

William Henry (Billy) Beckett

(1897 – 1917)



(30)

War Record

William (Billy) attested on 17th October 1914 in Bolton with the Loyal North Lancashire Territorial force (2901). Billy was born in the first quarter of 1897⁽³⁶⁾. When he signed on his “apparent” age is shown as 19 years, 2 months, but he would actually have been a few months short of his 18th birthday. He was 5’ 7” tall with good vision and good physical development. The photograph was taken during his initial training in Blackpool and shows no cap badge or insignia of any kind. He eventually goes into the 2/4th Battalion Loyal North Lancashire Regiment. (Service Number 241007).

Family History⁽¹⁾

In the 1911 Census Billy is 14 years old, living at 99 Bolton Road and his occupation is Apprentice Joiner, working for Messrs. Isherwood and Taylor.⁽²⁰⁾

His father is Harry, a Gardener Domestic born in Holton Halesworth, Suffolk. His mother Anna came from Eaton, Warslow, Staffordshire.

He has an older sister, Florence, 15 who was born in Suffolk and is working as a mill hand in the Cardroom. Younger sister Ellen Maria, aged 12, is also working as a half time mill hand in the Cardroom. There were three more young sisters, Rose, Gladys and Alice. He has younger brothers Ernest (Albert) and Charles. Peggy Hardman, 80, was a widow, occupation confectioner, who lived at 101 Bolton Road. He attends Turton Day and Sunday schools.⁽²⁰⁾

War Record

Billy wrote many letters home to his mother and father and sisters, which have been preserved. They tell the complete story of his experiences from the day he signed on. He refers constantly to "Old Peggy" and "Mr Reggie" and mentions many of the Turton men he has come across.

Initially he finds himself in training at Blackpool during November and December 1914. They start at 7.15 am with physical drill on the sands until 8.00, have an hour for breakfast and then have instruction from 9.00 to 12.45. In the afternoon they have a **"route march"** but they have plenty to entertain them in the evening with concerts in schools **"like they used to do at the Institute"**.

He talks about getting his uniform, bathing in the sea, sending money home to his mother and meeting other lads from Turton. He goes to have his photograph taken as soon as he gets all his uniform.

However, even at this stage, the grim reality does creep in. He has seen the Bolton news with "Jack's" photo in it. The Jack referred to is Jack Hayward, the first casualty from Turton, who has been drowned on HMS Monmouth at the Battle of Coronel.

"I am very sorry for Mrs Hayward. It must be awful for her, but she has the honour to think that he has died a hero and for his country."

Excitement arrives in the form of a scare that the Germans had landed at Morecambe **"we were ordered to be ready to go at any minute"**. He has already become friendly with W Briggs (Billy) who will be his friend and companion for many years, along with Tommy Greenwood. (See separate biographies).

Territorial troops were not obliged to serve overseas, although it was expected, but when they agreed to this they signed the "Imperial Service Obligation". They were then issued with a special badge, known as the "Imperial Service Brooch", to be worn on their right breast. Billy signed this pledge on 2nd December 1914 at Blackpool.

By January 1915 he is in Sevenoaks, Kent and training has begun in earnest. The amount and quality of food is an abiding concern for Billy and starts to become an issue at Sevenoaks.

“We are beginning to see what soldiering is likewe waited till ten o’clock for our breakfast. We got half a loaf apiece and a lump of bacon about 2” thick a quarter of butter as hard as iron and it stank like anything.... We lit a fire and cooked our bacon in a big frying pan. We made our tea in a big dixie and it tasted like pea soup. Anyhow I enjoyed my breakfast. I was that hungry”.

He sleeps in a barracks with 33 others on sacks filled with straw and with two blankets. He says he is getting to like the food because he has to. The first requests arrive at home for cake to be sent! A recurring theme.

“Remember me to Mrs Holmes and thank her for the champion pie she sent. It came in for dinner as we had nobody to cook for us”.

On 16th February 1915 he is on a ship heading to France. They are soon billeted in a barn and spend their days digging trenches. The food is rated as good but insufficient. Problems arise in that parcels sent from home are not arriving or are damaged. Basic supplies seem to be in short supply as he asks for writing paper, soap and a few boxes of matches.

