

Thomas Norman LEWIS

Born Courtown, Wexford, 2 December 1890 died 8 August 1917, aged 26
Act/Corporal 56682 Royal Garrison Artillery, 321st Siege Battery

Thomas Norman Lewis came from a North Devon family although he and his siblings were born in Ireland. His grandparents were Thomas Lewis (1829-1913), an agricultural labourer and Elizabeth Staddon (1828-), both born in Ilfracombe.

Their son, Thomas born in Ilfracombe on 1st February 1855 was one of five children at the time of the 1861 census. Young Thomas joined the Royal Navy on 1st January 1873, and one month later at age 18 he started a 10 year engagement. He became an Able Seaman in April 1875 and transferred to the Coastguard Service as a Boatman in March 1881. Up to that point his character was shown as 'exemplary'.

He married Mary Bray (1853-1924) in Q1 1881 and in that year's census she is living with her parents, William and Ann Bray at Berry Village, Berrynarbor where she was born. She is listed as a Coastguard's wife.

Mary followed Thomas to Ireland and was at Crosshaven when the first three children were born:

Lucy (1882-)
Annie Elizabeth (1885-) and
Constance Mary (1887-1974).

Thomas was moved to Courtown, Wexford, on 19th January 1887, in command of boats. It was while he was there that they had:

Emily Francis (1888-1946)
Thomas Norman (1890-1917)
William Bray (1892-1976) and
Rosina May (1896-1984).

Thomas was promoted to Chief Boatman at Rosslare on 31 May 1897 and to Chief Boatman in Charge in August 1900. In 1901 the family were at Mossyglen, Greencastle, Donegal. From 7th July 1903 until retirement on 3rd February 1910 he was based at Dawlish.

The seven children are still living at home in 1911 when the family were at Iddesleigh Terrace, Exeter Road, Dawlish and most were employed: Lucy was a dressmaker, Annie Elizabeth did housework, Constance Mary was a dressmaker, Emily Francis was a shop assistant in a drapery, **Thomas Norman** was an assistant clerk in Dawlish Brewery, William Bray was an assistant golf professional at Warren Links and Rosina Mary was at home.

Thomas Lewis was shown as a Naval Pensioner in the rank of Chief Petty Officer and lodging house keeper. They had one lodger, Charles Frank Chitty, 33, who was a golf professional at Warren Links.

Thomas Norman Lewis was medically examined on 16th January and measured at 5' 8 3/4" and weighing 143 lbs (fraction under 10 stone), having fair complexion and blue eyes. He enlisted in the Royal Garrison Artillery at Shepherd's Bush, Middlesex on 19th January 1915. He is unusual in being documented in a service record that survived the fires in the blitz of WW2.

He joined the RGA at Newhaven on the 20th January and was posted as a Gunner for training on the 27th. He was rated 3rd class at Dover on 1st May 1915 and served as a Gunner at Malta from 18th June 1915. He became a Qualified Gun Layer on 1st August 1916.

He returned to Britain and joined the 321st Siege Battery on 31st December 1916 and was promoted to Acting Bombardier on 6th April 1917. He embarked at Southampton on 11th May

for Le Havre, arriving next day. He was promoted to Bombardier on 29th May 1917 and was promoted to 'Acting Corporal vice 337638 Hardy, performing duties from 17th June 1917.'

General Haig ordered General Herbert Plumer, the commander of the British Second Army which occupied the Ypres Salient, to produce a plan in late 1916. Plumer believed that a force of 35 divisions and 5,000 guns would be necessary, which was far beyond the amount of artillery in the British Expeditionary Force.

Haig informed his Army commanders that his objectives were to wear down the German army, secure the Belgian coast and connect with the Dutch frontier by capturing Passchendaele Ridge and advancing on Roulers and Thourout, to cut the railway supplying the German garrisons holding the Western Front north of Ypres and the Belgian coast. An attack by the 4th Army would then begin on the coast, combined with an amphibious landing in support of the main advance to the Dutch frontier.

Thomas Norman Lewis was killed in action on 8th August 1917.

Great War Forum- Robert Dunlop posted "The war diary for 321 Sge Bty survives at Kew under their reference WO95/217.

321st Siege Battery - Here is the actual entry in the War Diary for August 8th.

"Battery and billets heavily shelled. 6 NCOs and men killed in battery position .. Men still continued on the operation targets. Fire 400 rounds."

From another respondent " - 321 having joined 84 HAG (Heavy Artillery Garrison) on 16 June and recorded as in action on the 17th (66 HAG diary). The other men killed that day from 321 Sge Bty were: Gnr 76393 BALLS George A/Bdr HUGHES David 46867

Cpl LEWIS Thomas Norman 56682 Gnr TAYLOR George Edward 177935

Gnr ROUTLEY Edmund J S 92982

"This appears to be a direct hit on a gun of which the 6in Howitzers were manned by 10 men. One common factor is that the buried bodies were later dug up and reburied at Voormezele. It does appear to be in connection with German retaliation for II Corps V Army counter battery work in the days following the attack on Westhoek Ridge."

He was buried, as so often, on the field of battle and was exhumed and reburied in Voormezele Enclosure No 3 extension ' 2 miles south of Ypres'.

His possessions were returned to his father later in the year (see Documents).

His British War and Victory Medals were received by his mother on 12th August 1921. His father had died on 30th December 1918 at No 2 War Hospital, Exeter and the effects of £245.3s.8d passed to his widow. On her death at the Cottage Hospital, Dawlish on 15th November 1925, her effects of £50.1s.3d passed to Annie Elizabeth Lewis, spinster.

Commonwealth War Graves entry: LEWIS T N Corporal 56682 8/8/17 R.G.A. 321st Siege Battery

Cemetery: VOORMEZELE Enclosure NO 3 – 4 km south-west of Ypres/Ieper

Headstone in Dawlish cemetery

After his death a payment of £9.3s.10d was made to his father. Following the death of his father in 1918 the War Gratuity of £12.10s.0d was paid to his mother in 1919.

His brother William was shown as serving with the 5th Battalion, Devonshire Regiment.

Thomas Norman Lewis is recorded on the Devon Roll of Honour and the Dawlish Boys' School Roll of Honour.

References:

Free BMD index

Great War Forum

Refs via subscription websites:

R N Service records

Probate records

Census data,

Army Service records

UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects.

Ireland, Casualties of WW1