

THE BLEASDALE FALLEN OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

LANCE CORPORAL
WILLIAM WILLS

1885 - 1917

3RD BATTALION CANADIAN PIONEERS

ARMY NUMBER 443340



(1ST WORLD WAR REGIMENTAL BADGE OF THE CANADIAN PIONEER CORPS)

DIED OF WOUNDS ON 20TH JANUARY 1917



REMEMBERED WITH HONOUR

LANCE CORPORAL WILLIAM WILLS 1885 - 1917
3rd Battalion Canadian Pioneers
Army Number 443340

William Wills was born in 1885, the son of James and Isabella Wills who were farmers. As a very young child he moved with his parents to Hazlehurst Farm, Bleasdale, where he grew up. After the death of his widowed mother in 1912, he emigrated to Canada but returned to Europe in early 1916 as a member of the 3rd Canadian Pioneers to fight in France. After being wounded by a shell in the following September, he died in a Leeds hospital on 20th January 1917 and was buried in Bleasdale Churchyard. He was 31 years old.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

William Wills was born on 10th October 1885 at Dalton in Furness, the youngest but one of James' and Isabella's seven children. James was a farmer, as was his father. William's parents came from the Appleby and Orton areas of Westmorland but in the early 1880's they moved to a farm at Dalton-in-Furness and then some ten years later to Hazlehurst Farm, Bleasdale where they remained until they died, James in 1905 aged 61 and Isabella in 1912 aged 66..



Hazlehurst Farm, Bleasdale

The Wills family made their mark on Bleasdale society. James Wills became a church warden and a manager of Bleasdale School. After his death in 1905, William's mother ran the farm at Hazlehurst with four of her children, Robert, Mary and Thomas (Tom) and William. Unusually, the girls also made a contribution outside the farm. Their older daughter Jane was a monitor at Bleasdale School for a year in 1895. (Tom tried to follow in her footsteps, but soon gave it up for a farming career.) The youngest daughter, Isabella, however became a 'supplementary school teacher' in 1905 at the School and remained there for 10 years until her marriage in 1915. The younger generation also joined in Parish activities. Both Tom and Isabella sang and acted in a fundraising concert held at the School in 1915. Their oldest son, James married and moved away to farm at Woodacre, Goosnargh. His wife, Ellen Barron was the daughter of another Bleasdale farmer and school manager two of whose daughters became teachers.

UPBRINGING AND WORKING LIFE

William is not mentioned in the Bleasdale School Logbook but undoubtedly he was a pupil there. After leaving school he joined his family on the farm, helping to keep it going after the death of his father. Tragedy struck again in 1912, when his mother died, and the following year he left for a new life in Canada. Although he may not have had the academic leanings of his sisters, he too was a young man of character, choosing to emigrate on his own, and being promoted to lance corporal during the War.

GOING TO CANADA AND ENLISTMENT

The evidence suggests he sailed on the S.S. Tunisian for Quebec and Montreal on 9th July 1913. He described himself as a labourer and travelled third class along with several hundred other emigrants. Once in Canada he must have made his way to British Columbia on the west coast as it was there that he enlisted just over two years later in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in August, 1915. He worked as a 'bridgeman' before he joined up – perhaps he was involved in the construction or maintenance of a bridge?

ARMY CAREER; THE SOMME OFFENSIVE, 1916

Karen Macaulay writes:

'He enlisted into the army on 23rd August 1915 at Vernon Camp at the age of 30. His medical records tell us that he was 5ft 6 inches tall, had a 39 inch chest, dark complexion, grey eyes and dark hair. His pre-war occupation was a 'bridgeman'.

'The 3rd Canadian Pioneers had arrived in Boulogne on 9th March 1916 and spent the next few months in the Ypres Sector. On 1st September the battalion was in billets in Poperinghe, near Ypres where they underwent a few days training and provided daily working parties to construct machine gun emplacements. Following this the battalion was on the move by bus, train and marching, and on 14th September they arrived at Usna Hill, about ¾ mile from Albert on the Somme. Most of this day was spent digging in and cleaning out the dugouts and a party of 250 men was sent to Aveluy railway sidings at midnight to unload pit props.

'As Pioneers, the battalion undertook a variety of tasks: repairing roads, building dugouts, laying cables (for communications) digging trenches, etc. On 17th September they were involved in digging out a tank which had become stuck in a shell hole. During September they were also employed in carrying out the wounded from the attacks going on near Courcelette and Schwaben Redoubt. Between 15th and the end of September 1916 they were carrying out these tasks in the Usna Hill area. Each day the battalion sustained casualties; 15th September – 4 killed, 34 wounded, 16th Sept – 3 wounded, 17th Sept – 1 killed, 13 wounded, 4 missing, 18th /19th Sept – after heavy shell fire 8 were wounded, 19th /20th Sept – heavy shelling again causing 10 wounded, 21st /22nd Sept – 6 wounded, 22nd /23rd Sept – 1 killed, 14 wounded, a couple of days without casualties then 27th /28th September, 3 killed, 15 wounded.

'I believe that at some time during this time at Usna Hill William Wills received the injury which would eventually claim his life.'

HOSPITAL AND DEATH

William was hit by a shell and received serious injuries. He eventually arrived at the 2nd Northern General Hospital in Leeds but the journey there would not have been an easy one.

We have no information about William, but the story of another Canadian Pioneer who had been wounded the previous March gives us an idea of the complexity of caring for casualties. Private Joseph Delisle of the 3rd Canadian Pioneers was wounded on 18th March 1916. He was taken to No. 1 Canadian Clearing Station by a Canadian Field Ambulance and then transferred the next day to a Canadian Stationary Hospital where an operation was

performed. Nine days later he was on his way to England on a hospital ship. He was admitted first to a hospital in London, then moved to Harrogate and finally to the same hospital in Leeds that William would be sent to a few months later. Eventually he was repatriated back to Canada. William's journey may have been different. No two casualties would have had the same experience, and in the middle of the Somme offensive the situation could have become more, rather than less, complicated.

Sadly, William was not as fortunate as Joseph. At Leeds, the doctors decided he must lose one of his legs. In an age without antibiotics the outcome was often fatal. William died on 20th January, 1917.

AFTERMATH OF WILLIAM'S DEATH

His body was sent home to Bleasdale immediately, presumably by train to Garstang/Catterall Station, and then to Bleasdale by road. The Kenlis Arms Hotel may have provided a vehicle. The funeral was on Wednesday, 24th January 1917, conducted by the Vicar, Rev. J.H.F. Parker who would have known William and who had buried both his parents, in 1905 and 1912 respectively. A Commonwealth War Gravestone marks his grave in the Churchyard.

William is commemorated on the Bleasdale War Memorial and in the Memorial Chamber of the Peace Tower in Ottawa, Canada.

References:

The Preston Guardian 27th January 1917 (microfilm, Community History Library, Harris Library, Preston).

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For other references etc., see the Acknowledgement Page.