Thomas McNamara



Number: - 3/3131

Rank: - Private

Regiment: - King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry 7th (Service) Battalion

Killed in action: - 20th September 1916

Memorial: - Thiepval Memorial, Somme, France

Thomas was the son of Thomas McNamara and his wife Mary (nee Niland). The couple, who lived in Hagfield near Charlestown in County Mayo, married on 15 November 1883 at the Roman Catholic chapel of Kilbeaugh. Thomas is described as a farmer but more often a labourer, in various official records. Their son Patrick was born in September 1884, followed by Bridget in December 1888, John in June 1890, Thomas in around 1893, Catherine (Kate) in September 1894, Mary Ellen 1898 and finally Anne in June 1901.

All the birth registrations have been found except for Thomas but his father, Thomas, did appear at the Low Park Sessions in September 1894 for failing to vaccinate the infant Thomas against smallpox within three months of birth.

Thomas (senior) is not recorded with the family in either the 1901 or 1911 censuses. However, in 1901, Mary and her children are living in Hagfield, with Mary's widowed mother Bridget Niland. This is very likely to do with for the support Bridget could give Mary in bringing up the family. Mary had struggled with heart disease since the middle of the 1890's and she died on 8 July 1903 aged 43. At around the same time two-year-old Anne also died. Bridget McNamara, the widowed mother of Thomas (senior) was also living in Hagfield in 1901, and by 1911, Mary Ellen, is living with her grandmother Bridget and aunt Ellen McNamara in their basic two-roomed Hagfield house.

Bridget, Kate, John and Thomas had made the move to Batley and were living with their eldest sister Catherine, who had married Luke Colleran in Dewsbury district in 1887, and were living in New Street. It would have been a huge change, losing their mother and leaving their rural home.

Bridget and Kate found employment as rag sorters and both John and Thomas were hurriers in the coal mining sector in the 1911 census.

Shortly after the outbreak of war Thomas left his job at Soothill Wood Colliery, to serve with the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. This was the same regiment with which his brother John served.

Thomas' Service Number 3/3131 with the prefix '3', indicates he signed as a Special Reservist, but unfortunately his service details have not survived to provide corroboration or any further details of his service. It was with the 7th KOYLI, comprising mainly Yorkshire miners, that Thomas served overseas. On the morning of 22nd July 1915 Thomas, along with the rest of the 7th KOYLI, left their Larkhill Camp on Salisbury Plain and headed for Southampton. Here, at 5 pm, they boarded the *Mona's Queen* and set sail disembarking the following morning at Le Havre. Part of the 20th (Light) Division based in Feurbaix sector of France they then took part in a final period of training to familiarise themselves with the conditions.

It was a steady first month but casualties were sustained including 16 other ranks but the majority was because of sickness. It was during this period Thomas penned his informal will in his Army Pay Book. It read: "*In the event of my death I leave all I possess to Mrs Bridget McNamara Hackfield, Charlestown, Co. Mayo, Ireland. Thomas McNamara Private 3131 KOYLI August 1st 1915."*

He was leaving everything to his paternal grandmother, rather than his father who was still alive.

The 7th KOYLI had a very minor part in the Battle of Loos at the end of September 1915, but in the main they were around Fleubaix sector. In mid- February 1916 the 7th KOYLI crossed the border into Belgium, to the trenches in the north part of the Ypres Salient, a recognised British line hotspot where casualties were all too frequent. On 16th April 1916 they moved to Calais for a spell of rest, but before May was out, they were back in Belgium and in the trenches.

In June 1916 they, along with their Division, took part in the Battle of Mount Sorrel which primarily involved the Canadians. At the beginning of June, the Germans launched an attack capturing the important vantage points over Ypres and the Ypres Salient of Mount Sorrel, Hill 61 and Hill 62. It was not until 13 June the high ground was re-captured.

In July 1916 the Battle of the Somme raged, the 7th KOYLI, and Thomas, were still on the Ypres Salient. They had been overseas for one year. So far, they had escaped relatively lightly. This is supported by their other rank casualties in this 12-month period to 22nd July 1916 of 45 killed in action; 21 died of wounds; 209 wounded; 145 sick and off strength; and 2 died of natural causes.

Within days of them celebrating their first anniversary since landing in France, they were on the move south and to the Somme. And to put their casualties over the first 12 months into some perspective, once there whilst in trenches in front of Ginchy on 23rd August 1916 they suffered 25 other ranks killed or wounded as a result of heavy enemy bombardment; on 24 August further, heavy shelling cost another 50 casualties.

