

John Jeffrey Nicholls, M.S.M.

Born East Allington, 22 October 1891 Died France 12 October 1918 , age 26
Private/Ambulance Driver Service No: 1703 5th Canadian Army Medical Corps

John Jeffrey Nicholls was a young man of some initiative and determination. He broke away from the family farming business to study as a sanitary inspector, left for Canada to make a new life, was early to volunteer for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force, won a Meritorious Service Medal, was indiscrete in writing his opinion of his superior officer. The extract from the *Dawlish Gazette* of 26 October 1918 supports his commitment as "one of the most dashing and most popular playing members of the Dawlish Association Football team a few years ago."

In 1833 twin sons were born to William and Margaret Nicholls and they decided on two names in alternate order, **John Jeffrey Nicholls** and **Jeffry John Nicholls**.

William Nicholls (1790-1851) was a wheelwright at Harberton, near Totnes, married to Margaret Boyd (1792-) and they already had three children, Thomas (1817-1888), William (1824-1901) and Margaret (1827-).

John Jeffrey Nicholls (1833-1910) followed his father to become a wheelwright and married Ann Peeke in 1857. Ann Peeke was born ca 1822 to John (1785-1874) and Susan Peeke (1790-1837). John Peeke was a farmer.

In 1861 John and Ann Nicholls were living at Harbertonford with their first child:

Jeffry John Nicholls, (1859-1899) born Harberton

He became a farmer in the course of the next ten years, possibly taking on his father's farm after his death so that they were at Cornworthy in 1871 where he was farming 72 acres. His widowed mother, Margaret Nicholls, was living with them. By that time they had two more sons:

William Sidney Nicholls (1862-) Cornworthy
Reginald Herbert Nicholls (1866-) "

When John Jeffrey Nicholls died on 17 November 1910, Probate was granted to these two surviving sons, farmers.

Jeffry John Nicholls (1833-1913) also followed his father to become a wheelwright. He married Elizabeth English Peeke from Cornworthy in 1856 (GRO ref Totnes, 1856, June, vol 5b, p 293). Elizabeth Peeke was born ca 1830 to Thomas (1800-) and Mary Peeke (1801-) of Cornworthy. Thomas Peeke is described as a Yeoman from Ashprington on the daughter's Marriage Entry. By the census of 1861 Jeffry John Nicholls had become a farmer of 14 acres at Cornworthy and they had two children:

John Jeffrey Nicholls (1858- 1923) ** born in Cornworthy
Elizabeth Jane Nicholls (1860-) "

They were still in Cornworthy village ten years later, with three more children:

Emily Nicholls (1863-) "
Mary Margaret Nicholls (1866-) "
Lucy Ann Nicholls (1868-) "

In the following ten years they moved to Slapton, Towns End, where Jeffry John Nicholls was farming 120 acres with one boy, John Jeffrey Nicholls ** in 1881. They also had another son:

William Hudson Peeke Nicholls (1872-1943) "

John Jeffry Nicholls ** left the family at Slapton and set up on his own farm at Harleyton, East Allington. He married Ann Hudson on 15 March 1883 at St James the Greater Church, Derby. (ref Parish Registers). By 1891 they had three children:

Eliza Margaret Nicholls	(1884-)	born	Slapton
Elizabeth Grace Nicholls	(1886-)		"
William Hudson Nicholls	(1888-)		"

and living with them were William Hudson, Father-in-law, widower, and Edwin Stentafor, a cousin.

In 1901 they had moved to Eastdon Farm, Dawlish, and were there with three children:

Elizabeth Grace Nicholls	(1886-)		
John Jeffry Nicholls	(1891-1918)		East Allington
Violet Anne Nicholls	(1894-1964)		"

Eliza Margaret Nicholls married Sydney Booth, an American preacher, and moved to New York, but was once more in England when John Nicholls moved to Canada. They returned to USA and lived in Waterville, Maine in 1924, and had a son John.

