

Private Thomas Albert Dickenson

Killed in the first British night action of the war

Thomas was born in early 1888ⁱ. He came from a long line of Dickensons who had lived in the Balsall Heath area since at least 1841, according to the census returns. Thomas's grandfather, James, and great grandfather, Edward, were both 'sawyers'. This is an occupational term referring to someone who saws wood, particularly using a pit saw either in a saw pit or with the log on trestles above ground or who operates a sawmill.ⁱⁱ He was one of eleven children born to his mother Rose, a monthly nurse and his father George, a house painter. At the time of his birth the family were living in Longmore Place in George Street, Balsall Heath before moving to 33 Grange Road, Kings Heath by 1901.ⁱⁱⁱ

On leaving school, Thomas became a gardener for Mr Suffield in Cotton Lane, Moseley^{iv} (the 1911 census shows a John Suffield, aged 77, living at 18, Cotton Lane), before enlisting on 27th February 1907 in the 3rd (Militia) Battalion of the South Staffordshire Regiment and became Private Dickenson, Number 8194. His younger brother Charles joined him just over three months later on the 6th June.^v After only one month with the Regiment, his younger brother left to join the Northumberland Fusiliers but Thomas stayed on in the Staffordshire Regiment until 10th December 1909, when, at his own request, he was given a free discharge.^{vi} The 1911 census shows Thomas once again living with the family, now at 9 Chandos Avenue, off Leighton Road, Moseley and working as an aluminium caster. In his spare time he played for the Birmingham Rugby Football Club and was also a member of the Moseley hand bell ringers.^{vii}

After the declaration of war on 4th August 1914, Thomas joined up, but not with his previous regiment. He chose instead the 2nd Battalion of the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry (Oxon & Bucks L I) who formed part of the 5th Brigade of the Second Division. It was one of the first divisions to arrive in France.^{viii} However the medal record of Private T A Dickenson, No 10633, indicates that he was not part of this first contingent, arriving in France over four months later on 27th December. As a consequence



Charles Dickenson.
Ref xix

he missed the earlier fierce fighting at Mons, the Marne and Ypres, unlike his younger brother Charles, in the 1st Battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers. Charles had been reported missing, presumed dead, on 8th November during the First Battle of Ypres.^{ix} By the time Thomas arrived in France, the 2nd Battalion Oxon & Bucks was very different from that which had arrived at the start of the war. It had sustained 632 casualties during the first five months.^x

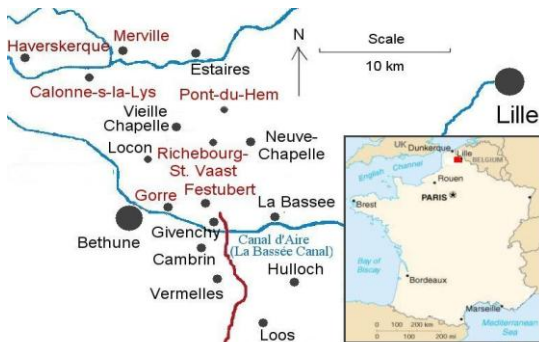


Private Thomas
Dickenson. Ref xix



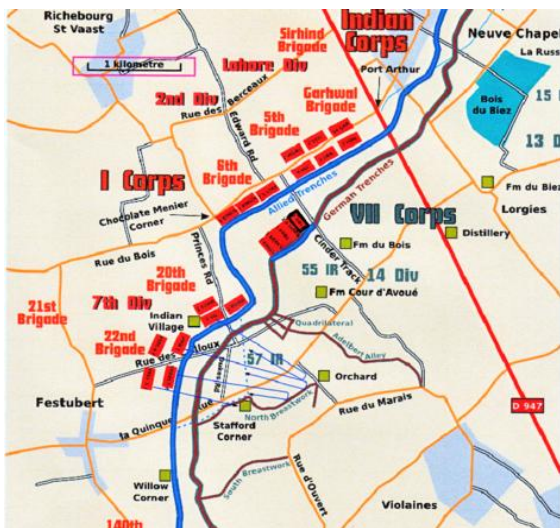
Festubert village during WW1. Ref xx

By 1915, trench warfare had commenced with both sides developing impregnable defences, leading to high casualties in return for minimal gain. The Battle of Festubert (9 -16 May), was launched in support of the French attack south of Vimy Ridge. **This was the first British night action of the war.**^{xi} The 2nd Oxford and Buckinghamshire Regiment were part of the second wave of the 5th Brigade attack at 3 am on 16th