They continue to dig trenches and move to a billet with **“an old Frenchwoman”** and her two sons. They are comfortable there and she clearly treats them well.

On 22nd March 1915 he goes to the trenches and **“I have fired my first shot at the Germans”**. However, the main interest is still the receipt of cakes and he mentions having received one from Mrs Ainsworth.

The Ainsworth family were close friends. They were a well to do family and lived at Spring Bank (See separate biographies). Billy often asks in his letters about Gerald Ainsworth, who has also signed up. He refers repeatedly to “Mr Reggie”. This seems most likely to be Mr Reginald Ainsworth. He does not appear to have joined up and Billy remarks that he must be sorry that he cannot go as he is “too small”.

Billy is involved mainly in a **“sapping”** job in the trenches which probably comes about as a result of his joinery experience. He refers to being **“up to the neck in slush and mud”** but generally seems cheerful. He advises his father not to enlist, but to let younger men do it.

Food is still an issue and he feels he is not getting enough to eat. He says they are **“clemming”** (starving). He talks about Mr Sparkes, who eventually becomes a Captain, but who now says he wishes he was back in Turton.

Billy comments, rather bitterly, about people back home who have not enlisted or who are in the army, but not at the front. **“Swanking about with walking sticks and fancy socks”**. He says that everyone mucks in together and the food is still bad:

“We always whack our parcels between one another. You know we are all palsThere are gentlemen’s sons, colliers, bank clerks, navvies and all the different classes mixed up in our ranks but they are all one class here”.

The lice are **“as big as donkeys”**.

Life in the trenches continues during 1915. He does not discuss the actual fighting. News starts to come through of men from the village being killed **“Jim Hamer from Prospect was killed last night”**, but he has an enjoyable time at a sports day when Mr Sparkes seems to have been the butt of jokes as he had difficulty crawling under a blanket in a race.

Rumours have been circulating in Bolton that the Battalion has been wiped out, but he pours scorn on this. News reaches him of the deaths of others – Bob Baldwin and Ambrose Raby **“it was hard lines to be done so soon”**. They are spending longer and longer in the trenches without relief.

In October 1915 he spends 32 days in the trenches with water four feet deep in places. He tells of how a soldier got stuck in the mud up to his waist and he and an officer had to spend one and a half hours digging him out.

Although he never complains, his true feelings seep out occasionally. He reserves special scorn for people who have not signed up and remarks they would come faster if only they knew what lads from their own village were going through.

In January 1916 he is happy to hear that **“slackers are being rounded up at last. My word, it will give one or two of them at Edgworth alone a shock when they have to leave go of their mother’s apron strings”**.

On 6th February 1916 he wistfully remarks that **“I don’t think the end is far distant now.”**

He suffers from trench foot, saying his feet are seven sizes too big. Food continues to be sent from home and he thanks his mother for a parcel apart from the sandwiches which were **“green inside”**.

He has gone into the Scouts whose job is to patrol between British and enemy lines at night.

He says he has had several narrow escapes and says that on 21st August **“I was the only Scout left out of G Companyit was simply murder. Hell upon earth with a vengeance.”**

He again turns his scorn on the conscientious objectors and single men who have not signed up and requests a new pair of socks as he has **“had these on a month with no change.”**

In December 1916, despite his bravery, problems are mounting for him.

“I am not feeling up to much at present as my hand is festering in two places also my right knee cap which I did a few nights ago in front of our trenches. You see I fell in the barbed wire and extracted myself”.

He is upset by the loss of a ring: **“You know the ring that Dad bought me the time he came to Blackpool? Well, I have worn it ever since but three nights ago I dropped it off my finger and could not find it. I was very sorry to lose it”.**

On 21st December 1916 the problems with his knee have become sufficiently severe for him to be in hospital in Boulogne: **“If the Doctor is in a good mood I might get marked Blighty and then it will be alright.”**

He is lucky, the Doctor was in a good mood and the New Year finds him being attended by the volunteer ladies at a hospital in Henley in Arden. His knee is causing a great deal of trouble but he remarks that lying in bed is better than lying in a dug-out. It seems possible that a piece of the barbed wire had become lodged inside his knee and eventually he has to go to the “Picture Palace” (operating theatre) to have it removed.