Violet Ann Nicholls was born on 2 July 1894. She married Stanley L Ramus, an uniform manufacturer in 1924, and was living at 9 Calais Gate, Lambeth in 1939. She died in December 1964, aged 70 (GRO ref Battersea, London, vol 5c, p 81)

Elizabeth Grace Nicholls married Sydney G Heywood on 10 June June 1914 (report in Western Times of 11 June, 1914). She became a member of the Red Cross VAD Devon 52 unit and was married with a Red Cross guard of honour at Cofton St Mary.

William Hudson Nicholls (Willie) married Mabel Lena Holbrook on 25 November 1916 at the Register Office, Newton Abbot. He was 29 and she was 22. They had a daughter, Lena Ann Nicholls at Eastdon Farm on 2 January 1928. William took over the family farm and was running it by the time of his father's death in May 1923. It appears that they also offered holiday accommodation into the 1930's.

(Starcross History Group)

In 1911 **John Jeffry Nicholls** jnr was listed among all five surviving children, living at Eastdon Farm and was himself working as pupil to a Sanitary Inspector. Eliza Margaret, 27, was a governess, William Hudson was 23 and working on the farm. None of the five children had married and the record shows that a sixth had died.

Eliza Margaret Nicholls sailed for Canada in 1911 to marry an American preacher, Sydney Booth. They moved to Toronto and this may have encouraged her brother, **John Jeffry Nicholls**, to follow her in 1914, although they had returned to England for a while.

An extraordinary collection of family documents was left at Eastdon Farm which tell something of the experience of **John Jeffry Nicholls** in trying to obtain work in Canada. ("A Dawlish Boy" Extracts from a collection of letters from John Jeffrey Nicholls – Edited by Tricia Whiteaway, Published by Dawlish Local History Group as a publication on their website.) A further selection from this correspondence is attached here as a 'Document – Letters from Canada'.

With his family background in farming **John Jeffry Nicholls** found a variety of short-term jobs on the land but on November 21, 1914 he signed up for the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force (COEF) and was placed with the 5th Canadian Army Medical Corps as an ambulance driver. **John Jeffry Nicholls** birth date of 22 October 1891 is recorded on his Attestation Paper for the COEF.

Canada was among the very first countries to respond to England's need at the outbreak of the First World War. 619,636 Canadians enlisted with the Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) and approximately 424,000 served overseas. Of these men and women, 59,544 members of the CEF died during the war, 51,748 of them as a result of enemy action.

No 5 Canadian Field Ambulance was organised in November 1914 under the command of Lieut Colonel G.D. Farmer and recruited in Military District No 2. It left Halifax, Nova Scotia, aboard the British Troop Ship NORTHLAND on 18 April 1915 and arrived in England on 29 April with 11 officers and 248 other ranks. Soon after arrival **J J Nicholls** was placed in the M.B. Canadian Hospital with a case of mumps which lasted from 26 May to 15 June. No 5 Field Ambulance was moved to Otterpool Camp, Kent.

At the outbreak of WWI, the massive increase in numbers of troops arriving at Shorncliffe Camp, Folkestone, could not be catered for without expansion of the camp. By 1915 additional camps had sprung up around Folkestone, including at Otterpool, Dibgate, East and West Sandling, Beachborough, Lyminge, and extending along the coast to Hythe, Lydd and the Romney Marsh. Each camp became substantially self-contained, although the facilities and comfort, or lack of, varied considerably.

By coincidence Harold Skilling from Ontario enlisted in The Canadian Expeditionary Force also on November 21, 1914, and joined the 5th Ambulance Corps.

He wrote home on 1st September 1915 from Otterpool Camp *"Well the big review is over and we were praised by the King. He said we looked better than any division he had yet inspected that was leaving for the front. He rode past our unit on horse-back about 11 o'clock a.m. and was accompanied by Kitchener and a score of staff officers. They made quite an imposing sight as all the prancing horses and distinguished men with their khaki uniforms trimmed with red. He passed directly in front of us and he scrutinized us closely as he rode by. Kitchener is a very heavily built man and wears a heavy brown moustache. I had always heard him described as one who seldom smiles, but his face was wreathed in smiles as he passed us. (I suppose it one of pleasure at our good appearance, eh what?)*

It threatened to rain all day as it usually does on inspection days, but kept off pretty well until we were on our way home and then it started to pour. We got a good soaking as we had to march about 3 miles in it.

