

Press release: Battle Babies – From Verdun to Passchendaele

Between 1914 and 1919, 1,634 babies born in England and Wales were named in memory of the First World War. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and The National Archives today reveal the forgotten stories of those given the name “Passchendaele” to encourage others to look into their own family connection to the War.

At least 10 babies were named after the battle that lasted between 31 July 1917 and 10 November 1917. At 3.50am on 31 July, Gough’s Fifth Army launched an attack over a 15 mile front. Despite initial successes, the attack soon became bogged down, hampered by rain which turned the battlefield into liquid mud. By the end of the offensive, the Allied forces had sustained over 320,000 casualties; German losses are estimated to be between 260,000 and 400,000.

While many of the war inspired names have passed out of use, some families have continued the tradition. The Government’s call for descendants of the men and women who took part in Passchendaele, Third Battle of Ypres earlier this year unearthed the stories of two people with links to the children named ‘Passchendaele’.

Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Karen Bradley said:

Those killed or injured in the battlefields of the First World War are still remembered and it is very touching that so many people were honoured in the names of their children, nieces, nephews and grandchildren. It is fitting, that in its centenary year, we are uncovering the forgotten stories that link people to Passchendaele and I encourage everyone to look into their past and discover more about their families experience in the First World War.

Ella Passchendaele Maton-Cole, aged 19, was unaware of the story behind her unusual middle name until researchers at The National Archives were able to trace it back to Gunner Frederick Fuller, a cousin of Ella’s great-great grandmother. Frederick was killed on 30 September 1917 during the Battle of Passchendaele; his cousin named her new born daughter Florence Mary Passchendaele, and her next born son, Frederick, in memory of him. Upon his death, Frederick’s sister was sent a letter from his Commanding Officer:

This feeling, I can assure you, is shared also by all the men in the Battery, for he was respected by all... But it must be remembered that all these happenings are witnessed by the eyes of the Maker, who does all things for the best. I was in charge of the party of men who carried him to the dressing station and I can certainly assure you he was perfectly calm and collected. He was known as the

coolest man in the Battery

Robert Passchendaele Oswald was named in honour of his uncle Thomas Oswald, who was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for extinguishing camouflage that was on fire, despite being under intense enemy bombardment.

The London Gazette records that Thomas:

Set a magnificent example of pluck and fearless devotion to duty.

Thomas' brother George named his next born son Robert Passchendaele, just months after the end of the battle.

The research has shown that the most common war inspired baby name of the period was 'Verdun' which was given to 901 children. Other major battles feature on the list with 15 babies named 'Somme' after the battle that claimed 57,470 British casualties on the first day alone, and a further 71 named 'Ypres'.