William Hargreaves



Rank: -Private

Regiment: - 1/4th King's Own (Yorkshire Light Infantry)

Service Number: - 202426

Date of Death: - 28 April 1918

Memorial: - Tyne Cot Memorial, Zennebeke, West Vlaanderen, Belgium

Willie, or William, was born in Batley in 1895, the son of Batley- born Charles Hargreaves and his Thornhill-born wife Annie Hirst who had married at Batley Parish Church on 16 July 1885. Their eight children included Louisa, who died at the age of 23 months on 19 December 1890, George William, who was 12 months old when he died in August 1892, Eliza who died March 1895 aged 1 year, Percy who survived 2 months, with his death taking place on 20 July 1898, and Friend who died on 29 January 1906, aged 6 months. Willie was their only child to reach adulthood.

The Hargreaves family lived in and around the Wards Hill area of Batley, with Charles working in the textile industry as a card cleaner. Annie, when she is

recorded as working, worked as a weaver. The 1911 census records Willie as a cloth finisher, for a woollen manufacturer. Before enlisting, he worked as a tenterer at rug and blanket manufacturers Messrs. John Fenton and Sons, Batley Carr. In December 1913 Willie was baptised into the Roman Catholic faith at St Mary of the Angels. On 25 November 1915 he married Margaret Agnes Lynch in the same church. The daughter of Thomas and Mary Lynch, she went back to her family home at Wards Hill whilst her husband undertook military service with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, being posted shortly after their marriage. He initially served with the 2/4th Battalion, before being transferred to the 1/4th. During the two years or so of his military service he was invalided home once due to sickness.

He was killed in the final year of the War, during the Spring Offensive of 1918. There is discrepancy around the exact date, with some sources, including newspaper reports and Red Cross enquires by his widow in the months immediately after, indicating he was posted missing on 14 April. Other sources, including Commonwealth War Graves Commission, along with information provided to Batley War Memorial Committee indicated he was missing presumed killed on 28 April 1918. This period was a tumultuous one for the British Army, taken by surprise by these German's last throw of the dice attacks spearheaded by their elite troops. Inevitably it led to confusion around casualties.

The Offensive began on 21 March 1918, with an attack, codenamed Operation Michael, along a 40-mile front from just north of Arras, encompassing the ground fought over in the 1916 Battle of the Somme. By 5 April, when the Operation Michael phase ground to a halt, the Germans had taken 1,200 square miles of territory including several important French towns including Bapaume, Albert and Peronne, advancing 40 miles and inflicting losses on the heavily outnumbered British in the region of 177,739. Many of these were taken prisoner as the Germans advanced. The nest phase of the Offensive Georgette (Battle of Lys) which began with an intense bombardment of high-explosive and gas shells over British and Portuguese positions on a 10-mile front south of Armentieres at 4.15am on 9 April. The German aim was to capture Ypres and force the British back to the Channel Ports. The first day the Germans took Fleurbaix, Laventie and Richbourg in a three-and-a-half-mile advance. By 11 April Sir Douglas Haig issued his famous "*backs to the wall*" order, calling on Allied

troops to stand firm against the Germans. On 14 April 1918 the 1/4th KOYLI were involved in the defence of Neuve Eglise at a heavy cost. Amongst the officers one was killed and two wounded. Amongst the men, 38 were killed, two died of wounds, and there were an unknown number wounded and missing. This was the day Willie was first reported missing according to earlier sources. On 28 April 1918, the official date of his death, the 1/4th KOYLI relieved a heavily depleted 9th KOYLI in the line, replacing them in the Cheapside trenches just north of Kemmel, the relief being completed by 3 am that morning. Willie was in "Y" Company's 9 Platoon.

The 1/4th KOYLI Unit War Diary for the next couple of days were brief:

28. 4. 18 7.35 pm Barrage opened; no infantry action.

29.4. 18 5 am Intense enemy barrage opened and the enemy attacked on a wide front. Attack repulsed by rifle and Lewis Gun fire; failed to reach our line at any point. Much sniping during the whole of the day.

5.20 pm Enemy crossed our front to attack on right; they were made to deploy by rifle and Lewis Gun fire from our support Company.

"Y" Company relieved by Australian Light Horse, who came under the tactical disposition of the Commanding Officer.

"Y" Company reinforced "W" Company on the Left. Dispositions: - 1/5thY&L on left," W"," Y", "X" and Australian Light Horse on Right, "Z" Company in Support.

30.4.18 Battalion relieved by 3rd Worcesters and proceeded to Camp North of RENINGHELST.

In the immediate aftermath, the Diary stated for the whole operation between 10-29 April 1918 losses amounted to three officers killed and 13 wounded; and 64 Other Ranks killed, 340 wounded, 93 missing and 13 died of wounds - with Willie presumably amongst the missing number. In the final analysis the dead were under-reported with one source stating: ---- *"in the fighting from 10 to 30 April 1918 the 1/4th KOYLI suffered as many killed (140) as it had sustained in the 82 days it was involved in the 1916 Battle of the Somme."*

By June 1918 the local newspaper carried a report that Willie Hargreaves was posted missing. His wife, Margaret Agnes, tried to find out his whereabouts via the Red Cross, initially to no avail. However, the Red Cross were gradually pulling

together strands of information, with the following summary; … *5.7.18 Hargreaves W No 202426 1/4th KOYLI – found dead, and buried south of Mount Kemmel. No further details known. Paybook sent in from Res. Inf. Regt 21.5.18.*

The ground continued to be fought over, and his body was once more lost. He has no known grave and is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial. He was awarded the Victory Medal and the British War Medal and is remembered on St. Mary's War Memorial as well as Batley War Memorial.

His mother, Annie, died on 13 December 1918 and his wife, Margaret Agnes, died on 3 January 1928 aged 35 years.



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