Altogether there would be about 22,000 reviewed, and they certainly showed well today.

They presented arms at the Royal salute like one man, and there was not a movement as the King rode past."

Training for battle took place in sections of trench cut into the hillsides of Kent to replicate the conditions they may expect on the Front, and all components of the new army exercised there. In preparation, **J J Nicholls** wrote his Will on July 30th 1915, leaving all property and personal effects to his mother in the event of his death.

Soon after the King's inspection **J J Nicholls** went absent without leave for 8 days and on return on 9 September was docked 16 days pay. It seems likely that he had heard of their imminent transfer to France and made a last visit to his parents in Devon.

Dawlish World War One Project

The Field Ambulance transferred to France on 16 September 1915.

Nicholls was given Christmas leave in 1916, from 14 to 25 December.

"A Dawlish Boy" records the award of the Meritorious Service Medal to **Pte. J.J.Nicholls**, following a visit by King George V to the Somme in 1916, "*for their splendid achievements during our tour of the Somme in September of last year.*" The award was announced in the London Gazette on 1 January 1917 in the New Year's Honours List.

Nicholls was attached to the 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station from 4 April 1917 to the 5 May, when he returned to his unit. On 3 July 1917 he was disciplined for, "on the 2nd instant, in a letter written, made statements criticising his superior officer." Presumably a censor had reported outspoken comment to his commanding officer.

He was given Christmas leave from 11 to 27 December 1917.

On 1st March 1918 **Private J J Nicholls** was appointed Lance Corporal but on the 14th April he reverted to Private at his own request. We have no record of the reason for his decision.

He died of his wounds on 12th October 1918 when a shell exploded between two field ambulances on a tour of ambulance posts, killing one officer instantly and wounding four others, one of whom died of his wounds. **Nicholls** was acting as a guide to a tour of the posts and suffered a broken right femur, injury to the perineum and surface wounds to both legs. He died on the way to the Casualty Clearing Station.

Cofton memorial inscription, 1918: John J Nicholls, Canadian Army Med Corps, Oct 12th

Commonwealth War Graves entry:

NICHOLLS J J, Private, No 1703, died 12/10/1918, age 26, Canadian Army Medical Corps,

Queant Communal Cemetery British Extension, Grave ref D.58 - 270 casualties

28 – 34 Rue de Riencourt, 62860 QUEANT, Pas de Calais, France

He was awarded the 1915 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal and the Meritorious Service Medal.

Last known address: Ontario, Canada

Next of kin: John Jeffry Nicholls, Farmer, Eastdon Farm, Cofton, Dawlish (1911 census) His father continued to farm at Eastdon Farm, until handing over to his son, William Hudson Nicholls, when he went to live in Barton Villas, Dawlish. He died on 21st May 1923 and the funeral took place at Cofton where he is buried in the churchyard. In November 1917 he is reported as chairman of a committee of farmers to ensure effective use of farmland. His son succeeded him (Kelly's Directories for Cofton, 1930 – 39). See also funeral tribute in 'Documents'.

References:

See Dawlish Local History Group website for an article '**A Dawlish Boy**' by Tricia Whiteaway, which describes his life and connections to Dawlish.

CWGC website

Free BMD

Library and Archives Canada, personnel records

Harold Skilling letters home - <http://haroldskillingslettersfromww1.blogspot.co.uk/2013/02/1-september-1915-otterpool-camp-kent.html>

National Newspaper Archive

Starcross History group website

refs via subscription website: Ancestry.com

census data

Nicholls-Danks family tree

Probate record

Peeke Family History in Devon, England

in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century; Parish of Cornworthy, Devon, England

Abstracted and modified from the paper 'Some Aspects of the Parish of Cornworthy in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century' By Bruce R. Peeke, C.Eng., M.I.C.E., Published in the 'Transactions of the Devonshire Association' Volume 123 1991