

Frank Rupert Wooster

Frank Rupert Wooster, eldest son of John Wooster (1865-1947) and Jeannie Frances Wooster nee Harrison (1875-1943), was born in Washington, USA on 27th October 1895. The family immigrated from America in 1902 and bought a farm on the Orira River, Umawera in the Hokianga.^{1,2}

Frank attended the Umawera school where he took a junior scholarship and then Whangarei High School (now Whangarei Boys' High School) in 1910. He quickly made his mark as an exceptionally capable student – a gifted linguist he had a bright future having achieved a Senior and University Scholarship. He also did his compulsory military service in Whangarei.^{1,3,4}

On leaving school Frank attended university in Auckland, training to become a teacher. Whilst in Auckland he lived with his Uncle Mr Rupert Harrison, Headmaster of Belmont School, and was a part of B Company of the Coastal Defence Department and 3rd Auckland Battalion.^{1,3,5}

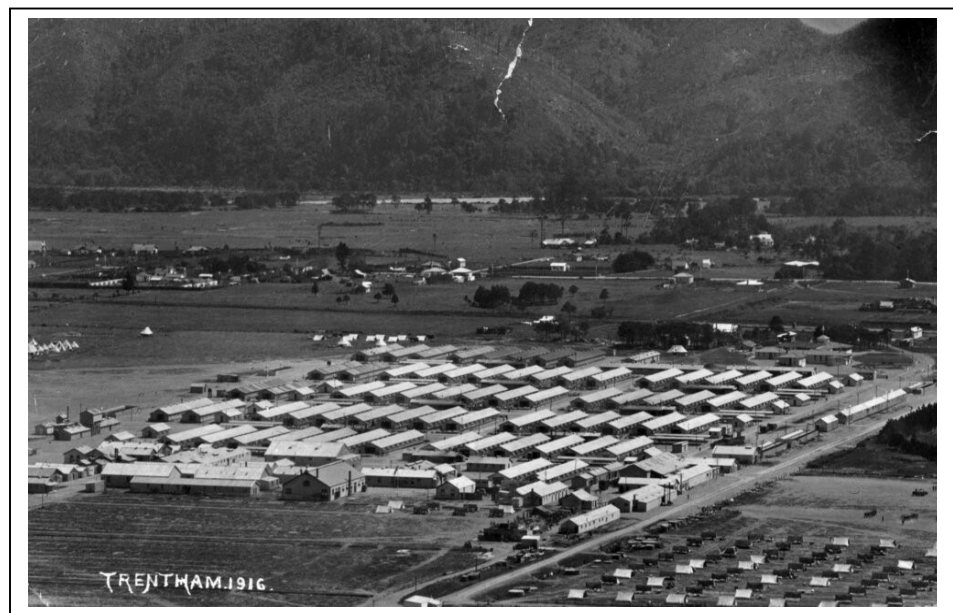


The Auckland Coastal Defence on North Head Devonport consisted of three guns. The north Battery defended Rangitoto Channel, another to the south defended the inner harbour while the third larger gun was on top of the summit. The guns, with barrels weighing more than 13 tons, were designed to retract underground in hidden pits for loading. During the First World War two newer 6-inch Mark VII guns provided the main defence of the Rangitoto Channel with the older disappearing guns in support, along with search lights and generators.⁷

The 3rd Battalion, Auckland (Countess of Ranfurly's Own) and Northland Regiment was a Territorial Force Battalion of the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, with headquarters in the Arch Hill Auckland Army Centre. The Unit consisted of Company-sized Units which had headquarters in Auckland and Whangarei.⁶

On 5th April 1916 Frank enlisted to serve in World War I. His medical notes state he was 5' 10" tall, weighed 10st 6lbs, had dark brown hair, brown eyes and a dark complexion. He was posted to A Company Auckland Infantry Regiment as a private. Ten days later he was promoted to Lance Corporal however on 8th June Frank, at his own request, reverted rank to private. He refused to sit for a commission, preferring to share in the ordinary duties of a soldier's life.^{1,2,3}

