

## **Private Thomas Nicholson<sup>©</sup>**

**Regimental number: 28698**

**16th (Service) Battalion (2nd Glasgow), Highland Light Infantry**

**born: 1889–died: 13 July 1917**

Thomas Nicholson was part of what today we might call a blended family. He was the second son of John Nicholson and Ann Summersides, who each had children from previous relationships. John had two sons, James (b. 1879)<sup>1</sup> and William (b. 1880)<sup>2</sup>; Ann had a daughter, Elizabeth Jane (b. 1871)<sup>3</sup> and a son, Charles William (b. 1879),<sup>4</sup> both of whose births were registered under Ann's surname, Summersides. John and Ann's first child together was son Mark (b. 1885)<sup>5</sup>, followed by Thomas,<sup>6</sup> and then daughters Rachel (b. 1892)<sup>7</sup> and Ann (b. 1896).<sup>8</sup>

In 1911 Thomas was living in Byker, a district to the east of the centre of Newcastle Upon Tyne, with his widowed mother, his father having died in 1896,<sup>9</sup> and his younger sisters while working as a baker.<sup>10</sup> A year later he married Frances Elizabeth Cavanagh<sup>11</sup> and their daughter, also named Frances Elizabeth, was born on 31 October 1912.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, tragedy struck the young family when Thomas's wife passed away barely a year later.<sup>13</sup>

Although exempted from compulsory conscription under the *Military Service Act, 1916* that came into force in January 1916 for every unmarried man and childless widower between 18 and 41 years of age,<sup>14</sup> Thomas enlisted that summer,<sup>15</sup> leaving his young daughter in the care of his mother.<sup>16</sup>

Despite enlisting in Newcastle Upon Tyne,<sup>17</sup> Thomas became part of the 16th (Service) Battalion (2nd Glasgow), Highland Light Infantry.<sup>18</sup> Though at the beginning of the war each infantry division had an Infantry Base Depot (IBD) in France to supply replacement soldiers for all battalions of a particular regiment, the 1916 Battle of the Somme resulted in such heavy casualties (57,000 British casualties on the first day, 1 July 1916<sup>19</sup>) that single-regiment IBDs were unable to bring their respective battalions up to strength.<sup>20</sup> Thus, at the beginning of August 1916, a new policy was introduced making individual IBDs responsible for supplying drafts to several regiments, usually three or four per IBD.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a Newcastle regiment was part of the same IBD as the Highland Light Infantry.

It isn't known exactly when Thomas joined his battalion in the field, but it was at least three months after he enlisted, which was the minimum training period for new recruits before they were sent to France.<sup>22</sup> If he joined his unit in the autumn, Thomas may have taken part in the Battle of Ancre, the last battle of the Somme offensive of 1916.<sup>23</sup> The entry in the battalion's war diary<sup>24</sup> describes how the battalion proceeded to assembly points at Wagon Road northeast of Beaumont-Hamel on the night of 17 November. Because the "Guides lost their way and connection was lost between companies," the battalion was only in battle position at 6 a.m. Battalion companies moved forward to the enemies' Munich and Frankfurt trenches but were quickly overwhelmed. The battalion was relieved on the morning of 19 November but not before 60 men of D company were surrounded and cut off behind enemy lines. Relief attempts failed; however, the men of the Frankfurt trench refused to surrender. When the Germans stormed the trench, they found only 15 wounded men alive, three of whom died soon afterwards.<sup>25</sup> Overall, the engagement cost the battalion four officers and 16 Other Ranks (ORs, all soldiers below the officer ranks) killed; three officers and 104 ORs wounded; three officers and 260 ORs missing; and three officers and 10 ORs wounded and missing.

The battalion remained in billets behind the lines at Rubempré throughout the month of December receiving training and integrating seven new officers and 215 ORs before moving forward again on 8 January 1917.

During the early months of 1917 the battalion moved between reserve and forward lines. The next major operation took place on 14 April 1917, when the battalion was ordered into battle position as part of the Arras Offensive. It accomplished its objectives with relatively few casualties and a significant number of the enemy taken prisoner.

