

## Thomas Nelson Seeley 1898 – 1918



This photograph is almost certainly by Nelson's uncle Walter Seeley, the well known Halesowen Photographer, Shopkeeper, and Itinerant Primitive Methodist Preacher

### First Enlistment

Family tradition always maintained that Nelson, as he was called to distinguish him from his father Thomas, falsified his age so that he could join the army when he was actually too young to do so. Indeed I so stated this in the notes I did to accompany the family photographs on page 92 of David Eades second book of photographs of Halesowen (Sutton Publishing, ISBN 0-7509-2498-5). Nelson was killed on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1918 on the Somme in France.

Some years after David's book was published, I obtained Nelson's birth certificate. He was born on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1898 and so was age 19 years and 3 months when he was killed. This was some 15 months past his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and seemed to cast a doubt on the family tradition.

Recently I obtained a copy of the Attestation (Army form B 2505) that Nelson completed when he tried to join the army on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1915. On this he stated and swore on oath that he was 19 years and 7 months old. In July 1915 he was actually only 16 years and 7 months old, so it seems the family tradition was true.

On the Attestation form, Nelson gave his address as 14 Stourbridge Road, Halesowen, although he took the oath in Handsworth. The attestation was approved by a Lieutenant in the 175<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery.

Nelson was immediately posted to the 'A' depot of the 175 Battery, Staffordshire Royal Field Artillery. This was part of the LV (presumably 55) Brigade of the 10<sup>th</sup> Irish division. This division was landed at Suvla Bay, Gallipoli, between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> August 1915, where no doubt Nelson would have joined them once his training was completed. However the second page of his attestation is endorsed as follows; -

“Revealed actual age 17, paragraph 392 VI A. Kings Regulations  
Having made a misstatement as to age on enlistment, discharged after 90 days service 25/10/1915”

Signed: - G.C. Crookshank, Captain, Royal field Artillery

## Second Enlistment

Nelson was eighteen on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1916. Conscription had commenced in England, Scotland and Wales in February 1916 under the Military Service Act 1916. So Nelson must have rejoined the army sometime in 1917, this time in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment.

It is not known when Nelson was sent to France. He could not have been there very long when he was killed in March 1918 because on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1917 he was still in Bury St Edmunds, from where he sent a Post card to his parents at Stourbridge Road, Halesowen: -

*“Dear Ma & Pa*

*Have just received Reg. Letter. Thanks very much for same. I will write on receipt of parcel. Cold better. Nelson”*

At 4-40 am on the morning of the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918, a single rocket soared into the sky over the town of St. Quentin in Northern France. It is quite likely that Nelson witnessed this rocket. It was normal practice for front-line troops to “Stand To” at 4-30 am on the Western Front during the First World War, in anticipation of a dawn attack. What poor Nelson would not know, was that the rocket signified that he had only one more night left on earth, that 10,000 heavy guns were about to open up on him and his comrades, and that one million German troops were concentrated on a front of about 70 miles, ready to launch a devastating surprise attack some 5 hours later.

This attack was known as the Michael Offensive, alternatively as *The Kaiserschlacht*, 'The Kaisers Battle' It was planned and launched by the German General Ludendorf, and was the heaviest military assault in the history of warfare up to that time. It opened with a sustained bombardment by six thousand five hundred field guns, and three thousand five hundred trench mortars, which fired over one million shells before the infantry assault itself was launched at 9-40 am. About eighty percent of the shells were of gas, mostly the ‘Green Cross’ Phosgene, which did its deadly work, then quickly dispersed so that it would not harm the advancing German troops. Some of the shells though were of the even more unpleasant ‘Yellow Cross’ Mustard gas, which was heavier than air, and thus persisted, taking a long time to disperse, so confusing and immobilising the British troops in their strong points that the advancing German shock troops, the Storm Troopers had been instructed to bypass.

The attack was designed to penetrate between the British and French armies, and separate them, rolling-up the British army northwards to the Channel. Ludendorf knew that before the end of 1918, the British and French would be heavily reinforced with the overwhelming numbers of fresh American troops, so that Germany had little time left if it was going to secure a victory with the troops that became available from the eastern front following the treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Russia of March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1918.

