Driver Thomas David Groves, age 23

Thomas was born in Overton, Hampshire but lived in Dog Kennels, Penshurst for the early part of his life, where his father, also Thomas, worked as a carpenter. By 1911, aged 18, he was working as a cowman on a farm in Motts Mill, Withyham, where he lived with the family of William Tasker, a waggoner at the farm, and his wife Eliza Ann. He was said to have been a good cross country runner. He enlisted in the 4th Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery, a regular army unit, in Tunbridge Wells.

The Division arrived in France in October 1914 serving in France and Flanders until December 1915 when it went to Mesopotamia. The Mesopotamia Campaign is often overlooked in the general predilection to concentrate on war in the trenches. Nor has it provided the dramatic backdrop of catastrophe engendered by the Dardanelles campaign.

Like Gallipoli, conditions in Mesopotamia defied description. Extremes of temperature, flooding, and mosquitos and other vermin led to sickness and death. Under these conditions, units fell short of officers and men, and all too often the reinforcements were half-trained and ill-equipped. Medical arrangements were shocking, with wounded men spending up to two weeks on boats before reaching any kind of hospital. Added to these factors, the unexpectedly determined Turkish resistance contributed to a casualty rate for the campaign of almost 100,000 British and Empire troops, many of whom were from India.

A campaign begun simply to secure oil supplies for the Royal Navy soon began to be seen as a less costly way towards defeat of Germany than the painful battering at the Western Front. Germany attempted to encourage a Jihad against the British forces. Around the time of Grove’s death, the campaign was going badly. The British Garrison at Kut was besieged, and surrendered on 29th April, with over 13,000 British troops captured. It remains one of the worst defeats ever suffered by the British Army.

Driver Groves died of wounds aged 23, near Orah Camp in what is now Iraq. His chaplain wrote to his parents

“.. In the midst of all the terrible sadness of the war, one constantly longs to do something to help those at home to whom sadness comes…We laid your son’s body to rest by the side of two of his companions who were wounded by the same shell and died on the same day he did, at the south end of Orah Camp on the right bank of the river Tigris. It was a nice quiet spot, out in the open plain, which is now beautifully green with the spring vegetation…”

He is commemorated in the Amara War Cemetery, in Iraq. Though it is difficult to establish more about his death, his story has an inspiring postscript from a much more recent conflict.

In 2003, The Royal British Legion announced that a lost graveyard for World War I dead had been found in central Iraq. The cemetery at Al Amara was discovered by the banks of the Tigris river by the Royal Irish Regiment. The site had been protected by its Iraqi keeper, Hassan Hatif Moson, a 40-year-old father of seven, in spite of death threats from Baath officials. But Mr Hassan kept the memorial polished, saved the masonry from looters and cut the grass. He worked without pay since the last Gulf war and kept all the documents relating to the graveyard since he took the keeper's job in 1977.

In his words

“The old regime, they threatened my life and my job but I never gave up. I could not permit the graveyard to be ruined - local people have tried to break in here to drink late at night and also to steal the carvings. I always believed that one day the British would return."