

## **Hopkin Joseph Thomas: Unknown Soldier**

In many ways, Hopkin Joseph Thomas of Bryncoch, two miles north of Neath, is an unknown soldier. He left no descendants to remember him, and as his immediate family grew old and passed away, memory of him slipped away. The same must be true of thousands of other Welsh soldiers of the Great War. However, one member of the family had kept some keepsakes of Hopkin's time in the army, and a few years ago this collection was found in a garage, allowing us now to put a face to the name of the memorial, and some flesh on the bare bones of the story of his life.

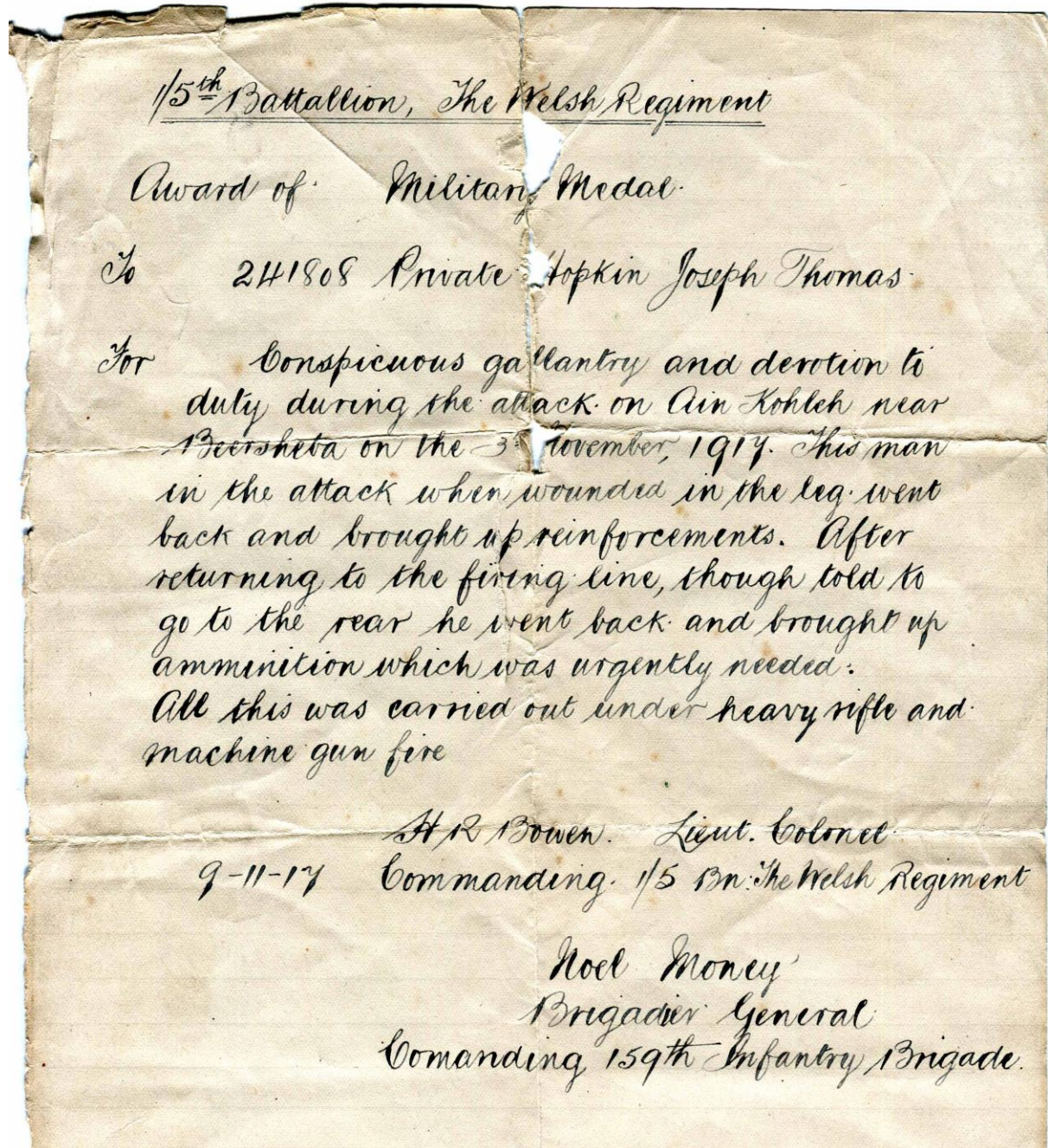
We know a little of Hopkin's background from the 1911 Census, where he is recorded as a 20 year old carpenter, living in 'Dyffryn Cottages', Bryncoch with his parents John and Hannah, and six younger siblings. The family spoke both Welsh and English.