The battalion remained in reserve in billets for the rest of April and May until moving north to relieve the French in the Coast Defence Line east of Dunkerque at Nieuwpoort on 20 June as part of Operation Hush.<sup>26</sup> The plan was that once British forces had broken through the German defences at Ypres, a major amphibious landing would take place at Middelkerke to clear and capture German positions on the Belgian coast. However, the landings never took place because the enemy launched a major pre-emptive assault on 10 July. Although the 32nd Division casualties were light compared with those of the other British divisions, during the tour of duty between 8 and 11 July, the 16th Battalion of the Highland Light Infantry lost one officer and 22 ORs killed, four officers and 112 ORs wounded, and five ORs wounded and missing believed killed.

Thomas, with gunshot wounds to his back and both legs, was among the wounded admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on 12 July<sup>27</sup> when the battalion was relieved from its forward position. Thomas died of his wounds on 13 July 1917<sup>28</sup> and is buried in Grave 814 of the Adinkerke Churchyard Extension in Belgium beneath a cross inscribed with “Thy Will Be Done.”<sup>29</sup>

Thomas was awarded posthumously the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre)<sup>30</sup>.

Thomas’s mother, **Ann**, died in 1930,<sup>31</sup> followed two years later by her eldest daughter, **Elizabeth**.<sup>32</sup> Elizabeth had married Joseph Riley in 1891<sup>33</sup> and had six children.<sup>34</sup>

Thomas’s half-brother **Charles William** Summersides married Sarah Elizabeth Laverick in the fall of 1898.<sup>35</sup> The couple had four children by 1911, two sons and two daughters, and lived near the rest of the family in the community of Byker.<sup>36</sup> Charles enlisted with the Northumberland Fusiliers sometime early in the war years, arriving in France on 20 April 1915, receiving the same war medals<sup>37</sup> as Thomas. It is not clear when Charles’s wife died, but he was living alone at 128 Avondale Road, Newcastle, working as a machinist in 1939.<sup>38</sup> Sadly, it seems that Charles himself died rather suddenly, certainly alone in his Avondale home, as he was last seen alive on 18 June 1955, but his body was not found until 22 June 1955.<sup>39</sup>

Little is known about Thomas’s two half brothers by his father except that the elder, **James**, was still living with his widowed stepmother in 1901, whereas the younger, **William**, was not.<sup>40</sup>

**Mark** Nicholson, Thomas’s immediately elder brother, was also living at home in 1901, helping support the family.<sup>41</sup> By 1911 only Thomas and his two sisters were at home.<sup>42</sup>



**Grave marker for Private Thomas Nicholson**

Source: “Global, Find a Grave Index for Burials at Sea and Other Select Burial Locations, 1300s–Current,” *Ancestry.com*

Thomas's daughter **Frances** remained in the care of Thomas's mother, presumably until Ann's death. Two years later, in 1932, Frances married Joseph Henry Hellens.<sup>43</sup> The couple remained in Newcastle Upon Tyne their entire lives, raising three sons<sup>44,45,46</sup> and a daughter.<sup>47</sup> Joseph died on 29 May 1975<sup>48</sup> and Frances passed away in November 1991.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for James Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sub-registration district: St. Andrew, Enumeration district institution, or vessel: 12, Piece: 4206, Folio: 36

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for William Nicholson

<sup>3</sup> "1881 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Elizabeth Jane Summersides, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 2, Piece: 5060, Folio: 21, page 11

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for Charles W. Summersides

<sup>5</sup> "1891 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Mark Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sub-registration district: St. Andrew, Enumeration district institution, or vessel: 12, Piece: 4206, Folio: 36

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for Thomas Nicholson

<sup>7</sup> "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Rachel Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sub-registration district: Byker, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 16, Piece: 4789, Folio: 194, Page: 50, Household schedule number: 291

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, entry for Ann Nicholson

<sup>9</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for John Nicholson, Death registration place: Tynemouth, Northumberland, United Kingdom, Inferred death place: Northumberland, United Kingdom Volume: 10b, Page: 161

<sup>10</sup> "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Thomas Nicholson, Registration district number: 558, Sub-registration district: Byker, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 12, Piece: 30668

<sup>11</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Thomas Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 184

<sup>12</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Frances Elizabeth Hellens, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Tyne and Wear, Volume: 2, Page: 804

<sup>13</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Frances E Nicholson, Death registration place: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Northumberland, United Kingdom, Inferred death place: Northumberland, United Kingdom, Volume: 10b, Page: 86

