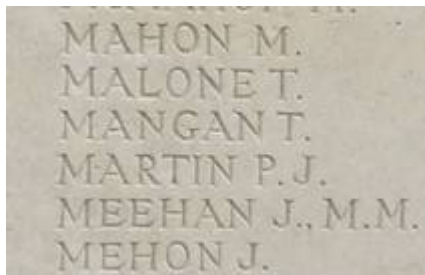


Up until September 1916 most recruits would be posted to the reserve battalions of their regiment for basic training, before they were posted to an active service unit, but this system floundered when conscription began, as the regimental system could not cope with the numbers. So instead, the Training Reserve was formed and the local recruitment for infantry regiments was abandoned. Men who were posted to the TR battalions could be allocated to any regiment when the time came for them to be posted, so from that time on one cannot assume that a recruit would serve with his local regiment.

Officially, Percy should not have been sent overseas until July 1917 when he reached the age of 19 years. If this was the case, he would have joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers in the action on the Somme, which continued until November 1916. During April and May 1917 the Fusiliers were again in action during the Arras offensive, in which the British achieved the greatest advance since trench warfare had begun. The advance slowed after a few days as the German defences recovered and the battle became a costly stalemate for both sides.

By 1<sup>st</sup> October, Percy's battalion was at Eton Camp near Ypres undergoing training for another forthcoming offensive. Two days later, after the celebration of Holy Mass and a Church of England service, the battalion moved off for the front

line at 5.30pm. The War diary describes how the drums played them away, with the Brigadier General and staff there to wish them luck. "Officers and men in excellent spirits and all confident of doing well – weather has broken – wind high and inclined to rain." The next day at 6 am, the battalion began their attack east of Langemarck. They went forward "with the most splendid resolution" and gained all their objectives "in the most brilliant manner." Thirty men were killed, twenty were missing and 126 were wounded. The diary reports that many acts of gallantry were performed and notes that the casualties "considering everything, were remarkably light." Sadly, one of those missing was 19 year old



Percy Martin. His name is listed on the Tyne Cot memorial along with the names of 33,782 other allied servicemen whose bodies were lost in the Ypres battlefields after 15<sup>th</sup> August 1917.

For further copies of this leaflet or if you have any information to add, please contact Di Landon on 01452 760531

# Westbury Remembers

## Part 17 - Nathaniel Phelps and Percy Martin

Written by Di Landon  
and sponsored by

**Westbury-on-Severn Parish Council**



Less than a fortnight after Ernest Hayward and Jack Hanna were killed in Flanders, two more Westbury men also lost their lives in the slaughter that was Passchendaele.

**Nathaniel Phelps** was born on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1891. His parents James, a cattle dealer, and Hannah Phelps lived at the Pole Yard in Minsterworth, which I understand was at or near Duni Farm. Nathaniel was the youngest of their eleven children of whom only eight survived childhood.

He was baptised at Minsterworth Church and started at Walmore Hill School on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1897. By 1901, the family had moved to Stantway Lane and his father was listed as a 'butcher/slaughterman'. Nathaniel's grandson, Colin Phelps, tells me that his father had a trophy in the form of a very large and ornate teapot that was won by the family for black pudding making.

On the 1911 census, Nathaniel, now 19, was listed as a farm labourer. His service record has not survived and so we do not know when he joined up, but it appears that initially he served in the 1/7<sup>th</sup> (Cyclist) Battalion

of the Devonshire regiment.

*This battalion was created in 1908 as a unit of the Territorial Army, although cyclists had long been employed by the army, mainly for reconnaissance and communication of messages. They were armed as infantry and could provide mobile firepower if needed. At the outbreak of war, they were quickly despatched to the south-*

*west coast to help provide defence in the event of a German invasion. Those units that went overseas combined trench-holding duties and manual work with their reconnaissance and message delivery duties.*

On 24<sup>th</sup> April 1916, at Westbury Church, Nathaniel married Rose Ann Cornwell, from Chaxhill. Nathaniel



Nathaniel, his wife Rose, and their baby son, Victor

describes himself as a 'dealer' on his marriage certificate, but it seems more likely that he was a serving soldier by this time so I assume he was describing his peacetime employment. Certainly, at some point, he transferred to the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment which had been formed in Exeter in August 1914 with recruits from all over the country. In August 1915, they landed in Le Havre and by 25<sup>th</sup> September they were engaged in the Battle of Loos, where in spite of German shelling and gas from the British attack blowing back on them, they managed to capture the German position. They held this position until the following evening but suffered over 600 casualties during the attack .

