

## **Thomas James Alexander Williams**

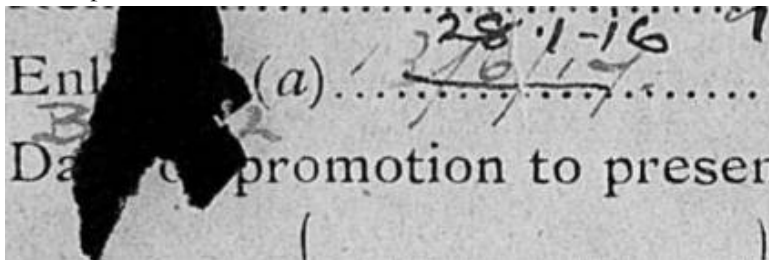
### **Royal Scots**

In researching Thomas William's First World War service we are fortunate that part of his service record has survived. On the night of the 7-8 September 1940, the War Office warehouse in Arnside Street, London caught fire and the majority of First World War service records were destroyed. Part of Thomas' service record was destroyed during this fire and with the loss of this document some of the information relating to Thomas' service has been lost forever. However, due to the severity of his wounds, Thomas applied for a pension after the war and part of his file was removed from the War Office warehouse to the Ministry of Pensions. These documents survived the fire and are part of the WO 364 series held at the National Archives. In total there are 31 surviving pages but as you go through them you'll notice that the majority concern Thomas' injuries and are therefore quite repetitive. However, there is still a lot more information available for Thomas than is usually the case for a First World War soldier.

### **First World War**

Britain declared war on Germany on 4 August 1914, and two days later, Lord Kitchener (Secretary of State for War) sought parliamentary approval for increasing the size of the army by 500,000 men. On 7 August, newspapers across the country carried appeals for 'an additional of 100,000 men to His Majesty's Regular Army'. Thousands of men answered the call and between August and December 1914, 1.2 million men enlisted into the British Army. Despite over 2.6 million men joining the armed forces, the British Government was compelled to introduce conscription with the Military Service Act of January 1916 which came into force on the 2 March 1916:

1. Every British male subject who (a) on 15 August 1915 was ordinarily resident in Great Britain, and who had attained the age of eighteen years and had not yet attained the age of forty-one years; and (b) on 2 November 1915 was unmarried or was a widower without any child dependent on him... be deemed to have been duly enlisted in His Majesty's regular forces for the general service with the colours or in the reserve for the period of the war, and to have been forthwith transferred to the reserve.



This act was passed on the 27 January 1916 and not wishing to be conscripted, Thomas volunteered the next day.

Above you can see part of Thomas' damaged Army Form B.103 - Casualty Form Active Service which records that he enlisted on 28 January 1916. This is the most important document to have survived in Thomas' service file as it records his exact movements. In this context, the word casualty refers to when a man left a unit regardless of the reason. Unfortunately, Thomas' attestation form was kept with his main service record and was destroyed during the Second World War. It is fortunate that the Army Form. B.103 has survived, as it contains important information not found elsewhere.

When Thomas enlisted he would have had a choice of which Regiment to join and on his Medical History was recorded that he had originally enlisted in the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles). The Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) would have been Thomas' local infantry regiment and had their Depot at Hamilton, a short distance from Bothwell. This Regiment is abbreviated to Scottish Rifles on Thomas' service record. When Thomas joined the Scottish Rifles he was given the regimental number of 36131. During this period, every time a soldier joined a new regiment or corps he was given a new regimental number. When Thomas left the Scottish Rifles in 1918 and joined the Royal Scots he received a new regimental of 42963.

When Thomas enlisted, he gave his occupation as miner and religion as Presbyterian. Among the documentation which has been lost would have been the results of a medical conducted on 28

January 1916. Fortunately, this information was duplicated again a year later when Thomas was mobilized. On the 13 June 1917, Thomas was medically examined again and during the examination the following information was recorded on his Medical History:

- Height: 5 feet 9 ½ inches [177 cm]
- Weight: 141 lbs [64 kg]
- Chest Measurement: Girth when fully expanded: 36 inches.
- Range of expansion: 3 inches.
- Physical development: Good.
- Hair: Brown.
- Eyes: Brown.
- Distinguishing features: Mole on side of abdomen. Mole on [I haven't been able to decipher the rest].