In the event, although the attack was initially very successful, indeed it achieved the greatest single advance in one day by any army in the whole war, it did not succeed in its objective. Later in the summer, using similar tactics, the British armies achieved a series of victories that brought about the Armistice. In this first day of the German offensive however, seven thousand British soldiers were killed, and almost as many the next day when Nelson was reported missing in action. The German army itself suffered fairly heavy casualties, Ludendorf’s own son being one of those killed. It may be that the effect of this influenced his thinking for the remainder of the campaign, because clearly he lost sight of his initial strategic objective to split the French and British armies, and allowed the power of the offensive to be dissipated in several unconnected thrusts aimed at just securing territory.

We do not know how Nelson Seeley died, perhaps he was gassed, or buried or blown to pieces during the initial bombardment, or shot with a Storm Trooper’s light machine gun, or impaled with a Storm Trooper’s bayonet. As he was reported ‘Missing in Action’ though with no body found, it is more likely that he perished in the explosion from an HE (High explosive) shell. It is on record that

many soldiers disappeared in this way, including a considerable proportion of some battalions. One presumes that there would have been a body had his death been by gas, bullet or the bayonet.

Nelson left no descendants, and he had no brothers and sisters. It is hoped that this little article will interest members of his mother's and father's families and thus preserve his memory.

### **Nelson is commemorated as follows:-**

On panels 18 and 19 of the Pozieres Memorial, Somme, France. Pozieres is a village about 6 kilometres north-east of the town of Albert. The memorial is on the south west of the village on the north side of the Albert to Pozieres road.

**In memory of  
THOMAS NELSON SEELEY  
Private 35189, 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Royal Warwickshire Regiment  
Who died on  
Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1918, Age 19**

The Commonwealth War Graves commission also records that Nelson was the son of Thomas and Mary Ellen Seeley of 14 Stourbridge Road, Halesowen, Birmingham.

Nelson is also commemorated on the War Memorial of Halesowen, which is located on the north side of the church yard of the parish church of St. John the Baptist. As he was in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, and also had a 'Birmingham' postal address, Nelson may also be commemorated in the Book of Remembrance at the Hall of Memory in Birmingham, although this has not been checked.

### **Family History**

Thomas Nelson Seeley was born on the 27<sup>th</sup> December 1898, at 42 Alexander Road, Handsworth, Staffordshire, the then home of his parents Thomas Seeley, and Mary Ellen Seeley, nee Boots. The birth was registered by his father on the 20<sup>th</sup> January 1899, who was described at the time as a General Labourer.

Alexander Road is just around the corner from Chapel Street, Handsworth, where Mary Ellen was born and raised at number 45 opposite the Ebenezer Primitive Methodist Chapel, where she was an active member of the congregation. Indeed as Thomas Seeley's older brother Walter was a Primitive Methodist Itinerant Preacher from Halesowen, this may have been how Thomas and Mary Ellen met. By the 1901 census Tom and Nellie (as Mary Ellen was known) had moved just around the corner to Watt Street, on the 1911 Census they were living at 76 Greenfield Road, Harborne, where Tom was described as a Milk Seller on a Farm. Over the next few years they moved to Summer Hill, Halesowen, and by the First World War, Tom had the Grocery shop at 14 Stourbridge Road, Halesowen. They were living here when Nelson was killed in 1914, and indeed stayed there until 1948 when they moved to Hayley Green to live with Nellie's younger brother Bert Boots senior and his wife Rose.

### **The Consequences of Nelson's Death**

Nelson was an only child, and very much the apple of his mother's eye. She was so overcome with grief at his death, that she could no longer serve in the shop, that his sister in law Rose Boots moved from Handsworth to 14 Stourbridge Road with her children Doris and young Bert, so that Rose could help out in the shop. Initially this was intended to be just a temporary arrangement but they were still there when her husband Bert senior came home from the Army in April 1919, and indeed stayed on until about 1936 when they bought a house in Hayley Green. Had Doris and young Bert been raised in Handsworth instead of Halesowen, it is unlikely they would ever have met their eventual spouses, with all that this implies for their descendants



Mary Ellen Seeley nee Boots 1872 - 1959

Alan S. Parr. November 2009