He expresses a desire to go into the Flying Corps or the Royal Engineers – anything to get out of the infantry. But he is rejected by the RFC and has to carry on being “a common or garden infantryman”.

His knee eventually heals and he transfers to a camp at Park Hall, Oswestry until he returns to France on 19th June 1917 on a boat with the first contingent of Americans **“They are a fine lot too”.**

Captain Sparkes has been in the paper and it now appears that Billy has come to respect the man who was a figure of fun for him at first. Captain Sparkes was Robert William Bell Sparkes who had received the Military Cross in 1917 for his “magnificent leadership and utter disregard for danger”.⁽¹⁹⁾

Billy continues to work as a Scout and goes back to the trenches. By early October he is on a rest break and comments that **“we are enjoying lots of sports such as football competitions, boxing, running, horse racing etc. etc. and on the whole we are having a very enjoyable time.”**

He replies to a letter from his sister who remarks that it is three years since he joined up.

“It was 17th October when I first joined upit has not been three years of misery and unhappiness. Many parts of my short career as a soldier I have enjoyed. I have also learned things which perhaps someday will come in useful for me.”

On the 16th October:

“We are still on our rest, but by the time you get this we shall be miles away and I hope I shall meet a few of the boys which I used to be with”.

Best love to all at home. I remain your ever-loving son and brother. Willie.

Billy died at Passchendaele on 26th October 1917. He was only 20.

“An officer wrote of him: “He was a most reliable, capable and invariably cheerful soldier; in his duties as a scout were these qualities, together with intelligence above the average and so much nerve. With his capabilities he would certainly have been an NCO if he had stayed with his company. He preferred however to remain in the Scout Section and his work as a scout was invariably excellent.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Throughout his letters Billy mentions two friends in particular who were with him for the majority of the time:

W Briggs (Billy) survived the war, married and had two children. He died in 1955. Tommy Greenwood also survived, but lost two of his brothers and a brother in law.

Mr Gerald Ainsworth died at Passchendaele in March 1918. He wrote a long letter of condolence to Mr and Mrs Beckett when he heard of Billy’s death (See separate biography).



The Register of Soldiers’ Effects show that £13 10s 0d was paid to his sole legatee, his mother Anna.⁽¹⁸⁾ He received the 1914-15 Star as he had seen active service before 31st December 1915, plus the Victory and British medals.^(2,15) He is commemorated on the war memorial at St. Anne’s, Turton.

The detailed orders for the action on the day Billy was killed are contained in the 2/4th Battalion War Diaries (page 230 onwards)⁽¹⁷⁾

The Commanding Officer’s report tells us that 3 officers were killed, 8 were wounded. Of the “Other Ranks” – 58 died, 251 were wounded and 38 were still missing.

Billy’s letters have been scanned and are available to be read in full. Contact The Barlow WW1 Project - www.thebarlow.co.uk.



Billy’s Mother and Father

APPY

Copy No 2.

2/4TH BATTALION LOYAL NORTH LANCASHIRE REGIMENT.

OPERATION ORDER NO. 12 - 85-10-17.

Reference Sheet: SCAAP - BALIS.

OUR PRESENT FRONTAGE. 1. By the latest information our line now runs approximately as follows:-

- REQUETE FM. - Huts at V.14.a.44.
- BESACE FM. - BOWER House.
- GRAVEL FM.

The Battalion is holding the line from BESACE FM. inclusive to WATERLIEBRECK Stream.

ALLOTMENT OF TROOPS. 2. The 58th Division is attacking on our right and the 30th Division on our Left.

- The 170th Inf. Bde. will attack with the
 - 2/5th L.N.L. on the right.
 - 2/4th L.N.L. in the Centre.
 - 4/5th L.N.L. on the left, with the 2/5th K.O.B.L. (less 1 Company) in support.
- "A" Battalion of the 171st Inf. Bde. will be in Reserve.

OBJECTIVE. 3. The objective of the Brigades:-

V.14.b.98.72. - V.8.b.9.3. - V.2.d.6.0. - V.2.d.12.55.

DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN BATTALIONS. 4. (a) Between 2/5th L.N.L. & 2/4th L.N.L. is V.14.a.00.95. - V.8.d.98.78. - BERNADOTTE FARM.