Map showing relative position of the village of Festubert. Ref xxi

May.^{xii} The regiment had been engaged in particularly heavy fighting at Richebourg-l'Avoué. By 7 am the Brigade diary reports that, "Not until now were we really able to ascertain how much line we had captured, or how great our losses had been. The distance our people had to traverse was considerable, between 200 and 300 yards. The night was very dark which made it difficult to keep direction and I fear that this resulted in many sections losing their way. From the reports I have now received from those holding the captured line, it was easy to realize how great had been their difficulties."^{xiii}



Map of the Battle of Festubert showing the position of the 2nd Btn. Oxon & Berks Regiment. It is the the red rectangle outlined in black, up against the German trench line. Ref xxii

Later that afternoon the Officer Commanding reported, "Nothing further happened until night, when we were relieved. I went back by a somewhat lengthy route and made some most unwelcome and cruel discoveries about our unfortunate casualties; at the same time we solved the fate of many poor fellows, who until then had been reported missing."^{xiv}

During the course of the battle the 2nd Oxford and Buckinghamshire Regiment suffered nearly 400 casualties. It was the largest number the regiment had sustained in a single battle for over a hundred years.^{xv} One of those casualties was Thomas who was reported missing on the 16th May 1915. He is commemorated on the Le Touret Memorial (pictured right) in the Pas de Calais.^{xvi}

Thomas was entitled to the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal 1914-1918 and the Victory medal 1914-1919.^{xvii} He was aged 29 when he was killed. His four other brothers survived the Great War.^{xviii}



Written and researched by Edwina Rees, Moseley History Society.

Footnotes

- i England & Wales births 1837-2005 Transcription
<http://findmypast.co.uk>
- ii Sawyer (occupation)
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawyer_\(occupation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sawyer_(occupation))
- iii 1891, 1901 Census
- iv British Army Service Records 1760-1915 image for T. A. Dickenson
<http://findmypast.co.uk>
- v British Army Service Records 1760-1915 image for C. A. Dickenson
<http://findmypast.co.uk>
- vi See iv
- vii *The Birmingham Daily Mail*, Thursday 10th June 1915
- viii Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oxfordshire_and_Buckinghamshire_Light_Infantry
- ix Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Private C A Dickenson
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/1609968/DICKINSON,%20CHARLES%20ALFRED>
- x See viii
- xi See viii
- xii See vii
- xiii Richebourg L'Avoue (9th -18th May). Based on extracts from the Regimental Chronicles of the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Volume 24, May 16th.
<http://www.lightbobs.com/1915-battle-of-festubert.html>
- xiv See xiii
- xv See viii
- xvi Commonwealth War Graves Commission
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/858544/DICKENSON,%20THOMAS%20ALBERT>
<http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/85800/LE%20TOURET%20MEMORIAL>
- xvii British Army WW1 Medal Rolls Index Cards
www.ancestry.co.uk
- xviii *The Birmingham Evening Despatch*, Thursday 20th December 1917
St Mary's Church WW1 Memorial Board
- xix *The Birmingham Evening Despatch*, Thursday 20th December 1917

xx Festubert village in WW1. Photo Visa Paris
<http://www.ww1battlefields.co.uk/others/festubert.html>

xxi http://owen.cholerton.org/image_files/m_nw_france_ww1.jpg

xxii Map of Battle of Festubert 16.5.1915.
<http://www.webmatters.net/txtpat/index.php?id=31>