

LANCE CORPORAL GEORGE MARSHALL TOPHAM

12/251, 12th (Service) Battalion, York and Lancaster Regiment

Died aged 18 on 10 July 1916

Buried with honour in *Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension No.1, France*; IV D 5

Commemorated in Tewkesbury on the Grammar School Memorial and in Sheffield



*Doullens Communal Cemetery
Extension No.1, Somme, France*



*L/Cpl. G. M. Topham
[Sheffield Daily Telegraph]*



*York and Lancaster
Regiment*

GEORGE MARSHALL TOPHAM was born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1897, the youngest son of Henry George Topham, a marine engineer from South Shields, and Annie Elizabeth (formerly Woods) from Newcastle. The only documented connection between the family and Tewkesbury is that George and his older brother, Arthur Henry, were educated at the Boys' Grammar School. Arthur attended between 1909 and 1912, when his home address was recorded as 2 North View, Wallsend-on-Tyne, although George was boarding in Church Street, living in the house of the Headmaster, J. E. Priestley. The family must have lived in Tewkesbury, probably connecting Henry's occupation and the thriving boat-building industry. Work must have taken the family to Sheffield by 1914.

George was one of the first volunteers in Sheffield in the York and Lancaster Regiment, joining what is often known as the Sheffield City Battalion. It was one of the many 'Pals' battalions, composed of university and commercial men, when it was formed on 5 September 1914 by the Mayor; in just two days it was complete. The hectic activity amidst volunteering no doubt helped to obscure the fact that George was under-age at 17 years.

The battalion was part of the 31st Division, which moved to Egypt in December 1915 to defend the Suez Canal against Turkish forces but did not see any action. In March 1916 the Division was transferred to France to prepare for the forthcoming *Battles of the Somme 1916*. On

the opening day, his Infantry Brigade was tasked with capturing the heavily fortified village of Serre. The Battalion suffered severely when its attempt to take the village failed. The battalion history described their fate: *'They had to pass through a terrible curtain of shell fire and German machine guns were rattling death from two sides. But the lines, growing thinner, went on unwavering ... Whole sections were destroyed ... The third and fourth waves lost at least half their strength before they reached No-Mans land ... The few survivors took shelter in shell holes until they could get back under cover of darkness.'* The remnants of the battalion were taken out of the line on the evening of 3 July. The Diary for 7 July records a total of 495 casualties, although some later sources put the figure at over 500. In the village of Serre, there is a memorial to the Sheffield City Battalion.

Lance Corporal George Marshall Topham died of wounds on 10 July 1916 in Doullens, probably in one of the Casualty Clearing Stations, and was buried in *Doullens Communal Cemetery Extension No.1*. It is quite likely that George was wounded on 1 July, *'the most disastrous day in the history of the British Army'*, but did not succumb to his injuries until some days later. George is commemorated on the Sheffield Council Official Roll of Honour and the Sheffield City Battalion Roll of Honour.

George's older brother, **2nd Lieutenant Arthur Henry Topham**, served with the Northumberland Fusiliers and survived the war.