The description of Thomas shows that he was well built for a young working class man of his day. However, while Thomas enlisted on the 26 January 1916, he wasn't mobilized until the 13 July 1917. The most likely reason Thomas took over a year and a half to be mobilized was the fact he was working as a coal miner at Bent Company's Hamilton Palace Colliery near Bothwell. During the opening months of the war, tens of thousands of miners had enlisted in the British Army which damaged the war effort. With the passing of the Military Services Act, mining was classified as a reserved occupation and miners were not liable for conscription. However, as the war went on and the British Army needed ever more men, some miners were called up. The most likely explanation for the delay in mobilization is that though Thomas enlisted before the Military Services Act came into force, it was felt he was more use working as a miner than in the army.

Report.	<i>mobilized</i>	<i>Plt 13. Comm</i>
<i>Scottish Rifles</i>	Record of promotions, reductions, transfers, casualties, and other service, as reported on Army Form B. 213, Army Form A. 36, or in other official documents.	<i>13.7.17</i>
From whom received	<i>formed</i>	<i>21.7.17</i>
<i>4th</i>	<i>posted</i>	<i>26.7.17</i>

Between enlisting on the 26 January 1916 and being mobilized on 13 July 1917, Thomas returned to civilian life and his job as a miner. On the 13 July 1917, Thomas was mobilized and proceeded to Hamilton where he joined the Scottish Rifles. Thomas initially joined the Depot of the Regiment which was at Hamilton Barracks on 21 July 1917, with the D on the far left of the excerpt above denoting Depot. There are photographs of barracks online. However, Thomas would not remain at the Depot for long as he was posted to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Cameronians Regiment on 26 July 1917.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion was an Extra Reserve Battalion formed at Hamilton in August 1914 as a training battalion. New recruits were sent to the Battalion to train before being sent on as drafts to other battalions of the regiment. When Hamilton joined the Battalion in July 1917, it was at Haddington, in East Lothian, Scotland. Here the Battalion trained and conducted coastal defence work. Thomas served with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion until February 1918 when he was sent to France. During the seven month Thomas served with the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, he would have grown accustomed to army life and the monotony of basic training. The aim of basic training was to build up the physical fitness of the recruit, instil discipline and teach them basic military skills. A typical day would begin with reveille at 5.30 am, where the soldiers would clean, and dress for a parade at 6.30 am. After the parade, the soldiers would breakfast before undertaking drill until lunch. Then, the day would continue with further training until 4.00 pm. As the weeks went by, the training would have become more advanced with rifle and grenade practice, marksmanship, and trench digging. This would have been a cold experience on the east coast of Scotland in the winter of 1917-18.

We now need to turn back to Thomas' Army Form B.103 - Casualty Form Active Service which records his exact movements in February 1918. On the 20 February 1918, Thomas embarked on board a troopship at Folkestone, Kent bound for France and disembarked at Boulogne later that same day. On the 21 February, Thomas joined the M Infantry Base Depot (I.B.D.) at Calais. Infantry Base Depot's were large holding camps where soldiers were kept until being sent on to their units. Thomas was initially recorded as being posted to the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Scottish Rifles on 21 February 1918 but on the 24 February 1918 was transferred to the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Scots. This was a compulsory transfer under Army Order 204/16 and Thomas had no say in which battalion he would be sent to. On joining the Royal Scots, Thomas received a new regimental

Battalion he would be sent to. On joining the Royal Scots, Thomas received a new regimental number of 42963.

Thomas was recorded as joining C Company, 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Scots on 4 March 1918. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Scots was a war-raised battalion formed at Edinburgh in 1914 by the MP Lieutenant-Colonel George McCrae. The Battalion had landed in January 1916 as part of the 101<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 34<sup>th</sup> Division. The Battalion suffered very heavy casualties on the opening day of the Somme and saw further action at Arras and Passchendaele. Very few of the original volunteers would still be serving when Thomas joined the Battalion. There is a book about Battalion called *McCrae's Battalion: The Story of the 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots* by Jack Alexander which may interest you. I haven't read the book but it has good reviews.

