

Thomas Carew MITCHELL

Corporal S/10594, 16th Battalion, Rifle Brigade

Died July 31st 1917, aged 27

Commemorated on Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial, Ypres, Belgium

Thomas Carew Mitchell was born in 1889 to Thomas and Annie Mitchell of Port Gaverne. In the 1901 census Thomas senior (41) was recorded as a master mariner and the household also consisted of Annie (39), with Thomas junior (12) and his older brother William (16) as well as his two sisters Hannah (17) and Lillie (9). In the 1911 census, Thomas had left home and was working in London as a drapers assistant for the large textile wholesaler Bradbury, Greatorex & Co. Ltd, where he was in a shared dormitory above their premises in Farringdon Street with 48 other drapers assistants. By 1911 his mother and father had moved from Port Gaverne to North Hill Road, Swansea with Hannah and Lillie, where Thomas senior was now working as an under ferryman.

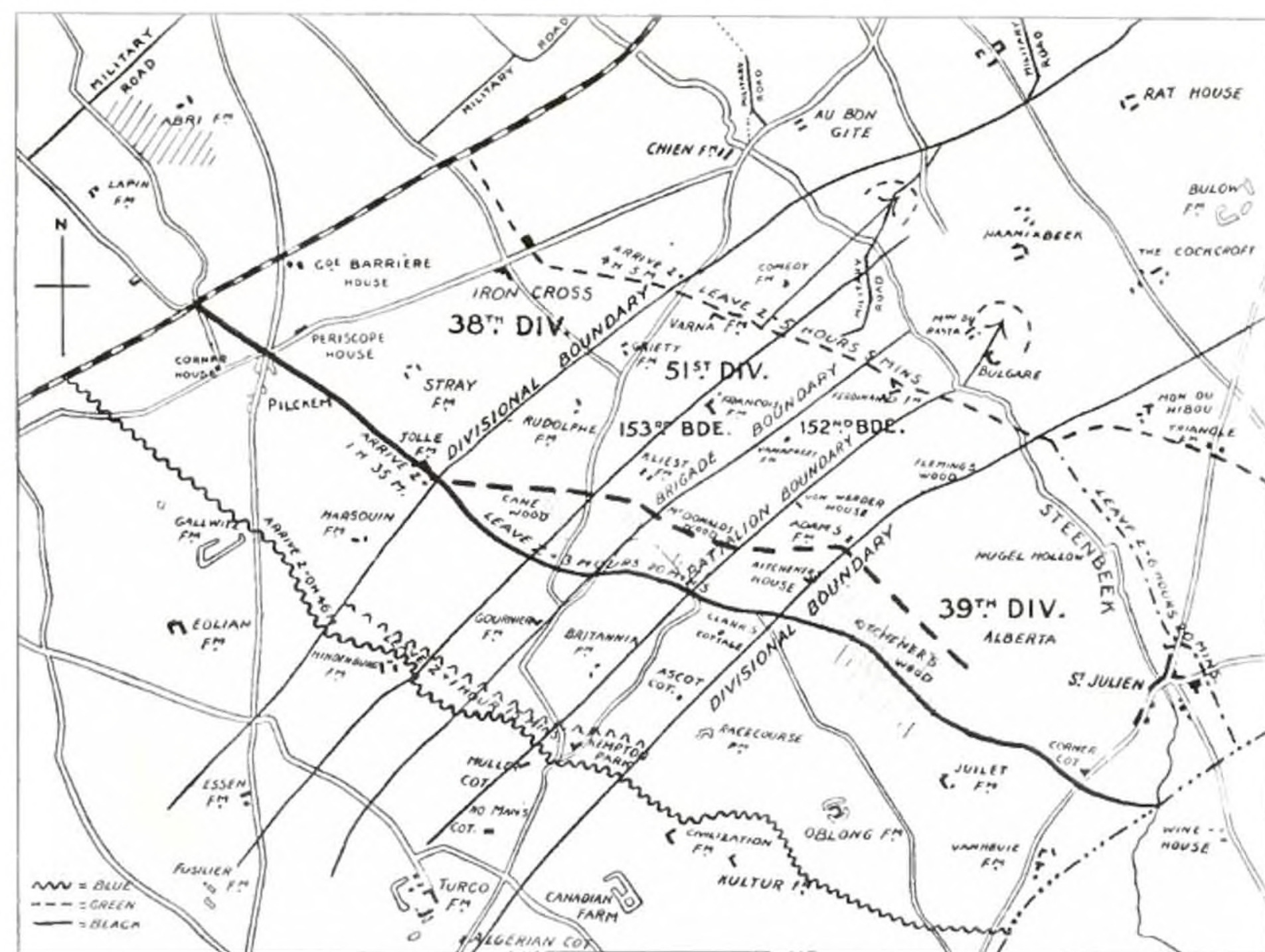
In 1913, Thomas married Elizabeth B May. She was born 1887 and was living with her family at old Bodannon Farm, Trewetha, in 1901. In 1911 she was in Streatham Common, London where she was living with her aunt, Susan Hayes, and her four sons. She was a drapers assistant, as was one of the cousins, and like Thomas, they may have all worked for Bradbury Greatorex. Thomas and Elizabeth were no doubt looking forward to the birth of their first baby in late spring 1914 when tragedy struck. Elizabeth died giving birth to their son, also named Thomas Carew Mitchell. Thomas Carew junior never knew his mother, or his father (who joined up when he was barely a toddler), and he was brought up by his grandparents in Swansea. He later lived in Port Isaac, and is buried with his wife in St Endellion churchyard.