September 1916 came, and with it the Battle of Flers-Courcelette between 15th - 22nd September 1916. This battle is best known for being the first-time tanks were used, but it was also during this battle Thomas lost his life.

At 4 pm on the 15th September they were billeted in Trones Wood. That evening they were attached to the Guards Division whose objective was the village of Les Boeufs. In the way of the British front line and this objective was a network of trenches, including the particular formidable Quadrilateral trench system. Orders were received about midnight, with the KOYLI detailed to protect the right flank of the attack because of earlier failures at the Quadrilateral, was exposed. As far as the 7th KOYLI and 61st Infantry Brigade was concerned the attack was successful, although through some misunderstanding the Guards did not attack and the line was consolidated around 400 yards west of Les Boeufs. On this day there were around 30 other ranks casualties amongst 7th KOYLI. A shell accounted for the loss of all the 7th KOYLI Battalion headquarters officers, but they achieved all their objectives in spite of the fact that units attacking both flanks were held up.

Just before dawn on 18th September, whilst in support of the 59th Infantry Brigade, a further 60 casualties were sustained as a result of a very heavy barrage of shells and sweeping machine gun fire.
The 19th September was a fairly quiet day. The only things of note were the rain and the fact no water was sent up. That changed on 20th September when more rain came and they were heavily shelled all day, suffering 30 more casualties. Finally, at 2 am on the 21st September, in horribly muddy and wet going, they were relieved in the trenches by the 1st Grenadier Guards. In the process of the relief, they sustained 10 more casualties.

Towards the end of September 1916 Thomas' sister, Bridget (now Mrs Rodgers) received a letter to her address at Union Street, Batley from Pte. John Doyle, a Batley soldier and a "pal" of Thomas'. In the letter dated 22 September he wrote: -
"I am sorry to have to tell you that your brother, Tom, has been killed. A shell dropped amongst the company as they were marching through a village away from the firing line yesterday, the 21st. It happened in the early morning. There were a few wounded besides, but Tom caught the most of the shell. He has been buried in the village, and a cross marks his grave. It was hard lines after after roughing it for a month in the trenches to be killed when coming out for a rest, but it was God's will. Poor old Tom. He was one of the nicest and jolliest lads in the company. All his platoon liked him, and join with me in sending you their deepest sympathy. He was one of the coolest under shell fire, and always jolly, in the trenches or out. Tom and John Burns (another Batley soldier) and myself belonged to the same platoon, and as well as losing a "pal" we have lost a fellow townsman. All he said after being hit was "I'm dying." He died as he lived, a man,

and there is no one more grieved than I am. I tried to get his badge for your keep-sake, but we do not carry our packs into the trenches with fighting going on, and we left our caps and such stuff with them till we came out again. When we come out got our packs, I got Tom's, but his cap was missing. The RAMC men got the property he had in his pockets. No doubt it will be sent on to you. Well, God has taken one brother, and we have lost a good "pal", and how grieved I am I can't tell you. All I can say now is may he rest in peace."

It is clear from this letter, combined with the Unit War Diary, that Thomas's death took place in the early hours of 21st September as the 7th KOYLI were leaving the trenches, not 20th September as is stated on official records.

Thomas is remembered on Batley War Memorial and St. Mary's Church. In Ireland he is honoured on both the Mayo Great War Memorial in Mayo Peace Park, Castlebar and in Ireland's Memorial Records of the Great War. His original war time grave is lost and subsequently he is has no known final resting place along with more than 72,000 other officers and men of the United Kingdom and South African who died in the Somme sector before 20th March 1918 and have no known grave.

Thomas was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal.



Research thanks to Jane Roberts for further information see
https://pasttopresentgenealogy.co.uk



Battle of Flers–Courcelette. "C" Company Mark I tank, C.19 'Clan Leslie', in the Chimpanzee Valley on 15 September 1916, the day tanks first went into action, by Lt John Warwick Brooke, © IWM Q 5574, IWM Non Commercial Licence

The 7th KOYLI, with the 61st Infantry Brigade, were attached to the Guards Division between the 15-17 September phase of the operations.

