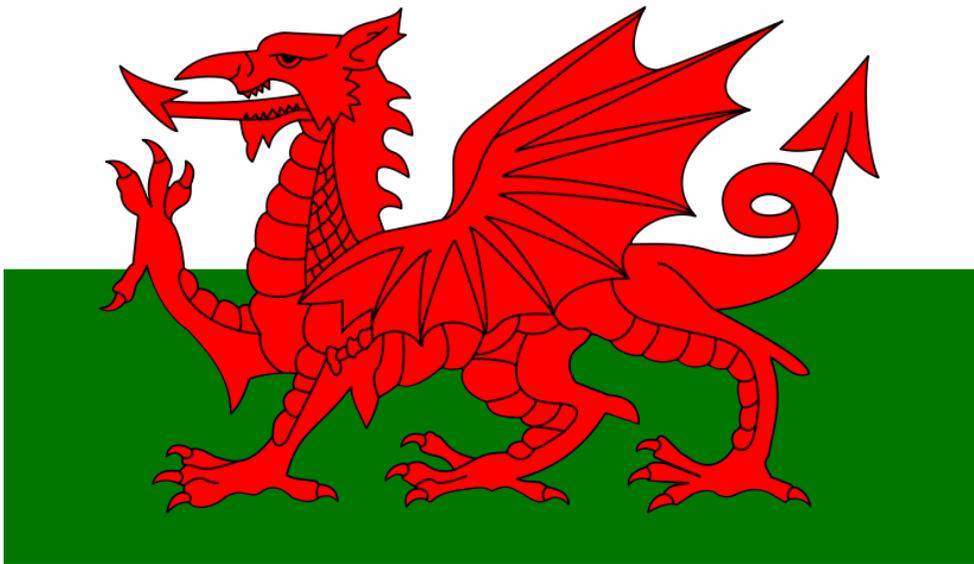


Life of my Great Grandfather Thomas James (1881-1935)



Thomas James and wife Lydia Kate Gillet Mahoney

Prepared by Ann Collins
18th December 2012
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Mae Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau

Mae hen wlad fy nhadau yn annwyl i mi,
Gwlad beirdd a chantorion, enwogion o fri;
Ei gwrol ryfelwyr, gwladgarwyr tra mād,
Tros ryddid gollasant eu gwaed.

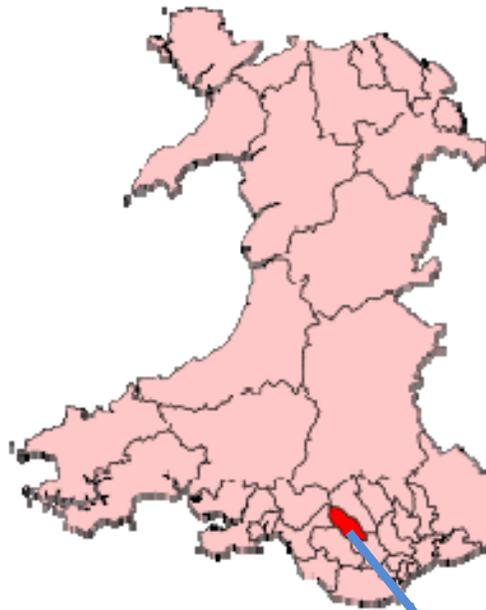
Gwlad, Gwlad, pleidiol wyf i'm gwlad.
Tra môr yn fur i'r bur hoff bau,
O bydded i'r hen iaith barhau.

Hen Gymru fynyddig, paradwys y bardd,
Pob dyffryn, pob clogwyn i'm golwg sydd hardd;
Trwy deimlad gwladgarol, mor swynol yw si
Ei nentydd, afonydd i mi.

Os treisiodd y gelyn fy ngwald tan ei droed,
Mae hen iaith y Cymry mor fyw ac erioed,
Ni luddiwyd yr awen gan erchyll law brad,
Na thelyn berseiniol fy ngwlad.



View of Cwmparc, Rhondda Valley, Wales



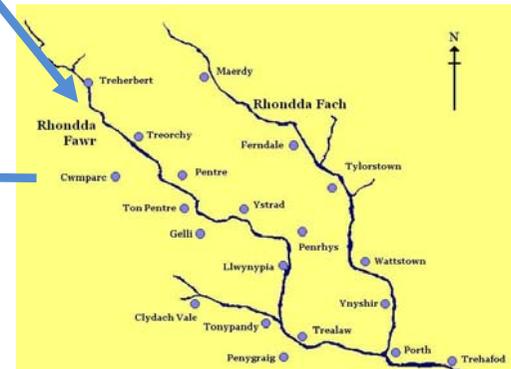
Land Of My Fathers

O land of my fathers, O land of my love,
Dear mother of minstrels who kindle and move,
And hero on hero, who at honour's proud call,
For freedom their lifeblood let fall.

Wales! Wales! O but my heart is with you!
And long as the sea
Your bulwark shall be,
To Cymru my heart shall be true.

O land of the mountains, the bard's paradise,
Whose precipice, valleys lone as the skies,
Green murmuring forest, far echoing flood
Fire the fancy and quicken the blood.

For tho' the fierce foeman has ravaged your realm,
The old speech of Cymru he cannot o'erwhelm,
Our passionate poets to silence command
Or banish the harp from your strand.



Introduction (family “lore”)

My great grandfather, Thomas James, died in Annandale, a suburb of Sydney, in 1935 a year before my mother was born. She was the daughter of his eldest son and his first granddaughter, preceded by two male cousins, born between 1932 and 1935. So my mother’s memories of her grandfather were created by his family of 8 surviving children and his widow. As we did not grow up near this family, our knowledge is very patchy and boiled down to the following “facts”:

- He was Welsh from Treorchy in the Rhondda Valley.
- He was very tall and handsome.
- My great grandmother was disowned by her Irish Catholic family when she married him.
- He was in a Welsh Guards Regiment, was required to be 6 feet tall and had a busby hat.
- He was a bandsman (instrument unknown) and acted as a stretcher-bearer on the front line.
- He was gassed in WW1 and suffered the effects of this for the rest of his life (coughing).
- The family came to Australia around 1925, after he had visited other possibilities.
- He and my great grandmother had 5 children before the war and 5 after, with the last being born in Australia – one died as an infant.

His wife Lydia Kate Mahoney, remarried around 1961, for companionship, and died in 1969. I spent two weeks with her when I was 12, and she was 84, and was exhausted by her energy. She took me all over Sydney visiting relatives. A few years ago my mother and her sister wanted to know a bit more about their grandfather, and so began my investigation into his life.

Talking to some of my mother’s cousins yielded a photograph of each of my great grandparents and the news that he had served in the Boer War and was a member of the regimental band.

My area of genealogical research is into my father’s Colenso heritage and researching a relatively common name is a new experience and required a disciplined process with a great deal of patience and assistance from some military family historians.

Ancestry (development of the Rhondda Valley)

Thomas James was born in Cwmparc, near Treorchy , on the 16th May 1881. He was the sixth child and second son of Thomas James and Mary Ann Evans. This couple had both been born in Carmarthenshire and migrated to the Vale of Glamorgan with their families when the South Wales Coalfields were opened in the 1860s. Thomas had been born in Pembrey, son of a miner. Mary Ann was born in Pontyberem, the daughter of a mining engineer, who had been working at Gwendreath Mine when it flooded in 1852. The couple married in Merthyr Tydfil in 1872 and settled in Cwmparc, with Thomas working at the Dare Colliery, which was owned by D. Davies and Company, later to become the Ocean Coal Company. In 1881 he had been a colliery fireman and by 1891 was an overseer. He died in 1925.