Details of when he enlisted in the Welsh Regiment are sketchy: his original regimental number was 5656, which suggests that he joined the regiment around February / March 1916.

We do know that he was serving in Egypt with 1/5th Btn in 1917: this unit had served in the Gallipoli campaign from August to December 1915.



The first concrete evidence we have of Hopkin's actions relates to an attack on the Turkish forces in November 1917 at Ain Koleh near Beersheba (now Be'er Sheva, in southern Israel). The Turkish defences at Beersheba were over-run by Australian and British forces on 31 October, and there followed a series of battles where they tried to press home their advantage.



On 3 November, Hopkin's unit attacked Ain Kohleh, where he displayed 'Conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty' which earned him the Military Medal. 'This man in the attack when wounded in the leg went back and brought up reinforcements. After returning to the firing line, though told to go to the rear, he went back and brought up ammunition which was urgently needed. All this was carried out under heavy rifle and machine gun fire'.

Hopkin's own account of the action, in a letter to his parents, is remarkably blasé about his injuries.

Tuesday 6 / 11 / 17

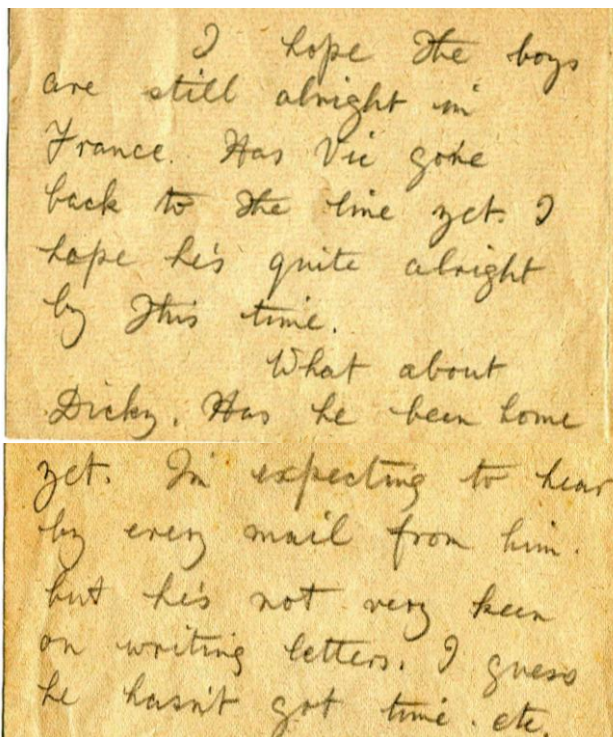
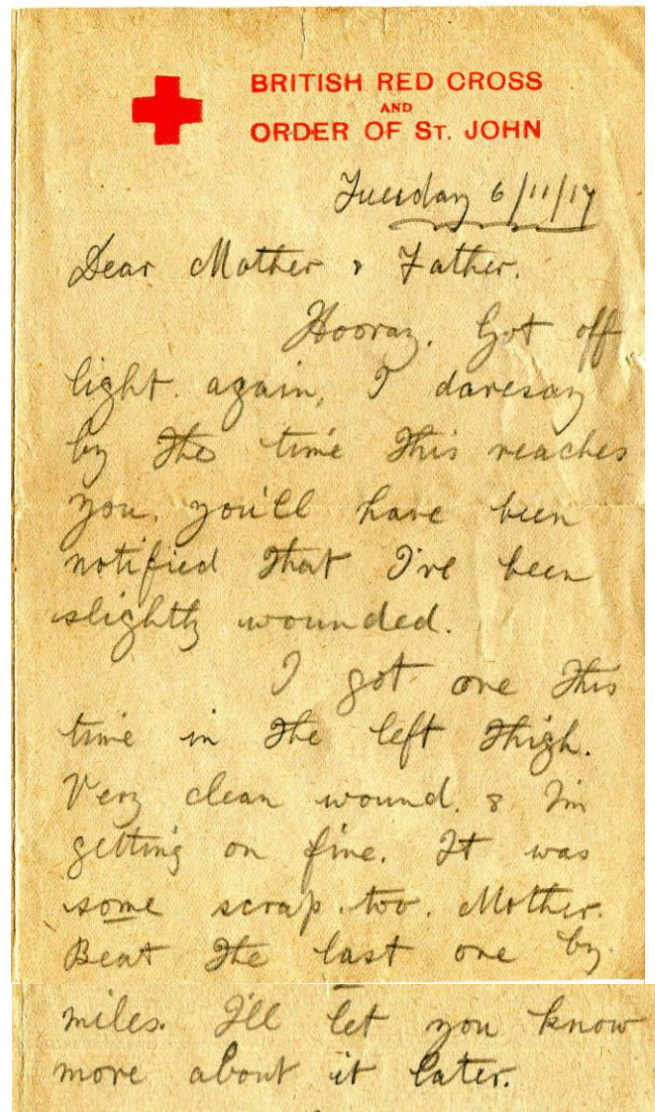
Dear Mother & Father

