

In August 1915 Lance Corporal Stanley Crook was killed on the Western Front, just five months after his younger brother Clarence had died in similar circumstances. In remembering him today we should also reflect on the double tragedy that affected his family that year. To lose two fine young sons in such short order must have been unbearable.

We know little of Stanley's early life

He was born in 1895 to James and Alma.

His mother died in 1908, and we know that Stanley went to live with his grandparents at No 8 Badlake Hill

He attended the Dawlish Boys School, and his name is recorded in the Roll of Honour that now can be found at Dawlish Community College

After school, he worked as a bricklayer's labourer. This may have been with his father James, who is recorded on census records as being a Bricklayer.

Stanley joined the army before the outbreak of war. This may have been in the usual manner of a young man from a small Devon town seeking to widen his horizons; or it may be that the press speculation of an imminent European conflict caused him to sign up so as not to miss what was expected to be a short and sharp conflict.

We know that his regiment travelled from Jersey to Le Havre and was involved in the early conflict, so much so that by the end of August 1914 we have the first report that he was wounded at the Battle of Mons.

The Dawlish Gazette is the source of this information. It reports that young Private Crook (As he was then) had written home to his worried grandfather with reassuring news that the wound was healing. The letter paints a graphic account of the newly landed British Army being over- run by a considerably larger German force.

Stanley was shot in the ankle but fought on, initially unaware of the seriousness of his injury due to the adrenalin of battle. He later collapsed unconscious and awoke to find his body stripped of much of its uniform. Clearly he gave the appearance of being dead and had been subjected to the scavenging that is part of the desperation of battle.

The wounded Private Crook was allowed home to convalesce, and we can only imagine how emotional an experience that must have been for his family. To see him limp home, wounded but safe but to know that this was a temporary reprieve before he returned to the Front.

In time, Private Crook was promoted Lance Corporal, a sign that he was well regarded by his officers and trusted to help organise the men. The Devonshire regiment became involved in heavy physical labour at the Front. As the engineers dug mines towards the enemy trenches and laid explosives, it was the duty of the infantry to remove the spoil in heavy bags to the rear.

This must have been incredibly physical work, carried out in lousy conditions and wearing heavy uniform. The German Army ever present and seeking to pick off tommies whenever possible.

The exact circumstances of Stanley Crook's death at Maricourt 100 years ago today are not recorded, save that he was "Killed in Action" and his body rests in the Commonwealth War Cemetary at Cerisy-Gailly with 259 of his comrades. His family was extended one final kindness when the news of his death was communicated not through the usual blunt War Office telegram but rather, as the Gazette tells us, via a personal letter from one of his chums breaking the sad news.

Reflecting on the death of Lance Corporal Stanley Crook, two thoughts occur. His family paid a heavy price in the service of their country. Two brothers were killed within months of each other, and before the conflict ended in 1918 their Uncle Edward Crook had also been killed. No family faced with the loss of three relatives in war could ever be the same again.

And it is clear to me that Lance Corporal Stanley Crook displayed great bravery, not just in battle but also on the day that he lifted his kit bag at the end of his convalescence and walked through the town to catch his train back to the Front. Any initial naivety about the reality of war had been removed by his own experience of trauma. His flesh had been damaged by war, he had experienced pain and the potential of death. Despite this he, like so many other fine young men, returned to duty. It is surely fitting that we remember him today.