Michael Hopkins





Photo by Jane Roberts

Rank: -Private

Number: - 3/866

Regiment: - King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry 9th Bn.

Killed in Action: - 1 July 1916

Cemetery: -Gordon Dump Cemetery, Ovillers-la-Boisselle, Some, France Y.K.4.

Michael was born on 27 September 1894, the son of labourer, Pat Hopkins and his wife Bridget (nee Boyle). His birth certificate indicates a Bella(g)hy birthplace although later records indicate Charlestown. His parents had married in December 1886 in Kilbeagh parish. Their other 12 children included Mary Ellen (born 1887), John (1889), Bridget (1891), Patrick (1892), Thomas (1896), Martin (1898), Catherine (1901), Bernard (1903) and Margaret (1906).

It was shortly after Margaret's birth that most of the family came to Batley. They lived at Cooper Street and Pat initially worked at Messrs Crossland, contractors at Healey Lane. At Christmas 1907 Pat went to work at Soothill Coke Ovens as a

hopper trimmer. He enjoyed the job and his employers said Pat "*was a man of excellent character and most reliable.*"

On Wednesday 8 July 1908 Pat left for work at 5.30 am, where his job entailed working in the 39-foot wide and 22- feet deep containers known as hoppers, where slack was stored. When the hopper was emptied of slack, Pat's next job was to use a hosepipe to clean out the hopper drains. Meanwhile the crane moved on to empty the slack from a neighbouring hopper. Just after 3 o'clock the brakes gave way and the grab fell into the hopper which Pat was cleaning. The crane driver pulled the grab out, more quick lime was applied, and he carried on working, oblivious in the fact that Pat was in the hopper. It was over half an hour before the accident was discovered. Pat was found dead, his neck fractured and jaw broken, the grab clearly having hit him and death would have been instantaneous. An inquest was held at Batley Town Hall the following day and the jury's verdict was accidently killed. The Hopkins family dispersed and Bridget, for a short time, returned to Ireland with the younger children but the older ones lived in houses across Batley.

In the 1911 census 16-year-old Michael was lodging at Fleming Street in the home of Patrick and Margaret Hopkins. He was employed as a colliery trammer and by the time the war broke out he had risen to be a deputy at Batley Colliery. Michael was with the pre-war Special Reserve and from there transferred to the 2nd KOYLI after they suffered heavy losses in August 1914 in the action at Mons and Le Cateau. Michael was amongst those men sent out to bring them back up to strength.

Michael did have a couple of narrow escapes, being twice wounded, on one occasion by bayonet and on another on being hit by a bullet. One was a hip injury, the other an arm. He also suffered from frost bite. Some- time after the summer of 1915 he transferred to the 9th KOYLI.

In the summer of 1916, in his final letter home, Michael hinted of a forthcoming battle. Enclosing a photo of himself and two comrades he wrote: - "*These are the boys that will give the Germans what Paddy gave the drum when we meet them, and I hope that won't be very long.*"

The meeting was on 1 July 1916, on the opening day of the Battle of the Somme. That day the 9th KOYLI were involved in the 64th Brigade attack north of the village of Fricourt, with a position known as Crucifix Trench being an initial objective.

The original assault, scheduled for 29 June, was delayed for 48 hours due to bad weather. As the bombardment of the German lines continued, on the evening of the 30 June the men, each carrying a staggering 66 lbs. of equipment, proceeded to their assembly positions, a move completed by 11 pm. It was now a case of waiting for Zero Hour set for 7.30 the following morning. The War Diary notes one piece of relief to the tension—the arrival of tea and rum for the men in the early hours.

At 7.25 am during eight minutes of intense bombardment, the leading platoons of A and C Companies emerged from their assembly points and crawled forward under the heavy barrage. As the barrage lifted at 7.30am the attack commenced and the men moved forward in waves across no-man's land.

The Operation Orders instructed the men to move in quick time towards their objective. It also notes: -

"The use of the word RETIRE is absolutely forbidden in this Division. All ranks are distinctly to understand that if such an order is given, it is either a device of the enemy, or is given by some person who has lost his head. In any case, this order is never to be obeyed."

Withdrawal was only allowed via written and signed order. In another part of the discipline instructions, the natural tendency of men to pick up souvenirs was discouraged in the strongest terms: -

The attack is not going to be a curio hunt. Any tendency to waste time in looking for, or picking up, curios, is to be checked AT ONCE. Positions are to be immediately consolidated, and troops made ready to meet enemy counter-attack. Any Officer, N.C.O. or man found in possession of any curio or souvenir will be tried by Court Marshall. Souvenirs will be collected under Divisional arrangements and distributed to the Units taking part in the attack.

It is a revealing order , with the perception that men might have the time and inclination to hunt for for souvenirs during the attack and when reaching their objectives, indicating the belief that opposition—following days of pounding from British artillery—would be minimal enough to allow it. The possibility of any curio hunting by the 9th KOYLI was quickly quashed by subsequent events.

The unit war diary goes on to record the initial assault as follows: -

When the leading platoons had crawled forward about 25 yards into NO MAN'S LAND, they were greeted by a hail of Machine Gun and Rifle Fire; the enemy, in

spite of our barrage, brought his Machine Guns out of his dug outs and placing them in the top of his parapet, opened rapid fire. A and C Companies suffered chiefly under this, while B and D Companies endured chiefly a heavy barrage. When the leading troops were close enough, the enemy also employed cylindrical stick bombs against them. The battalion suffered heavily in NO MAN'S LAND…

The 9th KOYLIs advanced crawling and dashing from shell hole to shell hole until they seized the German front-line trench north of Fricourt, then the Sunken Road about 600 or 800 yards behind the front line, and then they finally occupied Crucifix Trench, another 200 or 300 yards further on. But the War Diary was correct. They did suffer catastrophic losses. The Unit War Diary for the day records 22 of the 24 Officers of the Battalion had either been killed or wounded as a result of the action. In addition, the diary notes there were 475 casualties in the other ranks, about 145 of whom were killed.

From his original burial location, it seems Michael did not get beyond the German Front Line. His mother received official intimation of her son's death on Saturday 22 July 1916. Bridget was awarded a modest pension, initially 10 shillings a week, but increased by a further shilling from 4 April 1917.

Michael is now buried in Gordon Dump Cemetery, Ovillers-La-Boiselle, his body being laid to rest there after the war, recovered from his original resting place.

Michael was awarded the 1914 Star with clasp (the clasp indicates he served under fire), Victory Medal and the British War Medal. He is remembered on Batley War Memorial, St. Mary's of the Angels, and also on the Mayo Great War Memorial in Mayo Peace Park, Castlebar.



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