

THOMAS SPILLER 1859-1906
PRIVATE 728, F COMPANY, 2ND/24TH REGIMENT OF FOOT

“GONE FOR A SOLDIER”

By DENNIS STACEY (Grandson)

“Six heads before breakfast” Granny shouted. It was way back in the nineteen thirties when I was reading the text of an ancient Victorian illustrated book to my maternal grandmother when we chanced upon a picture of African warriors, probably Zulus. Grandmother was illiterate and lived in the top flat of my parent’s house in Holloway and I would be charged to read the text to her as “my eyes are bad today”. It was many years after her death at Morden in 1940 before I learned that she was illiterate. She started to tell me stories about my late grandfather Tom who had served in the Zulu campaign in 1878/9 fighting what she called “Fuzzy-wuzzies”; hence the cry “Six heads before breakfast”, allegedly part of Grandad Tom’s tales of his army service. It must be said that like all soldiers’ tales it should be taken with a large pinch of salt. When the film *Zulu* was made in the 1960s it started me on the trail of my mother’s ancestors. Let me start at the beginning.

St. Pancras in the 1850s was a desperately sad place to be. The area now covered in part by the new British Library was a seething mass of humanity packed into the mean streets of jerry-built housing thrown up to accommodate the hordes of displaced rural workers pouring into London seeking the means of survival. In later years a writer described it thus;

“The entire area of what consists of one of London’s three great railway termini serving the Midlands and the North, was formerly a sink of rotten slums, thieves kitchens, gin houses and prostitution whose squalor and contagion were evidently a combination of the London of Fielding and Dickens at its worst”.

It was into this squalid area that my maternal grandfather Thomas Spiller was born sometime during 1859. His birth was not registered, neither were those of his older brother John and his three sisters. The desperate poor of that place had more important things to worry about than compliance with official regulations; staying alive was their priority. Such attitudes to officialdom were not uncommon and it was in response thereto that legislation was brought in circa 1860 to make failing to register births an offence punishable by a fine.

This had the required effect as far as the Spillers were concerned in that the two subsequent children were indeed registered, Maurice in 1861 and Philip the last born in 1863; Thomas’ age was ascertained by reference to a census return in 1861. Perhaps to confirm their low regard for officialdom is the fact that 1861 was the only census in which the family featured. Thomas’ father John was employed as a mason but evidently he did not earn a good living from it although London was going through an explosive growth phase. Thomas’ mother was Johanna Spiller, nee Kenefick, daughter of one Thomas Kenefick and the name suggests they came from the Cork area of the South of Ireland. There is as yet no documentary evidence of their origin although the family anecdotes suggest Johanna was a devout Catholic, which would support the Irish connection.

Tragedy struck the family with the death of John at the age of 40 on the 18th of March 1866 in the London Fever Hospital. The cause of his death is given as typhus fever and congestion of the lungs. Chambers Directory describes typhus as;

“An extremely contagious and often fatal fever, transmitted by rat fleas, and especially associated with filth and overcrowding”.

Johanna was left to cope as best she may, a widow at the age of 40 with seven children. As if this was not enough, more tragedy was to follow. Later in the same year Maurice was kicked by a horse, his liver ruptured, and he died in the Royal Free Hospital on the 27th of September; he was six and a half years old. Johanna worked as a washerwoman to support herself and the children then still at home. She is supposed to have had a severe religious disagreement with her first born, John, as a result of which he left home and relocated to Maidstone in Kent.

Just eight years after John senior's death Johanna succumbed to phthisis, the Victorian name for what is now called tuberculosis, on the 28th of April 1874; she was buried in the Catholic cemetery at Kensal Green. John junior was now married and so his youngest brother Philip, now 11 years old, went to live with him at Maidstone. This meant that Thomas was probably homeless at the age of 15. The next record of him is when he decided to become a soldier of the Queen and joined the army in January 1876 when he would be 16 years old. His pay sheet indicates that he had joined the Territorial Army some time previously. This was part-time soldiering with annual training camps for small payment plus three meals a day. Then he decided to transfer to the regular army and joined the 25th Brigade. From the 10th of March 1876 he was posted to 'F' company of the 2nd Battalion of the 24th Regiment of Foot; otherwise known as the South Wales Borderers; he became Private 728 Thomas Spiller. Due to the preponderance of Welsh soldiers in the regiment and names like Jones, Evans and Williams, it was usual to prefix names with the regimental number. No doubt the break-up of the family had a bearing on Thomas' decision to become a 'Soldier of the Queen'; in the parlance of the day he 'went for a soldier'. Despite his desperately poor start in life in the capital of the richest Empire the world had ever seen he was apparently an ardent royalist. My aunt once said "Heaven help anyone who spoke ill of the Queen in his hearing".

