

# The King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment



The Great War 1914 - 1919



## Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918)



Isaac Rosenberg was the son of immigrant parents. His parents were Lithuanian Jews who arrived in Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century. Isaac was born in Bristol but was brought up in the East End of London. He left school at the age of fourteen. In 1911 the generosity of some Jewish patrons enabled him to enter the Slade School of Art. Isaac was a gifted painter and poet. He studied alongside Paul Nash & Stanley Spencer. Lawrence Binyon described him as 'Small in stature, dark and bright eyed... An unusual mixture of self-reliance and modesty'.

Isaac travelled to South Africa and worked there as a painter. He returned in 1915 and enlisted in the Army. He was opposed to killing and tried to enlist in the Royal Army Medical Corps. However, he was too short and instead he was sent to a 'Bantam' battalion, the 12th Suffolk Regiment. In March 1916 he was transferred to the 11th battalion King's Own.

Isaac was totally unsuited to army life, being clumsy and absent minded. He was bullied and encountered anti-Semitism from both officers and soldiers. Most of his writing was done on

scraps of paper, in very difficult circumstances. 'Break of day in the trenches' is Rosenberg's most famous poem. It was published in December 1916.

### Break of day in the trenches

*Strong eyes, fine limbs, haughty athletes  
Less chanced than you for life,  
Bonds to the whims of murder,  
Sprawled in the bowels of the earth,  
The torn fields of France.  
What do you see in our eyes  
At the shrieking iron and flame  
Hurled through the still heavens?  
What quaver-what heart aghast?  
Poppies whose roots are in man's veins  
Drop, and are ever dropping;  
But mine in my ear is safe,  
Just a little white with the dust.*

From February 1917 Rosenberg spent six months with the Royal Engineers. His job was to help load wagons with supplies and take them up to the front line at night. It was hard and dangerous work. Riding on the wagons at night and occasionally riding over unburied corpses prompted him to write 'Dead man's dump'.

In early 1918 the 11th battalion was disbanded and Rosenberg was transferred to the 1st Battalion King's Own. In the German 'March Offensive' Isaac was in the thick of the fighting. In the early hours of April 1st 1918 the survivors of Rosenberg's Company made their way to the rear. The men had gone no more than 200 yards when a German attack began. The men were asked to volunteer to return to the front line. Within an hour Isaac Rosenberg was killed in action, near the French village of Fampoux. His body was unburied for several days before it was placed in a mass grave. This grave was finally identified in 1926. Isaac's family had his headstone inscribed with the words 'Artist and poet'.