

John Frank WILLS

Born Dawlish Q1 1885,

died, France, 24 October 1914, aged 29

Private, Service no. 7380

Devonshire Regiment, 1st Battalion

John F Wills was born to Joseph (1847 – 1910) and Rebecca Sarah Wills (nee Lucas)(1854 – 1932). They had married in the October- December quarter of 1878.

Joseph was a Farm Labourer and Sarah a Laundress in 1891 census, with five children, three of school age, living in Ashcombe Road, Dawlish.

By 1901 census they had moved to 25 Old Town Street and had six children.

Joseph was a driver of a Milk Dray, **John F**, 16, was an agricultural labourer, James L, 12, Emily, 10, Frederick, 8, William G, 6, and Lilian B, 2.

Joseph Wills died in the October- December quarter of 1910, aged 63.

By 1911 census Rebecca was a widow and domestic worker, age 56, with **John F**, 26, single, a Farm Labourer; Joseph, 18, single, a gardener; William, 16, single, a general labourer; Bessie, 12, at school. *(Some name changes may reflect each parents choice of names for their children)*

JF Wills enlisted at Exeter with his brother, James. He was a Private, Service No 7380 in the Devonshire Regiment, 1st Battalion at the time of his death, aged 29. He served with the Expeditionary Force in France.

On 21st August 1914 the 1st Devons left Jersey, where they had been stationed since 1911, and landed at Le Havre, where they were reinforced by nearly 500 reservists from Exeter.

In September, during their first spell in the line, they suffered 100 casualties from shelling. In October on the La Basse Canal they supported the badly mauled 1st Dorsets and helped capture Givenchy Ridge. The Devons performed well during a bitter three-week battle but lost two thirds of their officers and a third of their men.

(Keep Military Museum account of 1st Battalion, Devonshire Regt)

The *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, of Tuesday 27 October, 1914, reported that,

"Two Dawlish men have received promotion in the Wessex Royal Field Artillery. George Sage is now full Sergeant, and **Fred Wills** full corporal. Both were privates when the war commenced."

The *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, of Friday 30 October, 1914, reported that,

"Private **Jack Wills**, of the Devon Regiment, has been killed in action. The sad news reached his mother, a widow, who resides at Old Town Street, in a letter from her second son, Jim, who belongs to the same regiment.

He states that he and his brother were fighting last Saturday side by side in a trench. A shell exploded quite close to them, and a second carried away part of the bank of the trench. A third dropped just as they were congratulating each other on their escape, and Jack was killed instantly.

His brother was wounded in the arm and in the back. He states that he is in hospital and making good progress."

The *Western Times* of Monday 9 November, 1914, reported that:

Dawlish World War One Project

"The Dawlish men serving with the Devons, as Reservists, have had a very trying time. Last week it was reported that all but one had been wounded. From news received, Ptes J.Wills, F.Brooks, and T.Stevens are in hospital at Oxford."

Commonwealth War Graves entry: Killed in action, France & Flanders. Buried Pas-du-Calais. Name is recorded on Le Touret Memorial, Richebourg-l'Avoue on panels 8 and 9.

Son of Mrs. R. S. Wills, of 25, Old Town St., Dawlish, Devon.

The Le Touret Memorial commemorates over 13,400 British soldiers who were killed in this sector of the Western Front from the beginning of October 1914 to the eve of the Battle of Loos in late September 1915 and who have no known grave. This part of the Western Front was the scene of some of the heaviest fighting of the first year of the war, including the battle of La Bassée (10 October – 2 November 1914).

UK, Army Register of Soldiers' Effects shows that he was killed in action at Givenchy, and that the Death Grant was paid in equal portions of 16/9d to his mother, Rebecca Sarah, his brothers Joseph and William G, his sisters Annie, Ellen, Emily and Lilian. A footnote shows that 'at written request of brother James' his portion of 16/9d be paid to his mother Rebecca Sarah.

The War Gratuity of £5 was paid to his mother alone in 1919.

He is recorded in the Devon Roll of Honour and the Dawlish Boys' School Roll of Honour.

Dawlish War memorial inscription reads WILLS J.F. PTE. DEVON REGT.

Next of kin: Rebecca Sarah Wills, Mother.

References:

Free Birth Marriage & Death refs

Keep Military Museum

Refs via subscription websites:

Census data

UK, Soldiers died in the Great War 1914-1919

UK, De Ruvigny's Roll of Honour 1914-1919

UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects

Newspaper archives.

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