<u>Michael Rourke</u> (Groark)



Michael was born in West Town, Dewsbury in late 1877, the eldest child of Patrick and Bridget Groark (nee Mullany and variants). The couple had married in around 1876/77 and they both came from Ireland. The 1891 census indicates they both came from County Sligo but in 1911 Patrick states his birthplace was Swinford.

Michael was the first of 10 children. His siblings included Mary Ann (born 1879 and died March 1904) James Henry (1881-1882), Maggie c1883, Lizzie born 1887, James born 1889, Henry born 1892, Frances born 1894, Nellie born 1896, Lizzie 1897, Agnes c 1900. James was the first to be baptised at St. Mary's Church, Batley.

Patrick was a cart driver when the family lived at Ingham Road, Dewsbury but they had moved to live at North Street, Batley before 1891 and Wooller Houses, Carlinghow in 1901. By 1911 they were back in North Street, Cross Bank.

During this period Patrick worked in the agricultural sector as a farm labourer and the 1911 shows that he was a cowman. Bridget worked in the woollen industry, in 1881 as a weaver and in 1891 as a rag sorter. She died in 1911, her burial taking place at Batley Cemetery on 2 March. In 1915 Patrick and his family

were living at Fleming Square, Commercial Street, Batley and this was their address at the time of Michal's death. In 1891 Michael was working at a coal mine at the age of 13 years. His Militia attestation papers of April 1897 say that he was employed at Critchley's colliery as a hurrier. After briefly serving in the Regular Army with the Royal Scot Fusiliers in 1898 he returned to Critchley's as is detailed in his January 1899 Militia papers. At the time of the 1901 census, he was a soldier but resident at the family home in Batley.

Michael first went to Dewsbury to enlist in the Militia on 21 April 1897. His brief foray was as Private 6285 in the 3rd Battalion King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. At this point he measured 5'3" and weighed in at 104 lbs. His features were described as fresh complexion, with light grey eyes and dark hair. A couple of scars were mentioned, including on the back of his left hand. However, within a week he purchased his discharge for £1. Three months later, on 29 July 1897, he re-enlisted and this time he served for just under 12 months with the 3rd KOYLI with the number 6400. He transferred to the Regular Army with the Royal Scots Fusiliers on 10 August 1898 with the number 5892. He lasted only 91 days instead of the 12 years he had signed on for and purchased his discharge for £10 in November 1898. He re-joined the Militia in January 1899 but once more transferred back to the Royal Scots in May 1899. He served in the Boer War and earned the Queen's South African Medal and date Clasp for 1901, along with clasps for service in Cape Colony, Orange Free State and Transvaal. After his South African service, he transferred to the Regiment's 1st Battalion, serving in India. Unfortunately, his Great War service papers are amongst the burnt records.

By 1911 he was working as a willeyer in a woollen mill and immediately before the war was working at Messrs Chas, Robinson and Company's mill.

Michael was using the name Groark and married Margaret Haley nee Duffy at St. Mary's on 7 June 1913. Margaret had married John William Haley and had children Thomas 1900, Patrick 1902 and Margaret Kathleen 1903. Her husband died just before the birth of Kathleen so she returned home to her family and in 1911 was living in Birch Street, Carlinghow with her widower father. In April 1914 their son Michael was born when they were living at North Street, Cross Bank.

At the outbreak of was he was called up as a National Reservist, going to France on 15 September 1914 to join his old unit who were based on the Aisne. In October his wife received a cheery letter which mentioned his good health and said: - *"I am the only Batley man in this regiment. I am proud to be a member of it, as it has done very good work, but I am not allowed to give details."*

In early November she received notification her husband was in hospital at Port-le- Grand with bronchitis but shortly afterwards was invalided home with rheumatism. After a short spell in England, he returned to France.

In May 1915 a letter from him at the Front was published in the local paper. He said he was well and the weather was very hot. He pointed out the men got a bath and a change of clothing when out of the trenches. Michael's last letter home was dated 14 June 1915, two days before the Battle of Bellewaarde on 16 June. The attack was conceived to dislodge the German trenches on high ground north of Hooge, between the Menin Road and the Ypres- Roulers railway. The Germans had gained this position at the end of the Second Battle of Ypres. This German salient, on the high ground of the Bellewaarde Ridge, provided the enemy with good vantage point overlooking the British Front Line Trenches. The British attack was to be undertaken by the 9th Brigade of the 3rd Division of which the 1st Royal Fusiliers were part. They were allotted and attacking role in the first phase of the operation, alongside the 4th Royal Fusiliers and the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers, to take a narrow strip of wood and the German front-line trenches as far as the north-east corner of Railway Wood.

