

JOSEPH JOHN FRY

Private G/7224, 8th Battalion, Queen's, Royal West Surrey Regiment

Killed in action on Monday, 4th September 1916, Delville Wood, Somme



Delville Wood in 1916 and today

Tommies called it "The Devil's Wood", with good reason. In early September 1916, when Joseph John Fry was killed, this is the description in the 8th Queen's Regimental History –

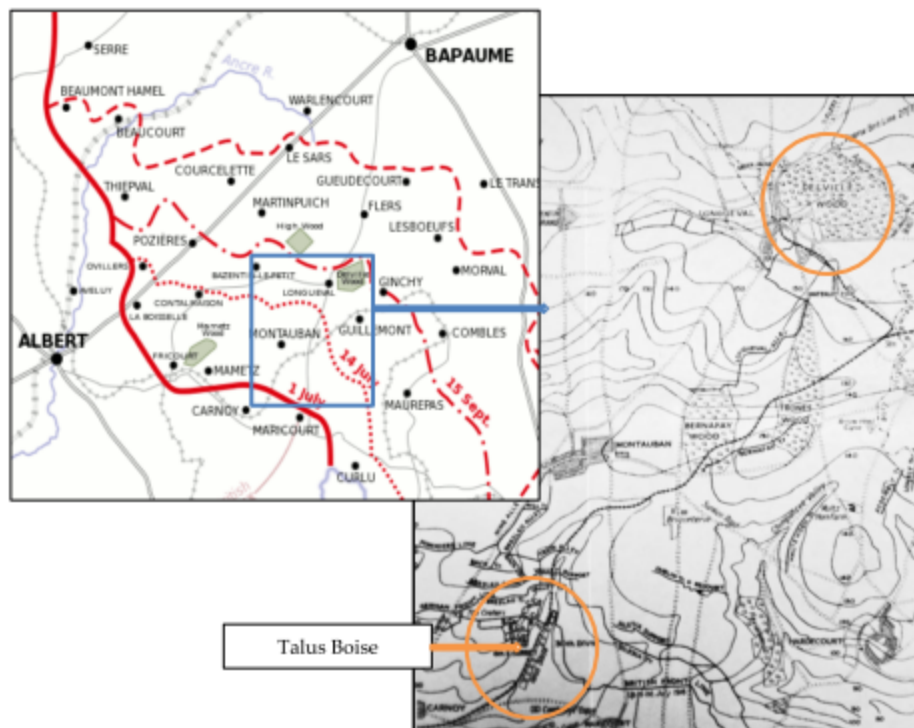
"The following day (Sept 1st) we relieved the West Kents in Delville Wood.... Here we remained in vile weather, during the whole of which time the enemy continued to batter unmercifully all that was once Delville Wood. The stumps of the trees alone remained, and the whole centre of the wood was one mass of tangled and rotting debris, still strewn with corpses and at intervals made more impassable by wire hastily thrown out by both sides during the confused and terrible fighting that led up to the eventual capture of the position... It was soon obvious that no troops could remain entrenched inside the wood without suffering very heavy losses, and accordingly B and D companies were moved out to positions outside the wood on the enemy's side. This undoubtedly saved many casualties..."

It was at the end of 1915 that Joseph Fry had his first taste of Army life. Enlisting on December 7th, he was sent, like all new recruits, to be kitted out and trained with the 3rd Battalion, The Queen's at Rochester before it moved to Sittingbourne.

He was sent on active service to the 8th Queen's, which had been in France since the end of August in 1915, being ordered hurriedly into the first day of the Battle of Loos with the 24th Division, which was decimated by 4178 casualties for very little gain, then ordered south to a relatively quiet Hoge Salient in January 1916, before moving to Wulverghem, about five miles south-west of Ypres at the end of March. They were there nominally in support, but suffered a considerable number of casualties from three German gas attacks.

With no surviving service record, it is impossible to be sure when Joseph joined the Battalion, but it would have likely been at the beginning of June, when reinforcements arrived.

On July 1st, while the Battle of the Somme raged further south, the 72nd Brigade, including the 8th Queen's, was relieved to a hutted camp at Locre, three miles from the Ypres front line, for just over a week of the loathed working parties before being sent back to the forward trenches for two days and in support for a week. Two nights later the Brigade moved west to Meteren for a very few days training, when orders were issued for the 24th Division to leave Flanders for the Somme, some sixty miles south. Such was the difficulty of transporting troops at that time that the journey took a week by train and marching to arrive at Morlancourt for more training before the Battalion went up to the front trenches in front of Talus Boise (*see map below*). At 4.30 a.m. on August 21st, one company of the 8th Queen's joined in an attack, only to be brought to a standstill and having to withdraw to the starting point that night, then being relieved by the East Surreys. The 86 casualties were all caused by shell-fire, which pounded the trenches.

