

Tribute to Charles Frederick King, who died on 20th September 1917 at the Battle of Menin Ridge

In our remembrances of the brave soldiers from Dawlish lost to the Great War we have reflected on the many different faces of courage.

Today we remember a man who died on the Western Front having made the choice to return to the field of battle despite having been offered the honourable alternative of remaining safe at home as an instructor. His fair share of the action as a combatant was already completed, but he chose to go back.

Charles Frederick King was just 34 when he died, unmarried and with a history of service in His Majesty's forces stretching back seventeen years to his employment as an Assistant Clerk in the Paymaster's Branch of the Royal Navy during the final months of Queen Victoria's reign, when he would have been aged just 17.

His parents were both school teachers, and firmly established in Dawlish. We know they were living at No. 3 Longlands from at least 1891. Charles was their first born, and in time the family grew to 8 children. 6 girls and 2 boys.

He was baptised soon after birth at St Gregory's, and later became a pupil of Dawlish School (Now the Community College) where his name is recorded on their Roll of Honour. His own father, the Headmaster of the school, was to commission the memorial to past pupils killed in the war.

We know little of Charles' career in the Royal Navy, save that by 1913 he was an Assistant Paymaster, a rank equivalent to a Lieutenant. His job suggests a clerk working in a dusty office, but actually he would have been an active member of a ship's company, serving on the high seas along with the other enlisted men.

In 1913 he left the Navy and returned to civilian life. Little did he know that just one year later he would be enlisted as a soldier in the King's army.

We know that he was amongst the first to volunteer in August 1914. His experience of 13 years service in the forces and military discipline would have made him a valued addition to the ranks, and we know that he served consistently on the Western Front in a variety of regiments and roles.

1917 found Charles King attached to the Liverpool regiment, and it was in that capacity that he was eventually to serve at the Battle of Menin Road Ridge.

This was a key engagement in the 3rd Battle of Ypres, and raged from 20th to 25th September. It took place in the Ypres Salient, an area of land projecting into German territory and surrounded on three sides by the enemy

Fought in large part to relieve pressure on the French further along the line, the Passchendaele campaign was fought over horrendous terrain.

Captain Wurtzburg, who was actually a soldier in the Liverpool Rifles, despite his Germanic name, described the conditions thus:

"...Those who took part in it will never erase from their minds its many ghastly features, among which the mud and the multitude of dead will stand out pre-eminent. Of the former it must be said that the sodden condition of the ground, though it stopped our advance, certainly prevented many casualties from shell-fire, but at the same time many a wounded man was sucked down into the horrible quagmire and stretcher-bearers found their task in many cases beyond their powers"

Sadly this may well have been the fate of Charles King, for he is one of the multitude of soldiers with no known grave, memorialised at Tyne Cot. Initially reported as missing, His fate was described by an eye witness in a letter to his grieving parents as follows

" (I) now understand that he was killed by machine gun fire and death was instantaneous the last he saw of Mr King was up at a place called Galapoli; after that he was never seen"

Charles King died courageously in the course of an armed conflict that he was committed to winning. His parents were to receive a letter written just two days before his death in which he said

" I am honoured by having to lead over the first rush I'm lucky, but it's a hard nut to crack"

His colleague 2nd Lieutenant G Tyson was to write about him

" I thought a great deal of him, and found what a good soldier and fine fellow he was. He did awfully good work and was very popular with the men and all officers. His loss is keenly felt in the Battalion "

Charles Frederick King was a man defined by military service. He served continuously from age 17 with just a short break in 1913-14. He saw the value of this, despite the hazards and privations.

He said he was honoured to be fulfilling his duty leading his men into battle,

Let his own words be his epitaph as we remember him today.