Hooray. Got off light again. I daresay by the time this reaches you, you'll have been notified that I've been slightly wounded.

I got one this time in the left thigh. Very clean wound & I'm getting on fine. It was some scrap too, Mother. Beat the last one by miles. I'll let you know more about it later.

As we read this we have to bear in mind the intended audience – clearly, Hopkin was trying hard to make sure that his parents did not get too anxious about his condition – and yet it still is remarkably upbeat about what must have been a real ordeal.

Another noteworthy aspect of this letter is how it forms part of a conversation with family members in another theatre of the war.

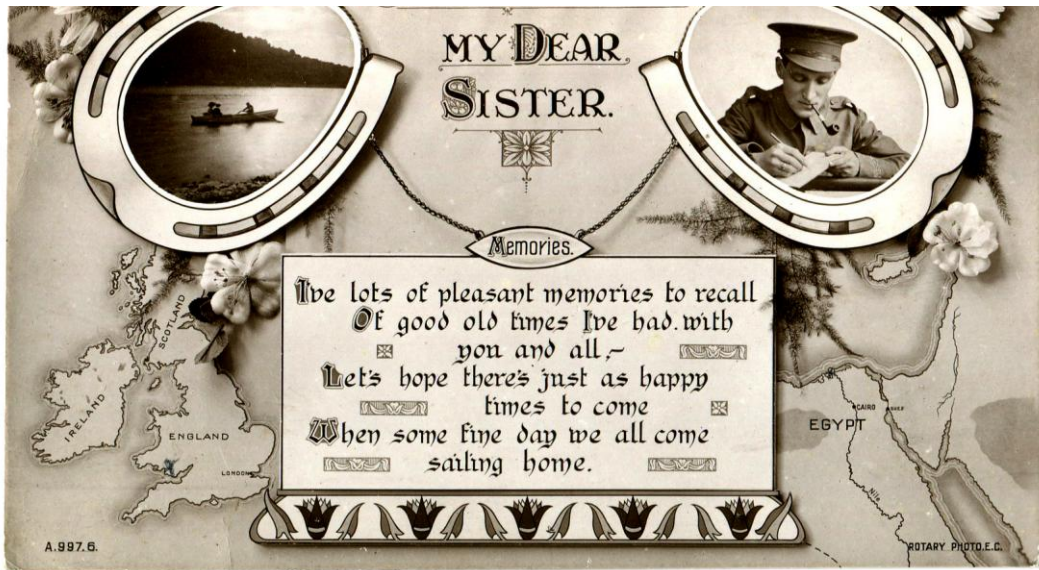
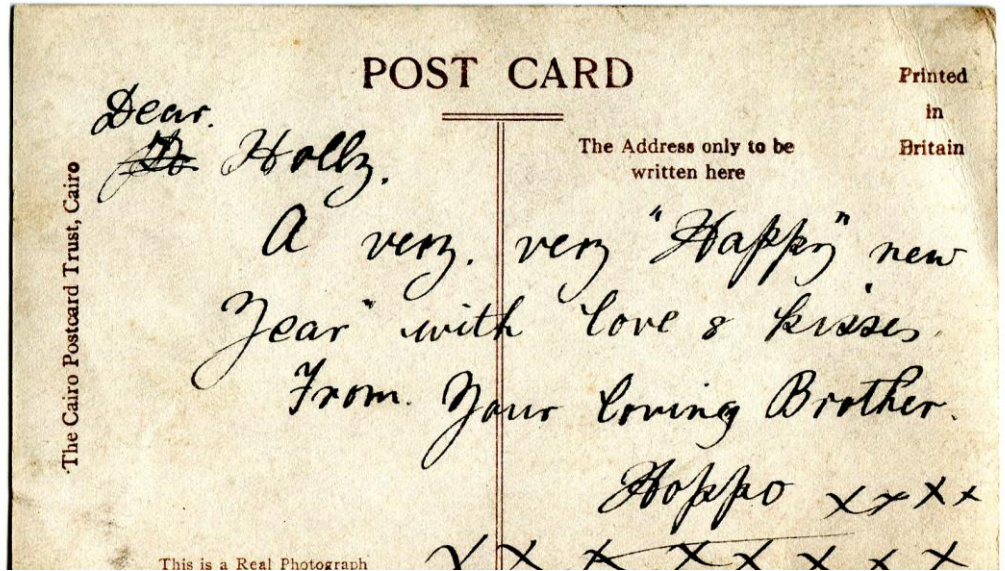


I hope the boys are still alright in France. Has Vic gone back to the line yet. I hope he's quite alright by this time.

What about Dicky. Has he been home yet. I'm expecting to hear by every mail from him but he's not very keen on writing letters. I guess he hasn't got time etc.

'Vic' and 'Dicky' are his brothers Victor (5 years his junior) and Richard (7 years younger). Very little more is known about their service: all we have is a letter written by Richard to his parents from France in May 1918, in which he states that he's just received a letter from Victor.

