

Second Lieutenant Fred Birks VC MM



Frederick Birks was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant on the 26th of April, 1917. He had enlisted on the 18th of August, 1914, and sailed from Australia on the *Wiltshire* on the 19th of October 1914. However, this was not the first time he had crossed the ocean, as he was born in Buckley near Chester in 1894, and his mother (listed as his next-of-kin) lived there until she died in late 1917. Frederick had two brothers, Samuel and John, and four sisters, Polly, Beatrice, Emily and Martha. There may have been a romantic interest in Australia, as a Miss Suzy Gelven of Langs Bay wrote twice to the authorities in 1917, concerned that she had not heard from Fred. Her letters date from well before he was killed however.

Frederick Birks was a Labourer, and aged just over 20 when he enlisted. He is described as having a dark complexion, hair and eyes. He trained at Broadmeadows Camp near Melbourne, which had only just been established and was then a "spartan and tented camp", and served initially as a Private with No. 2 Field Ambulance. He was wounded at Gallipoli, and later promoted, first to Lance Corporal and then to Corporal. He then served in France, and in October 1916 was awarded the Military Medal for "bravery in the field". He was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, for his actions during an attack on Glencourse Wood (about two miles from here) on the 21st of September, 1917. His official citation reads:-

For most conspicuous bravery in attack, when, accompanied by only a corporal, he rushed a strong point which was holding up the advance. The corporal was wounded by a bomb, but 2nd Lt. Birks went on by himself, killed the remainder of the enemy occupying the position, and captured a machine gun. Shortly afterwards he organised a small party and attacked another strong point which was occupied by about twenty-five of the enemy, of whom many were killed and an officer and fifteen men captured. During the consolidation this officer did magnificent work in reorganising parties of other units which had been disorganised during the operations. By his wonderful coolness and personal bravery 2nd Lt. Birks kept his men in splendid spirits

throughout. He was killed at his post by a shell whilst endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell.

Information in his service record at the Australian National Archives confirms that he was killed by a shell in the morning of the 21st, whilst standing in an exposed position trying to help those who had been buried by the shell.

His headstone today has the symbol of the Victoria Cross engraved on it, and in June 1924, the Imperial War Graves Commission wrote to Australia asking the Base Records office of the AIF to check with Frederick Birks next of kin as to whether the proposed design met with their approval. Their letter was returned to London, suggesting they contact the next of kin (Frederick's elder brother, Samuel) directly, as he lived in Buckley. Their mother, Mary Birks had died aged 59 towards the end of 1917, her own death perhaps hastened by that of her son in September.

Family Research

Our family has tried, over the years, to pull together information about Fred Birks. His life and the manner of his death has had a significant impact on the family, particularly on my father (also named Fred Birks). We would like to share the information that we have with as many people as possible, hence putting it on this BBC website. This was a remarkable young man whose story deserves to be preserved. If there is any additional information that people might have we'd be absolutely delighted to hear from them.

Fred Birks was born on 31st August 1894 in Buckley, Flintshire (North Wales) - son of Samuel and Mary Birks (nee Williams). Samuel Birks was born 24th January 1852 and died 10th November 1899, following a pit accident at the Elm Colliery in Buckley. He married Mary Williams on 29th December 1877. Mary died on 25th December 1917, not long after hearing of Fred's death. Samuel and Mary had 6 children Emily, Beatrice, Martha, Samuel, Fred and John. This was Samuel's second marriage, his previous wife Ann Dodd, having died. There was 1 child from this first marriage, George Henry.

The family lived at Garden Cottage, Lane End, Buckley. Life would not have been easy for the family, Fred's father died when he was just 5 years old and his mother had to care for her six children alone.

As a boy Fred attended St. Matthew's Church of England School in Buckley for eleven years without being absent or late, for this he was awarded a silver medal and a Bible by Flintshire County Council. From all accounts he was an adventurous boy, involved in and good at sports, particularly boxing and football. Boxing classes were taken by the Curate at St Matthew's, his nickname was Kit Kat. Stories about Fred describe someone who was a natural leader. He was a keen member of the Church Lads' Brigade and the earliest surviving photograph of him is with the Brigade. In the photo (see attached) he is standing in the

centre of the group immediately behind the Reverend Raymond Pelly, who wears an Officer's cap.

Buckley was very much part of an industrial area with the Brick Works, Mines and nearby Steel Mill dominating the town's economy. At the age of fourteen Fred left school to work in the steelworks of John Summers and Sons, Shotton. His strong physique and character led to early advancement to Steel Roller, a well paid job requiring strength and dexterity. During the following years he may have been a member of the Local Territorial Army, which in Buckley meant the Royal Artillery.

Clearly Fred wished to seek new adventure and was no doubt stimulated by the advertisements appearing during the years immediately before the First World War for young people to emigrate to the British colonies in Canada, South Africa and Australia. His brother remembered Fred being an avid reader of adventure books and travel pamphlets. Fred's mother had a brother who had moved to Australia (R.C. Williams of Woomera, South Australia) and it is believed that he sent Australian magazines to the family.