<sup>14</sup> "Military Service Act 1916," *Wikipedia* ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org): accessed 7 July 2023)

<sup>15</sup> Based on "War Gratuity Calculator" (<https://wargratitude.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/gratuity-calculator/>: accessed 7 July 2023)

<sup>16</sup> "UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 7 July 2023), entry for Thomas Nicolson [*sic*]

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- <sup>17</sup> "UK, Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914–1919," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 7 July 2023), entry for Thomas Nicolson [*sic*]
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> "Battle of Albert (1916)," *Wikipedia* ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org): accessed 7 July 2023)
- <sup>20</sup> "Infantry Base Depts in France, 1914–1918," *The Long, Long Trail* ([www.longlongtrail.co.uk](http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk): accessed 7 July 2023)
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> "Training to be a Soldier," *British Library* ([www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk): accessed 7 July 2023), article by Jonathan Boff
- <sup>23</sup> "The Battle of the Ancre, 13–18 November 1916," *The Long, Long Trail* ([www.longlongtrail.co.uk](http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk): accessed 7 July 2023)
- <sup>24</sup> "War Office: First World War and Army of Occupation War Diaries," *UK, National Archives* ([www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk): accessed 7 July 2023), entry for Battalion Highland Light Infantry, Reference: WO 95/2403/2. Unless otherwise specified all references to the experiences of the 16th Battalion, Highland Light Infantry, are from this source.
- <sup>25</sup> "Highland Light Infantry," *Wikipedia* ([wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org): accessed 10 July 2023)
- <sup>26</sup> "Operation Hush," *The Long, Long Trail* ([www.longlongtrail.co.uk](http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk): accessed 10 July 2023)
- <sup>27</sup> "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* ([www.bifhsgo.ca](http://www.bifhsgo.ca): accessed 15 March 2023), entry for Nicholson, C [*sic*]
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* ([www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org): 10 July 2023), entry for Nicholson, Thomas, Service No: 28698
- <sup>30</sup> "UK, WWI Service Medal and Award Rolls, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 7 July 2023), entry for Thomas Nicolson
- <sup>31</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 7 July 2023), entry for Ann Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 176
- <sup>32</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 7 July 2023), entry for Jane E [*sic*] Riley, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 207
- <sup>33</sup> "England, Select Marriages, 1538–1973," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Elizabeth Nicholson, FHL film number: 1564922, Reference ID: it329, p. 137, no. 273
- <sup>34</sup> "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Elizabeth Riley, Registration district number: 558, Sub-registration district: Byker, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 09, Piece: 30665
- <sup>35</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 24 July 2023), entry for Charles William S Nicolson [*sic*], Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 322
- <sup>36</sup> "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 24 July 2023), entry for Charles W Summersides, Registration district number: 558, Sub-registration district: Byker, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 11, Piece: 30667
- <sup>37</sup> "UK, WWI Service Medal and Award Rolls, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 24 July 2023), entry for Charles W Summersides
- <sup>38</sup> "1939 Register," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Charles W Summersides, Enumeration district: Gask; Borough: Newcastle-Upon-Tyne; Registration district: 558-5
- <sup>39</sup> "England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1966," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Charles William Summerside [*sic*]
- <sup>40</sup> "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 28 June 2023), entry for Ann Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Sub-registration district: Byker, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 16, Piece: 4789, Folio: 194, Page: 50, Household schedule number: 291

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Ann Nicholson, Registration district number: 558, Sub-registration district: Byker, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 12, Piece: 30668

<sup>43</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Marriage Index, 1916–2005," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Frances E Nicholson, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 31

<sup>44</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Robert J Hellens, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 288

<sup>45</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Brian Hellens, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 236

<sup>46</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Ralph Hellens, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 249

<sup>47</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Birth Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Ann M Hellens, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Northumberland, Volume: 10b, Page: 313

<sup>48</sup> "England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1995," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Joseph Henry Hellens

<sup>49</sup> "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1916–2007," *Ancestry* ([www.ancestry.ca](http://www.ancestry.ca): accessed 17 July 2023), entry for Frances Elizabeth Hellens, Registration district: Newcastle Upon Tyne, Inferred county: Tyne and Wear, Volume: 2, Page: 804