

Francis Liddell

1874 - 1918

Born and lived in Oxford

Wholesale clothier's cutter

Died near the Somme, aged 43, on 31 March 1918

Family and Education

Francis John Liddell was born on 13 August 1874 in Headington, Oxford. His parents, Samson and Eliza Liddell, lived in Temple Street (off Cowley Road), and he was baptised on 11 November at Wesley Memorial. Samson had also been baptised a Wesleyan Methodist in Oxford, on 14 May 1837, and his father Joseph had been a tailor.

By 1881 the family had moved to 65 Bullingdon Road, in East Oxford. Samson was a solicitor's clerk, Francis was at school, and Francis's brother Henry was 16 and a pupil teacher. Henry would later become headmaster of the Oxford Wesleyan School in New Inn Hall Street, and a Methodist local preacher.

By 1891 Samson had died, leaving Eliza as a woman of independent means. Francis had become a tailor's clerk, and his three sisters were employed in dressmaking and embroidery. Later, Francis became a tailor's cutter, and between October and December 1899 he married Sarah Ann Parrot. In the 1901 census Francis was described as a wholesale clothier's cutter. The couple had taken over the house in Bullingdon Road: they lived there with their baby son, and later had another son and a daughter.

War Service: 2/4 Battalion, Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry

As the war started Francis was reaching 40, and he was probably already in the 4th Battalion of the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, which was a Territorial unit. Its members were part-time soldiers, but when war broke out they were mobilised to serve full-time. The unit was split into two: the second line 2/4 Battalion took the men who had not volunteered for overseas service, and who might be needed to repel an invasion. Francis may already have been C Company's Sergeant Major, its most senior non-commissioned officer.

The 2/4 Battalion remained at locations in England for nearly two years, but when conscription was introduced in 1916 it was sent to France, and landed there on 24 May. By the end of June it was taking part in raids across the front line. On 19 July it was in reserve for the disastrous attack at Fromelles (north of the action at the Somme) when little was gained: it suffered heavy shelling and C Company lost many men.

After this the battalion had a period away from noteworthy action. In his book Captain Rose records: 'It was a fine autumn. The French civilians were getting their crops within a mile or two of the trenches'. But at the end of October they marched to the Somme and did stints in the misery of its front-line trenches. They were there on Christmas Day, when fighting continued.

January 1917 was bitterly cold and in February the unit frequently experienced gas shelling. Then it was involved in pushing back the Germans and following their retreat to the Hindenburg Line. In June the battalion played a small part in the Battle of Arras. The Germans were now routinely using planes for bombing as well as for observation and machine-gun attacks: the danger extended far behind the front line.

In August the 3rd Battle of Ypres, or Battle of Passchendaele, was fought in appalling mud due to unusually high rainfall. On 22 August the 2/4 Battalion advanced across farmland amid machine-gun and sniper fire. C Company was held back as it tried to take Pond Farm: the fifty German soldiers there did not surrender until the evening. It was on this day that Benjamin Tyler, also in this battalion and perhaps this company, was killed, and he too is named on the Wesley Memorial Methodist Church memorial.

In the German Spring Offensive, from 21 March 1918, it was the battalion's turn to attempt to hold defences, near Ham on the river Somme, with tremendous loss of life. By this time Francis had substantial battle experience, and no doubt he encouraged his men in the difficult withdrawal amongst gas, smoke and thick mist. He survived the main action but died on 31 March in an incident from which his body could not be recovered. He was aged 43 and he is commemorated at Pozieres Cemetery. He is also remembered on the memorial at Cowley Road Methodist Church.

This is the story of one of the men who appear on a war memorial at Wesley Memorial Methodist Church in Oxford, UK. For Francis Liddell's experience, 'The Story of the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry' by Captain G K Rose, published in 1920 by Blackwell, Oxford (and available at the Gutenberg Project website), was particularly helpful.