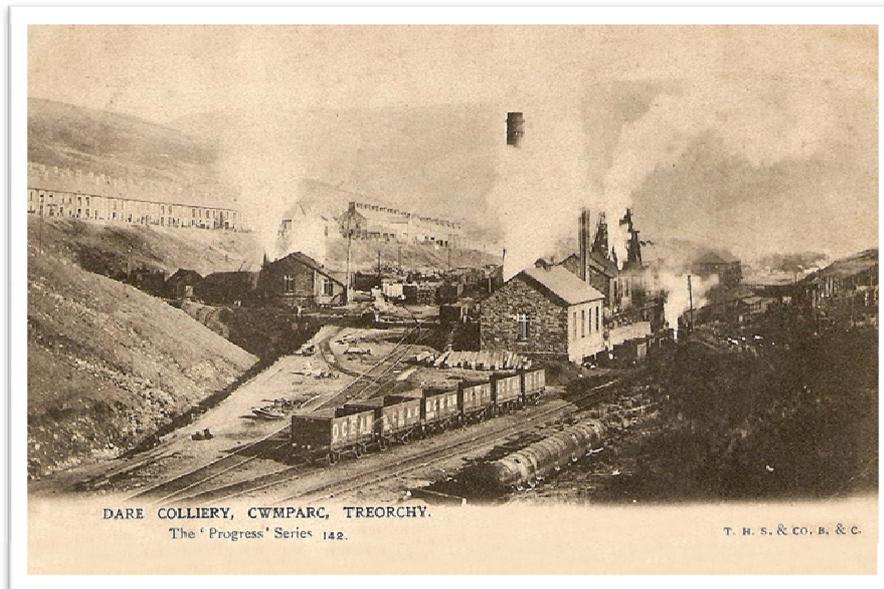
The Dare Colliery was first opened in 1870 and by 1896 employed just over a thousand men. It mined steam coal, which was used to fuel steam ships and rail locomotives in the 19th and early 20th Century. It fuelled the Royal Navy when it “ruled the waves”. The rise of the steam engine and the superior calorific value of the Rhondda Valley coal led to rapid expansion of mining in the Rhondda. In 1875 the production was over 2 million tons, which was later dwarfed by the massive excavation

Thomas James (1881-1935)

rates seen in the last quarter of the 19th century up to the beginning of the First World War. In 1913 the Rhondda output was 9.6 million tons.

The wages of the miners was regulated by the Sliding Scale Agreement according to the coal sale price. This agreement was struck in the 1870s, after bitter industrial action, where one thousand soldiers were sent into the valley.

Thomas and Mary Ann had 12 children between 1873 and 1899, 6 being boys. They lived in 5 Gaffer's Row, which was officially called Greenfield Row.



Militia and the Boer War

The Education Act of 1870 required attendance at school from ages 5 to 13, so Thomas junior probably went down the mine when he was 13, in 1894. His elder brother John was 15 in 1891 and was shown as a coal miner in the census. His younger brother David was a coal miner at 14 in 1901. Leaving school and going down into a dark pit for a working day would have been a sudden jump into manhood.

The geological formation of the southern coalfields made it the most dangerous in Britain. Here were 18% of the UK miners, but 48% of the major disaster (> 25 deaths) fatalities. Further to that, 80% of the total fatalities were individual incidents, and additionally a 100 disease related deaths, principally pneumoconiosis. My mother painted the picture of wives drawn to the mine gate when the sirens sounded, waiting for the men to come out and hoping to hear "not your man". Her maternal grandfather was also a miner in the Hunter Valley.

In 1897 the miner's side of the Sliding Scale Agreement calculated that there should be a 10% increase in their wages. This was rejected by the Colliery Owners and consequently in April 1898 the miners went on strike. They were forced back to work on the owners' terms in September 1898.

Just before the strike Thomas joined the Cardigan Artillery Militia, lying about his age. Towards the end of the strike he also joined the Royal Welsh Fusiliers militia regiment, again lying about his age.

Thomas James (1881-1935)

Militia Attestation & Discharge Records			
Number	1921	2618	2140
Name	Thomas James	Thomas James	Thomas James
Militia Corps	Cardigan Artillery	Royal Welsh Fusiliers	Cardigan Artillery
Battalion		3rd	
Where were you born?	Treorkey	Cwmpark	Cwmpark
Where do you reside?	Treorkey	Cwmpark	Cwmpark
Where did you reside a year ago?	Treorkey	Cwmpark	Cwmpark
What is the name of current master?	Mr Williams	Davies & Co	Mr Tallis
What is your age?	17 y 10 m	18 y	18 y 9 m
Real age (birth 16 May 1881)	16 y 9 m	17 y 2 m	17 y 9 m
What is your trade or calling?	Haulier	Collier	Collier
Are you single, married or widower?	Single	Single	Single
How many children do you have?	none	none	none
Have you ever served in the defence forces?	no	no	Cardigan Artillery
Did you receive a notice?	Yes	Yes	Yes
Enlistment Date	7 Mar 1898	8 Aug 1898	3 Mar 1899
Discharge date:	25 Jan 1899	24 Apr 1899	30 Nov 1899
Discharge reason:	by purchase	by purchase	enlisted RWF
Character	good		fair
Age on Discharge	17 y 8 m	17 y 11 m	18 y 6 m

At this time the militia was a volunteer force intended as an alternative to the army. Men could volunteer and undertake basic training for several months at an army depot. They could then return to civilian life, but report for regular periods of military training (usually on the weapons ranges) and an annual two week training camp. In return, they received military pay and a financial retainer.

It looks like the perfect opportunity for a young miner on strike, needing some adventure, training and money. His youthfulness was highlighted by the change in his height over the dates covered by the Militia records – still a growing boy.

Date	Age	Height
7 Mar 1898	16 y 9 m	5 ft 6 $\frac{3}{8}$ in
8 Aug 1898	17 y 2 m	5 ft 8 $\frac{5}{8}$ in
3 Mar 1899	17 y 9 m	5 ft 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ in
Aug 1914		5 ft 9 in

The Boer War was fought between the 11 October 1899 and the 31 May 1902. To supplement the regular army 99,000 members of the Militia were embodied and 22,000 were sent abroad. The 3rd Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers was embodied on the 8th December 1899 and disembodied on the 5th July 1901.



Cap Badges for the Cardigan Artillery and Royal Welsh Fusiliers

The first newspaper article (2nd December 1899 Wrexham Advertiser) describes the order to embody the 3rd Royal Welsh Fusiliers, the second (10th February 1900 Wrexham Advertiser) describes their departure from Wrexham for Plymouth.

**EMBODIMENT OF THE 3RD BATTALION
R.W.F. (MILITIA).**

The Permanent Staff at the Wrexham Depôt have received commands from the War Office for the embodiment of the 3rd Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers, at eleven o'clock, on the 8th of next month. The summonses were sent out to the men on Tuesday evening, and the officers have also been notified. The embodiment affects 400 men, mainly drawn from the reserves and special service section. About 200 members of the battalion are not affected by the order, these mostly being married men. At the time of writing no orders have been received as to where the Militia will be forwarded immediately on assembling at the Wrexham Depôt.

It is now stated that the 3rd Battalion R.W.F. will be stationed at Plymouth and Devonport.

**DEPARTURE OF THE MILITIA FROM
WREXHAM.**

On Monday, another company of the 3rd Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers (Militia) were embodied at the Wrexham Depôt. The men turned up in good numbers, and altogether sixty-four reported themselves at the Barracks. On arrival they were medically examined, and provided with the regulation outfits. They were found to be a fine set of fellows, and in good condition. Owing to the smartness of the staff at Hightown they were all clothed and equipped by an early hour, and were assembled shortly after seven o'clock in the evening for the march to the Great Western Railway Station. Through the courtesy of Drum-Major Foster, the Volunteer Band assembled at the Barracks to play the Militia to the station. Hundreds of people had become aware of the movements of the men, and when the procession moved off from the Barracks, shortly before half-past seven, there was a crowd of people along the route through the town. Several flags, including the Union Jack, were displayed from houses, shops, and hotels, and cheering was indulged in. At one point, when in Salop-road, a number of squibs were fired by enthusiastic spectators. The men stepped briskly along to the strains of "March of the Men of Harlech," "Soldiers of the Queen," and other lively airs. They were in full marching order, and wore their great coats, and had their outfits strapped to their shoulders. There was another crowd to witness the Militia enter the station, where, considering their numbers, they had an enthusiastic send-off. The men left by the 7.48 train for garrison duty at Plymouth. The remainder of the company of one hundred men departed on Wednesday.

