John Thomas Connelly



Rank: - Sapper

Number: - WR/600740

Regiment: - Royal Engineers Inland Water Transport

Died at Sea: - 05/11/1918 Age: 29 years

Memorial: - Basra Memorial, Iraq Panel 5 and 61

Family Details:

John Thomas was born in Batley on 22nd September 1888 the son of John and Mary Connolly (nee Rush). The couple had married in the summer of 1884. In 1891 the family with elder sister Catherine born 1887 were living at 4, Ambler Street, Batley and John was employed as a general labourer.

His maternal grandmother Ann Rush died in September 1900 and when the 1901 census was taken the family including Irish born Michael Rush and his aunt Ann Rush was living with them at 23, Villiers Street, Batley. His sister Ellen (Nelly) was born in 1897 along with her twin sister, Anne, who sadly died in July 1897 aged 6 weeks. Mary Elizabeth had been born in 1895 but sadly died in March 1898 aged 3 years, Michael died in September 1900 aged 7 months at 4 Ambler Street, Batley.

John was by now a carter at a colliery and all the women of the family were working as rag sorters.

Mary (jnr) was born on the 30th December 1901.

His mother, Mary Connolly died in November 1903 in Villiers Street and the family moved to East Street where John sadly died in July 1906.

Catherine married Reginald Roberts in 1909 and in 1911 they were living at Back Richmond Street, Batley with Mary (jnr,) born 1901.

Nellie (Ellen) in 1911 was living as a scholar at St. Mary's Orphanage, Richmond Hill in south east Leeds. In this orphanage the census shows that there were 10 rooms for 109 orphans who were all girls. In 1920 she sailed on the S.S. "Empress of Britain" to Quebec to be married she gave her next of kin to be her sister Mrs. Gannon of 20, New Street, Batley. Catherine had married John W. Gannon in Batley in 1919 after the death of her husband, Reginald, who was killed in action in November 1914.

John Thomas emigrated to New York on the "Lusitania" arriving in New York on 22nd October 1909. He was a miner and his last address was given as Back Richmond Street, Batley.He went with Thomas Connolly born 1887 described as a barman who was from 19, Bank foot, Batley. This would have been his cousin whose father was Michael Connelly brother of his father, John Connolly.

Service Details:

John Thomas enlisted in Chicago, United States of America and returned to Europe.

John Thomas Connelly was still in the United States when war broke out. On 6 April 1917 the United States declared war on Germany and officially entered the conflict. In order to increase their military capacity they passed the Selective

Service Act on 18 May 1917 which meant all men between the ages of 18 and 45 has to register for the draft, regardless of their US citizenship status. Not all men who registered for the draft actually served in the military.
The first registration, which took place on 5 June 1917, was for men aged twenty-one to thirty-one. As a result John Thomas registered. Living at Blue Island in Cook County, Illinois, he gave his occupation as a locomotive engineer employed by the Indiana Harbour Belt Railway. He was described as short and of medium stature with light blue eyes and dark brown hair.
It appears he did not wait see if he would be called to serve with the US military. Instead his Soldiers Died in the Great War (SDGW) record indicates he enlisted in Chicago, Illinois and was assigned to the Royal Engineers (RE) as a sapper, to serve with the Inland Water Transport section. The extensive canal system of Northern France and Flanders as well as the rivers of Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) were a valuable supply line, and the REs were involved in maintaining and operating this system.
It seems Mesopotamia was John Thomas Connelly's destination. He was officially reported drowned on or since 5th November 1918 and has no known grave. He is remembered on the Basra Memorial.
He was awarded the British War Medal only. This implies that he did actually leave his native shores in any part of the British Empire whilst on service, but he did not enter a theatre of war. The possibility is he drowned before setting foot on land in the Mesopotamia region. His medal was also returned under Paragraph 992 of King's Regulations 1923 Medals. This paragraph stated that medals which, at the end of one year still remain unclaimed, were be sent to the Secretary at The War Office.
On 7 May 1915 whilst crossing from New York to Liverpool the "Lusitania" on which he had sailed to New York was torpedoed by the Germans just off the coast of Ireland. She sank with the loss of around 1,200 lives.

John was awarded the British War Medal, 1914-1918, and is remembered with Honour at the Basra war Memorial, Iraq and Batley War Memorial Addenda 2019.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group