(b) Between 2/4th L.N.L. & 4/5th L.N.L. is V.7.b.9.0. - V.8.b.73.80. - HELL FARM.

DISPOSITION OF BATTN. 5. The Battalion will carry out the attack on a 3 Coy. Front as follows:-

- "A" Coy. on the Right.
- "C" " in the Centre.
- "D" " on the Left.
- "B" " in Support.

DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN COYS. 6. (a) Between "A" Coy. & 2/5th L.N.L. V.14.a.00.95. - V.8.d.98.78. - BERNADOTTE FM.

(b) Between "A" Coy. & "C" Coy. V.7.d.80.35. - V.8.c.5.8. - V.8.d.50.92. - V.8.b.90.10.

(c) Between "C" & "D" Coy. THE WATERLIEBRECK Stream.

(d) Between "D" Coy. & 4/5th L.N.L. V.7.b.9.0. - V.8.b.73.80. - HELL FARM.

OBJECTIVE OF BATTALION. 7. The objective for the Battalion is:-

V.8.b.95.80. - V.8.b.9.3. - V.8.b.77.80.

FORMING UP LINE. 8. The Battalion will be formed up on its taped line ready for the attack on the night of 25/26th October, 1917, by ZERO minus 2 hours.

As soon as the position of the initial barrage line is communicated the forming up line will be taped out 200 yards behind the barrage line.

O.C. "B" Coy. will arrange for tapes to be laid from each Platoon in the front line to where the WATERLIEBRECK Stream can be crossed in the vicinity of TAUBE FARM, thence to its forming up position NORTH of the Stream to about V.7.b.8.8. and O.C. "B" Coy. will withdraw his Company to that position as soon as "A", "C" and "D" Coys. are on their forming up line.

FRONTAGE &
BEARING OF
COMPASS,
IN THE
ATTACK.

9. The Frontage of Coys. in the Attack and MAGNETIC Compass Bearings are as follows:-

- "A" Coy. Magnetic Bearing ... 78°.
Frontage on forming up line ... 220 yds.
" at objective ... 135 yds.
- "C" Coy. Magnetic Bearing ... 85°.
Frontage on forming up line ... 200 yds.
" at objective ... 135 yds.
- "D" Coy. Magnetic Bearing ... 79°.
Frontage on forming up line ... 50 yds.
" at objective ... 230 yds.

METHOD OF
ATTACK.

10. Each Coy. will carry out the attack in 3 waves and one line of "Moppers Up" as follows:-

1st Wave - (1 Platoon) in 2 lines each in extended order, distance between lines 10 yds.

Moppers Up - (1 Platoon) in line of sections in single file, distance of 50 yds. behind the rear line of the 1st Wave.

2nd Wave - (1 Platoon) in line of sections in single file, distance 100 yds. behind the Moppers Up.

3rd Wave - (1 Platoon) in line of sections in single file, distance of 150 yds. behind the 2nd Wave.

Coy. H.Q. will move with and immediately in rear of the 2 centre sections of the 3rd Wave.

"B" Coy. - Will move along 150 yds. in rear of the 3rd Wave of "D" Coy. North of the Stream in Diamond Formation - Coy. H.Q. will move with the rear Platoon.

Moppers UP - The Moppers Up will clear up all trenches, shell holes and concrete dugouts between our present front line and the objective. Any strong points must be held by the Moppers Up, after clearing same. Special attention must be paid to the following:-
RUBENS FM. Southern portion of W N DYCK FM. FARM at V.8.d.85.90. Organized Shell Holes at V.8.b.15.15. and Pill Boxes at V.8.d.40.75.

On reaching the objective "A", "C" and "D" Coys. will form 2 lines.

FIRST LINE - Section in Shell Holes at the objective.

SECOND LINE - Section in Shell Holes about 50 to 100 yds. behind the 1st Line Posts and in the interval between the front line Shell Holes.

"B" Coy. - Will form up about 300 to 400 yds. in rear of the front line Shell Holes ready to counter attack any enemy attack.

