Gilbert Thackray





Number: - 11642

Rank: - Trooper

Regiment: - 13th Hussars. "C" Squadron

Killed in Action: - 5th March 1917 aged 21

Remembered with Honour: - Basra Memorial, Iraq. Panel 1

Family Details:

Gilbert was born at White Lee on 6th December 1895, the son of Harry and Mary Elizabeth Thackray (nee Overend). He was baptised at St.Peter's, Birstall on 24th June 1896 along with his sister Ethel Thackray, born August 1891, and his brother George Berwick, born April 1893.

Harry Thackray was a teamer living in White Lee at the time and by 1901 the family had moved to Church Lane, Birstall where they were living with Mary's mother and the newest addition to the family, Lillian, born Bentley, Doncaster in 1899. A decade later, the family including Rachel Overend were living at 21, Pearl Street, Carlinghow, with Harry working as a rag grinder and Gilbert as a mule piecer.

Prior to the war, Gilbert joined Messrs. Wilson Bros. Little Orme Mills in the willeying and rag departments. He was associated with Batley Parish Church, probably due to the fact his parents had gone to live at the Telephone Exchange, Batley.

Service Details:

At the outbreak of war Gilbert immediately joined up into the 13th Hussars. On the same day, his father, Harry was called up as a Reservist having previously fought in South Africa with the Gordon's and been made a Sergeant Major. Harry trained with his regiment but was not allowed to go to the Front and was sent to work at Armstrong and Whitworth's, Newcastle. Gilbert's brother, George, joined the King's Own Scottish Borderers.

The 13th Hussars were formed in 1715. In August of 1914 they were in India forming part of the Meerut Cavalry Brigade. They left for France, landing in Marseilles in December 1914 as part of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division.

Gilbert left England to join his unit in France on the 17th October 1915. In July 1916 the Hussars moved with the Brigade to Mesopotamia and came under the orders of the 7th Indian Cavalry Brigade, landing at Basra in August 1916.

The Batley News published a letter from Private W. Flowers of the Blockade Police:-

"I am receiving the good old "News". When I can sit down and read about the doings in dear old Batley it reminds me of old times. How I wish I was there just now among my own people instead of living amongst these Arabs. All Arabs wear a headdress consisting of a large red and blue handkerchief, folded diagonally and held on by a

coil of camel's hair or wool called "agal". The clothing consists of a long white garment like a nightdress called "dishdasha" held up by a belt called "hizam ". Richer Arabs wear over this a tunic called "zibun" of rather finer material sometimes silk. Over this is worn a cloak or "aba". A man's standing can generally be known by grade of his "aba". In later years many have begun to wear coats, frequently second hand from Europe. Sandals are worn though often shoes. Arab women of the better class are kept veiled though the labouring class do not veil. A European should never address an Arab woman. The Arabic spoken in Mesopotamia is very good though mixed with Persian and Turkish words. There is a fair sprinkling of Jews here too. They are practically all traders and can be distinguished generally by the bright red fez, frequently accompanied by a light "abe" coat and tunic although many wear European clothes. Here you have the people I am mingling with every day. It gets on my nerves a bit. The weather here now is a lot cooler but the sun is very hot -----"

Mesopotamia is an ancient land, through which run the great Rivers Tigris and Euphrates. At the southern end, this is a complex river delta. The two rivers meet at Qurna, 40 miles north of Basra, where they come together to form the Shatt-al-Arab, which flows into the Persian Gulf. The land is for the most part desert and is very flat. The rivers flood the plains to a great extent, when the winter snows in the northern mountains thaw. The small towns and villages that existed along the river banks in 1914 were generally constructed several feet above water level. There is virtually no water in this land, except that from the rivers. There were no roads, so all transport had to be by boat along the rivers. The major centre of population was Baghdad, almost 570 miles upstream from the Gulf.

In December 1915 the Turks had pursued the retreating 6th Poona Division to Kut and cut it off. There were several battles to try to relieve it before they surrendered on 29th April 1916. The British ordered Major-General Stanley Maude to take charge of the British Forces in Mesopotamia, and the experienced 3rd (Lahore), 7th (Meerut) and 13th (Western) Divisions brought significant increase in strength.

On 25th February 1917 Kut al Amar was retaken by the British and the Turks are pursued to Baghdad. The Allied troops were fighting and losing over 50 soldiers every day before Baghdad was eventually taken on the 11th March 1917. Gilbert was killed on the 5th March along with another 10 soldiers from the 13th Hussars and over 40 from Indian Regiments.



Gilbert was awarded the 1915 Star, British Medal and the Victory Medal.

He is remembered with Honour on Batley Parish Church, Batley War Memorial and Basra memorial along with 54 others killed on the same day. The Indians suffered great losses and there are a total of 40, 626 identified soldiers on the Basra Memorial.



Researched by members of
Batley History Group