Together with two friends, William (Bill) Gray and Emrys Jones, he left Buckley for Australia in 1913. They sailed from London to Melbourne on the 29th. August on the Otway. We have no information as to what happened to Bill and Emrys after they left Buckley.

Fred is known to have worked in Tasmania, in South Australia and in Victoria. For at least part of the time he worked as a waiter. In South Australia he lived in the Largs Bay area and struck up a friendship with Suzy Gelvin who was sixteen on 31st March 1914, Fred was then nineteen. From letters she later wrote to the Australian army seeking information about Fred, they had continued to correspond after Fred joined the army. Suzy did not marry until April 1928 and this marriage ended after the birth of her second child. Kay, her daughter, remembers her mother talking of a young man very special to her, who was killed in WW1, she always got tears in her eyes when she spoke of this. Suzy took the girls to the annual ANZAC Day remembrance services every year and her daughter recalls her having had tears in her eyes. Kay never knew the name of the young soldier but remembers her mother talking fondly of special times, of walking along the beach with him accompanied by her dog, Jack. It is a real regret that we did not establish any contact with the Gelvin family until after Suzy's death. Her recollections of and strong connections with Fred would have been powerful.

Following the outbreak of the First World War, Fred enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 18th August 1914 in Melbourne. Fred gave his age on arrival in Australia as 22 when, in fact, he had been just 19. His occupation was recorded as a labourer and his Australian address as "Care of Mrs. Cornelius, 18 King Street, Norwood, Adelaide, South Australia".

Mrs. Cornelius was another person who wrote to the Australian army in 1917 seeking information about Fred and we can assume that she was his landlady in South Australia and that he had continued to correspond with her as well, as she had his latest army address in 1917.

After basic training at the Broadmeadows camp outside Melbourne, Fred was posted to the 2nd Field

Ambulance, part of the 2nd Brigade of the 1st Australian Division which left Australia on 19th October 1914, destination France. Fred sailed on the troopship Wiltshire and this vessel, together with others carrying his Division, were diverted to Alexandria in Egypt, arriving on 10th December 1914. Here the unit established a training base just outside Cairo, within sight of the Great Pyramid. The 2nd Field Ambulance eventually sailed for Lemnos on 7th April 1915 to prepare for the ANZAC landings on the Gallipoli peninsula.

His unit landed on 25th April 1915 at Anzac Beach, Gallipoli. The Major General commanding 1st Division recommended Fred's actions on that day for an award for –"carrying wounded single handed under shell and rifle fire from the firing line from positions where it was impossible to take stretchers"

The 2nd Brigade were drafted to assist at Kivithia, Cape Helles in May 1915 and on the 8th May he gained a second recommendation for an award for "Devotion to duty under heavy rifle and shell fire". Around this time Fred acquired a non standard issue Belgian five shoot revolver which was with his effects at the time of his death. The revolver is now at the National Memorial, Canberra.

He was wounded on 26th June whilst working as a stretcher bearer.

Fred's Division was shipped back to Egypt when the AIF left Gallipoli in December 1915 and then moved on to Marseilles arriving on 30th March 1916 for the train journey to the Western Front and the preparations for the Somme offensive. In May of that year Fred was promoted to Lance Corporal and only three months later promoted again to Corporal after the incident that brought him the Military Medal. The official record states that - "At Pozieres on 26th July L'Cpl Birks continually led his squad of stretcher bearers through Pozieres Wood and village from the front line, many of the Regimental stretcher bearers being out of action. He was exposed to shell fire the whole time."

When his units were moved away from the Front, Fred was able to spend a short period of leave back with his family in Buckley. His arrival in Buckley was remembered by many pupils of his former school, St. Matthew's, as the Turkish flag he had taken in Gallipoli was displayed in the school. Fred returned to his unit in France and his army records indicate that he suffered an illness that caused him to stay in hospital for five days in February 1917. A week after leaving hospital he was on his way to Officer training school having been selected for a commission.

The Australian system for selecting junior officers was based on performance and merit. Clearly Fred's actions, albeit in an ambulance unit, had marked him out as a strong candidate for a commission. He attended the Australian 1st Division school in France and received his commission in April 1917 as a Second Lieutenant with the 6th AIF Battalion (he had asked for this unit since he had acted as stretcher bearer with them since leaving Australia in 1914). He joined his regiment as they were preparing for the next big offensive in the area east of Ypres.

His first major action as an officer was to be his last. On 20th September 1917, the opening day of the Battle of the Menin Road which began the 3rd Battle of Passchendaele. This was the first of four battles in September and October in which the A.I.F. was engaged. The battles were a part of a general offensive to push the Germans off the Passchendaele - Messines Ridge and achieve a breakthrough. For the A.I.F. it was a fight to control Menin Road ridge, the high ground which the road crossed on the way east. The 1st and 2nd Divisions, with a combined front of 1800 metres, were at the centre of a 13 kilometre British front. The Australians were positioned along Westhoek Ridge and faced enemy - held Glencorse Wood.

The Battalion history records the events leading up to the attack.