C.O. "B" Coy. on arrival at that position will detail an Officers Party to ascertain whether the WATERLIETBEK Stream is fordable at any portion between his position and the front line so that if necessary he can be prepared to move across 2 or more Platoons to support "A" or "C" Coy. against an enemy counter attack. As "A", "C" and "D" Coys. will send out their L.G. Sections with 2 snipers attached to it to act as outpost. These sections will push out behind the barrage and take up their position approximately as follows:-

- "A" Coy. - BERNADOTTE FARM.
"C" " - V.9.a.20.20.
"D" " - V.9.a.10.60.

ZERO HOUR. 11. ZERO hour will be notified later.

- BARRAGE.** 19. The Barrage will come down and leap forward as shown on the special barrage map already issued to Companies.
- MACHINE GUNS.** 13. Machine Guns will form a creeping barrage moving 400 yds EAST of the Artillery Barrage. They will also put down a protective barrage 500 yds. EAST of the final objective.
- TACTICAL.** 14. Strong Points will not be made in the objective line. All ranks must know that they are to hang on to everything they have gained and O.C. "A" Coy. will ensure that the spur WEST of BERNADOTTE PW. is held at all costs.
- LEAP FROG.** 15. Although it was decided that leap frogging should NOT be done, the Commanding Officer considers it highly advisable that when the barrage dwells on the line shown on the barrage map at Q, the 2nd Wave should push up to the first Wave and carry it on, or if the 1st Wave is much exhausted to push on through it and reach the objective.
- CONTACT AEROPLANE.** 16. (a) A contact aeroplane will fly over the front at ZERO hour, plus 1 hour 30 minutes, and at ZERO hour, plus 2 hours 30 minutes, and subsequently as ordered by Corps H.Q. Leading troops will light flares only when demanded from the aeroplanes - (i) by Klaxon Horn Signal. (ii) by a series of white lights. No flares will be lit until called for. Flares will be lit as far as possible in bunches of three. The importance of lighting flares and of waving to the aeroplane will be impressed upon all ranks. (b) A counter attack aeroplane will be up during daylight from ZERO hour onwards. Whenever the machine observes Hostile Parties of 100 or more moving to counter attack it will drop a Smoke Bomb over that portion of the front towards which the enemy is moving. The Smoke Bomb will burst at a distance of about 100 feet below the aeroplane with a white parachute flare which descends slowly leaving a trail of brown smoke about 1 foot broad behind it.
- BATTALION HEADQUARTERS.** 17. This will be established at LOUIS FARM. The Battalion Forward Station will be at CONDE HOUSE and Coys. will send messages to that point.
- R.A.P.** 18. This will be at CONDE HOUSE.
- DISPOSAL OF PRISONERS.** 19. All Prisoners will be sent back to Bn. H.Q. All Officers will be searched immediately they are captured and all documents, maps, etc. which may be found in their possession will be taken from them and sent to Bn. H.Q. The proportion of escort to prisoners will be
1 man for 5 prisoners.
2 men for 10 prisoners.
Over 10 prisoners an additional escort of 1 man to every 10 prisoners.
When possible slightly wounded men should be used as escort. Coys. will inform Bn. H.Q. the number of prisoners captured by them at the/days fighting, and of
20. ACKNOWLEDGE.
21. ZERO Day will be October 26th, 1917.

(SD) A. GREENHALGH, 2nd Lieut. A/Adjutant,
for Lieut. Colonel,
Comdg. 2/4th Bn. Loyal N. Lancs. Regiment.

COPIES TO:

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|
| 1. H.Q. 170th Inf. Bde. | 5. O.C. "D" Coy. |
| 2. O.C. "A" Coy. | 6. War Diary. |
| 3. "B" " | 7. " " |
| 4. "C" " | 8. File. |

In Memory of

Private

William Henry Beckett

241007, 2nd/4th Bn., The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment who died on 26 October 1917 Age 20

Son of Harry and Anna Beckett, of 173, Bolton Road, Edgworth, Bolton.