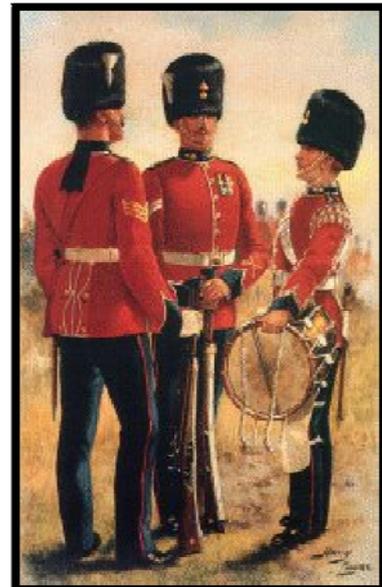
Thomas James (1881-1935)

During this time the Battalion was based at Tregantle Fort in south-east Cornwall, one of the forts surrounding Plymouth and still in use today. This was where Thomas was for the 1901 census, although his birthplace was indicated the same as the man above him – Carmarthenshire.



The Royal Welsh Fusiliers was considered a Welsh regiment even though, while the officers were mainly from the landed Welsh families, the majority of the ordinary soldiers were from England. At the beginning of WW1 the small percentage of Welsh was originally Militia soldiers, not till halfway through the WW1 did the majority become Welsh. The Nonconformist Chapels did not encourage military service. Thomas James gave his religious affiliation as Church of England.

The Regiment was founded in 1689 and was one of the oldest regiments in the British Army. It has a goat, called William Windsor, gifted to the regiment from the Queen's Kashmir goat herd. The soldiers' dress uniform includes racoon skin hats with a white hackle, the description of these had led my mother to believe that he had been in a Guards Regiment. The Royal Welch Fusiliers do not celebrate battle honours but the national day of Wales, St David's Day (1st of March) is celebrated wherever there are Royal Welch Fusiliers. In Battalions the ceremony 'Eating the Leek' is observed by the youngest soldier in each company, and by newly-joined officers and guests at dinner in the Officers' Mess, whilst drummers and fifers, led by the Regimental Goat, march round the table.



The militia was transformed into the Special Reserve by the military reforms of Haldane in the reforming post 1906 Liberal government. In 1908 the militia infantry battalions were redesignated as "reserve" and a number were amalgamated or disbanded. The 3rd Battalion of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers continued as a special reserve.

Marriage & Children

On the 15th December 1906, in the Registry Office of Pontypridd, Thomas James married Lydia Kate Mahoney, a spinster of 23 years, residing at the Lion Hotel, Treorky. She was described as the daughter of Michael Mahoney, a baker. Michael Mahoney and Hannah James (Thomas's sister) were the witnesses.

Lydia Kate had been born in the Bridgend Poor House in Aberkenfig on the 3rd August 1883, the daughter of Alice Gillet, a servant girl from Aston Ingham, Herefordshire. Her mother later married Michael Mahoney, born in Monmouthshire but of Irish heritage, and Lydia adopted his name.

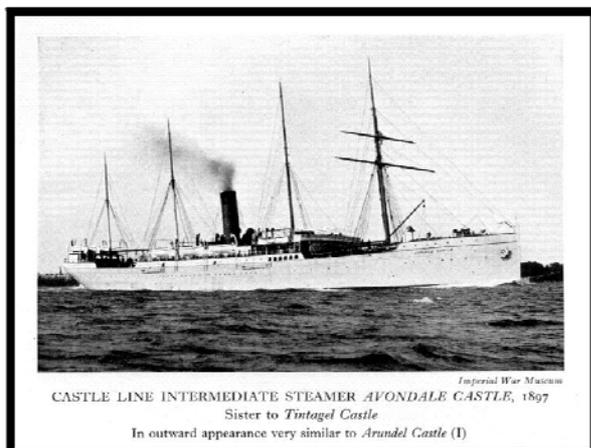
Thomas and Lydia settled in Treorchy, close to Cwmparc and produced the following children:

- Thomas Michael, born 15th November 1908 in Treorchy
- Harold, born 10th November 1909 in Treorchy
- John, born 11th January 1911 in Treorchy

In 1911 Lydia and her sons Thomas and John were living at 76 Dumfries Street in Treorchy, Harold was with his maternal grandparents in Aberkenfig - Michael Mahoney was now a plate layer with a colliery. Lydia's husband was described as "away in Australia".

Industrial action was again disrupting the collieries of the Rhondda. This dispute arose from the owners of the Ely Pit in Penygraig posting a lock-out notice on the mine from 1 September 1910, after accusing the miners of working deliberately working slowly during a test period for a new seam. Consequently the Ely miners went on strike. The owners then called for strikebreakers, resulting in 12,000 miners of the South Wales coalfields going on strike from the 1st November 1910.

The following day the local authorities were enquiring about how to request military aid in the event of disturbances caused by the striking miners. On the 6th November the Chief Constable of Glamorgan had assembled 200 police from Bristol. The following day these police dispersed miners, who had been stoning the mine pump house in Tonypany, using truncheons. At the mine owners' request, Winston Churchill, then the Home Secretary, authorised military troops to be deployed. On the 9th November a squadron of 18th Hussars were despatched, followed by a company of Lancashire Fusiliers with fixed bayonets. There were no official reports of shots fired, but one miner died of head injuries said to be inflicted by a policeman's baton. These incidents became known as the "Tonypany Riots".



The strike finally ended in August 1911, with the miners returning to work on the 1st Monday in September 10 months after the strike began.

Thomas could not have left for Australia until after April 1910, when John was conceived, and must have returned around August 1911 for his daughter Kittie to be conceived. There is a record of a miner called T James returning to London on the SS Avondale Castle from Capetown on 2nd August 1911.

This journey could be the reported exploration of future emigration opportunities for the family and perhaps this well-worn photograph of Lydia and Thomas Michael was carried in his wallet.

Two daughters were born in the years leading up to the outbreak of WW1:

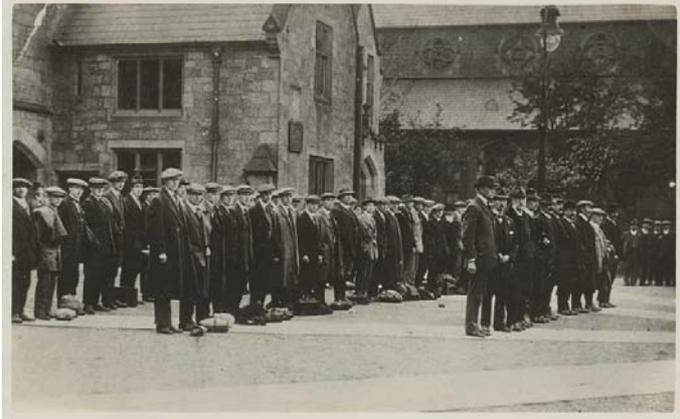
- Catherine Mary, born 27th April 1912 in Pontypridd
- Alice Maud, born 4th September 1913 in Aberkenfig

Alice Maud's birth at Aberkenfig, Harold being with his grandparents in 1911 seem to contradict the story that Lydia was estranged from her parents. In 1917 she is present at the death of her half-sister. One of the family photographs is of "uncle Michael", her half-brother.



Start of WW1

On the 3rd August 1914 Germany declared war on France and invaded Belgium. The next day Britain declared war on Germany. The British Army started to expand with volunteers. Upon mobilisation, the special reserve units of the militia had formed at the depots and continued training while guarding vulnerable points in Britain. The special reserve units remained in Britain throughout the First World War, but their rank and file did not, since the object of the special reserve was to supply drafts of replacements for the overseas units of the regiment. The original militiamen soon disappeared, and the battalions became training units pure and simple.



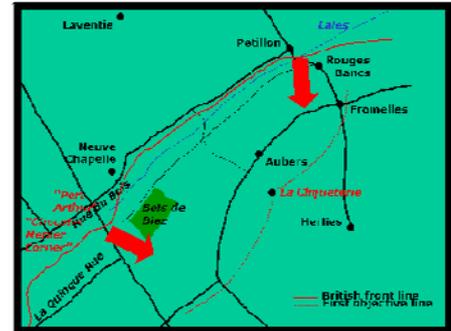
Royal Welsh Fusilier Recruits at the Wrexham Police Station Yard, 1914

Thomas James, with the regimental number of 6229 indicating he was of the militia originally embodied late 1899, arrived on the Western Front on the 1st June 1915. All this information is available from his medal card. His RFC record indicates that he had signed up in the militia for 3 years under colour and 9 years in the reserve, and therefore was probably mobilised August 1914.

