Thomas Gavaghan



Photo thanks to Jane Roberts

Thomas was born in Batley on 10 January 1893 and baptised at St. Mary's Church later that month. He was the son of James and Catherine Gavaghan (née Lynch). The couple came from Charlestown, County Mayo and had married in 1883. They had a total of eight children five of whom were still alive in 1911. They were James 1888, Mary 1890, John 1895, Peter 1897 and another son named John was born and died in 1887. In 1891 the family lived at Churchfield Terrace, Batley but subsequent censuses saw them living at 10, Ambler Street, Batley.

James worked as a Willier in the textile industry or a farm labourer. Catherine in 1891 and 1901 was recorded as a rag sorter.

Thomas in 1901 was described as working as a piecener in a mill but before he enlisted, he was working as a miner at West End Colliery where he was described as very popular amongst his workmates.

Besides his involvement with the church at St. Mary's, he was also a member of the St. Mary's Batley Branch of the National Catholic Benefit and Thrift Society. In March 1916 he was named as one of 11 members who had given their lives for King and Country.

Thomas enlisted in Batley in November 1914 into the local Territorial Army and joined them in the vicinity of the Ypres-Boesinghe line, Belgium on 15 August 1915. This is an area north of Ypres, along the Yser Canal, near the village of what is now known as Boezinge.

Whilst there no major battles took place but the area was subjected to regular hostile shelling, combined with the constant threat of snipers, rifle grenade attacks and machine gun fire.

In December 1915, whilst still in the Ypres-Boesinghe line, Thomas was commended to take part in a significant incident involving the 1st/4th KOYLI.

Early that month intelligence reports, and information collated from captured German soldiers, suggested the enemy was about to mount a gas attack. Gas cylinders had been seen along the German front line, opposite the 49th Division's position. At just before 5am on the morning of 19 December the anticipated attack began. The KOYLI's Unit War Diary for the day described events:

4.50am: A hissing noise like a fast-running motor car was heard in the German lines. Very shortly after the presence of cylinder gas, said to be Fosgene [sic], was detected in the air. Warning was given, tube helmets put on and rapid fire opened on the enemy's parapet with rifles and machine guns. S.O.S Gas was sent to the Artillery who immediately opened fire. No Infantry attack was made but later a German patrol numbering about ten was seen advancing towards our trenches. Rifle fire was opened on them and they dispersed, only one man being seen to regain the German trench. The enemy heavily bombarded the whole of our front line and Support trenches during the day.[7]

The 1st/4th KOYLI did manage to keep the enemy at bay, but as they were being relieved that evening a fresh German bombardment was launched using shells filled with lethal phosgene gas.

The diary for the day goes on to record one officer and 23 men killed through gas poisoning, with a further two officers and 149 other ranks wounded as a result of it. In addition, another officer was wounded and subsequently died, and a further six other ranks were killed and 19 were wounded in the ensuing attacks of the day.

News filtered home to towns across the Heavy Woollen District. The *Batley News* was one of many local papers to cover the incident. It included the following official praise:
How well our brave Territorial's behaved in the trying ordeal on December 19th is shown by the appreciation of their Divisional Commander, who in an Order issued on December 22nd, in "Belgium," said:

I have just received the preliminary report of the gas attack and heavy shelling by the Germans on the Sixth Corps' front on the 19th inst., and I should be very glad if you would convey to the troops of the 49th Division my appreciation of their steadiness and behaviour under very difficult and trying circumstances. Owing to their steadiness the attack failed to produce any practical or material effect. It was a day which reflects great credit on the whole corps.[8]

Thomas was among a number of men named in the Unit War Diary to be commended for good work during this gas attack.[9] Four men received the DCM; the others, including Thomas, received gallantry cards from the Divisional Commander.
By the 27 December he was once more in the front-line trenches of the Ypres-Boesinghe line,

The Unit War Diary for the 27 and 28 December 1915 notes:

Enemy's machine guns were particularly active up to 10 p.m. Some sniping all through the night and heavy sniping this morning. Relieved by 8th Battn. Rifle Brigade, 14th Division. Casualties: O.R. 4 killed, 5 wounded.[10]

Thomas along with another Batley man Pte. Orlando Morrison, were amongst the victims of German snipers on 28 December.

Thomas and his cousin Peter Gavaghan served in the same Battalion, and it was Peter who sent the family first news about Thomas' death. This was followed by a letter from Captain George Thomson who wrote on Sunday 3 January to Thomas' mother as follows:

I expect by now you will have heard of the death of your son. He was shot in the head by a German sniper on the 28th December and died shortly after. I saw him very soon after and I am certain he suffered no pain; I cannot say too much in his

favour. He has done some good work since he joined us and he will be greatly missed by all of us. It is only a few days since I drew the attention of the Commanding Officer to the good work your son has done. He was laid to rest just behind the firing line and the exact place has been marked by a cross. I hope you will accept my deepest sympathy in your sad loss.[11]

The family also received a letter from Lt. Col. Haslegrave, the Commanding Officer of the 1st/4th KOYLI. It read:

It is with extreme regret I have to inform you that your son No. 3197 [sic][12] *Private T. Gavaghan, of the Battalion under my command, was killed in action on the 28th December 1915. He was shot through the head by a German sniper, and died immediately afterwards. Please accept my heartfelt sympathy with you in this your sad bereavement, which, I am sure, you must feel very much. It is exceedingly hard lines that he should be killed the same day the Battalion were coming out of the trenches for their well-earned rest. There is some consolation, however, to be found in the knowledge of the fact that your son did his duty and died a hero, fighting to uphold the honour of his King and Country. He is buried in a military cemetery just behind the firing line, and the place is marked by a cross. I can assure you every care will be taken to see that the grave is well looked after, and I hope at some future date to be able to tell you the exact spot where his body lies.*[13]

Thomas was 22 years of age, his family hearing the news of his death just days short of his 23rd birthday. He is buried in the same Belgium cemetery, Bard Cottage, as two other St Mary's men, Martin Carney and Thomas Donlan. Orlando Morrison, the other local man who died on the same day as Thomas, is also buried in that cemetery.

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

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

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