Once Thomas joined the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the field we can turn to the Battalion's war diary which I have included in the folder. A war diary was kept by a unit on active service and recorded its location and activities. The war diary for the 4 March 1918 begins on page 85 of the second pdf. folder. The Battalion was recorded as being in the trenches in the Croisilles Area. Croisilles is a village 13 km south-east of Arras in France. During March 1918, the Allied armies were waiting for a German offensive which they is about to commenced on the 21 March 1918.

The war diary of the Battalion provides very detailed entries describing the German Spring Offensive but it wasn't until the 22 March that the Battalion was heavily engaged:

About 5 am enemy opened a heavy bombardment. 12.30 pm. Enemy attacked and after severe fighting drove in our centre. A new line was established in the 3<sup>rd</sup> System and a new line formed with the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots.... The day passed with many minor attacks by the enemy and at night the Battalion was withdrawn to Reserve and quartered in Armagh Camp Hamelincourt

The total casualties for the Battalion were 9 officers and 211 other ranks. While the Battalion had been shelled while Thomas had been with it earlier in the month, this was his real baptism of fire. Between 23 and 27 March, the Battalion moved from Hamelincourt (8 miles south of Arras) to Petit Houvain (5 miles south of Saint-Pol-sur-Ternoise). On the 27 March the Battalion entrained and arrived the next day at Merville (10 miles north of Bethune). The Battalion was billeted at Vieux Berquin (6 miles south-west of Bailleul) on the night of the 28-29 March before marching to Erquinghem (1 mile west of Armentieres). On the 31 March, the Battalion relieved the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers in the trenches near Erquinghem. The war diary records:

- 1 April 1918: In trenches. No unusual activity. Patrols sent out at night.
- 2 April 1918: In trenches. Activity normal. Special patrols sent out to reconnoitre enemy wire and trenches with a view to a raid being carried out.
- 3 April 1918: In trenches. Normal activity. Special reconnoitring patrols during night.
- 4 April 1918: In trenches. Slight enemy bombardment during morning. Reconnoitering patrols out all night.
- 5 April 1918: Normal day. Battalion relieved in the evening by 23<sup>rd</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers and upon relief occupied billets in Erquinghem.
- 6 April 1918: In billets. Cleaning up and Company organisation.
- 7 April 1918: In billets. Working parties digging on reserve lines. Company training.
- 8 April 1918: Company parades. Night digging party on reserve line near Streaky Bacon Farm whole Battalion digging. Party returned to billets about 1 am 9<sup>th</sup>.
- 9 April 1918: Heavy enemy bombardment commences at 4.30 am. Companies ordered to scatter into the fields and remain in readiness to move immediately. 11.30 am, Battalion moved off to line sunken road in H 19 and during the day enemy attacked in force on our front.

Between the 9 and 21 April, there is a detailed appendix describing what happened. This starts on page 99. The Battalion took up a position at Fort Rompu (a place name not an actual fort) approximately 2 miles south-east of Erquinghem near the River Lys. If you Google Le Fort Rompu and click on Google Maps you'll be able to see the position. During the 9 April, the Battalion was heavily engaged but managed to hold on to its position. The appendix records the following for the morning of the 10 April 1918:

At daybreak on the 10<sup>th</sup> the situation was quiet, patrols had encountered the enemy in and around Fleurbaix [approximately 2 miles south-east of Fort Rompu) in large numbers, but there was no indicating of an immediate attack. My line had been dug in and was held by front line, supports, and reserves, and fire positions were well sited. About 7 a.m. however, small enemy parties were seen to be moving northwards from Fleurbaix are, and evidently concentrating in dead ground and behind natural cover. Artillery was brought to bear on enemy assemblies but this was not sufficiently

concentrated to break up coming attack. As the situation appeared critical owing to enemy concentration at about 7 am I asked for more troops to reinforce my support and reserve lines, (which were held by the 18<sup>th</sup> Northumberland Fusiliers [a pioneer battalion] and Australian tunnelers respectively), neither unit of which was very conversant with active warfare conditions), but this message was I think never delivered at Brigade owing to casualties.

At about 8 am the enemy attacked in force from about Fleurbaix and at the same time thrust forward in an easterly direction from Fort Rompu. The result was that my Battalion was attacked on both fronts of a right angle bend, the main weight of the attack being at the point of the bend in H.14.d. Heavy fighting ensued in which it is believed the enemy had severe casualties. The enemy eventually penetrated the line in force at a point North of Fleurbaix and thus entirely cut off my forces about Rue Dormoir. This garrison fought until entirely isolated...

