Willie Riley





Rank: - Private

Number: - 21163

Regiment: - Middlesex Regiment 11th Battalion

Killed in Action: - 4th October 1916 aged 26 years

Cemetery: - Bancourt British Cemetery, Pas-de- Calais, France 1X.J.10

"HE DIED FOR FREEDOM AND HONOUR"

Batley News, 28 Oct 1916 (photo)

Family Details

Willie was born in Soothill in 1890 the youngest child of Joe and Sarah Riley nee Carter who had married at St. Paul's Church, Hanging Heaton on 26th December 1871.

Polly was born in Soothill in 1873 but the couple moved to live in Alverthorpe before the birth of Sarah Ellen in 1874 and Clara Ann, 1876 moving back to live in Soothill Lane before the birth of Edith in 1882, Florrie 1885, John Thomas 1888 and Willie.

In 1891 the family was living in Soothill Lane and Joe gave his occupation as a stone mason. Joe died in March 1894 and was buried at St. Paul's, Hanging Heaton. The family continued to live in Soothill Lane and in 1911 the census shows that there had been 10 children born to the couple but only seven had survived infancy. Sarah lived in a 3 roomed home at 98, Soothill Lane with her 5 daughters who were all cloth weavers and her two sons John Thomas being a quarryman and Willie a general labourer.

Before he enlisted Willie was employed by the Woodkirk Stone and Brick Co. as a labourer. He was very well known in Soothill and was connected with Soothill Congregational Church.

Service Details

Willie enlisted at the same time as his friend Sam Bateman of France Street, Soothill in November 1915 and they went to the Front in the same draft in March 1916.

The 11th Middlesex Regiment came under the command of 36th Brigade, in 12th (Eastern) Division.

In February 1916 before Willie joined them the Division had moved into the trenches between Loos and the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

The area of the Hohenzollern Redoubt had become one where underground mine warfare was very active. A plan was evolved that required 4 mines to be blown under the enemy positions, which would be followed by an infantry assault aimed at capturing the enemy front trench called "The Chord". 36th Brigade made the attack after 170 Tunnelling Company RE detonated the mines

at 5.45pm on 2 March 1916, successfully capturing the craters and gaining important observation over enemy lines as far as Fosse 8. Severe fighting in the crater area continued for some weeks, with the Division suffering more than 4000 casualties until being finally relieved on 26 April. A period of rest and training began, until finally – beginning with the RE Field Companies – the Division moved to the Somme.

Willie and Sam would have joined their unit at the Hohenzollern Redoubt.

By 18 June 1916 the Division was based at Flesselles. The Division moved up to Baizieux on 30 June and reached Hencourt and Millencourt by 10am on 1 July, in reserve to the British infantry attack that had begun earlier that morning. It moved to relieve 8th Division, which had suffered a severe repulse at Ovillers-la-Boisselle, during the night of 1-2 July. On 7 July 36th Brigade, with 74th Brigade attached to the Division for the purpose, attacked again and in spite of heavy casualties from German artillery and machine guns in Mash Valley, succeeded in holding the first and second lines that they captured on the spur on which Ovillers stands. By the time the Division was withdrawn to the area on Contay on 9 July, 189 officers and 4576 men had become casualties.

After short spells at Bus-les-Artois and in the front line at Beaumont Hamel, the Division moved back to the Ovillers area for an operation north and northwest of Pozieres designed to destroy the enemy garrison holding Thiepval. On 3 August, an attack aimed at capturing 4th Avenue Trench was successful and pushed on to Ration Trench next day. German counter attacks including flamethrowers were beaten off over the next few days.

An attack on 8 August to finally capture the stubborn enemy Point 77 failed with heavy casualties to 7th Sussex. Severe local fighting continued for five more days, when the Division was relieved and moved to the area of Doullens. Casualties since 28 July amounted to 126 officers and 2739 men.

They took part in the Battle of Le Transloy having marched for five days after leaving the Somme and relieved 11th (Northern) Division on the Arras front on 22 August. This was a comparatively quiet time, punctuated by trench raids. They were relieved on 26-7 September and moved back to Somme, taking over forward positions in appalling conditions at Geudecourt, Grid and Grid Support on 1-2 October.

Willie's mother received news of his death which occurred on the 4th October from the wife of an officer: -

"I am so sorry to hear the news of your son, I am the wife of one of the original officers of the Middlesex and know what the anxiety has been. It is difficult to say anything to bring comfort but the men have fought so splendidly and the battalion has done such good work, that one is proud to have a son serving in it."

His friend Sam Bateman son of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Bateman of France Street was injured the following day and his left arm had to be amputated. His brother Edwin was serving with the same regiment.

Willie was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

He is remembered with Honour at Soothill Congregational Church, Hanging Heaton War Memorial (St. Paul's) and Batley War Memorial.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group