Remembered with Honour

Tyne Cot Memorial



Commemorated in perpetuity by
the Commonwealth War Graves Commission

No known grave - commemorated on Panel 102 – 104. .⁽¹⁵⁾

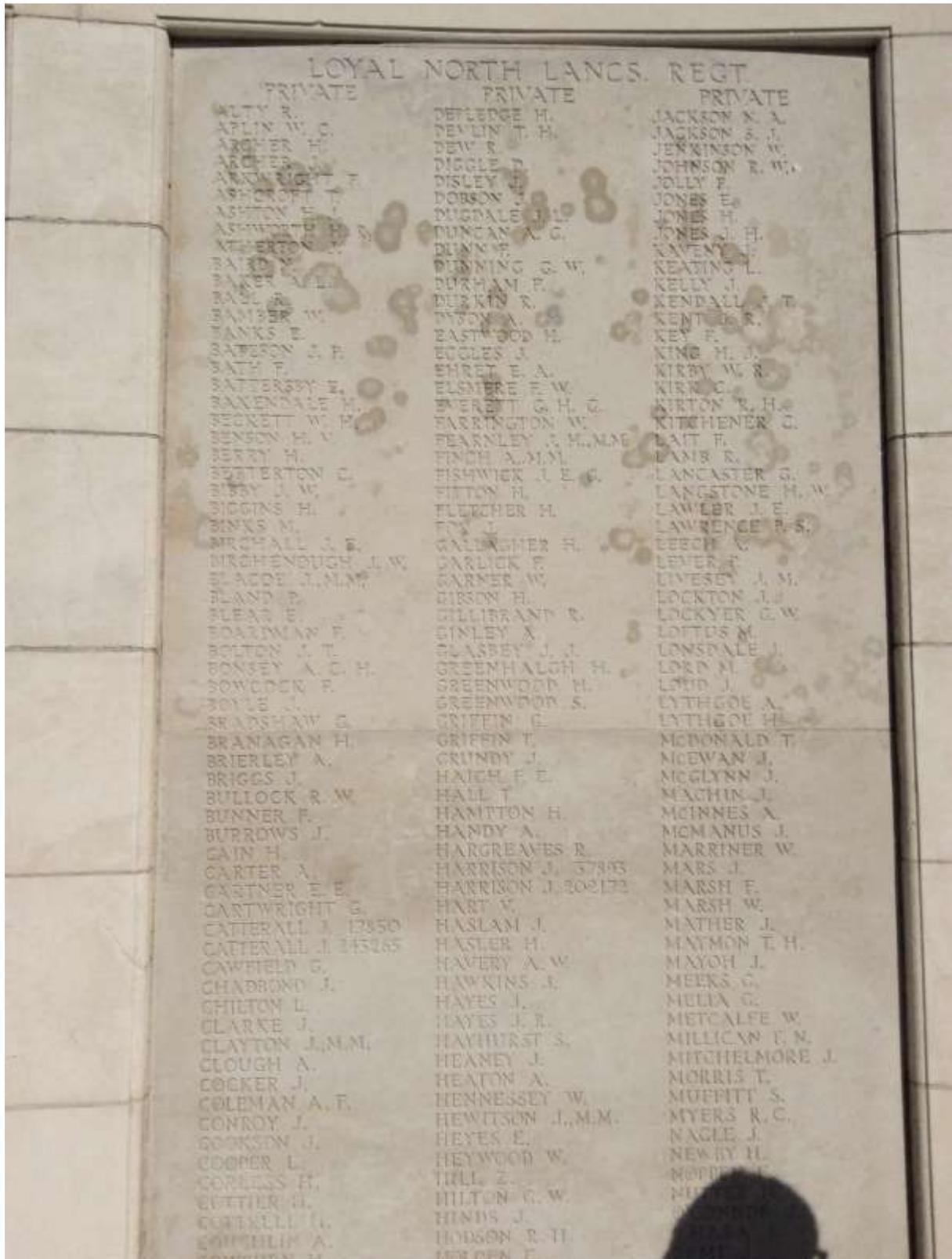


Photo: Copyright P Abbott

The Panel at Tyne Cot Memorial remembering Billy and many other men from The Loyal North Lancashire Regiment.



Photo: Copyright P Abbott

Research: Linda Spencer

Standard References: 1, 2, 3, 15, 30, 36

- 16 UK De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour (www.ancestry.com)
- 17 Ancestry.com. *UK, WWI War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914-1920* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2015. Original data: First World War and Army of Occupation War Diaries. WO 95/1096–3948. The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey,
- 18 www.ancestry.co.uk –Army Registers of Soldiers' effects 1901 – 1929
- 19 Lancashire Evening Post – 15.01.1918
- 20 Bolton Journal obituary