During his embarkation leave in May 1915, he and Lydia had conceived another daughter, who was called Winifred Loosilia when she was born on the 14th February 1916 in New Tredegar. Sadly she died on the 9th July 1916 after failing to thrive (marasmus). Marasmus results from an insufficient nutritional intake frequently associated with acute infections (eg, gastroenteritis, respiratory illnesses, measles), chronic illnesses (eg, tuberculosis) or drastic natural or manmade conditions (eg, floods, droughts, civil war). On both her birth and death certificates her father is described as a private in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

Winifred's second name suggests that Thomas James participated in the Battle of Loos, which was fought between 25th September and 8th October 1915, in the area around Loos and including Aix-Noulette, Noeux-les-Mines, Bethune, Gorre and Festubert. Four Battalions (1st, 2nd, 4th and 9th) of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers participated, although the 4th was acting as a Pioneer Battalion – digging trenches in preparation for the offensive and the release of gas for the first time by the British. Thomas was in France in December 1917 while the 1st Battalion was sent to Italy in November 1917, the 9th arrived on the Western Front in mid July 1915. So it is likely that Thomas was sent as reinforcement to the 2nd or the 4th Battalion. As he was a miner and as the family believed he was a stretcher bearer it is most probable that he was a member of the 4th Battalion.

This Battalion landed in France on the 6th November 1914 and was attached to the 3rd Brigade in the 1st Division on the 7th December and spent the winter in trenches at Festubert. In May 1915 the battalion took part in the unsuccessful assault on Aubers Ridge and suffered heavy losses including their Commanding Officer Lt-Col F C France-Hayhurst.

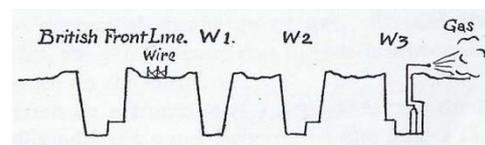


So Thomas' arrival on the 1st June coincided with the battalion's need for reinforcement. For the next couple of months the battalion was doing ordinary trench duty in Vermelles – four days in and four days out. They were moved to the Cambrin area in late August, with a new Commanding Officer, Lt-Col George Edward Pereira.

On the 1st September 1915 the battalion was transferred to the 47th (London) Division and moved to Le Brebis. The next day it became a Pioneers unit, due no doubt to the large number of miners in its ranks – and because it had been found that the Londoners could not dig. It was to spend the rest of the war digging and repairing trenches, roads and tramway lines, often in the front line and in hazardous situations. The first task was preparatory digging for the Battle of Loos, where the British were to discharge poison gas (chlorine) for the first time.



From the 3rd to the 9th September they dug assembly trenches behind the front line. On the night of the 16th three new trenches were begun in front of the front line – to be called W1, W2 and W3. W2 and W1 were to accommodate the first and second waves respectively in the coming attack. W3 was the trench to contain the gas cylinders.



All these three trenches were begun simultaneously and they were got down two feet in the first night, in spite of discovery and interruption by the enemy. One company had twelve casualties. Three nights' work sufficed to complete the system of trenches. The work was done behind infantry covering parties, who lay out in shell-holes some way in front of the work.

W1 was a mere shelter trench, but W2 was fire-stepped.

W3 had to be a special construction to shelter the cylinders of gas from shell-splinters, and to conceal them from air observation. The method used was an overhanging parapet supported by a special revetment. A fire-step was made on the rear wall of the trench for the use of the garrison who were to protect and release the gas.

Duck-boards were laid along each of the trenches, which were to be available and in position as bridges over which the assaulting troops would cross the trenches at zero. All the trenches had to be connected up by the communication trenches, and furnished with the usual annexes of a trench.

In order to assist the assault, once it was launched, advanced machine-gun and trench-mortar emplacements were made, and shell-holes close to the German wire were adapted, and to conceal the existence of the new work all the soil excavated had to be taken back in sandbags for disposal.

On the 19th the gas cylinders were brought up.

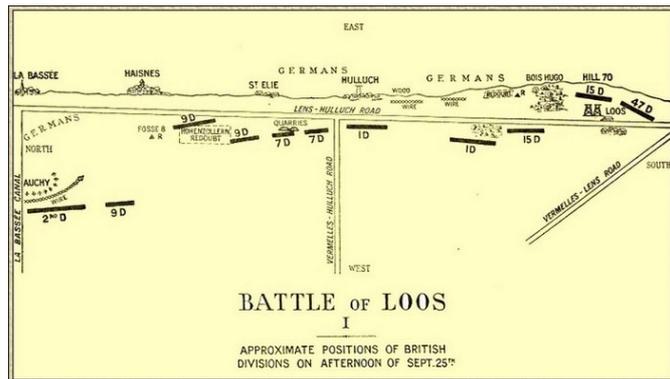
With the approach of zero hour on the 25th September the battalion was ready. The nozzles had been screwed on the cylinders, and they were standing by in their gas-masks. At 5:30 am the gas was released. It was the first time the gas had been used by the British. On the front of 47th division the wind was in the right direction and the right strength – the gas went over well.

When the cylinders were exhausted a smoke screen was put down, the trenches were bridged over with duck-boards, and the infantry, wearing their gas-masks, went over at 6:30 am.

The 4th Battalion had played its part, and moved back to the railway cutting. One company had thirty casualties, for as soon as the gas began to drift over, the German guns opened on the trench. They collected and sent back the casualties. "We all felt sick as a result of the fumes, and nearly all of us were sick." (Lt. Picton Davies).¹

Battle of Loos

The battle was the British component of the combined Anglo-French offensive known as the Third Battle of Artois. General Douglas Haig, then commander of the British First Army, directed the battle.



¹ 4th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers in the Great War, Ellis

However, his plans were limited by the shortage of artillery ammunition (due to the Gallipoli action), which meant the preliminary bombardment, essential for success in the emerging trench warfare, was weak. Prior to the British attack, about 140 tons of chlorine gas was released, with mixed success—for, in places the gas was blown back onto British trenches. Due to the inefficiency of the contemporary gas masks, many soldiers removed them as they could not see through the fogged-up talc eyepieces, or could barely breathe with them on. This led to some British soldiers being affected by their own gas, as it blew back across their lines.

The British were able to break through the weaker German defences and capture the town of Loos, mainly due to numerical superiority. However supply and communications problems, combined with the late arrival of reserves, meant that the breakthrough could not be exploited. A further complication, for many British soldiers, was the failure of their artillery to cut the German wire in many places in advance of the attack. Advancing over open fields within range of German machine guns and artillery, British losses were devastating. When the battle resumed the following day, the Germans were prepared and repulsed attempts to continue the advance. The fighting subsided on 28 September, with the British having retreated to their starting positions. Their attacks had cost over 20,000 casualties.

Following the initial attacks by the British, the Germans made several attempts to recapture the Hohenzollern Redoubt. This was accomplished on 3 October. On 8 October, the Germans attempted to recapture much of the lost ground, by launching a major offensive along the entire line, but abandoned the effort by nightfall, due to heavy losses. This marked the official end of hostilities, although in an attempt to strike before the winter rain set in, the British attempted a final offensive on 13 October, which failed, due to a lack of hand grenades. General Haig thought it might be possible to launch another attack on 7 November, but the combination of heavy rain and accurate German shelling during the second half of October, finally persuaded him to abandon the attempt.