The diary continues the account. At 4.30pm the Battalion set off for the trenches by Bellewaarde, in preparation for the attack. They consisted of 18 officers and 839 other ranks, including Michael. By midnight they were in position in the assembly trenches. At 2.50 am a Divisional Artillery bombardment commenced and unfortunately the Royal Scot Fusiliers' trenches were slightly damaged by this so- called friendly fire. The bombardment ceased at 4.15 am and they advanced. On the right 'A' Company, of which Michael was part, under the command of Captain Utterson-Kelo reached their objective with practically no loss. The much-depleted Battalion was finally relieved at 11 pm that evening. The following day the Royal Scot Fusiliers' shocking roll call of casualties during the battle stood at one officer and 36 other ranks killed; two officers and 24 other ranks seriously wounded; 10 officers and 199 other ranks

wounded; and a further 202 other ranks missing. These figures were later amended with the CWGC's figures showing one officer and 115 other ranks killed on the 16 June. Only two of these have known graves, the others are commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres. The first news to reach Batley was a letter from a Batley soldier Pte. C. King of the 1st Northumberland Fusiliers: -

"Mick and I were together on June 15th and promised that if anything happened to either of us on the 16th we would write to his home. I hope you will not take this too seriously but live in hope. I went round his regiment and could not find any Mick. Some of his palls told me he was wounded."

He wrote to Mr. A. Baines of Upton Street, Cross Bank, on June 30th: -

"I am very sorry for Mrs. Rourke. His regiment was in charge with us on the day I will never forget- the 16th of June. I saw for myself that he was amongst the missing, but there is hope yet. It was a bloody sight but a grand charge. We had a lot of casualties and they lay all over. My deepest sympathy goes to Mrs Rourke, for I am very much afraid that poor Mick is gone. The Germans shelled us for 27 ½ hours after we made the charge and the men were blown to bits; it was hell."

Margaret received news that her husband had been wounded and taken to the Chelsea Hospital. The Record Office could not confirm this so she wrote to Father Mc Clement of St. Mary's, Chelsea, but this proved fruitless. For months she tried contacting various organisations, trying to find the fate of her husband, one of them was the British Red Cross and the Order of St John Inquiry Department. They sent the news that a Pte. Pilgrim knew two men named Rourke, one was a slim man, slightly built dark, with a moustache, about 38 years of age. This man was wounded at Hooge on 16th June and could not be brought back in because the Germans had retaken the trenches which they had lost. The description matched Michael's. As more news filtered through, it appeared that Michael had been involved in the Battle of Bellewaarde action where the Allies captured four lines of German trenches. The Germans counter- attacked, recapturing the last two trenches. Michael lay wounded in the third line of trenches, but so severe was the action that when the retreat came and the Germans re-captured that line his comrades were unable to take their wounded

colleagues back with them. Margaret still did not give up, hoping he was a prisoner of war, and wrote to the International Committee of the Red Cross and also to the King of Spain. Spain was neutral but the King at his own expense tried to help prisoners of war. Despite all the setbacks she continued until she received a letter from a Pte. Harry Thomson, who was in a military hospital in Newcastle on Tyne: -

"I am sorry to tell you that your husband, Pte. Michael Rourke, was killed on the 16th June 1915. He was slightly wounded with my- self and Lance Corporal Morton. I wanted him to go back to the dressing station and get looked after there. But he would not hear of it. He wanted to go on and have it out with the Germans as he called it. We went on together for about 20 yards when he fell with a bullet through the head. He never spoke after it. We managed to get him and some other men back later on and bury them behind our firing line. I am sorry to have to tell you the sad news Mrs Rourke but it is best to know the truth. The regiment lost very heavily that morning. The Royal Scots Fusiliers did their work very well. I am glad to say I am keeping a little better. This is the second time been wounded. I hope you are keeping well, yourself and all your family. Anything also that you want to know about "Mick", as we used to call him, I shall be pleased to tell you if I can. I must close now because the doctor is on his rounds."

Michael was awarded the 1914 Star, The British War Medal, 1914-18. Victory Medal.

He is remembered with Honour at St. Mary's Church, Batley War Memorial and the Menin Gate, Ypres.



Thanks to Jane Roberts and for further information and acknowledgments please see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk