Willie Barber





Rank: -Private

Regiment: - 1/4th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry

Service Number: - 1737

Date of Death: - 23rd July 1916

Cemetery: - Authuile Military Cemetery, Authuile, Somme, France

Willie Barber was the eldest son of Garforth- born William Thomas Barber and his wife Ada (nee Pearson), who came from Dodworth near Barnsley.

The couple married towards the end of 1890. By 5 April 1891 the newly- weds were living at Albert Street, Batley, with Thomas working as a coal miner. Ada was pregnant with Effie May and she was baptised at St. Mary's of the Angels in May 1891.

The couple had nine more children. Alice was born in 1892, Gertrude in 1894, then came Willie born on 11 December 1895, Edward was born in the summer of 1897, when the family lived in Soothill. He was followed by Harold in 1899, Arthur (1901), George Herbert (1904), Theresa (1907) and finally Wilfred in 1910.

Willie attended St. Mary's day school, where he played an active part in school life. For example, he was amongst the pupils who represented St. Mary's in a school pageant in August 1907 to celebrate the raising of money to build an extension to Batley hospital.

The 1901 and 1911 censuses saw the family settled in a three- roomed home at Hamburg Street, Caledonia Road, Batley. By 1911 it accommodated William, Ada and their 10 children ranging from four months to 19 years. Incidentally with the anti-German sentiment generated to the war, the street was renamed Devon Street.

By the time of the 1911 census 15-year-old Willie had left school and was employed as a hurrier in a coal mine. Before enlisting, Willie worked in Messrs Critchley's West End Colliery, the same mine where his brother Edward worked in the lamp department.

Outside of work, both brothers were keen footballers, playing for Batley Albion Association Football team, receiving medals in both the 1912-13 and 1913-1914 seasons.

Football was a recurring theme through Willie's military service, with published letters from him frequently referring to his beloved sport. At Christmas 1915 he wrote to the Batley News appealing for an Association football to be sent out to the boys, who were on the Western Front. The day after the letter was published, 19 December 1915, the 1/4th KOYLI were subjected to a German gas attack. The Unit War Diary that day records heavy losses as a result. One officer and 23 men were killed through gas poisoning, and a further two officers and 149 other ranks were wounded.

By the time of this incident Willie had been on the Western Front for eight months. A member of the local Territorial Force, Willie had joined them around 1912. They practised at the Batley Drill Hall. Willie was amongst those who went into training with them when they were mobilised on the outbreak of war. He went to Sandbeck Park, near Maltby in South Yorkshire, and then to Louth and Gainsborough in Lincolnshire in January 1915.

At Gainsborough on 19 February the KOYLIs were having a raft building training exercise on a pool of water beside the River Trent at Morton, known locally as a gyme. The raft proved unstable, and the men aboard were thrown into the deep water. Seven of them, including Batley man Edmund Battye, lost their lives. Willie described his part in trying to rescue the men: -

"*I was on the bank watching the raft, and saw the water was getting into the straw and thought it would sink. I took off my coat and got ready to go into the water, but then the raft seemed to right itself, and I put my coat on again. Then the raft started to sink, and this time it went down. I took off my coat again and dived in and fetched out two men.*"

He recalled rescuing only two men, but other men who were present state that he was involved in the rescue of three.

Days later the 1/4th KOYLI left Gainsborough for York and on the 12 April 1915 set off to Folkestone, bound for France, arriving the following day. They became part of the 148th Brigade, 49th (West Riding) Division.

Willie wrote often describing details to the Batley News, which the proprietors sent free of charge to France.

In the early hours of the morning of Sunday, 23 July 1916, the 1/4th KOYLI were ordered to attack in an attempt to enlarge the 49th Division's hold in the Leipzig Salient, south of Thiepval. Bombardment of the German lines commenced at 10pm the night before. The 1/4th KOYLI moved along Oban and Campbell Avenues and assembled in the front line on the eastern side of the captured Leipzig Redoubt opposite German held Hindenburg Trench. At 2.20 am "X"company clambered ot of the trench to advance across No Man's Land. The usual combination of rifle fire and shrapnel took a heavy toll and when survivors reached the German positions, they found them heavily defended. Desperate fighting in the German trench ensued and, as casualties escalated, it became apparent that the much-weakened KOYLI's could not hold the position and withdrew. The German bombers mounted a counter attack along the trenches leading to the British front line but were driven off by bombers from the 1/4th KOYLI along with those of the 1/5th KOYLI and 4th and 5th battalions York and Lancaster regiment who had rushed to their assistance. The operation had cost the 1/4th KOYLI three officers killed and one missing, and six men killed and 60 wounded. It appears likely this was the incident in which 20-year-old Willie lost his life.

Besides being a bomber, Willie acted as servant to an Officer and it was, he who wrote to the family informing them of Willie's death. He wrote: -

"*It is with deep regret that I have to inform you of the death of your son, Pte. W. Barber. Kindly accept my very deepest sympathy in your great loss. It may be some small consolation to know how very trustworthy and faithful I, on all*

occasions found him as my servant. He met his death doing the highest duty a soldier can possibly do. The Germans were trying to affect an entrance into a trench captured from them, when he was struck down by a bomb and died immediately. He would have no pain. He was always an excellent bomber, and his fine qualities as such undoubtably helped to stay the Germans. He is buried in a military cemetery in a little village behind the line, along with others of his comrades whose bravery has been beyond description.".

The letter arrived at the family's home on Sunday, 30 July, within three days of the family receiving notification of Willie's younger brother, Edward. The family received a second letter dated 26 July, from one of his friends, Pte. George Jaggar, who gave further details about Willie's death and burial.

It is painful for me to have to acquaint you of the death of your son, who was killed instantly about three o'clock on Saturday morning. I regret the loss of him as I knew him quite well before the war ever started, and for a long time now we have both been officers' servants together, and acted just like brothers. I saw him laid to rest in a grave-yard just behind the firing line, alongside a lot of other comrades, and a small cross is erected in his memory, whilst a few flowers that were gathered roundabout have been placed on his grave. Now I will close my letter with deepest sympathy.

A number of other officers' servants also signed the letter, expressing their sympathy for the bereaved parents.

Willie is buried in Authuile Military Cemetery. He was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal. He is commemorated as William Barber on St. Mary of the Angels War Memorial and is remembered with Honour at Batley War Memorial.



Thanks to Jane Roberts and for more information please see www.pasttopresentgenealogy.com