

Frank Richards, DCM, MM. 'Old Soldiers Never Die'

Frank Richards was an infantry soldier who served with the Royal Welch Fusiliers for the duration of the war. He achieved a remarkable service record during the war, seeing action in most of the major battles the British Army fought in on the Western Front; the retreat following the Battle of Mons, Le Cateau, the battles of the Marne and the Aisne, the First Battle of Ypres, The Battle of Loos, the Battle of the Somme, the Battle of Arras, The Third Battle of Ypres and the German offensive of 1918. In 1933 Richards published an account of his service in the Great War; *Old Soldiers Never Die*, with the help and encouragement of his friend and former Royal Welch Fusilier officer, Robert Graves.

Richards, whose real name was Francis Philip Woodruff was born in 1883 and brought up in Blaina, Monmouthshire by his aunt and uncle. On the 12th of April 1901, Richards enlisted in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and served with the 2nd Battalion overseas in India and Burma for seven years as a battalion signaller. On returning to civilian life he transferred to the Army Reserve and worked as a timberman's assistant with a coal mining company in South Wales. At the outbreak of war in August 1914 Richards was recalled to the colours and re-joined his old battalion with the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

During the War, Richards continued with his pre-war regular army trade of signaller. He refused all promotion and never rose above the rank of a private soldier. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) and Military Medal (MM). He was fiercely proud of his pre-war regular service and would often use his pre-war service experiences to his advantage.

On Christmas day 1914, Richards was in trenches at Houplines, a village north of Armentières. Only eighty yards from the German trenches, stovepipes could clearly be seen sticking up above the parapets. His company took part in the truce, receiving two barrels of beer from the opposing German commander. Both sides returned to their trenches at midnight.

During his four years as an infantry soldier on the Western Front, Richards was involved in many intense engagements with the Germans and saw many of his friends and comrades killed. Throughout his memoir he recalls these events with little emotion. Possibly, as a pre-war regular, he may well have viewed the war as his soldier's profession, to uphold the traditions of the Regiment and Battalion, something to get on and do as he had trained for and to suppress his emotions beneath his professionalism. During the Battle of the Marne Richards' recalls firing across the river at retreating Germans and describes the action as,

"Excellent shooting practice for about five minutes and saw a lot of men fall"

It was during the Third battle of Ypres, more commonly known as the battle of Passchendaele, that Richards won his Military Medal (MM). He was involved in some intense fighting and acted on many occasions as a 'runner', running messages between the Company and field commanders.

On the morning of the armistice on the 11th of November 1918, Richards and his Company were in the village of Aulnoye. After four years of fighting, Richards' believed there were only two or three soldiers left from the original battalion that had arrived in France. On hearing of the Armistice he said,

"Everyone was glad to hear the news."

He expressed no other opinions publically at the signing of the Armistice. No reflections on fallen comrades, no thoughts on the defeat of the Germans, or the peace that had returned to the world. He celebrated the rest of the day by playing Pontoon and lost all his money, consoling himself with the thought that he had arrived in France broke and would be leaving France broke.

As a Miner he was among the first of the soldiers to be released from duty and on the 5th of December 1918 he was demobilised in Liverpool. The old pre-war regular, had done the job he was called up to do, his service with the colours had ended.

Writing fifteen years after the end of the war from memory it is easy to imagine some of his experiences may have been embellished, but what cannot be ignored are the facts of his service record. He also experienced the transformation of the British Army from a small regular force to an army of volunteers and conscripts that successfully achieved the defeat of the German Army.

Jeff Clare



Frank's wedding day, 21 November 1937, Danycastle Methodist Chapel

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