Following the victories in the vicinity of Beersheba, the Allied forces continued to push on, reaching Jerusalem by Christmas 1917. We know nothing of Hopkin Joseph Thomas' movements, although he did take time to write a letter to an aunt and uncle in July 1918, with his sympathy on the death of their daughter. (Although this letter, like the rest of Hopkin's correspondence, was written in English, he does quote from two hymns in Welsh as he tries to console his relatives). There is also a New Year card in the collection that has survived, sent to his sister Holly (Olwen).



Hopkin's luck ran out in September 1918. A telegram was sent to the family on 24 September: 'Regret to report 241808 L/C H. J. Thomas Welsh Rgt is dangerously wounded and in hospital in Egypt'.

Two days later they received the news they had been dreading:

This Form must accompany any inquiry respecting this Telegram.

**POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS.**

Delivery and Charges: Sent, or No. of Telegram **1060**  
 Sent out Office Stamp  
**CARD**  
**26 SEP**  
**1918**

If the Receiver of an Inland Telegram doubts its accuracy, he may have it repeated on payment of half the amount originally paid for its transmission, any fraction of 1d. less than 1d. being reckoned as 1d.; and if it be found that there was any inaccuracy, the amount paid for repetition will be refunded. Special conditions are applicable to the repetition of Foreign Telegrams.

