

Frederick Morris

Private

22531

South Wales Borderers

11th Battalion (2nd Gwent)



Death is an inevitability of war and any loss is a tragedy. An individual life is cut short, but for those who remain to mourn, immense suffering is endured. Such loss is even keener when the soldier in question is married, and what is more heart rending, has children. Frederick Morris was one such soldier whose death left a young family devastated back home in Britain. Fred had married a Leominster girl, Ruby Davis, in early 1908 and this happy event was quickly followed by the birth of two children, Reginald in late 1908 and Cecil in 1911. Today, we can only imagine the effect Fred's loss would have had on this young family but it also demonstrates that not only young, single men died.

Frederick Morris was born in Kington in 1884, the fourth child of William and Jane Morris. William was a carpenter and sometime assurance agent from Llandegley in Radnorshire and in 1871 married Jane Jones from Glasbury, near Hay-on-Wye. A couple of years later they had their first child William and in 1878 Stanley followed. In 1880 their first daughter, Elizabeth, arrived and in 1884, the focus of this piece, Fred, was born in Kington. Fred's birth was eventually followed by two younger sisters, Elizabeth May born in Kington in 1889 and Annie in 1894, also born in Kington. The 1901 census

informs us that the family were living at the Queens Head Inn, 51 Bridge Street, Kington and William was recorded as being an insurance agent. Fred was duly dispatched to Kington Boys School to be educated but by 1901 appears to have left school and was working in the town as a hairdresser with his older brother William.

Tragedy hit the family in 1903 when Fred's father William died, at a relatively young age, and from the 1911 census we discover that family circumstances had changed dramatically. Following the death of her husband Jane had moved her family to Rhiwderin, a small town on the outskirts of Newport, South Wales. Living at No. 2 Tredegar Street where she had established a small grocery business. The 1911 census return provides a wealth of useful genealogical information. Married women were required to declare how long they had been married, how many children they had delivered and how many of those survived in 1911. Rather shockingly Jane revealed that she had delivered thirteen children but sadly only four survived. The return informs that three of her surviving children are living with her in Tredegar Street. William, her oldest son, is married with one child and is continuing his profession as a hairdresser. The two daughters, Elizabeth May and Annie are helping their mother in her grocery business. Fred, who had settled down and married Ruby, was living in the same building but in a separate two room apartment, with them is Reginald their first born. Fred is continuing his profession as a hairdresser and proudly records his employment as a (Master) hairdresser. Fred plied his trade in a barber's shop in Wattsville, a small village up the valley from where he lived. No other children are recorded as living at Tredegar Street which perhaps gives credence to Jane's tragic statement of her infant losses. A second child Cecil, is born to Fred and Ruby in 1911 and it appears this prompts Fred to move from the small two room apartment at Tredegar Street and to re-establish his family at 24 St. Woolos Road in Newport, just a mile or so from his mother's home.

Regrettably, few of Fred's service records survive but by consulting those which do and his regimental diary we are able to plot his military career and the events leading up to his death. It is believed Fred, at the age of 30, enlisted in Newport in 1915 joining one of his local regiments, the South Wales Borderers, 11th (Service) Battalion (2nd Gwent), as Private 22531 Morris. The battalion had been established in Brecon, at the instruction of the Welsh National Executive Committee, on 5th December 1914. They were quickly moved to Colwyn Bay for training and were placed under the command of the 130th Brigade, 43rd Division. In April 1915 the Brigade was reformed becoming the 115th Brigade, 38th Welsh Division and moved to Hursley Park on the outskirts of Winchester in July of the same year. It is unclear when Fred joined the battalion but his Medal Index Card provides the information that he first entered theatre, France, on the 4th December 1915, landing with his battalion at La Havre. We must now turn to the battalion war diary to discover what happened to Fred and his chums during the next fifteen months or so.

The 11th Battalion the South Wales Borderers first entered trenches at Richebourg, just west of Neuve Chapelle, on the 28th December. Here they were taken under the wings of experienced battalions and taught the ways of trench warfare. Battalion war diaries contain a wealth of historical information about day to day activities. Initially the 11th battalion diary records all wounded and soldiers killed, by name. This is most unusual

since invariably only officer's names were recorded and all others were referred to as 'Other Ranks'. However, as the months passed and more and more casualties were incurred, so this practice ceased. During 1916 they worked closely with their brother battalion the 10th South Wales Borderers, relieving each other in the trenches regularly. They remained in the Neuve Chapelle area until the end of July 1916 when they were entrained, away from the front lines, to St. Omer for some well-earned rest. In mid-August they returned to the trenches, this time to the north of Ypres on the west bank of the Ypres Canal. Christmas 1916 was fortunately spent out of trench rotation and hence the opportunity was taken to indulge, push the boat out, and to engage in the best Christmas possible under the circumstances. Turkeys were sent from Division, supplemented by Geese and legs of pork, potatoes and green vegetables. The diary reveals that the meal was 'excellent and enjoyed by all'. Christmas day passed quietly with everyone thankful they were not in the trenches. On Boxing Day, the battalion marched into St. Omer where they took advantage of the hot baths located there.

The end of 1916 until the 21st January 1917 was spent based at Tatinghem to the west of St. Omer. Here they undertook training and provided general fatigue parties. On the 22nd January they started moving toward the front again, heading for Poperinge and on the 28th were back in the trenches at Brininghe Chateau. Again positioned on the western side of the Ypres Canal, north of Ypres, the diary provides a graphic illustration of just how close the protagonists trenches were to each other at that point in the line, no more than 50 yards apart. Weather conditions were extreme and the canal had frozen solid. On the 2nd February they were relieved and retire to a safer position some way behind the front line at Rousell Farm on the outskirts of the small village of Boezinge. Here it was quieter but, as they were to discover later, still within range of enemy heavy artillery. From here the battalion provided fatigue parties, their primary occupation being to build a new railway supply line. And when they were not laying tracks they were training, practicing their bayonetting skills and Lewis Gun procedures. On the 10th February they relieved the 16th Welsh (Cardiff City) Battalion in the line and had a pleasant, quiet night with the snow thawing around them. A couple of quiet days followed but, for no discernible reason, on the evening of the 12th the Germans started bombing the frozen canal. This confused the battalion and they never really worked out why the enemy would do such a bizarre thing, but a note suggests 'the enemy appeared very nervous'. One might hazard a guess suggest this was in fact ranging practice, for the following day those same guns were turned onto the British trenches with surprising and ferocious accuracy.

War at the front was not only fought in trenches. Information within the diary is very revealing, with some notable events relieving the monotony and anxiety of trench life. On the 14th February the men witnessed an aerial battle between five German and two British aeroplanes. The British pilots came off worse with one of them being shot down behind the British line. We are informed the pilot lost his life. That evening the battalion were relieved again and retired to their respite centre at Rousell Farm. The following day, the 15th, the return aerial match occurred and on that occasion the British came out on top with one German pilot losing his life. That evening the farm came under heavy and accurate enemy fire from their 5.9" artillery. Shelter at the farm was limited and one company of the battalion took the full force of the bombardment. Hit by a full

salvo of enemy fire they sustained many casualties, four killed and eighteen wounded, five of whom subsequently died. Fred Morris was one of those mortally wounded on the 15th February at a small farm outside Boezinge.

I now turn to a report in the 31st March edition of the Kington Times which informs the town of Fred's loss. Fred was evacuated to a Casualty Clearing Station and it was here that he lost his fight for life on the **18th February 1917**. During the bombardment he was wounded in the arms and buttocks and in a letter sent to Ruby from his Captain we learn of his bravery and self-sacrifice even when in severe pain and discomfort. An additional letter from the regimental Chaplain details the last days of Fred. His injuries were severe and he suffered from shock and blood loss. One of his arms was amputated in the hope that his life might be saved. The operation was a success but in spite of the attentive nature of the medical staff and Fred's own high spirits he gradually became weaker and eventually lost the fight. The Chaplain closes by assuring Ruby that her husband was well cared for and buried respectfully in a nearby cemetery. Ruby also received a letter from the RAMC Captain who cared for Fred. In it he writes, 'I had a lot of wounded that night but your husband was exceedingly good. He never murmured except to say, "Dress the others first, I can stick it"'.



Mendinghem Military Cemetery, Belgium

Fred is buried in Mendinghem Military Cemetery, grave reference II.A.15. The cemetery is located five miles north of Poperinge on the road to Oost Cappel in Belgium. Even in pain, suffering and death there can be humour and military men will find humour wherever they can. Mendinghem, Dozinghem and Bandaghem, were popular names given by the troops to groups of Casualty Clearing Stations in the Ypres area. The Casualty clearing station was there to deal with injuries and pass the casualties on to field hospitals. However, when men died they were interred close to the Casualty Clearing Station and this was Fred's fate. Fred's contribution to the war was considerable and for his sacrifice his country awarded him the Victory and British War medals and the 1915 Star.

Fred is remembered in his birthplace of Kington and also in Mendinghem cemetery in Belgium but he is also remembered on a splendid memorial at the sight of the old Lysaght's (Orb) Steelworks in Newport. Lysaght's was a family run steelworks employing 3500 men and women during the war period. 42 steel mills produced steel for trench plates, helmets and other military hardware including vast quantities of cartridge brass. It would appear that Fred was employed within the steelworks for a time, quite possibly as a hairdresser, but we will never know for sure. In the mid-20th

century the Lysaght family sold the company which became Orb Electrical Steels. In 2009 this company sold part of the old steelworks site for housing development which necessitated the memorial being relocated, brick by brick. In May 2009, at a formal rededication ceremony, the memorial was unveiled in its new location close to the new steel works, ensuring Fred's name and the other 120 men who lost their lives during World War One, will never be forgotten.



Lysaght (Orb) Steelworks Memorial, Newport



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