RWF Unit	Killed	Wounded	Missing
1 st Battalion	44	275	135
2 nd Battalion	37	76	
4 th Battalion	not tabulated		
9 th Battalion	31	133	85

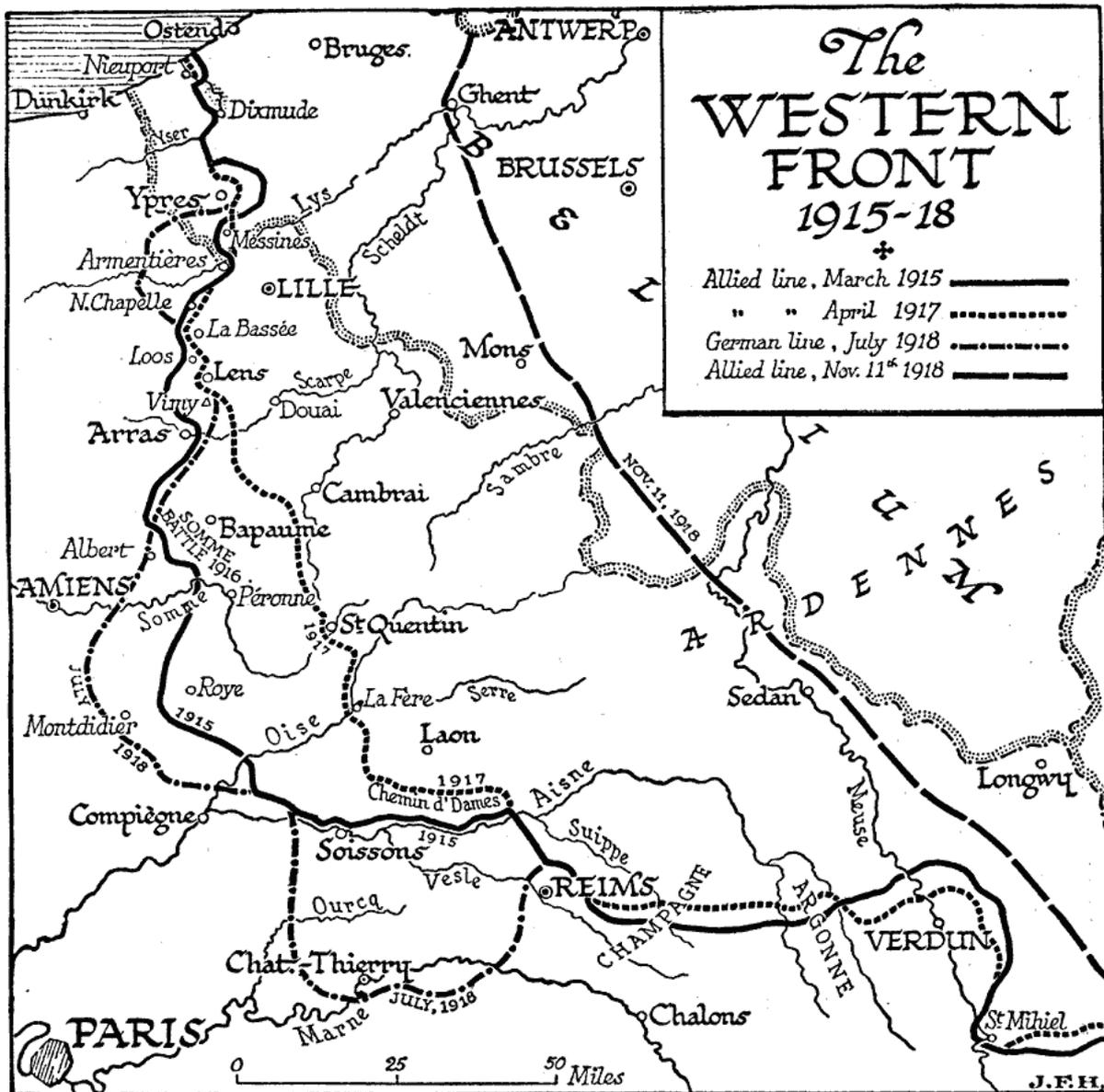
British records for the war show that the fatality rate for gas was only around 3%, 2% permanently incapacitated, with 70% fit for duty after 6 weeks.

Many of those who survived a gas attack were scarred for life. Respiratory disease and failing eyesight were common post-war afflictions. Many of those who were considered as fit for service were left with scar tissue in their lungs. This tissue was susceptible to tuberculosis attack. It was from this that many of the 1918 casualties died, around the time of the Second World War, shortly before sulfa drugs became widely available for its treatment.

The family memory is that Thomas was affected by the gas for the rest of his life, suffering with a continual cough. However his Medal Card and RAF Service Records indicate that he continued with the Royal Welsh Fusiliers.

Life in the Trenches

The Great War on the Western Front was typified by its lack of movement – years of stalemate – trench warfare. This map of the Western Front illustrates very little movement between 1915 and 1918. It was estimated that up to a third of the Allied casualties on the Western Front were actually sustained in the trenches, both from enemy injuries and disease.



In busy sectors the constant shellfire brought random death. Many novices were killed on their first day by a sniper's bullet.

The trenches were infested by rats, feeding on human remains. Lice was also a problem and was the cause of Trench Fever, which started with severe pain followed by a high fever and took up to 12 weeks away from the trenches to recover.

Trench Foot was another condition peculiar to trench life. It was a fungal infection caused by the cold, wet and unsanitary conditions. It could turn gangrenous leading to amputation.

taking a part. The Welsh always sang when pretending not to be scared; it kept them steady. And they never sang out of tune.”²

The other overriding feature of the trenches was the stench – of rotting bodies, overflowing latrines, men who had not had the luxury of a bath for weeks or months, cordite, residual of poison gas, stagnant mud, cigarette smoke, rotting sandbags.....

Pioneers

In November 1914, as the war of stalemate settled into exhausted armies glaring and firing at each other from the growing system of trenches and breastworks, the War Office announced that the army was to create and post a Pioneer Battalion to each division of Kitchener’s New Armies then forming in Britain.

These new units were designed to be equipped and trained as conventional infantry, but be more closely affiliated with the Royal Engineers. They were to be provided with special training in entrenching, road-making and demolition and a selection of technical stores. At least 50% of the battalion’s strength was to be men who were used to picks and shovels. The other 50% were to be men with a recognised trade such as masonry, joinery or bricklaying. Their role was to provide “organised and intelligent labour” for engineering operations such as building railway embankments, constructing wire obstacles, bridging and felling trees. They would receive an extra 2d a day.

The conversion of infantry battalions to Pioneers took place over a period of 6 weeks around August of 1915. The 4th Royal Welsh Fusiliers, as a Territorial Force formation, was a prime candidate as almost all of its remaining warrant officers, NCOs and men, after the battle of Aubers Ridge, were skilled miners. Their attachment to the 47th (London) Division was after the representations of the officers of the London Rifle Brigade, via friends in high places, to stop their conversion to a Pioneer Battalion. After being hugely depleted during Second Ypres, this class conscious battalion, composed almost entirely of middle-class office clerks, had spent several weeks performing tasks at the numerous rail heads. It had not been a function the battalion had enjoyed – they were horrified that the army was considering making it permanent.

One former Pioneer recalled:

“It was one thing to dig a trench through good, unbroken ground, but quite a different affair when the shell holes lie so thick that it is difficult to distinguish one crater from another, and the sides must be supported as one goes. And when after a barrage of such as nature as those that preceded the attacks on the Somme, a trench became almost a shapeless trace a little below the surface of the ground and was filled for many yards with debris of the shattered parapet, splintered timber, tangled barbed wire and here and there, the dead. ‘Clearing’ was an even more difficult task than digging . . . But when, following on days of fighting, the infantry, ashen white, bearded, and slimed with mud, came after relief down a communication trench newly dug, thankful for its protection, one felt amply repaid for the days and nights of unceasing labour.”³

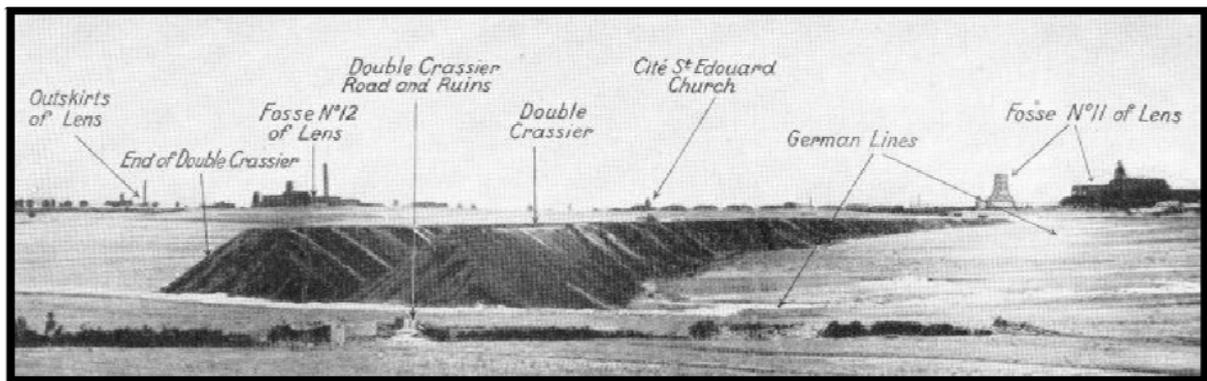
While the Battalion were Pioneers their fatalities were 28 Officers and 273 men. The battalion’s original strength is unclear but it may have been 30 officers and 1000 other ranks.