Later in 1915, they were moved to the Somme area, which at that time was relatively quiet. It seems that Nathaniel must have had some home leave for his wedding in April 1916 but he would have been back in action by the first day of the battle of the Somme, when the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Devons attacked towards Mansel Copse. Here some well-placed German machine guns were mowing down the advancing men, and by midday the survivors had been scattered across the battlefield. In the afternoon, the final company of the battalion found a route that avoided the guns and succeeded in occupying a stretch of the German trench. The next day, they fought off a German counter-attack and were able to advance yet further. 160 officers

and men of the two battalions were killed, but they continued to serve on the Somme until the end of July when they were withdrawn for rest.

Meanwhile at home, in August 1916, Nathaniel's wife Rose had given birth to a son, Victor James, whose son, Colin, has kindly provided the cover photograph.

By March 1917, German forces had withdrawn from the Somme to the formidable construction known to the Allies as the Hindenburg Line. In April 1917, Nathaniel's battalion was again involved in heavy fighting during the Battle of Arras on this line, and in May they captured part of Bullecourt, where they again suffered heavy casualties with 54 killed, 170 wounded and 9 missing.

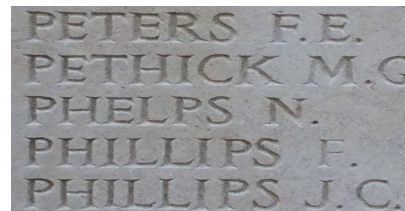
The battalion's war diary shows a summer spent constantly on the move between billets with training and cleaning interspersed with spells in the trenches. By August the battalion had moved to Flanders and was taking part in the Third Battle of Ypres known as Passchendaele.



*The devastation that was Passchendaele*

On 1<sup>st</sup> October, Nathaniel's battalion was in a bivouac camp near Polygon Wood, four miles east of Ypres. The neatly typed war diary tells how the battalion moved forward at 4.30pm to relieve the troops in the line but during the march the enemy put down a barrage causing 24 casualties. Nathaniel was one of them, killed in action at the age of 26 years on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1917. The report concludes with the comment that "the relief passed off otherwise quite quietly and was complete by 12.30am" which seems to indicate how injured these men had become to the tragedy that was constantly around them.

Nathaniel was awarded the Vic-



*Nathaniel's name carved on the Tyne Cot Memorial to those who died at Passchendaele and have no known grave*

tory Medal and the British War Medal.

In 1919, on the first anniversary of the Armistice, Nathaniel's widow married William Sherwood, also from Westbury, who was a private in the King's Own Hussars.

**Percy Martin** was born in July 1898 and was the sixth of Albert and Ellen Martin's nine children. The family lived in Rodley, near Blue Boys and Rodley Sands. Albert was a farm labourer and by 1901, his oldest son, also called Albert, was a farm labourer too. Walmore Hill school records show that another son, Frank, had been in trouble for wandering off with three other pupils to go blackberry picking during their dinner hour, so I imagine that Percy and all his siblings also attended Walmore Hill School.

Percy left school at the age of 14 years and probably became a farm labourer like his father and brothers. His service record has not survived but we know that he enlisted in Lydney. Unfortunately, we don't know when, so he could have enlisted under age or he could have been conscripted when he reached the age of 18 years in July 1916. He ended up serving with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers but the record of his death, which shows his service number as 41408, has a supplementary note that he was "Formerly 6738, T.R." I'm not entirely sure what that means but the most likely explanation seems to be that this refers to him starting his service in the Training Reserve before joining the Royal Dublin Fusiliers.