Thomas Donlan





Photo courtesy of Jane Roberts

Rank: - Private

Number: - 2084

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

Killed in Action: - 9 November 1915

Cemetery: - Bard Cottage Cemetery, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium

According to census records, Thomas Donlan was born in Batley in 1894, but other records his birth as Heckmondwike. His parents were Thomas and Catherine (Kate) Donlan (nee McDermott) from Glenamaddy, County Galway.

The couple married at St. Austin's Catholic Church in Wakefield on 4 July 1893. Margaret (Maggie was born in 1884 in Wombwell, Mary 1886 was born in Normanton and Catherine (Kate) 1888 was born in Barnsley. It was not until July 1890 and the birth of twins Ellen and John was there a link to Batley and St. Mary's Church. Martin in 1904 was also baptised there. Honora (Annie) born in 1892, Winifred 1897, Bridget 1899 and twins Michael Martin and Patrick born in 1901 were baptised elsewhere. Of the twelve Donlan children nine were still alive in 1911: Ellen died in June 1893, Patrick March 1903 and Mary aged 20 in September 1906. Their father, Thomas, worked as a miner.

It was quite a tumultuous childhood for the Donlan children. By August 1901 their father, Thomas, had accumulated seven convictions. These included two serious assaults on policeman, both resulting in lengthy prison sentences and committed when drunk.

On 13 March 1908 Thomas, appeared in Batley Borough Court, accused of pigeon stealing. The birds were recovered in the possession of Robert Clarkson, a Commercial Street fish and game keeper. He told the boys they were old and to fetch the owner and he would pay them. The boys did not return. They were placed under the supervision of the first ever Probation Officer for Batley and it seems to have worked because he was never in trouble again. Described as a pony driver (working in the pit conveying the coal tubs to and from the hewers) he stood alongside Michael James O'Hara and Austin Nolan, who were also to lose their lives in the Great War.

In April 1891 the family lived in New Street, Batley in June 1893-- The Crofts, Staincliffe, March 1901--Thornton Street, Staincliffe, August 1901—Common Road, Staincliffe, March 1903—Spa Street, Batley, April and September 1904 --Hume Street, September 1906—Harrison's Yard, Dark Lane but before April 1911 they seem to have settled in Hume Street.

Thomas worked as a Hurrier at Soothill Wood Colliery before he went to war but had previously worked at White Lee Colliery.

Thomas and his brother John were members of the 1/4th King's Own Yorkshire light Infantry and were in training with them when war broke out and eventually arriving in France on 13 April 1915. Thomas' letters home were described as "*always cheerful*". He was universally respected by officers and men and was described by one comrade as "*one of the best lads in the Battalion*".

The battalion were in the Ypres-Boesinghe line in November 1915. The Unit Diary for the period reads:

Nov 1 to 6 –Battalion on Canal Bank in Brigade Reserve. Furnished working and ration carrying parties for front line Battalion. Casualties 7 O.R. wounded.

Nov 7 – Relieved 4th (H) Y & L Regt in SKIPTON ROAD position. Casualties 2 O.R. wounded.

Nov 8- Enemy was fairly active sniping both by night and day, otherwise situation quiet. Casualties O.R. 2 killed; 3 wounded.

Nov 9- Enemy more active with rifle and machine gun fire. They put a large number of rifle brigades and whizz-bangs in front trench. Retaliation silenced enemy. O. R. 1 killed.

Nov 10- Enemy has been much quieter. No shelling. 2 O.R. killed.

It was during this relatively quiet period that Thomas was shot through the head by a German sniper. He died instantly. His official date of death as Tuesday 9 November but some letter reaching his home gave Wednesday 10 November.

Official confirmation came from Major Moorhouse of the 1/4KOYLI:-

"It is with extreme regret that I have to write to tell you that your son, 2084 Pte. Thomas Donlan, was killed on the 10th inst. He was shot through the head by a German sniper. Please accept my heartfelt sympathy in this your sad bereavement, which I am sure will come as a great shock to you. But there is some consolation

to find in the knowledge of the fact your son was a brave lad and died nobly fighting to uphold the honour of his King and Country. He was buried in a military cemetery just behind the firing line, alongside some of his fallen comrades and the place is marked with a cross. I can assure you his grave will be well looked after and I hope at some future date to be able to tell you the exact spot where he is buried".

One of the letters from a companion who wrote:-

"*I have some sad news for you. Poor Thomas was shot in the head last Wednesday morning. Poor lad, he died almost at once, as it was an explosive bullet and it shattered his head. We, in his platoon are very sorry, and we shall miss him very much. I expect John (his brother) won't know as he has gone back down the line sick. Thomas is buried behind the trenches along with Colour-Sergt. Major Pollard who was killed the same day."*

Colour-Sergt. Major Pollard, referred to in this letter, has a recorded death date of 10 November 1916. A further indication was another letter which read:

"I am sorry to have to tell you that Private Thomas Donlan has been killed. He got hit in the head by a sniper on Wednesday morning about 10 o'clock. I was stood by his side when he was hit, and my pal held him while I ran for the stretcher bearers, but he was dead when we got back. He did not suffer any pain. He was buried in a little cemetery behind the firing line, and I will look after his grave while we are in this part of the line. There is not a lad in the Company who is not sorry for he was cheerful and one of the best lads in the Battalion. We were only about 50 yards from the Germans when he got hit."

The cemetery in which Thomas lies buried is Bard Cottage. The inscription on his headstone reads:

SLEEP ON DEAR SON

REST IN PEACE

AMEN

Thomas was one of the 11 members of the St. Mary's Batley Branch of the National Catholic Benefit and Thrift Society, listed in 1916, who were with the Colours and died during the war.

Thomas was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal.

He is remembered with Honour at St. Mary's Church, Staincliffe Working Men's Club and Batley War Memorial.



Thanks for allowing extracts taken from research by Jane Roberts, and for further information see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk