John William Callaghan





Rank: - Private

Regiment: - The King's Own (Yorkshire Light Infantry)

Number: - 200274 (formerly 2017)

Date of Death: - 20 July 1918

Cemetery: - Courmas British Cemetery, Marne, France.

John William Callaghan was born at the Jeremy Lane end of the Nunroyd area of Heckmondwike on 7 February 1897, and baptised at St. Patrick's chapel the following month. This is now Heckmondwike's Holy Spirit Catholic Church. He was the third child of Michael and Nora Callaghan (nee Gallagher). His parents both came from County Mayo, Nora being born in Cloonlyon, Townland in 1869. The couple married in June 1892.

Martin was born on 15 November 1893, Ada Mildred arrived on 22 December 1896, although she only lived until March 1897 a little over a month after John's birth.

Michael James was born on 19 July 1899 and the family had moved to Providence Street, Batley. On 24 September 1899 his father, who was a tripe dresser, died and on 10 November, 4-month- old Michael Jnr also died.

Widowed Nora worked as a rag sorter to support her two young sons although on 20 April 1901 she married James Gavan at St. Mary's Church. Within the next decade they lived at various addresses including Ward's Hill, Woodwell, Peel Street, and Clerk Green. James and Nora had four children, James Patrick, born 2 March 1902, Ann, born 20 January 1904, Margaret, born 13 May 1906 and Mary born 13 May 1906.

John attended St. Mary's school and by 1911 the family were living at North Street, Cross Bank and John was working as a hurrier below ground in a coal mine. This was employment at Crawshaw and Warburton's Shaw Cross Colliery before the outbreak of war.

Thomas was born on the 14 January 1914, the family moved to Field Lane and by September 1914 both John and his brother, Martin, were serving in the Army. John was a member of the local Territorials, the 4th KOYLI when war broke out and was at the summer camp at Whitby. He went into training with them and wrote to the Batley News describing army life. He was transferred to the 2/4th KOYLI although the exact date is unclear. The 1/4th KOYLI had gone to France in April 1915 but John was too young to go. On 15 January 1917 John sailed from Southampton to Le Havre with the 2/4th KOYLI. John wrote his informal will on 27 January leaving everything to his mother, Nora. Newspaper reports following his death said he had been in France for two years and been injured once during this time.

John was killed in action on 20 July 1918 during the opening phase of the 2nd Battle of the Marne. A German offensive to the east and west of Rheims on 15 July 1918 had been held up and the Allies launched a counter offensive. John's Battalion hastily left their camp at Couin, in the Pas-de-Calais area to travel almost 200 km (around 125 miles), arriving at Sermiers in the Marne area during the early hours of 19 July. The 62nd (2nd West Riding) Division, with whom the 2/4th KOYLIs served, were assigned to attack along the northern bank of the River Ardre. The specific line of attack for the 187th Brigade lay along the steep sided valley through Bois du Petit Champ and the wooded grounds of the Chateau die Commetreuil. At 8.30 pm on 19 July the 2/4th left Sermiers, with the attack due to take place early the following morning. The Unit War Diary describes the day's events: -

The Battalion arrived at ECUIEL FARM at 12.20 am night of 19/20 July, guides were not provided for some time and it was not until 4 am that the Battalion reached their point of assembly, the six cross roads. On arrival here they were subjected to an intermittent shell fire for about 1½ hours causing several casualties… Battalion HQ was later established at advance Brigade HQ owing to telephone facilities. About 7 am owing to there being some doubt as to the disposition of the 2/4 York and Lancaster Battalion received to take their place, arrangements to do this was accordingly made. About 7.40am when it was ascertained that the 2/4 York and Lancaster were in their correct jumping off place, orders were received to follow behind the 2/4th York and Lancaster at about 500 yards distance. At 8.10 am the Battalion moved forward to keep in touch with the 2/4 York and Lancaster as follows A Company on the right, C Company left, and B Company following in the rear. This was done with scarcely a casualty.

A Company advanced in artillery formation from wood and extended on ridge S.E. of COURMAS on coming under Machine Gun fire from left flank (Bois and Reims). An enemy machine gun was captured and crew dispersed in COURMAS-ONREZY road. The Company was now in line with 2/4 York and Lancaster who were held up by enfilade fire. An enemy machine gun was captured on the same road, crew killed and captain in command captured.

The Company then moved in the direction of BOUILLY but machine gun fire caused many casualties and the Company was held up. Company advanced 800 yards in artillery formation through wood on left side of road from BOIS de REIMS to COURMAS. Machine gun fire then caused extension. Company reached a small copse and cornfield W of COURMAS where intense machine gun fire held up the Company for a time. Advance was continued by sectional rushes and the 1st wave of the 5th KOYLI passed. Four officers were wounded in the cornfield leaving 2nd Lt SWABY, who had been cut off, alone with the remainder of the Company. B Company were in Support but filled up a gap shortly after zero. They captured a machine gun nest of 4 guns.

On the night of the 20/21 July the majority of the survivors of A, B and C Companies were lined up along the COURMAS BOUILLY road from COURMAS to the cross roads at the N corner of CHATEAU Wood facing the Chateau. With them were details of the other two Battalions. That evening orders were received to reorganise the three Companies together with D Company which had arrived from SERMIER, take up a position in the Brigade frontage in a line running from

the COURMAS- BOUILLY road extensive southwards to the BOIS de PETIT CHAMPS 2/4 York and Lancaster on right and 5th KOYLI on left.

The dispositions of the 2/4 York and Lancaster were easily ascertained but information as to the situation on the left was uncertain as also whether any troops were still holding the ground E of CHATEAU WOOD between COURMAS & S edge of the BOIS de PETIT CHAMPS. From reconnaissance made there appeared to be a gap between the BOIS de PETIT CHAMPS & the COURMAS BOUILLY ROAD & as the position of the 5th KOYLI could not be accurately ascertained D Company with the remainder of A, B, C Companies took up a position west of the sunken road running SE from COURMAS & dug in as well as holding the old French posts, with orders to be prepared to move forward as soon as possible after reconnaissance had been made & occupy a more forward position at the same time to be prepared for a counter- attack as there had already been on the left.

This was the position early on the morning of 21 July 1918. John was one of 51 men from the Battalion who died that day. The advance was considered a 62nd Division success.

His mother, Nora, received official notification he was missing, and then that he had died. She also received a letter from a Lieutenant saying:

"Your son was reported missing on July 20th, and now reported killed in action. I must say he was a good soldier and very attentive to duty, and his absence is greatly felt among the men of his company.".

John was awarded the Victory Medal and the British War Medal. He was also awarded the Territorial Force War Medal. Only 34,000 of these were issued and he received one because he was a member of the Territorial Force on 4 August 1914 and volunteered prior to 30 September 1914 for overseas service.

John is remembered at Batley War Memorial, St. Mary's Church and Crawshaw and Warburton's work-place memorial, which is inside St. Paul's Church, Hanging Heaton.



Thanks to Jane Roberts and for more information see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk.