John Law





Rank: - Gunner

Number: - 84160

Regiment: - Royal Garrison Artillery (278th Siege Battery)

Killed in Action: - 26th September 1917 (aged 30)

Cemetery: - The Huts Cemetery, West Vlaanderen, Belgium V11.D.12

Family Details:

John (known as Jack) was born in Mirfield on the 28th August 1887 to Leeds born couple John and Annie Law (nee Pinder) and baptised at Battyeford Christ the King on 25 November 1887.

His older siblings Charles George (1876), Harry Roland (1879), Frances Gertrude (1881), all born in Leeds, Frederick William (1883), Ernest (1885), born Mirfield and younger sister Hilda (1890 Mirfield) were living at 1, West End Bottom Hill Mirfield in 1891. John (senior) was a woollen warehouseman.

A decade the family had moved to 8, Clarence Street Batley with additions Herbert Wilson (1892), Arthur Reginald (1894) and Sydney (1897) John was now a wool salesman and Jack attended Park Road School.

By 1911 the family were living at 5, yard 3, Bradford Road, Batley. John Law (senior) is now a Commercial Traveller for an oil refiner whilst Jack was working as a spinner at a woollen mill. His parents have been married for 36 years and had 11 children although not all survived childhood.

His mother died in December 1912 and his father in January 1923.

Jack was actively associated with Batley Parish Church and Institute and was a member of Batley Conservative Club. He worked as a spinner at Messrs. J. B & W. Hirst's, Lady Ann Mills, Batley.

Service Details:

The Royal Garrison Artillery (RGA) developed from fortress-based artillery located on British coasts. From 1914 when the army possessed very little heavy artillery it grew into a very large component of the British forces. It was armed with heavy, large calibre guns and howitzers that were positioned some way back from the front line and had immense destructive power.

With the new long-range small arms available to the infantry in the era before World War I, artillery fighting in the infantry line was increasingly brought under fire. The solution to this was the principle of standing off and engaging the enemy with indirect fire. However, even after this became official military

doctrine, field and horse artillery on both sides kept trying to fight in the old way. One instance was a gun duel fought between British and German horse artillery units using open sights during the Retreat to the Marne. In the quagmire of trench warfare that followed it was finally realised that it was not the place for the artillery to be in the infantry line.

Henceforth the artillery would be positioned well behind the infantry battle line, firing at unseen targets, at co-ordinates on a map calculated with geometry and mathematics. As the war developed, the heavy artillery and the techniques of long-range artillery were massively developed. The RGA was often supported by the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) who had devised a system where pilots could use wireless telegraphy to help the artillery hit specific targets. The RFC aircraft carried a wireless set and a map and after identifying the position of an enemy target the pilot was able to transmit messages such as A5, B3, etc. in morse code to an RFC land station attached to a heavy artillery unit, such as Royal Garrison Artillery Siege Batteries.

The Siege batteries had the largest guns and howitzers; mounted on railways or on fixed concrete emplacements.

John joined the Forces on 24th May 1916 and went to France March 1917. He was one of six soldier sons of John Law of Maxwell House, Bradford Road, Batley. Sapper Harry R. Law. (R.E.), Sgt. Fred Law (Canadians), Gunner Ernest Law (R.G.A.), Private Herbert W. Law (K.O.Y.L.I.) and Lance Corporal Sidney Law in training.

Siege Batteries RGA were equipped with heavy howitzers, sending large calibre high explosive shells in high trajectory, plunging fire.The usual armaments were 6 inch, 8 inch and 9.2 inch howitzers, although some had huge railway- or road-mounted 12 inch howitzers. As British artillery tactics developed, the Siege Batteries were most often employed in destroying or neutralising the enemy artillery, as well as putting destructive fire down on strongpoints, dumps, store, roads and railways behind enemy lines.

Private (Gunner) 84160, John Law, was serving with the Royal Garrison Artillery, 278th Siege Battery, when he was killed in action near Ypres, Belgium on the 25th September 1917. He is remembered at The Huts Cemetery which is situated 6 kms south west of Ypres.





The cemetery takes its name from a line of huts strung along the road from Dickebusch (now Dikkebus) to Brandhoek, which were used by field ambulances during the 1917 Allied offensive on this front. Nearly two-thirds of the burials are of gunners as many artillery positions existed nearby. There are now 1,094 Commonwealth burials of the First World War in the cemetery.

John Law is one of those men and he lies alongside a colleague, Gunner G. Weller, also of the 278th RGA Siege Battery, who was killed on the same day. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) records John Law's next of kin as Mr S. Law of 11, Stralau Street, Batley, Yorkshire. This may be his youngest brother, Sidney Law who was also in the Army and possibly the only one of six brothers still in the UK at the time of John's death.

Gunner Law's particular whereabouts on the day of his death are uncertain but it is possible that he was killed in action in the build up to the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26th September 1917. This was one of several battles collectively known as the Third Battle of Ypres which began with the allied offensive on the 18th July 1917. As was the norm for any major Allied offensive, a heavy preliminary artillery bombardment was effected for the ten days prior to the launch of the attack at 03:50 on 31 July. The bombardment made use of 3,000 guns which expended four and a quarter million shells. Given such an onslaught the enemy fully expected an imminent offensive: the element of surprise was entirely absent.

Thus when the attack was launched across an 18 kilometre front, the Germans were in place to hold off the main British advance around the Menin Road, and restricted the Allies to fairly small gains to the left of the line around Pilckem Ridge.

British attempts to renew the offensive over the course of the next few days were severely hampered by the onset of heavy rains, the heaviest in 30 years, which churned the Flanders lowland soil into a thick muddy swamp. found themselves immobile, stuck fast in the mud. Similarly, the infantry found their mobility severely limited.

As a consequence, no renewed major offensive could be contemplated until 16 August, when the Battle of Langemarck saw four days of fierce fighting which resulted in small gains for the British, but heavy casualties. The attacks began afresh on 20 September with the Battle of the Menin Road Bridge. This was followed by the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September and the Battle of Broodseinde on 4 October. Taken together these established British possession of the ridge east of Ypres. Sadly, Gunner Law would not live to see the allied breakthrough.

John Law was awarded the British and the Victory medals.

He is remembered with Honour at Batley War Memorial, Batley Parish Church, Batley Conservative Club and The Huts, Cemetery, Belgium along with another 23 killed on the same day from a total of 1,092 at this cemetery.

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/ypres3.htm



Researched by members of
Batley History Group