

Private 58015, Fred Skuse



Fred was born to Cornelius and Elizabeth (Crook) Skuse on 24th January 1884 in Beanacre, Wiltshire, and christened on 17th April 1884 at St Michael's church, Melksham (the church in Beanacre not being completed until 1886).

In the Beanacre census of 1891, Frederick is recorded as being 7 years old, living with his parents and 6 siblings. He is a scholar. By 1901, Alfred is a 17 year old flour mill worker, still living in Beanacre with his parents and 3 siblings. In 1911, he is still in Beanacre, with his parents, but is the only child still at home, they share the property with Harry Crook, boarder. Fred is a farm labourer.

Fred marries Emily Alice Hicks on May 9th 1914, in Melksham. Their 1st child, Dorothy Kate is born 19th August 1914, in Melksham, and their 2nd child, Constance Kate was born 28th May 1917 in Melksham. (Fred never knew his 2nd daughter).

He was a foundry labourer at the time of his marriage until he enlists in Melksham to the Devonshire Regiment, 9th Infantry Labour Battalion.

There is a lot of information about the regiment during the war:

The Devonshire Regiment was officially formed in 1881 when the 11th (North Devon) Regiment of Foot and the Devon Militia were merged. However it can trace its history back nearly 200 years prior to this.'

I am unable to find anything about the 9th Infantry Labour Company Fred was attached to even though the Labour Divisions were an important part of the war effort, they appear to get much less credit. As Fred was about 34 when he enlisted, he was probably classed as unfit for front line fighting and assigned to the Labour Company for this reason.

Although the army in France and Flanders was able to use some railways, steam engines and tracked vehicles for haulage, the immense effort of building and maintaining the huge network of roads, railways, canals, buildings, camps, stores, dumps, telegraph and telephone systems, etc, and also for moving stores, relied on horse, mule and human.

In August 1914 there was no formed body of troops specifically designed for these tasks. In the infantry, manual work near the front lines was carried out by the Pioneer Battalions which were added to each Division. Some infantry regiments formed labour companies and works battalions for work on the lines of communication and at home, but the organisation of manpower was haphazard until the formation of the Labour Corps.

The labour units expanded hugely and became increasingly well-organised. However, despite adding large numbers of men from India, Egypt, China and elsewhere, there was never enough manpower to do all the labouring work required. The total number of men engaged on work in France and Flanders alone approximated 700,000 at the end of the war, and this was in the labour units alone. In many cases the men of the infantry, artillery and other arms were forced to give up time to hard effort when perhaps training or rest might have been a more effective option. According to the Official History: "although some labour units were raised and eventually labourers from various parts of the Empire and China were brought to France, the numbers were never at any period sufficient for the demands of a great army operating in a friendly country".

The regiment Fred was in has some information about their whereabouts during World War 1:

The Regiment raised a total of 25 battalions and fought on the Western Front, in Italy at the battles of the Piave and Vittorio Veneto, in Macedonia, Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. It was awarded 65 battle honours and two Victoria Crosses during the course of the war.

Fred died in the 7th Canadian General Hospital, Etaples, France, on 30th March 1917.

The No. 7 Canadian General Hospital was originally formed as No. 5 Stationary Hospital. It was first established as a project of Queen's Faculty of Medicine, Kingston, Canada. The staff of the hospital consisted of ten men – eight medical officers, a Dental Surgeon and a Quarter-Master. Six of these officers were members of Queen's Faculty of Medicine. Ninety-four men and thirty-five nursing sisters, was recruited in just over two weeks to man a 200 bed hospital. The Unit left Montreal by sea on the 6th of May 1915 and ten days later debarked at Plymouth Harbour, England to establish a 400 bed hospital at St. Martin's Plain in England.

In July the unit, along with forty-five additional staff who had volunteered from Kingston, was ordered to establish a 400 bed hospital at Cairo. In January 1916, the unit became No. 7 Canadian General Hospital with an increase to 1,040 beds. Between 26th August 1915 and 23rd March 1916, 4,140 patients were treated with only 28 deaths occurring. After the end of the Gallipoli campaign, having treated some 10,000 patients at the Cairo hospital, on the 10th of April 1916, the unit set sail for Etaples, France to set up a tent hospital. The tented hospital proved inadequate during the harsh winter and in November 1916, moved to a more permanent site with 35 wooden huts. By March 1917 the number of beds had increased to 2,290, a number which was maintained until the end of hostilities.

From the information I have found, Fred spent his time in Etaples, in France, he certainly found himself being treated in the hospital there.

Étaples is a very old fishing town and port, which lies at the mouth of the River Canche in the region of Pas de Calais in Picardy. The Étaples Army Base Camp, the largest of its kind ever established overseas by the British, was built along the railway adjacent to the town. It was served by a network of railways, canals, and roads connecting the camp to the southern and eastern fields of battle in France and to ships carrying troops, supplies, guns, equipment, and thousands of men and women across the English Channel. It was a base for British, Canadian, Scottish and Australian forces.