Pictured right: 1916, Trentham Military Camp had its own electric light plant, water supply from a reservoir in the hills, a complete postal, telephone, and telegraph system connecting it with the civilian world, hot-water baths, many huge stores and sheds, drying-rooms, offices, as well as numerous clubhouses and institutes provided by various bodies. It also had shops which supplemented the service rendered by the large canteen providing supplies of items not included in the canteen's schedule.^{6,7}



The 15th reinforcements New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) embarked from Wellington on 25th July 1916, Frank aboard *Waitemata* HMNZT 59, along with 9th Reinforcements NZ Rifle Brigade 1st and 2nd Battalion, and 6th Reinforcements NZ Rifle Brigade 3rd and 4th Battalions.^{1,8}

WAITEMATA HMNZT 59 (1908-18)

*5432 gross tonnage, launched on 28 February 1908 and delivered to the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand in April for their trans-Pacific cargo service. Length 126.49m, breadth 16.46m, depth 5.36m. She was powered by a Dunsmuir and Jackson triple-expansion steam engine of 548 nhp. Her propulsion was a single screw giving her a speed of 10 knots. On 14 July 1918 she was torpedoed by a German in the Mediterranean Sea 160 km northeast of Marsa Susa and sunk. All aboard were rescued.*⁸



Disembarking in Devonport England on 3rd October Frank was marched into Sling Camp and posted to the Auckland Infantry Battalion 2nd Company. Sling, officially named 4th New Zealand Infantry Brigade Reserve Camp, served to train reinforcements and rehabilitate casualties. In order to support the New Zealand Expeditionary Force on the European continent an enormous infrastructure of camps, hospitals, depots, and offices was developed in England. On arrival at Sling Camp troops were instructed to remove their Reinforcement insignia and await a posting. Reserve Camp Battalions fed men into Regiments/Battalions that had suffered casualties and required reserves to fill gaps and bring the Regiment/Battalion back up to strength – the men had no choice as to where they were assigned.^{1,9,10}

By 20th October the troops were proceeding overseas to France, Frank with 3rd Reserve Battalion 2nd Auckland Company. They arrived at Étaples Base Depot and were attached to strength on 21st October.¹

Étaples was the Allies main infantry base with sections for every Regiment with Battalions at the front. In theory the base held a ten percent reserve for every frontline Battalion, but figures fluctuated significantly depending on the levels of casualties at the front and the supply of fresh troops from England. Troops held at the base were 'toughened up' while awaiting despatch to the front. Étaples serviced the Regular and New Army Battalions at the front and included 16 hospitals.¹¹

On 5th November Frank joined 1st Battalion Auckland Regiment in the field in the Fleurbaix-Sailly sector, based on the little town of Estaires some eight kilometres south of Amentieres.^{1,12}

The line was quiet but the weather became increasingly miserable – wet, raw, windy and sleety – then toward the end of November came frost and snow. Early in December the winter set in properly, it was the hardest, coldest, most terrible winter known in Europe for half a century. The troops suffered terribly in the extreme conditions with frozen hands and feet, and nights spent shivering in trench and billet.¹²

Quiet as the sector was at that time, there were reminders of previous activity. No-man's-land was full of dead Australians – it was here a disaster had occurred when the 5th Australian Division failed completely in their attempt to take the Aubers Ridge six months earlier.¹²

It was on this sector the Aucklanders first experienced the atrocity of the deep dug-out. Built for the accommodation not of a few officers or a Company headquarters but a 'home' for three hundred men, it was wet, steaming, dimly lit and badly ventilated, the air unspeakably polluted.¹²

On 23rd December 1916 1st Auckland were relieved in the line by 2nd Auckland, and so managed to have Christmas Day in billets.¹²

The New Year saw a complete reorganisation of the 1st and 2nd Brigades. The North Island Battalions now formed 1st Brigade, and the South Island 2nd Brigade. This change brought 1st and 2nd Battalions of all the Infantry Regiments into much closer touch with each other. From this time until the end of the war 1st Brigade consisted of 1st Auckland and 2nd Auckland, 1st Wellington and 2nd Wellington.¹²