² In his autobiography “Goodbye to All That”.

³ Pioneer Battalions in the Great War

Activities in 1916

For the winter of 1915/16 the 4th Battalion remained on the Loos-Hulluck front. Here they tunnelled the slag-heap known as the Double Crassier at the rate of 14 feet 2 inches per day, a feat of which they were justly proud.



On the 8th March 1916 the 47th Division moved to the Vimy Ridge sector. The Arras-Vimy sector was conducive to tunnel excavation owing to the soft, porous yet extremely stable nature of the chalk underground. As a result, pronounced underground warfare had been an active feature of the Vimy sector since 1915. The Bavarian engineers, for example, had blown 20 mines in the sector by March 1915. By early 1916 the German miners had gained a clear advantage over their French counterparts. On their arrival, the British Royal Engineer tunnelling companies, including the 4th Battalion, became actively engaged in offensive mining against German miners, first stopping the German underground advance and then developing a defensive strategy that prevented the Germans from gaining a tactical advance through their mining activities. The 47th Division conducted effective mining operations against Vimy Ridge on 3 May and 15 May 1916, but a German attack on the evening of Sunday 21 May moved forward 800 yards, capturing 1,000 yards of the British front line, and the Division performed badly during a counterattack on 23 May. The Division conducted a carefully planned single battalion raid on the night of 27–28 June, claiming to have killed 300–600 Germans for only 13 British casualties.



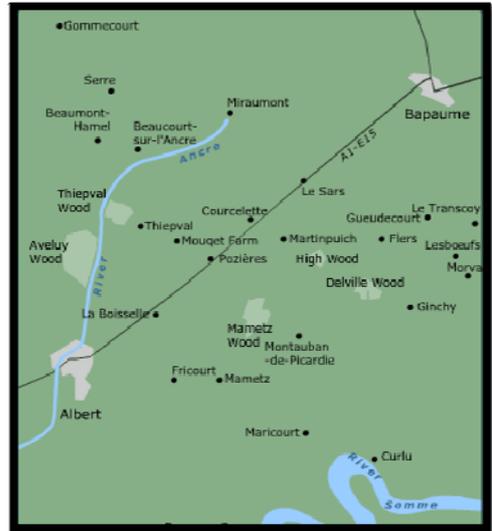
The 4th Battalion left the Vimy Ridge sector (Villers au Bois) on the 26th July, and marched for days, round by St Pol, pausing in villages sometimes for a week, and arriving finally at Bresle, behind

Albert, on the 20th August. “Bresle was a filthy little village, abounding in German prisoners, refuse dumps, manure heaps, and bluebottles.”

The roads were now in a terrible condition. The congestion at Loos had been bad, it was infinitely worse on the Somme; added to the wear of the mass of traffic, which sometimes locked for hours, there was the pitiless weather, the rain flooding everything.

On the 27th August the battalion was put on the “German Road” running from Fricourt through the “Valley of Death” south of Mametz to the two Bazentins, where they worked without ceasing, constructing and maintaining it.

The 47th Division was moved up to the line at High Wood on the 11th September, and the 4th Battalion was then employed in digging assembly trenches for the big attack on the 15th (Battle of Flers-Courcelette). At 6:30 am on the 15th the advance commenced. The attack progressed fairly well on the right, but the 47th had some hard fighting in High Wood before they drove the enemy out of it. Our 4th Battalion then commenced their arduous and most unpleasant task of digging communication trenches in the midst of heavy shell fire; they also had to construct artillery tracks. This they also had to during the Battle of Morval, which commenced on the 25th September.



During the Battle of Le Transloy Ridge on the 1st October Eaucourt l'Abbaye was secured by the 47th Division, the assembly trenches for the attack having been dug by the 4th Battalion. On the evening of the 2nd, companies went up to consolidate the line won. All the work of the 4th Battalion was carried out under the most appalling conditions. The rain had turned the battlefield into a morass – they dug into mud, they lived in mud, with the bodies of the festering dead around them. But their valuable work carried on. Relief on the 9th October must have been welcomed.

They left Albert, with the Division, on the 13th for the “Pioneer Camp” between Vlamertinghe and Dickebusch, at the southern end of the Ypres salient. The 4th Battalion had interesting work the moment they arrived (for the infantry who watched them) on the 20th October. Amongst the various jobs they undertook was the tunnelling of the Bluff, the spoil-heap from the Ypres-Comines Canal, and the construction of cupolas in the ravine and Larch Wood; the cupolas were corrugated iron huts with a little cement plastered over them, and would resist a direct hit from field guns, but nothing heavier.

Their programme of work also included trench tramways and a light railway, roads and tracks. “Dumps of trench stores, ammunition, and all the other beastly impedimenta that one associates with the term ‘push’ were already beginning to show themselves. A big scheme for the construction of trench tramways, of which there



Royal Welsh Fusiliers tunnelling – possibly the 4th Battalion

already appeared to be more than enough, was evidently in operation. "Altogether the future looked none too rosy."⁴



Anything in the nature of a bank was being bored into to provide shelters from at least splinters, but the deep dugout, peculiar to the Germans, was not attempted in that low-lying country. There had always been, however, in this part of the salient, a bitter underground war, mining and counter-mining having been carried on since the winter 1914-15. Hill 60 and the Bluff were notorious centres for this form of warfare. A number of mines were already completed when the 4th Battalion arrived; others were rapidly being sunk.

The battalions saw the wet summer pass into a wet autumn; the rank grass and poppies died down; the winter, with snow to relieve the monotony of rain, with the trenches knee-deep at times with liquid mud, slipped by; but they were more comfortably situated for rest-billets than the battalions in the Somme area.

As a man who had signed up in the Special Reserve, his four year period of service expired on the 19th December 1916. The Military Service Act 1916

enabled conscription and the retention of men who had already served. They were paid a bounty of £15-00 and were entitled to a month's furlough if the exigencies of the service allowed. His RAF Record indicates he was paid the bounty. Perhaps the lack of another child indicates he did not get the furlough.

Activities in 1917

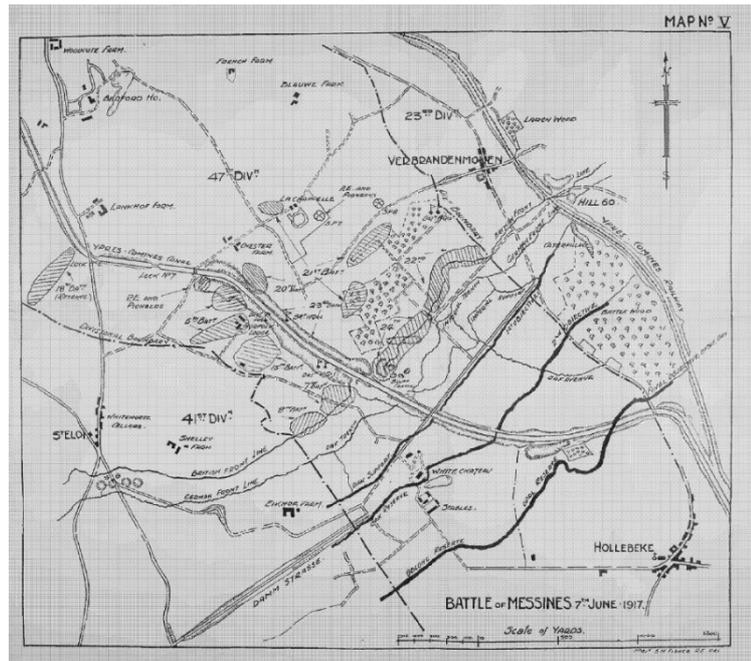
The 4th Battalion had been working through the winter on preparations for the Battle of Messines. On the front selected twenty mines were either completed or in the course of construction; guns were massed at the ratio of one to every seven yards; and the somewhat complicated movements of the infantry were worked out in consultation with the lower commands, who had special knowledge of the sectors they were defending or holding.

