour Party in Carmarthen, working for Major Daniel Hopkin MC MP and in the Cooperative movement becoming its president. He was a local councillor and became a JP serving on the bench with Sir Courtenay Cecil Mansell Bt. My grandfather was always ready to help people. He stopped his daughter, my mother, joining the Girl Guides presumably not wanting to see her in a uniform so soon after a war. Sadly he lived to see another war but not the end of it.

As an engineer he was always interested in technology and wired their home for electricity and made a crystal radio for them to listen to.

This is an article in the newspaper when he was appointed JP four years before he died prematurely and before his only granddaughter was born.

Appointment as JP - The Welshman Friday August 23, 1940

FOUR NEW J.P.s

MR. J.R. DAVIES - LABOUR ORGANISER CO-OPERATOR

Mr James Rufus Davies, who is a native of the borough, has been a prominent figure in the Labour Party for several years. He became a member of the Town Council, as a representative of the western ward, in November 1938 and is vice-chairman of the library committee and a member of the watch committee. For six years he has efficiently carried out the secretarial duties of the Carmarthen Division Labour Fair as a member of the divisional executive committee. Keenly interested in the co-operative movement, he is vice-president of the Carmarthen Industrial Co-operative Society and serves on the Wales District Association of the Co-operative Society. Mr. Davies is also a member of the Carmarthen Sports and Attractions Committee.

*An ex-Serviceman of the Great War, he was with the Royal Engineers in **Gallipoli**¹, Egypt and Palestine. He had previously served with the Volunteers since 1905. Mr Davies was made a member of the lord lieutenant's Advisory Committee for Carmarthen Borough a year ago and was placed on the Land Tax Commission.*

¹ Jim was probably meant to go to Gallipoli but he set sail after 19 January 1916, when Olive was 2 days old, and the campaign ended on 8th January. He probably went straight to Palestine.

Jim worked for the railway, namely the GWR, like his grandfather and his brother Thomas. His posts on returning from the war were:

- {1} Signal and telegraph linesman (much outside work with frozen points etc and did not suit his health damaged in WW1)
- {2} Telegraph Officer in charge of the Grey Bridge opening and closing

He refused promotion before taking the Telegraph Officer post because of poor health, which meant he could not be away from home. He had recurrent malaria and bronchitis. His health was ruined in WW1 when he contracted malaria and nearly died. He smoked as well which brought on recurrent bronchitis because of his weak chest. The doctor warned him it would kill him and he should give it up but he was too addicted!

His daughter remembers him being in charge of signalling and opening and closing at the **grey bridge**. This would appear to be the **signal box** shown in this postcard of 1920-30s shown on website:

<http://www.oldukphotos.com/carmarthenshirecarmarthen.htm>.

A temporary bridge is shown here whilst the Roman road bridge is out of action. Behind is the railway bridge. Jim had a tame jackdaw, which used to follow him when he was on duty.



His final post was as **railwayman in charge of signalling from Carmarthen to Swindon**.

When, in 1945, his widow and daughter were looking for a shop to buy bereavement cards in Swansea it was after it was bombed and there were makeshift signs showing to where the bombed shops had been moved.