James Gavaghan



Rank: - Private

Number: -2532288

Regiment: - West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince of Wales's Own) 1st Battalion

Killed in Action: - 10 August 1916

Cemetery: - Englebelmer Communal Cemetery, Somme, France 1.A.1

James was born in Batley on the 29 July 1888, the son of James and Catherine Gavaghan (nee Lynch), who both came from Charlestown in County Mayo, although they had married at Batley St. Mary's in June 1883.

James was one of eight children and five were alive at the time of the 1911 census, Mary born 1890, Thomas born 1893, John born 1895, Peter born 1897 and James. Another son, John was born and died in 1887. In 1891 the family address was Churchfield Street, Batley but subsequent censuses saw them living at 10, Ambler Street, Batley.

James (snr) worked as a willeyer and Catherine in 1891 and 1901 worked as a rag sorter. James went to St Mary's school, although his attendance was not unblemished. For example, in June 1899 his father was fined for failing to send James and his younger sister, Mary, to school.

After leaving school, James went to work as a miner at Bruntcliffe colliery but on 30 January 1906, he signed for the 3rd Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) Regiment. This was part of the militia, not a regular Army battalion. In his attestation papers for the militia, he declared he had received a fine of 2/6 for playing football in the streets. His physical description was given as slightly over 5'6" weighing 121lbs. had a fresh complexion, black hair and eyes. He was discharged days later because he was said to be unfit.

On 11 September 1909 he married Catherine Donlan at Batley, St. Mary's. Within days of the marriage their first son, James, was born. The baby lived for only 18 months and was buried at Batley cemetery on 29 March 1911. The census, taken a couple days later records miner James and wife Catherine, a rag sorter, living at 17, Ambler Street. Peter was born in May 1911 followed by a daughter, Mary, in August 1913.

In August 1914, James was called up as a Reservist. He left his coal mining employment at Soothill Wood Colliery to rejoin his regiment. According to newspaper reports he had managed to re-enlist in 1906 and was with the Militia in 1907 when major reforms to the Army structure took place. James' service number prefix indicates he was part of the Special Reserve. Special Reserve men undertook an intensive period of initial training, topped up by annual camps to refresh their skills.

He landed in France on 25 September 1914, and was transferred to the West Yorkshire Regiment's 1st Battalion. One newspaper reported that after about six months James, was temporarily attached to the Royal Engineers but this is not noted on any surviving military records. His brother Thomas, served with the 1/4th King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry and John and Peter enlisted with the King's Own Scottish Borderers.

In 1915 James was wounded in the back, but he quickly recovered from his injury and returned to the trenches without the need to return home to England. He did however manage a period of home leave at Christmas time in 1915.

On 1 July 1916, the commencement of the Battle of the Somme, the 1st West Yorkshire's were operating on the now much quieter Ypres Salient. At the beginning of August though they made the move south to join the Reserve Army on the Somme.

On 2 August they entrained at Doullens, reached Orville, the next day, Acheux on 4 August and arrived at Mailly-Maillet on 6 August. They did not have long to

acclimatise. After being served dinner, they immediately took over the trenches from the 3rd Worcestershire Regiment near Menil, the relief being completed by 7pm that evening. They remained in the trenches until 9 August, during which time two men were killed and another ten sustained wounds.

On 9 August they were replaced in the trenches by the 1st Battalion The Buffs, the relief being completed by 4.30pm without incident. From there the 1st West Yorkshires returned to billets in the Somme village of Englebelmer where they were in Brigade Reserve. Behind British front lines throughout the war, Englebelmer, though relatively safe, was liable to occasional shelling.

On 19 August between 9pm and 10 pm the village suffered one of these infrequent periods of enemy bombardment, during the course of which James lost his life and another man was wounded. On Wednesday, 23 August James' mother received official news that the second of her sons had been killed. His wife, sought and received, further details about the manner in which her husband lost his life. An officer replied as follows: -

I regret to say that your husband was killed by a shell on the night of August 10th, near his billet. His death was instantaneous I cannot say whether anyone saw him fall or not, as the village was being shelled at the time, and the majority of men were under cover. He was buried in a civil cemetery near the village where he was killed and where the bodies of other men of the Regiment lie, and a cross has been erected on his grave,

In a personal letter to James' widow, the Colonel of the Regiment wrote: -

I cannot tell you how sorry I am at your great loss. Your husband did his duty nobly and you can be very proud of him. His death was pure chance. The village where we were resting, was suddenly shelled at night. All ran to their cellars as ordered, but your husband was hit by a piece of shell just as he was running down the stairs to his cellar. We are not allowed to mention names but if you write to ----, they will tell you the name of the village and the exact position of the grave. —Yours, with much sympathy.

On 24 June 1916, only weeks before he died, James wrote an informal will in which he stated: -

In the event of my death, I leave all I possess to my wife Cathrine [sic] Gavaghan No9 Fleece Street, Batley, Yorkshire, England.

Because it was written whilst James was categorised in actual military service, it was recognised as a valid will.

Additionally, Catherine was awarded a pension for her and her two children for the loss of James. Initially set at 18s 6d per week, it was increased to 22s 11d a week from 4 April 1917. However, when she married miner Thomas Stenchion at St Mary's on 7 February 1918, Catherine forfeited her portion of the pension, though she was paid a one-off marriage gratuity sum of £35 3s 3d, and payments to the children continued till they reached the age of 16.

Of the four Gavaghan brothers, only John survived the war. In addition, cousins Joseph and Peter Gavaghan also died.

The Second World War brought further family losses. James and Catherine's son, Peter, was killed in the days after the Normandy landings of June 1944.

James was awarded the 1914 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal.

He is remembered with Honour at St. Mary's Memorial and Batley War Memorial.



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