At: M. To: By:

Prefix Handed in at Office of Origin and Service Instructions Words Received here at  
 7-15 Othms Shrewsbury 46 7-30

Mrs J. Thomas The Mill Bryncoch near  
 Nr 2804 26/9/18 and regret to report death  
 of 241808 L/C H. J. Thomas Welsh Regt on 22  
 Sept 1918 and I am to express the sympathy  
 of secretary of state for war in your sad  
 bereavement Records War Dept

Received at From By Charges to pay s. d.

B or C 3 M4480 Wt. 30890 F357 10,000,000 2/18 C & B (257)

Regret to report death of 241808 L/C  
 H.J.Thomas Welsh Regt on 22 Sept 1918. I am  
 to express the sympathy of secretary of state  
 for war in your sad bereavement.

The family collection has preserved letters of sympathy from Hopkin's commanding officer, and from some of his comrades.

17 / 10 / 18

My Dear Mrs Thomas

Permit me to sympathize with you in your great sorrow & loss through the death of your dear son, who as at home as well as out here had been my dear chum. ...

I cannot say how greatly I miss him, he was respected by all & always jolly in company. However you may console yourself that he was a brave man & gave his life as a sacrifice for righteousness.

May God help you in your great sorrow.

Kind Regards,  
 Pte E J Lloyd

17/10/18

My Dear Mrs Thomas Permit me to sympathize with you in your great sorrow & loss through the death of your dear son, who as at home as well as out here had been my dear chum. ...

He was seriously wounded & lived to reach the field ambulance but died peacefully there & had no chance to have a word with him being too far away & on duty.

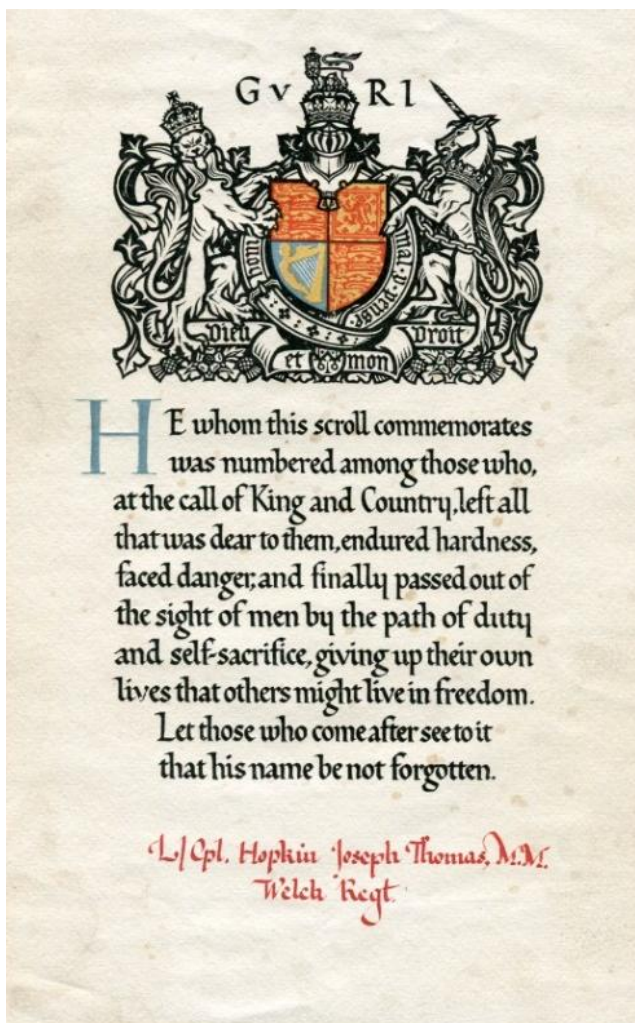
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Kind Regards  
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And so Hopkin was buried, far from home, in a war cemetery in Palestine. Following the erection of a permanent headstone in March 1925, the family received a photograph of their son's grave.

By this time, the family, like thousands of other Welsh families, had received a scroll to note their loss. The final sentence is perhaps the most powerful, stating 'Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten'.



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