

Private

ROBERT STANLEY NORTH

22424, 6TH Battalion Somerset Light Infantry

Killed in Action 22 August 1916

Aged 25

Commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial

Robert Stanley North was born on September 2 1891, the oldest surviving son of Levi Robert and Anna (or Hannah) Rebecca North. The North family had been small farmers and farm workers at the eastern edge of Buckland St Mary in Dommett for many years. Anna was a widow with a young son when she married Robert, 9 years her senior, in 1887. The North family still live today in the same area, at Lane Farm.

Stanley went to school in Buckland St Mary from 1898, leaving in September 1905, when he was 14. By 1911 he was working as a farm labourer, and living at Howleigh, Pitminster, boarding at the home of George Bussell, an elderly farm labourer. When he enlisted in Taunton his address was still given as Pitminster.

No Service Records survive for Stanley, so one has to surmise his army career, based mainly on the War Diaries for his battalion, the 6th Battalion, Somerset Light Infantry. The North family still has a handful of mementoes of him, one of which is a small unidentified press cutting listing the latest names of those who had been killed; following Stanley's name is that of Harry Yard, whose regimental number is one short of Stanley's, suggesting that they enlisted together. Harry was a cousin, and was killed 2 days after Stanley. No Service Records survive for Harry either.

As young unmarried men they would have been obliged to enlist during 1916, when full conscription was introduced, but we do not know whether they may have enlisted earlier, in 1915. Judging by what some of their contemporaries did, I suspect that an enlistment together may mean 1915; Harry Painter and Walter Pring for example enlisted together in May 1915. If so, they didn't get abroad till 1916, neither qualifying for the 1914-1915 Star for those who had served abroad before the end of the year.

The 6th Battalion was one of the First New Army of 6 Divisions, or K1 (raised at the urging of Lord Kitchener). They left Aldershot on May 21 1915, as part of the 43rd Infantry Brigade of the 14th Light Division, and by May 31 were digging trenches west of Ypres. When they came out of the line on June 19, the War Diary records that 'The Battalions who were our instructors were full of praise of the bearing and behaviour of the Kitcheners who they saw for the first time.' The Battalion was in and out of the line during June and July, often under heavy fire, with a particularly bad spell at Hooze at the end of July counter-attacking and attacking; a 6th Battalion Corporal, F.W.Loxton, wrote at the time: 'The whole hollow...was covered with dead bodies of K.R.R.s and R.B.s, killed in the original retreat and subsequent counter-attacks on retreat, and the stench was awful and the outlook appalling.'

During September and October the 6th were involved in subsidiary actions of the Battle of Loos, but at considerable cost: 3 officers killed, 4 wounded; 26 other ranks killed and 107 wounded. The War Diary pays tribute to the stretcher bearers: 'The outstanding part was the conduct of the stretcher-bearers, who worked magnificently, especially on the morning of the 25th [of September].' At the end of



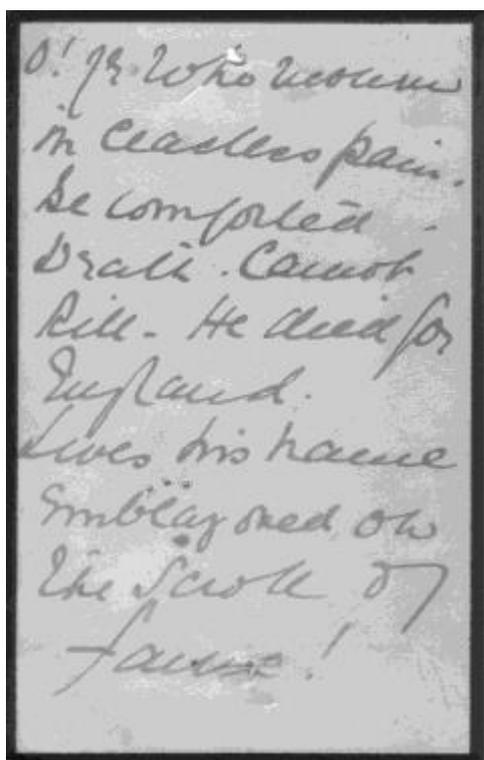
October the Battalion went into Reserve in the Poperinghe area, in 'heavy and continuous rain', with no preparations made for proper paths in the camp; 'The whole arrangement a triumph of misconception and lack of forethought' the War Diary bitterly records – and much more to the same effect.

The Battalion was again in and out of the trenches over the winter, in the now usual wet and miserable conditions. In February they moved further south, to the Arras area, a relatively quiet sector. Over the next few months trench activity increased. They were not involved in the early days of the July 1 Somme attack; their War Diary observes on June 30: 'Bombardment still continues with intensity down south.', but in their area things were extraordinarily quiet.

Before the end of July the 6th Battalion were heading south, by route march and train. On August 12 they took over front line trenches in Delville Wood – 'Devil's Wood' – by this time shelled from leafy summer beauty into a place of horror: 'a truly terrible place over which to fight. ...this new line was surely the most noisome spot it was possible to be in. The stench from the decaying dead was awful, gas fumes hung about the shell holes and clung to the undergrowth, weird and ghostly in the semi-darkness were the gaunt long arms of the torn and blasted trees.' *The Somerset Light Infantry 1914-1919 - Everard Wyrall.*

By August 15 they were relieved, but still provided a working party of 250 to dig all night. Orders were for a new attack by the 43rd Brigade on the 18th. The attacking Battalions were in their assembly positions by 3am amid heavy preliminary shelling from the British, some of which fell short. Zero hour was 2.45pm. After intense fighting the attack was largely successful, but the inevitable counter attacks followed through the rest of the day into the night while the Somersets, and fellow Battalions, under heavy shelling, worked to consolidate their position. They were finally relieved by 4.15am by the 9th Rifle Brigade; 'The men, on arrival in rest billets, were absolutely beat' the War Diary tells us. They paid a heavy price: 5 officers killed, 7 wounded, 48 other ranks killed and 220 wounded and missing.

They were in rest billets till August 23; when the 43rd Brigade paraded on that day the 6th were complimented particularly by the Brigadier for their fine behaviour in Delville Wood.



Stanley is recorded as killed on August 22; in fact by that time they were out of the line, with no casualties. I believe that on some occasions these dates are merely a best guess, especially when the body is never found; Stanley is recorded only on the Thiepval Memorial, along with the other 72,000 dead of the Somme who have no known grave.

This anguished cry is written on the back of a Memorial card, most probably by his mother: 'O! ye who mourn in endless pain, be comforted. Death cannot kill. He died for England. Lives his name emblazoned on the scroll of fame!'

Our grateful thanks to the North family for photos & information.