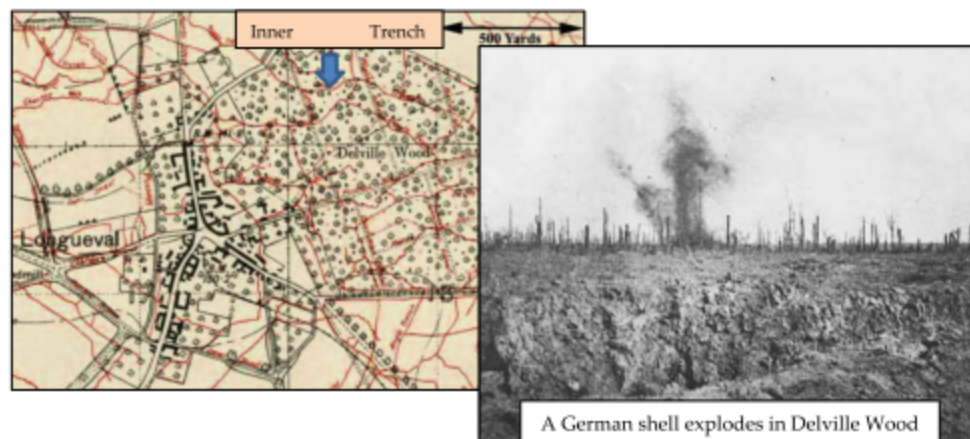


This was a period in between the two great attacks of the Somme, with the gains of the first being consolidated and starting points for the second being established, so the next few weeks were spent in and out of forward trenches in what were essentially minor operations with very little tangible result except for more casualties from the incessant shelling, such as here



at the remains of the village of Guillemont. On August 29th came reinforcements of one officer and 214 other ranks to bring the Battalion up to strength, before, for Joseph John, the fateful move to Delville Wood.

This started on the very wet night of the 30th with the relief of the 6th Somerset Light Infantry in the rear trenches, with no cover and the unpleasantness of a seven hour gas attack the next day, before an advance in the maze of trenches to the chaos of the wood described at the beginning. Joseph was probably one of the 150 men of B and D Company at Inner Trench subjected to the bombardment of the next four days.



Some time on Monday, September 4th it was probably a shell here that killed Joseph John Fry. It must have been a close or direct hit, as his body was not recovered and buried, his name being carved on the majestic Thiepval Memorial some miles away to the west.

Daniel Fry, Joseph's grandfather, was a carpenter. Although born at Godalming in 1830, he had come to Pirbright with his parents in the 1850s and settled here, marrying firstly Eliza Stevens, who died shortly afterwards in childbirth, then Elizabeth Simmonds, who bore him nine children, including James, Joseph John's father, born in 1865. James married Alice, the daughter of John Stevens, at St Michael's Church in 1890. They went to live at Jubilee Cottage in Gibbs Acre, next door to John Faggetter of Elm House, who had built the property, and the couple had three sons.



Daniel James Fry (*left, sitting on right*) was the eldest, born in 1891. He became a painter and decorator, marrying Mary Mitchell at St. John's Church in April 1915, enlisting under the Derby scheme in November that year, a month before Joseph John, and being called up in April 1916, becoming a fitter in the Royal Horse Artillery. Sent to France in 1917, he served with Rowland Hilder (*on the left*), later to become a well-known landscape artist. After the War Daniel came back to live with his growing family at Hazel Cottage in School Lane and became a partner with Arthur Laker in the well-known local builders, Fry and Laker, marrying again in 1934 and dying in 1974, aged 83.

Percy Harold Jesse was the youngest son, born in 1897. He also joined up and was sent to the 11th Queens, who spent 1916 and 1917 on the Western Front, went to Italy for three months before returning to France and Flanders for the end of the war. "Perce", an undertaker, married Dorothy Bricknell Dew in 1920, living most of his life at 4 Pirbright Terrace and dying at the age of 90 in 1988. Here he is on the left (*below*), with Dorothy right. Joseph John was the middle child, born on October 6th 1894. Unfortunately no photo of him has been found. He went to Pirbright School under Mr Frost in 1898 and left, as was usual, at the age of fourteen in 1908. By 1911 he was a paint shop labourer, living with his parents at Gibbs Acre. Nearby at Gibbs Acre was Joseph's grandfather, Daniel, still working as a carpenter for the Necropolis Co. aged 81 with his wife Elizabeth. He died two days before the



Armistice in 1918, she shortly after the outbreak of war in 1914. All the long-lived Fry family are buried in the churchyard except Joseph John, whose remains still lie in a corner of some foreign field.