"The Battalion moved from Zillebeke Bund on the night of 18th/19th to trenches and positions near trenches. D Coy relieved B Coy of 1st Battalion in front line, C Coy to Mennin Tunnel, A Coy to Leinster Farm and B Coy to Half Way House. En route there were some casualties resulting from barrage near Zillebeke (mostly gas shells) and near Clapham Junction through which the Battalion had to pass. The day of 19th passed without incident or casualties, all preparations being complete."

When the battle began at dawn on 20th September, the troops closely followed their own barrage, overcame enemy infantry opposition and an unusually rapid advance took them to the north edge of Glencorse Wood, Hannebeek Swamp and the bogs of Nonne Boschen Wood.

"In Glencorse Wood part of the 6th Battalion was held up by a machine - gun in a pillbox. Second Lieutenant Fred Birks, with Corporal W. Johnston, rushed the post. Johnston was wounded but Fred Birks killed the enemy and captured the gun. At once he organised a small party and attacked another strong point occupied by about twenty-five Germans. Some of the enemy were killed and an officer and fifteen men were captured. Pressing on, Birks reorganised a large number of Australians who had strayed from the units during the attack and consolidated the sector he had captured. By noon that day (20th September) the 1st and 2nd Divisions had taken all their objectives and were at the western end of Polygon Wood."

The message map found in Fred Birks' possession after his death gives more information about the action. It is dated 20th September and timed at 7 a.m. and clearly shows where he believed his position was at that time.

The reverse of the message map indicates Fred's understanding of his and his men's position. Other companies were retreating in disorder and he believed that he was being shelled by his own artillery, not an uncommon incident in the confused situation of trench warfare of the First World War. It was in this confused situation that he confidently reorganised men and attacked the enemy strong points with such devastating effect.

The Battalion record continues;

"During the morning the enemy shelling was light and work proceeded rapidly & well, by 1000 posts had

been dug and a fair system of defence had been established. At 1230 a message was received from 7th Bn that the enemy were counter attacking their front line. 'C' Coy was ordered to stand by in readiness to support and at 1400 moved forward to support 7th Bn.

During the morning and afternoon carrying parties worked very hard, they moved a considerable amount of ammunition & stores from CLAPHAM JUNCTION to forward battalions. This was also proceeded with during the night and next day. At 2000 double sentry posts were mounted in all posts and throughout the night Patrols kept touch with right & left Brigades & the Battalion in front. At 1927 S.O.S. signal was observed on our direct front and our artillery put up a barrage in front of our lines. At this time enemy shelling was heavy but slackened again at 2030 and remained quiet until 0430 next morning.

Before dawn our aeroplanes flew low over enemy's lines and fired into their trenches with Machine Guns. They remained up until after daylight. From 0430 ("Stand to") until 0539 our artillery put a stationary barrage in front of our forward lines in case the enemy were preparing for a counter attack. The enemy replied vigorously to our artillery & shelled all our sector heavily. One shell bursting in a post of 'D' Coy Killed Lieutenant BIRKS and 4 Other Ranks and wounded 2 others."

Fred Birks was just twenty three years old. He was killed at his post by a shell whilst endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a previous shell. For his actions on the 20th and 21st September 1917 Fred Birks was nominated for the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry, by Maj. Gen. W. R. Birdwood Commanding the 1st Australian Division whose recommendation is dated 27th September 1917. Fred's VC was the only one awarded to the 6th Australian Infantry Battalion. His V.C was the last one to be awarded at the Battle of Passchendale. The copy of the recommendation in the Australian Army records reads.

"During the advance on GLENCORSE WOOD East of YPRES on 20th Sept, 1917 this officer accompanied only by a Cpl. rushed a strong point which was holding up the advance. The Cpl. was wounded by a bomb but 2/Lt BIRKS went on himself, killed the remaining Germans and captured a machine gun. Shortly afterwards he organised a small party and attacked another strong point which was occupied by about 25 Germans; after killing a number of these they captured an Officer and 15 men. During the consolidation this Officer did magnificent work in reorganising parties of other units who had been disorganised owing to getting too close to our own barrage. By his wonderful coolness and personal bravery he kept his men in splendid spirits through-out. 2/Lt BIRKS was killed at his post by a shell on the morning of 21st Sept. whilst standing exposed endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell."

The official citation was published in the London Gazette on 8th November 1917

Second Lieutenant Frederick Birks, VC, MM
6th Australian Infantry Battalion, AIF

20th September 1917, at Glencorse Wood, East of Ypres, Belgium.

Citation: For most conspicuous bravery in attack when, accompanied by only a corporal, he rushed a strong-point which was holding up the advance. The corporal was wounded by a bomb but Second Lieutenant Birks went on by himself, killed the remainder of the enemy occupying the position, and captured a machine gun. Shortly afterwards he organised a small party and attacked another strong-point which was occupied by about twenty-five of the enemy; of whom many were killed and an officer and fifteen men captured. During the consolidation this officer did magnificent work in reorganising parties of other units who had been disorganised during the operation. By his wonderful coolness and personal bravery, Second Lieutenant Birks kept his men in splendid spirits throughout. He was killed at his post by a shell whilst standing exposed endeavouring to extricate some of his men who had been buried by a shell.