At 4pm on the 15 September they were billeted in Trones Wood. That evening they were attached to the Guards whose objective was the village of Les Boeufs. In the way of the British front line and this objective was a network of trenches, including the particularly formidable Quadrilateral trench system. Orders were received at about midnight, with the KOYLI detailed to protect the right flank of the attack which, because of earlier failures at the Quadrilateral, was exposed.

The attack on the 16 September, as far as the 7th KOYLI and the 61st Infantry Brigade was concerned, was successful. Parties got into Les Boeufs but, through some misunderstanding, the Guards did not attack, so the 61st consolidated the line which it had gained around 400 yards west of Les Boeufs. On this day there were around 30 other ranks casualties amongst the 7th KOYLIs. A shell though accounted for the loss of all the 7th KOYLI Battalion Headquarter's officers. But the 7th KOYLI achieved all its objectives in spite of the fact that the units attacking both flanks were held up.

The casualties continued to mount. Just after dawn on 18 September, whilst in support of the 59th Infantry Brigade, a further 60 other rank casualties were sustained as a result of a very heavy barrage of shells and sweeping machine gun fire.

The 19 September was a fairly quiet day. The only things of note were the rain and the fact no water was sent up. That changed on the 20 September. More rain came and they were heavily shelled all day, suffering 30 more casualties. Finally, at 2am on the 21 September, in horribly muddy and wet going, they were relieved in the trenches by the 1st Grenadier Guards. In the process of the relief they sustained 10 more casualties.

Towards the end of September 1916 Thomas' sister Bridget (now Mrs Rodgers, following her very recent marriage to Ernest Rodgers) received a letter to her address at Union Street, Batley from a Pte John Doyle, a Batley soldier and a "pal" of Thomas'. In the letter dated 22 September, Pte Doyle wrote:

I am sorry I have to tell you that your brother, Tom, has been killed. A shell dropped amongst the company as they were marching through a village away from the firing line yesterday, the 21st. It happened in the early morning. There were a few wounded besides, but Tom caught the most of the shell. He has been buried in the village, and a cross marks his grave. It was hard lines after roughing it for a month in the trenches to be killed when coming out for a rest, but it was God's will. Poor old Tom. He was one of the nicest and jolliest lads in the company. All his platoon liked him, and join with me in sending you their deepest sympathy. He was one of the coolest under shell fire, and always jolly, in the trenches or out. Tom and John Burns (another Batley soldier) and myself belonged to the same platoon, and as well as losing a "pal" we have lost a fellow townsman. All he said after he was hit was "I'm dying". He died as he lived, a man, and there is no one more grieved than I am. I tried to get his badge for you as a keep-sake, but we did not carry our packs into the trenches with the fighting going on, and we left our caps and such stuff with them till we came out again. When we came out and got our packs I got Tom's, but his cap was missing. The RAMC men got the property he had in his pockets. No doubt it will be sent on to you. Well, God has taken one brother, let us hope He spares the other to come home to you. You have lost a good brother, and we have lost a good "pal", and how grieved I am I can't tell you. All I can say now is may he rest in peace.[9]

It is clear from this letter, combined with the Unit War Diary, that Thomas' death took place in the early hours of 21 September as the 7th KOYLI were leaving the front line trenches, not 20 September as is stated on official records.

The end of the letter also makes reference to Thomas' brother John. He did, thankfully, survive the war.

In addition to St Mary's, Thomas is remembered on the Batley War Memorial. He is also honoured in Ireland, both on the Mayo Great War Memorial in Mayo Peace Park, Castlebar and in Ireland's Memorial Records of the Great War. The eight volumes of the Memorial Records contain details of more than 49,000 fatalities. The men and women commemorated either served in Irish Regiments or were born or resident in Ireland at the time of their death and were serving with units from Britain and its Empire.

And, because his wartime grave was subsequently lost and he has no known final resting place, Thomas is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial, along with the more than 72,000 other officers and men of the United Kingdom and South Africa who died in the Somme sector before 20 March 1918 and have no known grave.

The Thiepval Memorial – Photo by Jane Roberts
Thomas was awarded the 1914-15 Star, Victory Medal and British War Medal.

One final footnote, whilst Thomas' will left everything to his grandmother Bridget McNamara, his pension payment went to his father Thomas (senior) who was living at Hardybutts, Wigan.

Notes:
1. 20 September 1916 is Thomas' official death date. However some sources indicate 21 September 1916, including his pension record card and letters home to the family. The latter, coupled with the Unit War Diary, would seem to indicate the early hours of the 21st as his battalion were leaving the firing line.
1916

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