The 47th would advance astride the Ypres-Comines Canal, with D Company of the 4th Battalion allotted to the 140th Brigade on the south bank, and B Company to the 142nd Brigade on the north. These two companies were to consolidate the positions gained and link them up with the old trenches; while A Company was to rush through the repair of the old road as far as out old line, and C Company was to run a tram line from the canal bank to the old line.

⁴ 4th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers in the Great War, Ellis

But when the 7th June dawned, the ground rose from beneath the feet of the German defenders, their most vital points collapsed, and through the smoke and falling debris of the mines, the English storm-troops passed forward over the last remnants of the German defence.”⁵

The 4th Battalion got to work quickly behind the assaulting troops of the 47th Division, and soon connected the old front line with the enemy support line. There was, however, a big programme of work, and they were kept hard at it



constructing tracks and tramways for the next 8 days. They went to Bouvelinghem on the 15th August, and for the first time in ten months had a week out of the battle area. They returned to Vlamertinghe and continued the struggle, which seemed so hopeless, of improving the communications to the front line: amongst other jobs was the construction of a tramway from Hellfire Corner, on the Menin road, to the advanced positions. This cheerful and hard-working battalion left the salient on the 18th September for a sector just north of Arras.

The 4th Battalion had been working in the comparative quiet of the Arras sector. Rumour had been busy, and the 47th Division, when relieved in the line on the 19th November, commenced a march which, it was thought, would end in Italy. The 4th Battalion concentrated at Roelincourt, and after passing through Acq and back to Dainville found themselves at Courcelles, in the devastated and depressing area of the Somme battlefield. They passed through Bapaume to Beaulencourt. It was frightfully cold, and the sound of continuous artillery fire could be heard in the distance.

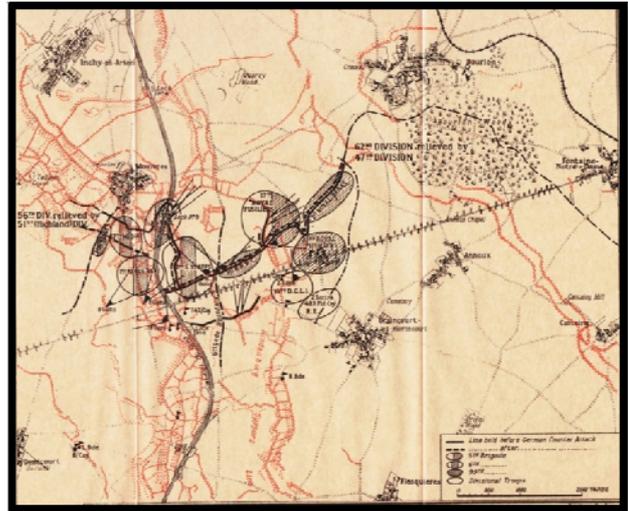
On the 26th November the 4th Battalion moved to Bertincourt, after sending a detachment of 100 to Maily Maillet. Here they waited until the 30th, when they had orders to move through Metz to Trescault. The 47th Division had taken over Bourlon Wood during the night 28th/29th. The 4th Battalion set out to march to Metz. "We came to the conclusion, long before we reached Metz, that the Boche had sprung an unpleasant surprise upon some part of the salient. The roads were thick with transport, all moving backwards, Metz was being heavily shelled, and the Boche planes were flying about as they pleased....Once clear of Metz we made better progress, but the sights that greeted us as we marched towards Trescault were enough to dishearten the stoutest. Gunners carrying their dial-sights, infantry in stray groups, some in the very act of throwing away their Lewis guns, others without rifles, all wearing a hunted look, and all hurrying back towards Metz.... We now understood why the Guards had been ordered forward." ⁶

⁵ *Hindenburg, Out of My Life*

⁶ *4th Battalion Royal Welsh Fusiliers in the Great War, Ellis*

The 4th Battalion also realised that they stood in a very good chance of being rounded up and ending their march in Berlin! As they moved forward they found that “pandemonium was now raging to our immediate front, as well as to the south” – the 47th Division was in the thick of the northern fight.

Following fresh orders, the battalion passed on through Havrincourt and occupied the Hindenburg Support Line on the left of Flesquieres where they were kept busy. As darkness fell on the 1st December they were up in Bourlon Wood digging trenches in place of the line of shell-holes now occupied by front-line battalions. The latter were reduced to about a fourth of their strength, and the battalion was also providing carrying parties to bring back the wounded and to carry up ammunition.



The work continued on the night of the 2nd. The 7th and 8th London Regiment had attacked and recovered ground lost on the 30th November, but the old trenches were battered to pieces; A and B companies dug 450 yards of trench for them, while C and D, on the right, dug 175 yards of trench under appalling shell fire, a large portion of which was gas. “As dawn was breaking, the 4th, laden once more with scores of wounded from the forward aid-posts, staggered back to the Hindenburg Support Line, having completed as a night’s work as they had ever achieved.”

For Christmas Day 1917 the Battalion was out of the line at a village called Senlis, having a roaring day of feasting. Thomas James, however, was admitted to the Stationary Hospital at Abancourt on the 22 December 1917 with sciatica. He was transferred to the 3rd General Hospital and then back to England to the Metropolitan Hospital in Kingsland Road, Hackney.

Sciatica is a set of symptoms including pain that may be caused by general compression or irritation of one of five spinal nerve roots that give rise to each sciatic nerve, or by compression or irritation of the left or right or both sciatic nerves. The pain is felt in the lower back, buttock, or various parts of the leg and foot. In addition to pain, which is sometimes severe, there may be numbness, muscular weakness, pins and needles or tingling and difficulty in moving or controlling the leg. Typically, the symptoms are only felt on one side of the body. Pain can be severe in prolonged exposure to cold weather.

Royal Flying Corps & Royal Air Force

On the 28th February 1918, following his bout of sciatica, Thomas James entered the Royal Flying Corps as a labourer. He was subsequently part of the Royal Air Force when it was formed on the 1st April 1918. He was stationed at 9 ARD, an aircraft repair depot north of London at Edmonton. Eventually Thomas became an airfrafthand on the 1st January 1919,



although he was recorded as discharged on the 14 December 1918 from RD40.

The Silver War Badge was instituted in 1916 and was awarded to all those military personnel who were honourably discharged under the King's Regulations, generally when no longer physically fit for service. This was issued on 19th December 1919. He also received the 1914/15 Star in 1921, followed by the British War and Victory Medals in 1923.

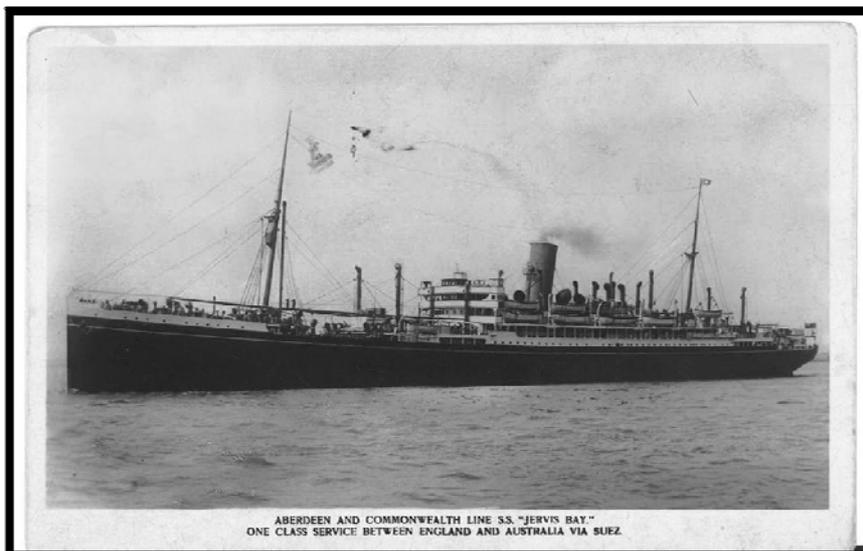


Demobilisation & Pension

Thomas was granted, on the 8th November 1918, a pension of 10d per day for life as well as a disablement pension of 8d per day from the 14th December 1921.