The 16th (Service) Battalion (St Pancras), Rifle Brigade was formed on April 2nd 1915 by the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee in the London Borough of St Pancras. Thomas enlisted at St Paul's Churchyard, only a few hundred yards from Farringdon Street. In August 1915 the 16th moved to Hursley Park near Winchester, where it came under the orders of 117th Brigade in 39th Division. In March 1916 the 39th moved to the western front in France, and were concentrated around Blaringhem, 20 miles south east of Calais. The 39th saw action in the western front right up to the end of the war. In 1916 it was involved in the following engagements in the Battles of the Somme - Battle of Thiepval Ridge, Battle of Ancre Heights and the Battle of the Ancre.

July 31st 1917 saw the opening attack in the Third Battle of Ypres (*Passchendaele*), known as the Battle of Pilckem Ridge. Ypres is at sea level and, as the landscape is flat, farming is only possible with extensive drainage. The Belgians let it flood when the Germans invaded, then with all the shelling, the place was just a morass of mud. The surrounding ridges are nearly all under 50ft high, but they were dry and gave a view of the area. The 39th and 51st divisions formed XVIII Corps, and were in position just north of Ypres, a mile to the south west of the village of St Julien (*in Flemish Sint-Juliaan*) held by the Germans.

The Germans had excellent observation over the battlefield, so zero hour had been chosen for dawn at 03:50. It was a wet day and there was low cloud and mist so it was still dark when the British creeping barrage began, moving forward 100 yards every 4 minutes. Behind a smoke and shrapnel barrage, the 39th advanced across the 200-300 yards of no man's land and on to their first objective known as the blue line, then through the black line down to the Steenbeck stream, one of the muddiest parts of the battlefield. The 39th and 51st established themselves on the stream for 3,000 yards, from St Julien to the Pilckem–Langemarck road. Several tanks were able to help capture German strong-points which were delaying the advance, and outposts were established across the stream at the green line.

German regiments of the 221st and 50th Reserve Divisions coming from the vicinity of nearby Passchendaele, had been able to begin their counter-attack at 11:00–11:30am, by which time the three British brigades that faced the counter-attack were depleted and thinly spread. The British brigades could not communicate with their artillery due to the rain and because the Germans also used smoke shell in their creeping barrage. The German counter-attack was able to drive the British back from the green line. The Germans also recaptured St Julien just west of the green line on the 39th Division front, where the counter-attack was stopped by mud, artillery and machine-gun fire. The three most advanced British brigades had lost 70% casualties by the time they had withdrawn from the green line.



Battle Plan for July 31st 1917 showing the blue, black, and green objective lines of 39th Division

In the four days the battle lasted, from July 31st to August 3rd 1917, there were 31,820 UK and French casualties. Corporal Thomas Carew Mitchell was one, being killed on that first day. With no known grave he is commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial along with 54,405 other casualties from the forces of Australia, Canada, India, South Africa and United Kingdom who died in the Ypres Salient and also have no known grave.

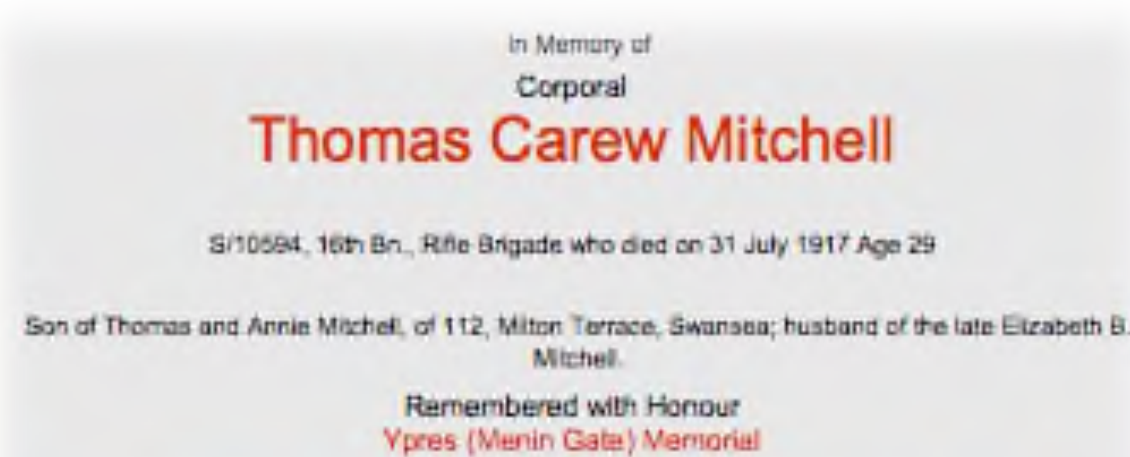
The site of the Menin Gate was chosen as a memorial to the missing because of the hundreds of thousands of men who passed through it on their way to the battlefields. To this day, each night at 8 pm the traffic is stopped at the Menin Gate while members of the local Fire Brigade sound the Last Post in the roadway under the Memorial's arches.



The memorial to Corporal Thomas Carew Mitchell on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial



British stretcher bearers near Boezinge, north of Ypres, struggling in the mud to recover casualties from the Battle of Pilckem Ridge on August 1st 1917



Commemorated in perpetuity by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission



The grave of Thomas Carew Mitchell junior at St Endellion Churchyard

Sources

Rifle Brigade: <http://www.1914-1918.net/rb.htm>

39th Division: <http://www.1914-1918.net/39div.htm>

Battle of Pilckem Ridge: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Pilckem_Ridge

and <http://machineguncorps.com/tag/pilckem-ridge/>