

Remembering John Willie Raw

27th December 1915. Aged 21.



John William “Willie” Raw was born in Skipton in 1894, one of ten children of Joseph, a cotton mill worker and Annie Raw. Shortly after the family had moved to Millholme in Embsay so that Joseph could become a warehouseman at the Millholme weaving shed, Annie Raw died. John, who was 15, left school to become a warp dresser. Five of his sisters, and a younger brother, also worked at the mills.

On the outbreak of war Willie was caught up in the excitement of “war fever” and was part of the early rush to the recruiting office. He took the oath on 2nd September, just one month before his 20th birthday, and was enlisted into the 6th Battalion of the Duke of Wellington’s West Riding Regiment. After a short period of training, Willie’s battalion was sent over to France in April 1915. In June he was admitted into the field ambulance hospital with rhinitis but was discharged the same day.

In October, his girlfriend, Mary Jowett, who lived at Baildon, sent him a notebook to use as a diary. In the front she had written a poem:

*May God protect you dear one
It was hard to say goodbye dear
When you were called away
And now we are doing our best dear
Till you return some day
Our thoughts are ever with you
From danger may you be free
Your loved one ever loyal to you
When you are across the sea.*

Willie dutifully wrote in this diary the following entries cataloguing the often humdrum routine of trench life, but carefully avoiding making anything but a passing mention of actual fighting in which he was involved:

November 3rd 1915: We went to the trenches on November 3rd and had to walk to the parapet to get in the front line. It was up to the waist in mud. We had to stand in the water for twenty-four hours and were wet through to the skin.

November 4th 1915: We were relieved on the night of the 4th November at about 1 o’clock in the early morning, where we went just behind the line for 24 hours. Then we were in the trenches again for another twenty-four hours. It was over the mud in water, but we made the best of it till night.

November 5th 1915: We were relieved on November 5th. We lost our way on the top, when we could not get through the communication [trench] way, as it was up to the body in water.

November 7th 1915: We came out of the trenches. We came to a farm about two miles back.

November 8th 1915: We were sent to a chateau about a mile from the front line on guard.

November 9th 1915: We were at the chateau and we were making vino until two in the morning.

November 10th 1915: We were still at the same spot.

November 11th 1915: We were sent to a farm for wood for one of our officers who had been killed. [2nd Lieut. Thomas Saville Whitaker, of 'C' Company, killed in action, 7 November 1915.]

November 12th 1915: We went to dig his grave by the side of Burd Cottage. At night his coffin came, Lieutenant Varley, me and two of my pals put him in his coffin and lowered it in the grave. The quartermaster preached a sermon.

November 13th 1915: We moved from the chateau to a rest camp six miles back and rested in a hut, which some of our men made.

November 14th 1915: We had to clean the camp ground up.

November 15th 1915: We moved to the wood where we had been many times.

November 16th 1915: On a working party up the Yser Canal and it was up to the mud. We got our old Captain back.

November 18th 1915: Went for a bath in the afternoon, then a working party at night. Landed back about 4am next morning.

November 19th 1915: We moved to Pilesuar [Pelissier] Farm.

November 20th 1915: We went to Brealin Shold [Brielen Chateau?] on guard for four days.

November 21st 1915: Still at the same place.

November 22nd 1915: One of my pals went to be a groom at the brigade-staff.

November 23rd 1915: We were still at the chateau. We had our breakfast at two in the afternoon.

November 24th 1915: We went in the trenches for 24 hours.

November 25th 1915: We were relieved late at night.

November 26th 1915: We went in the trench on the top late at night.

November 27th 1915: We were relieved and came back to the farm about a mile from the front line of trenches.

November 28th 1915: We were still at the farm and at night we had to carry rations for the boys in the front line.

November 29th 1915: We had the same job to do.

November 30th 1915: We took the rations again. We had to go about one and a half a mile. We took them on wagon and we had some sport with the job, though it was still open to the Germans to fire at us.

December 1st 1915: We were at the farm till about...

December 19th 1915: We were in the Great Gas Attack. It was a sight that I have never seen before and don't want to see again.

On the 25th December he wrote a letter home and said he was looking forward to coming home on leave. But two days later, he was killed in action - two days after Christmas 1915. John Willie Raw was 21 years old. He is buried at the Talana Farm Cemetery, near Boesinghe, in Belgium.

[This diary was kindly made available to the Craven's Part in The Great War website by Mr and Mrs Coates of Skipton, to whom we are grateful.]

Captain Nicholson of the 6th Battalion wrote to Willie's parents assuring them he had been a good soldier, and a keen worker. "I am exceedingly sorry to lose him" he wrote, "and the N.C.O.s and men in the Company are also sorry to lose a good comrade." Corporal D. Carruthers also sent a personal letter:— "I beg to offer my deepest sympathy in your sad bereavement. John was always in my section and won the greatest respect of all his comrades by his cheerful and willing nature. He always carried out his duties with cheerfulness and set a fine example by his courage. Such lads as John we cannot afford to lose, and he is missed by all of us. It may be some consolation to you to know that your son died instantly."

A large number of mourners attended his memorial service at St Mary's Church in Embsay. The village was visibly shocked to lose a second young man from the community (after the death of James Willie Scott earlier in the year).

On the anniversary of his death, in December 1916, his family published a heartfelt memorial in the local newspapers, which read:

RAW – In loving memory of J. W. Raw, of Embsay, Duke of Wellington's Regiment, who was killed in action on December 27th 1915.

Sleep on, dear son, in a far off land,

In a grave we may never see;

But as long as life and memory last,

We will remember thee.

From Father, Brothers and Sisters.

Willie's brother Edward had enlisted in the Scots Guards in 1915, but after 38 days was discharged on account of severe psoriasis which covered virtually his whole body. At the age of 18 he must have felt very disappointed, but it meant he survived the war, working as a belt repairer at the mill. He married a munition girl from Cononley in 1917 and continued to live in Embsay. In the 1939 National Register he is listed as a textile thread manufacturer, residing in Centenary Place.

Their sister Agnes, who in her teens had taken her late mother's place as the family's housekeeper, became a munitions girl in Keighley during the war, and at the age of 25, died during the Spanish influenza epidemic which ravaged Keighley in November 1918. She is buried in parish churchyard of St Mary's, Embsay-with-Eastby.

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