The camp was a training base, a depot for supplies, a detention centre for prisoners, and a centre for the treatment of the sick and wounded, with almost twenty general hospitals. At its peak, the camp housed over 100,000 people; altogether, its hospitals could treat 22,000 patients. With its vast conglomeration of the wounded, of prisoners, of soldiers training for battle, and of those simply waiting to return to the front, Étaples could appear a dark place. Wilfred Owen [Collected Letters. Oxford University Press] described it as,

A vast, dreadful encampment. It seemed neither France nor England, but a kind of paddock where the beasts are kept a few days before the shambles ... Chiefly I thought of the very strange look on all the faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England; nor can it be seen in any battle, but only in Étaples. It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's

Excerpts from [Elsie Tranter](#), *In all those lines*

02.03.1917 The streets are very narrow, indeed in one part so narrow that you could touch the walls on either side from the car. We passed through the village, along past some farms, under a railway bridge, past the motor ambulance depot (which, we are told, is called 'Thumbs Up Corner') to the Land of Hospitals. Here before us was a stretch of six kilometres of hospitals. This district, Camiers and Etaples, takes 6 500 patients. This hospital, No. 26, takes 2 600. The nursing staff, including VADs and special military probationers, number eighty-five. It is a regular city of huts and tents. Hospitals on one side of the road, officers' and sisters' quarters on the other...

26.03.1917 We have large training camps round us here for Australian, New Zealand, English and Scotch troops. Thousands of men pass by every day. Day after day we say 'Goodbye and good luck' to lads with their full kit on, on their way to that well known place 'up the line'. There is a continual tramp, tramp all day long. Each morning just after

breakfast, we see hundreds of soldiers passing on their way to the 'Bull Ring' for drill. They are usually headed by the Australian band...

The village of Etaples is filthy dirty-such narrow, pokey little streets and-no decent drainage-so if you take two sniffs when going through 'Paradise Alley', you are indeed proving yourself a glutton. The housewives do not seem to be very tidy, in fact, they are not a bit fussy and when walking on the footpaths you have to dodge basins of rubbish and pails of water all the time for they just open their front doors and fling the rubbish out into the street.

Most of the shops are built facing onto a square. Just near the square is an old stone building where Napoleon once stayed. It is now used as a wine and spirit store. On Tuesday and Friday mornings there is a street market where you can purchase anything you require, from a needle to an anchor. Barrows and stalls with fruit, fish, vegetables and clothing of all description. Pigeons and rabbits killed while you wait...

Fred died from Purulent Bronchitis, at the time of his stay in hospital, there was a pandemic of respiratory infection.

Étaples was, from a later British scientific viewpoint, at [the centre of the 1918 flu pandemic](#). The British virologist, John Oxford, of St Bartholomew's Hospital and the Royal London Hospital, and other researchers, have suggested that a principal British troop staging camp in Étaples was at the centre of the 1918 flu pandemic or at least home to a significant precursor virus to it. There was a mysterious respiratory infection at the military base during the winter of 1915-16.

[Étaples](#) – Wikipedia, accessed 24 June 2011

Undoubtedly, overcrowded conditions on the western front and in the camp, with most of the 100,000 soldiers being housed in tents or temporary wooden barracks, were ideal for spread of a respiratory virus. At this time, ambulance trains were arriving day and night from the Somme battlefield. The camp also had an extensive piggery whilst in nearby villages soldiers could purchase live geese, chickens and ducks. Therefore, the requisite conditions for cross species transfer of avian influenza A virus existed at the camp alongside large numbers of young soldiers in overcrowded conditions and many with a compromised respiratory system after gas attacks. In total, two million soldiers camped in this small region of Northern France, and six million soldiers occupied stretches of the 10 mile wide trench system from the English Channel to Switzerland.

[A hypothesis: the conjunction of soldiers, gas, pigs, ducks, geese and horses in Northern France during the Great War provided the conditions for the emergence of the "Spanish" influenza.](#)

Fred is buried in Etaples Military Cemetery in France, ref XX11. D 13A.

There is a memorial to him in St. Barnabas Church, Beanacre, and his name is listed on the war memorial in Canon Square, Melksham.



He was awarded 2 medals, one of which I have. The Victory Medal (pictured) and the British War Medal.



Fred's war pension records state that he was based in Exeter barracks in July 1917, and Emily was given £2, 3s 10d in October 1917 and another £3 in November.

If it wasn't for Fred joining the war effort, I would never have known all the people I have met since researching his life. Emily later married Percy Cleverley, they lived in Melksham and had several children, I am now in contact with many of the Cleverley family. Several years ago, whilst walking my son to primary school, we would say hello to a couple every day, I never spoke more than this to them, but it was with great sadness that I later discovered that the lady was actually Dorothy Skuse, Fred's eldest daughter, I wish I had started my family tree sooner and could have found out what she knew.

R.I.P. Fred Skuse



Etaples 1919 (see No. 7 hospital)

Source References:

[Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#)
[The Long, Long Trail](#)
[The Keep Military Museum](#)
[War Time Memories Project](#)