The Battalion was eventually forced back and during the period between 9 and 21 April suffered over 560 casualties. One of these casualties was Thomas who was wounded at 9 am on 10 April. Thomas would have been stretchered off the battlefield and was initially sent to the 76<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance. A Field Ambulance would have been a wounded soldier's first port of call after the regimental aid post and was located close to the frontline. On Thomas' Field Medical Card the following information was recorded:

Wounded 9 am. Machine gun bullets. Operation 12 midnight 10 April 1918. Large wound anterior aspect of the tibia, wound excised. Damaged muscle cut away. Comminuted fracture shaft of the tibia. Loose fragments removed. Haemorrhage a puncture of one of the anterior tibial veins which was ligatured. Free oozing from muscles. Wound packed with flavine gauze. Thomas's splint[the name of a type of splint] [?] lying.

From the Field Ambulance, Thomas was sent to the No.1 Australian Casualty Clearing Station where he stayed between 10 and 12 April 1918. Thomas was then sent to the St. John's Ambulance Brigade Hospital at Etaples, where he remained before being shipped back to England on a Hospital Ship on 13 April 1918. Thomas' wound was very serious and he would spend over two years in hospital waiting for it to heal. Once back in England, Thomas was admitted to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Western General Hospital, Manchester where he remained between 15 April 1918 and 1 May 1919. The following information was recorded about the state of Thomas' wound on 10 May 1918:

Bullet Wound Left Leg Compound Fracture

Swelling round ankle. Wound of ? clean? but extensive. A large wound on front of left leg. Fractured bone exposed at bottom of wound. Ankle and knee stiff.

On the 2 May 1919, Thomas was admitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Scottish General Hospital, Glasgow where he remained until the 15 November 1919. On the 15 November, Thomas was sent to the Edinburgh War Hospital where he remained until he was discharged on 30 July 1920.

The information we have regarding Thomas' recovery is extensive as it was the medical documents which were sent to the Ministry of Pensions. The two pages in Thomas' service record which contain a list of the treatments and surgeries he has received are 15 and 16. A Medical Board held at Edinburgh Hospital on 30 July 1920 recorded Thomas' disablement at 40% and recommended that he be discharged as "physically unfit for further war service". Thomas was discharged from the British Army on 30 July 1920 due to his wound. Thomas' cause of discharge was recorded as 392 (XVI) K.R. which stands for King's Regulations Paragraph 392 (XVI) No longer physically fit for war service.

Became non-effective by Discharge  
392 (XVI) K.R.  
on 30 day of July 1920  
(Signature) Amundson Capt  
(Rank) for OFFICER i/o RECORDS

Corps.	Rank	Regtl. No.
R Scots	Pte	42963

For his service during the First World War Thomas qualified for two campaign medals, the British War Medal and Victory Medal. Thomas qualified for these medals as he served in a theatre of war. There are two documents relating to Thomas' medal entitlement which I have included in his folder. The first is his Medal Index Card which was used by clerks to look up Thomas Medal Roll and also carried the information which would be impressed on his medals. The Medal Index Card contains basic information regarding a soldier's service. As well as a soldier's name, it recorded the units they served with abroad, their rank and regimental numbers. As you can see below, only the Royal Scots was recorded as this is the only regiment which Thomas served with abroad. The rank of private was recorded along with the regimental number of 42963.

Also recorded on Thomas' Medal Index Card was the location of his Medal Roll entry which was Roll D/1010 B18 Page 1853.

Medal.	Roll.	Page.
VICTORY	D/1010 B18	1853
BRITISH	"	"

I have also included Thomas' Medal Roll for the British War Medal and Victory Medal which confirms his medal entitlement. The Medal Roll Thomas appears in is for the Royal Scots and was dated the 18 August 1920 at Hamilton, Scotland. Thomas' medals would have been sent to him shortly afterwards. The Medal Roll contains the same information which is found on the Medal Index Card with the addition of the exact Battalion, the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Scots, which Thomas served with abroad.

42963.	Pte.	✓ WILLIAMS.	16th.R.Scots.42963.
		Thomas.J.A.	Pte.

Below is a photograph of the two medals which Thomas qualified for, the British War Medal is the silver medal.