At that time the regimental organisation was such that the 1st Battalion would be posted abroad whilst the 2nd Battalion was recruiting and training at home. In emergency the 2nd Battalion would be sent abroad also; so it was that Thomas was embarked for South Africa in 1878 in response to concern about the large and somewhat belligerent Zulu army that was worrying the settlers in the area. The British Authorities made excessive demands of the Zulus to disband their army and other high-handed sanctions that not surprisingly the Zulu king rejected. Much of the British pressure was believed to be related to the rumours of large gold and diamond discoveries on Zulu territory.

Thomas almost certainly had never seen the sea let alone been on a ship so it must have been a great adventure for him. The Regiment found itself in camp at the foot of the hills known as Isandlwana in January 1879. It was a part of Lord Chelmsford's large column that entered Zulu territory seeking battle with the Zulu army of Cetshwayo, King of the Zulus.

The British seem to have had a somewhat contemptuous attitude to the Zulus. Chelmsford divided his forces and set off to find the Zulu army, leaving the 1st Battalion plus one company of the 2nd Battalion and various other contingents in the camp. The Zulus attacked the camp in some strength from an unexpected direction and despite the best efforts of the troops they were overrun and virtually annihilated, 800 men of the 1st and G Company of the 2nd Battalion were killed along with the vast majority of the native contingents. Grandmother said that Grandad Tom was part of what was called 'mounted infantry'. In view of the vast distances in Southern Africa messengers were mounted on locally acquired horses to act as despatch riders. As such Grandmother suggested that Tom was sent off, with other riders, with a message to Lord Chelmsford that camp was under attack. Whether this is in fact true cannot be confirmed; sources suggest that his F Company was with Lord Chelmsford's contingent. By the time the information reached them and Chelmsford and the troops returned to the camp, everyone was dead and the bodies severely mutilated.

Grandfather used to tell of his having to collect the parts of some of his erstwhile comrades to enable them to be buried, although it was many weeks before the burial party returned to the scene of the battle.

It was later in the same day of the battle at Isandlwana that the Zulus attacked the nearby station at Rorke's Drift, the heroic defence of which was the subject of the 1960s film. About 130 men properly organised were able to beat off the attack. 11 VCs were awarded as a result of this action, the most ever in one day.

In the following July the Zulus were overwhelmingly defeated at Ulundi by a strongly reinforced army under Lord Chelmsford.

It has not been possible to confirm Grandfather's exact whereabouts during this time, as army records are somewhat sparse regarding individual soldiers. He did sustain a wound to his left calf from an assegai but again no record of wounds were kept unless the soldier was detained in hospital for more than three days. There are only Grandmother Spiller's recollections of her husband's experiences; not perhaps the most reliable source but the only one we have. There is a reference in a book, 'The

Washing of The Spears' about the war, which mentions that Lord Chelmsford had issued cavalry sabres to the mounted infantry and in time they become fairly proficient in using them. This does land a little credence to the story.

Grandfather did not stay long in the army; probably he was on a recently introduced six-year engagement. In 1884 he was married to my grandmother, Sarah Duffin, and had become a father to his son Thomas George and was working as a mason installing marble fireplaces for Messrs. Maples, a very up-market supplier of furnishings to the upper crust, who had premises in nearby Tottenham Court Road. The family still lived in the St Pancras area and it was there that Thomas and Sarah had a total of one son and five daughters. Like his mother before him, Thomas was also to die at the age of 47 and of the same disease, tuberculosis, in the hospital at Dartmouth Park Holloway on the 23rd of October 1906. No doubt the poor environment played a large part in their short lives. Sarah had to struggle to raise her younger daughters in the days before Social Security. Two of the girls, my mother Louisa and her sister Lily, were taken into care by the Catholic Church and for two years were subjected to what Louise called a harsh and loveless regime at St Josephs Convent in Whetstone before being returned to live with their mother. Thomas junior also joined the Territorial Army as a youth and spent time in South Africa during the Boer War 1899-1902. He rejoined the army at the age of 31 in 1915 and was killed in France in May 1915 while serving with the Middlesex Regiment. He was not married and so the Spiller name died out with him in that branch of the family. The five sisters resolved to better their lot and as soon as they could, moved out of the St Pancras area to infinitely better lives and fortune. I do wonder why Thomas, born in such poor circumstances in the capital city of the wealthiest country in the world, could be such a staunch royalist. No doubt, like many other young men, he joined the army for adventure, three meals a day and a pair of boots as a writer of the time remarked. But it is still curious that he was so patriotic given his desperate home circumstances. I feel he got more adventure in the Zulu campaign than perhaps he expected. His elder brother had a large family in Maidstone and many of his descendants live there still. The youngest brother Philip migrated to Australia around 1888 and has many descendants there. I have found no trace as yet, of Thomas' three sisters. Among my late mother's papers was a memoriam card issued by the undertaker at Thomas' funeral which gives the location and number, Grave no; 240 Plot RC10, of Thomas' grave in the St Pancras cemetery at Finchley in North London. From the Cemetery Office it was learnt that Thomas was buried in a common grave in the Catholic Area along with several others, as was the custom with people of limited means. The gravesite has been recently cleared so no accurate location is possible; just the approximate area.



Thomas Spiller