John Leech





Rank: -Private

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

Number: - 34341

Date of Death: - 13 April 1918

Memorial: - Tyne Cot Memorial, Zonnebeke. West-Vlaanderen, Belgium.

John Leech, or Leach as the surname sometimes appears, was born in Batley on 19 September 1897. He was the eldest child of Batley born couple Michael and Bridget Leech (nee Connell), who married the year before John's birth. The Leech family spent most of their married life at New Street, raising seven children. After John, their only daughter, Nora, was born in 1901. Then five more sons: Thomas, born in 1903, Patrick in 1906, Edward in 1909, James in 1911 and Michael in 1914.

John attended St Mary's school, and was one of those who controversially represented the school in the August 1907 pageant (for more details see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk). To support the family, Michael mainly worked as a general labourer in a variety of settings. This included for a house builder, in a woollen mill and for Batley Corporation for a brief spell at the turn of the 20th century he was employed as a coal miner. Bridget worked in the local shoddy industry as a rag picker.

Michael, a former Batley footballer, was often in trouble with the police in incidents usually involving drink. By 1912 these had landed him in Wakefield prison on at least ten occasions. In March 1916 Bridget summoned her husband for desertion because although he was earning 30s. a week before overtime as a labourer he gave her no money for four weeks and the family had to rely on the wages of John and Nora. It is likely at this point John was working for Scott Brothers Waste Merchants in Batley, although he had for a long time been employed at Soothill Wood Colliery. John was called as a witness saying his father had "*leathered*" him when he intervened to stop him striking his mother. Michael left home to live in a boarding house but at some point, he did return home.

In late August 1916 John joined the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry in Batley and in early September his youngest brother, Michael, died.

John's service records have not survived but he went to France in December 1916 and it appears this was to serve as Private in the 6th KOYLI. The 6th KOYLI was disbanded in France in February 1918 although John may have had a posting to the 1/4th KOYLI by this time. The exact date is unclear. What we do know is he spent some time back in England returning to France at Christmas 1917. He also spent some time in hospital in early 1918 with a severe abscess in his groin.

He is officially recorded as dying on 13 April 1918 from wounds received in action. There is no information as to when he received these wounds, but his death occurred during the Operation Georgette phase of the German Spring Offensive. With the United States entering the war the previous April, the Offensive was Germany's last chance to end the war before the American Expeditionary Force could be fully deployed.

The Offensive began on 21 March 1918 with an attack, codenamed Operation Michael, along a 40- mile front from just north of Arras to the east of Noyon, encompassing the ground fought over in the 1916 Battle of the Somme. The next

phase of the offensive was Operation Georgette (Battle of the Lys was the official name given by the British), 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 for this phase was to capture Ypres and force the British back to the Channel Ports. The first day the Germans took Fleurbaix, Laventie and Richebourg in a three-and-a-half-mile advance.

On the launch day of Operation Georgette, the 1/4th KOYLI were quickly moved to Ontario Camp at Reninghelst, and at 1 am the following morning received a warning order to prepare for an early move. They left at 9 am and eventually camped in fields adjacent to the road about one mile to the west of Neuve Eglise. They remained in the field for the rest of the day at thirty minutes notice to move.

The following day, the 11 April, at 11.30 am they received orders to move. Two hours later they were on their way to assist in holding the Army Line on the left of Neuve Eglise. This was the day Sir Douglas Haig issued his famous "*backs to the wall*" call. The night was spent trying to improve the defensive positions.

The new Front Line of defence was subjected to persistent German shelling throughout the 12 April, with a few casualties being sustained. The German troops could be seen massing on the right of the Brigade Sector, and following an intense barrage, launched an attack at 4.40pm which was driven off by rifle and machine gun fire. During the attack the whole of the Battalion Sector was heavily shelled. At 7am on 13 April, persistent shelling and repeated attacks forced the line to fall back to Neuve Eglise, with the enemy entering the southern part of the village. The KOYLIs were then involved with the York and Lancs and Worcesters in a counter- attack which successfully pushed them back out. The 1/4th KOYLIs took 17 German prisoners.

The struggle in Neuve Eglise continued throughout the following day, with the Germans taking the village and the KOYLIs forced to withdraw from the positions. They were finally relieved on 15 April. Though the Unit Diary does not give any specific other Rank numbers, it is likely to have been during this period that John sustained his injuries. The Diary does state for the whole of the operation from 11 April to 30 April the casualties amounted to three officers killed and 13 wounded, and 64 other ranks killed and 340 wounded 93 missing and 13 died of wounds—with John presumably amongst this latter number.

The family at this time lived at 44, Victoria Street, Carlinghow and received the news relatively quickly. They received his British War and Victory Medals.

John is remembered with Honour at St. Mary's Church, Batley War Memorial and the Tyne Cot Memorial for the missing.



Thanks to Jane Roberts and for more information about John please see pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk