

Private Ronald Thomas John Frayne 2416, 1st/6th Battalion Devonshire Regiment

Ronald Thomas John Frayne was the fifth of seven children of John and Martha Frayne of 113 Pilton Street and the youngest of four brothers. He was born in Pilton in 1894. Before volunteering into the army at the outbreak of war in 1914 he had been an apprentice engineer at his father's workplace, Shapland & Petters' Raleigh Cabinet Works, to learn cabinet making. He was known in Barnstaple for his athleticism and football skills. He was a keen footballer and played for Derby United for several seasons. All but the youngest of his siblings served in one way or another.

He joined the 6th Devons in 1914 and, shortly thereafter, the battalion was sent to India. Apparently the Indian Army was keen to get into action in France but they needed some British troops to release them from garrison duties in India. Two Indian divisions went to France in return for the battalion of Devons being sent to India. Ronald was trained as an armourer while in India. Later the battalion was sent to Basra in Mesopotamia as a part of a scratch force raised in India. This was to provide a diversionary attack on the southern flank of the Turks in the south of Iraq, while Wavell (and Lawrence of Arabia) directly assaulted the Turks through Palestine.

An account of the action states that the Devons were sent to attack a hilltop fort held by the Turks on 8th March 1916. The battle seems to have been an unmitigated disaster and the commanding general was sent home afterwards in disgrace. The 6th Devons and the Indians attacked across a flat, featureless dried mud plain against dug in Turkish troops armed with machine guns. The result was entirely predictable! Apparently the British officer commanding had particularly racist views about the Indian troops and thought this was about all they were worth! The poor old Devons got sent in as part of the larger Indian force. Ronald did not survive this act of hubris and was only 21 when he died.

A fellow soldier wrote to the family that Ronald died instantly from a head wound, suffering no pain, shot as his regiment advanced on the city. *"He was liked by all who knew him and you can be proud he died fighting for his country,"* according to his friend. A report in the North Devon Journal on those killed in action described Ronald as a first-class

armourer and shot. A few days before he was killed he had met up with one brother, Harold Frayne, who had just arrived with the Devons in the Es Sinn theatre of war. He had told his parents in a cheerful letter of a '*coming great fight.*'

Ronald's friends and family held a memorial service for him in April 1916 writing:

*"No mother's care did him attend
Nor o'er him did a father bend
No sister by to shed a tear
No brother near, his last words to hear
Sleep on, dear one, in a foreign grave
Your life for your country you nobly gave;
We do not know what pain you bore
We did not see you die;
Distance made the blow fall harder
As we could not say goodbye"*

There was a British WW1 war memorial in Basra on which Ronald is listed. This was moved as one of the last acts of Saddam Hussein as President of Iraq so that it is now re-erected out in the desert well away from Basra. It put the memorial away from the likely destruction it would have attracted in Basra after the First Gulf War. Ronald is also memorialised on the brass plaque in Pilton Church, the Devons' memorial in Barnstaple Guildhall and further on his parents' grave in Barnstaple Cemetery. He is also remembered on a family stone in Pilton Churchyard (left). After the war they received his service medals, posthumously, the Victory and War Medals, which were nicknamed "Mutt" and "Jeff" as explained elsewhere on The Pilton Story.

Many thanks for the contribution of Jon Frayne, Ronald's second cousin, the North Devon Journal and the comprehensive research of Brian Barrow and his many helpers for his story.