

Private Frank Norman 10003 **1st Battalion, Devonshire Regiment**



Frank Norman was born in Barnstaple in 1894 to William and Susanna Norman and lived at 47, Bradiford. In this family photograph from about 1904, he is on the right with his parents and siblings. Prior to enlisting with the Devonshire Regiment, just before the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914, Frank, who was single, was employed as a turner at the Radford Bros Turning Mill in Bradiford.

The 1st Battalion of the Devonshire Regiment (known as the 1st Devons), a regular army unit, had been stationed in Jersey since 1911. The Battalion mobilised and landed at Le Havre on 21st August 1914, as part of the British Expeditionary Force, where they were reinforced by nearly 500 reservists from Exeter. Having enlisted at the end of July 1914, Frank underwent four months training in Exeter and then left England for the Front on the 27th November in a party of 100 men. They also landed at Le Havre and were immediately sent to Rouen, where there was a large base, and joined their regiment which had just returned from the firing line for a few days rest.

In the meantime, in September 1914 during their first spell in the line, the 1st Devons had suffered 100 casualties from shelling. The battalion served on the Western Front throughout the war, seeing action first during the Battle of La Bassée in October 1914, where they helped in the capture of Givenchy Ridge. This was followed by the First Battle of Ypres, in October and November, where the battalion, in common with most of the rest of the British Regular Army, sustained very heavy casualties. From November 1914, when Frank joined the Battalion, they occupied Messines Ridge in rain and sleet, often knee- or waist-deep in mud and icy water.

In the New Year 1915, when Frank was spending a few days at home on sick leave having got frost bitten in the trenches, his story of how Christmas 1914 had been spent in the trenches was reported in the North Devon Journal on 4th February 2015 under the headline 'Barumite's Experience at the Front'. On Christmas Eve the Devons were ordered back into the trenches with the Germans only 70 yards from the British. Under fire as he reached the trench, he replied with a few rounds and then retired for the night in the trenches. On Christmas morning the ground was covered in snow and the country around was very picturesque. They were about to fire on the Germans when one of their officers called out "You no fire today, we no

fire today". When the English officers agreed, the two sides emerged from their trenches, sang carols, exchanged cigarettes and cigars and talked and walked about all day. At dusk they were ordered back to their trenches and the truce ended. The full story of the day and Frank Norman's return home with frostbite can be found in the archives of the North Devon Journal.

On 21st April 1915 the 1st Battalion occupied Hill 60 south of Ypres, which had been captured on 17th April. Counter-attacks and heavy shelling cost them more than 200 casualties. On 31st July 1915 they moved to the Somme although when the Somme offensive began on 1st July 1916, the Devons were actually at Arras. They returned to the Somme to consolidate the line around Longueval and, in that exchange, shellfire and German counter-attacks cost them 265 casualties.

In September 1916, the 1st Battalion was part of the 95th Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division of the British Army fighting in the Battle of the Somme which lasted from July until November 1916. From 3rd – 6th September, the troops were involved in two successful advances during the Battle of Guillemont, specifically the attack and capture of Leuze Wood, north of the village of Ginchy. British attacks on Leuze Wood began on 3rd September when the village was captured, before being forced back by a German counter-attack. Further attacks on Leuze Wood and attempts to re-take Ginchy on 4th and 5th September were also defeated by German counter-attacks. Frank Norman is thought to have been wounded on 3rd September, one of the 376 casualties suffered by the 1st Devons, and was being evacuated from France by hospital ship when he died of his wounds on 5th September 1916 age 22 years. As a result, he was buried at sea and has no grave.

He is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial in the Somme (Pier and Face 1 C). He is also commemorated in St Mary's Church, Pilton and on the war memorial in Rock Park, Barnstaple. Frank was posthumously awarded the British War Medal and his family received the Memorial Death Plaque.

In September 1917, his family posted a commemoration in the North Devon Journal:

*"In fond and loving memory of my darling son and
loved brother, Pte Frank Norman (1st Devons), killed in
action in France on September 5 1916.*

*He gave his life for home, and King, and country;
One of the dearest, one of the best.
Missed by those who loved him best.
From his loving mother, brothers and sisters.
Bradiford, Barnstaple.*

Many thanks are due to John Norman, Frank's great-nephew, to Brian Barrow, for his tremendous work in collecting information on all the men of Pilton who died in the Great War, and to the many postings online relating to World War I, the Battles of the Somme and the 1st Devons.