

JOHN LEONARD METCALFE



11th April 1918

1876-1918 Aged 41



Private 204116, 'C' Company 1/4th Battalion Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment.

John Metcalfe's parents John and Catherine were both from Bingley. During the 1860s they moved to Bradford where the elder John worked as cashier for a worsted spinner and manufacturer. For more than thirty years they lived at St. Andrews Place off Listerhills Road. John and Catherine had five children, three daughters followed by two sons. John Leonard Metcalfe was the elder of the sons, born near the end of 1876. He started in the B.G.S. Junior School in 1886 when he was nine; he left in July 1892 aged fifteen after one year in the Senior School, in First Modern. In that year he did well enough to gain an honourable mention for the form prize. Among his subjects was Book-keeping (he came fifth) and after school John followed in his father's profession as a cashier for a company of Bradford woolcombers. He continued to live with his parents until he married Louisa Oates in 1904. She was from Normanton, Wakefield, where her father Fred had been a publican. He was successful enough to live 'on his own means' after retiring, and when he died in 1891 to leave his widow and eight children comfortably off. They moved to Shipley, which was where John and Louisa were married. They set up house at 120 Harrogate Road in Undercliffe and had one child, a daughter named Kathleen.

John was in his late thirties when war broke out and probably felt that fighting could be left to younger men. He was conscripted on 29th August 1916 at the age of 39. Unlike many conscripts of that period he was not rushed to France to replace the casualties of the Somme with only the basic twelve weeks training. When he was posted to 'C' Company 1/4th Battalion Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment is not known, but it was not until 1917. As part of 49th West Riding Division the battalion had a relatively quiet year until it was called into the later stages of the Third Battle of Ypres to attack the lower part of the Passchendaele Ridge on 9th October. Metcalfe may have been involved in this battle which took place in appalling conditions.

By the end of March 1918 the first blow of the German Spring Offensive which commenced on March 21st 1918 was running out of steam. General Ludendorff ordered a second assault code-named 'Georgette' to strike at the important rail centre of Hazebrouck to the south of Ypres. On 9th April the German blow fell upon and routed an over-stretched Portuguese division, and the next day 49th Division was moved south from Ypres and fed piecemeal into battle. Metcalfe's battalion was engaged at Erquinghem to cover a crossing over the River Lys. Metcalfe's 'C' Company suffered severe casualties from artillery and machine-gun fire and was nearly cut off when orders to retire did not get through and the units on the flanks fell back. Metcalfe was almost certainly wounded during this action as he died on the following day, the 11th, at a Casualty Clearing Station located more than eighteen miles away at La Kreule near Hazebrouck. He must have been evacuated there by ambulance. During the 10th April fighting a fellow member of 'C' Company stretcher bearer Private Arthur Poulter won the Victoria Cross for his bravery carrying in ten wounded men on his back and dressing the wounds of forty more under heavy fire. It is possible that Metcalfe was one of them. Poulter was an employee of Timothy Taylor's Brewery in Keighley.

Metcalfe was buried in the military cemetery at La Kreule. His wife Louisa did not remarry and when she died in 1955 John was remembered on her grave in Shipley's Nab Wood Cemetery.



Acknowledgements:

John Metcalfe's photo is from the School memorial book courtesy of the O.B.A. and B.G.S. The family was researched using Ancestry.com. His years at B.G.S. are recorded in the Annual Reports for 1887-1892.

John's Service Record has not survived. The Bradford Roll of Honour records his enlistment on 29th August 1916 (<<https://www.flickr.com/photos/bradfordww1/10724072186/in/album-72157637409009126/>>). He died of wounds on 11th April (Soldiers Died in the Great War, Register of Soldiers' Effects, Medal and Awards Rolls). For the circumstances I used Laurie Magnus, *The West Riding Territorials in the Great War* (1920, Naval & Military Press reprint), 184-5, and the War Diary for 147th Infantry Brigade: 1/4 Battalion Duke of Wellington's (West Riding) (1915 Apr - 1919 Jun), Ancestry.com Piece 2799/1-4. The latter contains a detailed account of the operations of 'C' Company during the first phase of the Battle of the Lys. For Poulter, see Magnus and <<http://www.victoriacross.org.uk/bbpoult2.htm>> (accessed 23-3-2018). It is an intriguing speculation that Metcalfe might have been one of those saved by Poulter. Timothy Taylor's brewed a commemorative porter in the winter of 2017-2018 (also available from the brewery in bottle) which I can recommend. For La Kreule Cemetery, see <<https://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/6701/la-kreule-military-cemetery,-hazebrouck/>>. For Louisa Metcalfe's tomb, see <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/52510>>. Metcalfe was one of 68 WW1 dead named on the Marble Tablet on the north side of the tower base of Bradford Cathedral. Also among them is EH Bower O.B. Why these men were commemorated there is not known.

This biography was researched and composed by Nick Hooper in March 2018. For further information, contact Nhooper1956@googlemail.com, or see <<http://www.bradfordgrammar.com/former-pupils/bradford-grammar-school-in-ww1/>>.