After the war finished Thomas and Lydia had settled in New Tredegar, where Lydia had started a "corner store" during the war. They had three more children Kenneth (1920), Iris (1923) and May (1925).

The demand for steaming coal declined sharply with the coming of oil, the peak having been in 1921, with 80,000 miners being laid off in that year. Although work had been plentiful in the early years of the Rhondda industrial history, working conditions and pay were poor and disastrous. The cramped towns and bad sanitation led to ill health, poverty and death. Rhondda suffered excruciating, hard and difficult times. Between 1868 and 1919 statistics show that a miner was killed every six hours and injured every two minutes. As a result of these conditions South Wales was at the forefront of political strife as the militant South Wales miners sought to ensure suitable working and living conditions in the Rhondda.



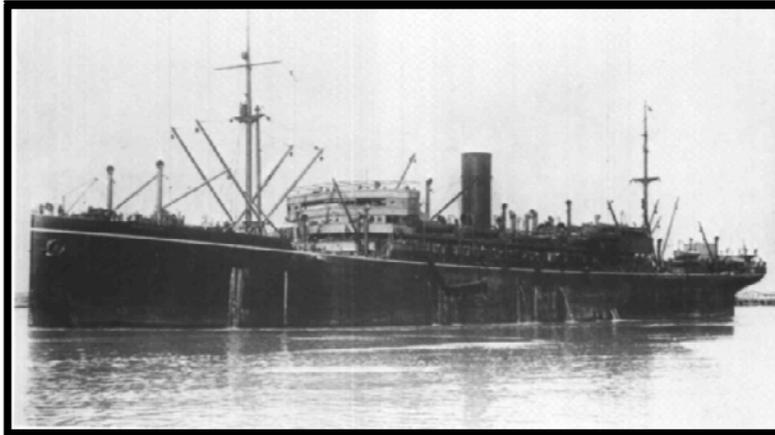
ABERDEEN AND COMMONWEALTH LINE S.S. "JERVIS BAY"
ONE CLASS SERVICE BETWEEN ENGLAND AND AUSTRALIA VIA SUEZ.

The family decided to emigrate. Their selection of Australia was a result of Thomas's exploratory trip in 1911. On the 17th June 1924 Thomas sailed from London to Sydney on the SS Jervis Bay, aged 43 and his occupation given as a miner. Just over a year later, on the 25th June 1925, his wife and family followed on the SS

Thomas James (1881-1935)

Beltana. Thomas, the eldest son, may have been designated a coal miner at 16. The writing is not clear.

This is very different from the story my grandfather told us as children. He claimed to have walked to Australia. When we were sceptical about walking across the sea, he claimed to have had an old-fashioned diving suit, which after arriving in Sydney he posted back to Wales for his next brother to use.



He also claimed to have been selected by my grandmother as a husband after she had seen what a hard worker he was in an orphanage. When challenged about why he was in an orphanage, he told us his mother was in jail. When we asked her why she was in jail, she just shook her head and said "that Tommy!"

Life in NSW

The family initially settled in Kurri Kurri in the Hunter Valley. They had another son David in 1928 and Lydia was living in Sydney by 1930. She and Thomas were residing in Ferris Street in Annandale in 1932, with Thomas retired at the age of 54. He died in 1935 of chronic myocarditis which was attributed to his gassing. My great grandmother was bitter about the war and the effect it had on her husband. She and Thomas had 12 granddaughters and 5 grandsons. Thomas may have seen two of his grandsons before he died.

Lydia continued to live in Annandale until she married Cyril Adrian Broughton Ballard in the early 1960s and they moved to Croydon. She was again widowed in 1966 and died in 1968.



Left to right

Back: Iris Felton, Betty James, Maud Fisher, May Thurgood, Zell & David James

Front: Thomas James, Reg Fisher, John Felton, Steve Thurgood

Kittie and Harold died of TB, but had married and had a child each. Winifred died as an infant. Kenneth and Jack are missing in the photograph, but still alive.

Thomas James (1881-1935)

Thomas Michael James (1908-1978) was a miner, carried a swag around outback NSW during the depression, married Elizabeth Douglas in 1935, and had two daughters. He enlisted in the Australian Army, but after two years was discharged as he was in an essential occupation as a bus driver. He told us it was because he had a disagreement with a tank – he directed it go one way and it ran over his foot. I was very disappointed not to confirm this in his army records.

Harold James (1909-1935) was a miner, married Phyllis Smith in 1931, and had a son Kevin, before dying of tuberculosis.

John (Jack) James (1911-1991) was a miner, mechanic and driver. He married Hazel Close in 1931, had a son John. They were divorced in the 40s and Jack married Jessie Margaret Lydia Missingham in the early 50s. His son John went on to become a marine engineer, manager of Hexham Engineering outside Newcastle and died in a light plane crash in 1977.

Catherine Mary (Kittie) James (1912-1947) married Edward Sawdy, a bus driver and divorcee, in 1938. They had a daughter, before Kittie also died of tuberculosis.

Alice Maud James (1913-1994) married Harold Reginald (Reg) Fisher, a motor driver, in 1935. They had four daughters.

Winifred Loosilia James (1916-1916).

Kenneth James James (1920-1994) was a slitter and guillotine operator, served in the Australian Navy, married Audrey Jean Leatheam Wright in 1942. They adopted a son.

Iris James (1923-1993) married John Felton in 1944. He was in the Australian Army at the time, a meat carter after the war. They had two daughters and a son.

May James (1925) married Steven James Lewis Thurgood in 1948. He had been a RAN sailor in the war. They had a daughter.

David Henry James (1928) became a policeman and lawyer, after some time in the Australian Navy. He married Zell Marie Milton in 1949. They had two daughters and a son.

In January 1918 Wilfred Owen wrote a poem, "Miners" inspired by the Minnie Pit Mine explosion where 156 men and boys lost their lives. He had served in France from 1915 and had just been released after treatment for shell-shock. He was killed in action on the 4th November 1918. This poem entwines the mining tragedy with the tragedy of war. It reminds me of my nana's grieving for her tall, handsome husband and all the soldiers and miners who had been lost. Even more relevant as Thomas spent the war as a soldier and a miner.

MINERS by Wilfred Owen

*There was a whispering in my hearth,
A sigh of the coal,
Grown wistful of a former earth
It might recall.*

*I listened for a tale of leaves
And smothered ferns,
Fronn-forests, and the low sly lives
Before the fauns.*

*My fire might show steam-phantoms simmer
From Time's old cauldron,
Before the birds made nests in summer,
Or men had children.*

*But the coals were murmuring of their mine,
And moans down there
Of boys that slept wry sleep, and men
Writhing for air.*

*And I saw white bones in the cinder-shard,
Bones without number.
Many the muscled bodies charred,
And few remember.*

*I thought of all that worked dark pits
Of war, and died
Digging the rock where Death reposes
Peace lies indeed.*

*Comforted years will sit soft-chaired,
In rooms of amber;
The years will stretch their hands, well-cheered
By our life's ember;*

*The centuries will burn rich loads
With which we groaned,
Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids,
While songs are crooned;
But they will not dream of us poor lads,
Left in the ground.*

Appendices

1	Birth certificate Thomas James, born 16 May 1881, Cwmpark
2	1891 Census record in Cwmpark of Thomas James and parents
3	Militia Record for Thomas James, Cardigan Artillery, No.1921
4	Militia Record for Thomas James, Royal Welsh Fusiliers, No.2618
5	Militia Record for Thomas James, Cardigan Artillery, No.2140
6	1901 Census record T James at Tegantle Fort, Cornwall
7	Marriage certificate Thomas James & Lydia Kate Mahoney
8	Birth certificate Thomas Michael James
9	1911 Census record Lydia Kate James & sons Thomas & Jack
10	1911 Census record Michael Mahoney with grandson Harold James
11	Passenger record on SS Avondale Castle T James, boarding at Capetown
12	Death certificate of Winifred Loosilia James
13	British Army WW1 Medal Card for T James, RWF & RFC, 6229
14	RAF Service Record for Thomas James, Official Number 139373
15	Passenger record on SS Jervis Bay, T James to Sydney
16	Passenger Record SS Beltana, Lydia Kate James, 4 sons and 4 daughters, to Sydney
17	Death record Thomas James
18	Death record Lydia Kate Ballard

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