Immediately after the reorganisation 1st and 2nd Auckland relieved each other in the Tin Barn Avenue and J-Post trenches for the next month. The cold was intense and the enemy moderately quiet. The main occupation was shooting hares, a sport which was enthusiastically pursued at considerable risk, not only to the hares but also to anyone who happened to be within a few hundred yards as bullets ricocheted in every direction off the frozen ground. German action at this time consisted mainly in the use of minenwerfers – mine launchers – into certain areas of the front and support lines to clear obstacles, including bunkers and barbed wire, that longer range artillery could not accurately target.¹²

On 28th February 1917 1st Auckland took over the Despierre Farm sub-sector, which consisted of two gaps and three localities. With no maintenance work having been done for months the neglected trenches were tumbling to pieces and the Germans were active, both with snipers and minenwerfer guns.

Despite hostilities the Germans were on occasion courteous – the day after the Aucklanders took over the line a notice was displayed over their parapet: *Engl. Ober leutnant Gefallen. Er Ruht in Friedhof von Quesnoy*. This news of the death and burial of an English officer missing after a raid was one of those touches of human kindness which occasionally shine amid the bitterness and hatred of war.¹³

On 12th March Frank was attached to the NZ Engineers as part of a cable laying party and rejoined his unit on 28th April.¹

An enormous amount of work was necessary digging new communication trenches, assembly trenches, gun-pits and burying cables. With the success or failure of the battle depending on the work of the artillery it was important telephonic communication with all parts of the battlefield were made as secure as possible. To ensure this cable was buried six to eight feet deep right up to the front line, with the greater part of this work done at night. Working parties would fall in at any hour of the night deemed most suitable by the authorities, and march through the darkness to an allotted place which in the case of 1st Auckland volunteers was usually Ploegsteert Wood. Engineer sappers would mark out the task for the night and as a rule each man was given two yards to dig down to a depth of six or eight feet. In daylight on clear ground such a task took from one-and-a-half to two hours but at night, in difficult country, it might take twice as long, and Ploegsteert Wood was difficult owing to tree roots which had to be removed before progress could be made. Close to the front line the enemy on hearing suspicious sounds intervened actively with machine-guns and whizz-bangs. The extremely variable weather was also a hindrance – the occasional days which gave promise of spring were invariably followed by snowstorms, hail, rain, and sleet.¹³

On 8th May 1st Auckland moved back to the Strazeele-Ccestre area to begin training for the coming battle. It was important every man should not only be physically fit and expert in the use of his weapons, but also that he should have an accurate knowledge of his own task. In the Army training area a few kilometres outside St. Omer a full-size model of the Messines fortifications was laid out so the troops could rehearse as nearly as possible attacking under actual conditions the operation they would perform on the day of battle.¹³

Twelve days training in the pleasant Setques Village near St. Omer passed quickly and the Battalions made ready for the long tramp back to the battle sector.¹³

On 3rd June 1st Auckland moved into support on Hill 63 while 2nd Auckland took over the whole of the Divisional front. On Hill 63 1st Auckland were in huts and tents beneath the trees. Guns of all calibres were firing around them drawing retaliatory fire. At night the Germans sent over gas shells – alarms were frequent and respirators were in use much of the time.¹⁴

On the afternoon of 5th June 1st Battalion were relieved and returned to Canteen Corner to get a night's rest and to be served with a final issue of gear and ammunition. The extra equipment issued – steel helmet, rifle, bayonet, Webb equipment and an extra hundred rounds carried in bandoliers, entrenching tool, haversack, water-bottle and a small box respirator slung on the chest – was sufficient to make a good load. In addition every man carried two Mill's bombs in his breast-pockets and extra rations in his haversack, also a pick or shovel. Then, distributed amongst members of a platoon, were wire-cutters of all sizes shapes and descriptions, buckets of bombs, carriers full of rifle-grenades, spare Lewis-gun panniers and ground flares with which to signal positions to contact aeroplanes. All officers and section commanders were supplied with small scale maps showing in detail the enemy trench system in the area to be assailed by the New Zealand Division.¹⁴

At dusk the following day 1st Auckland fell in and commenced the march to their battle-station in Hanbury Support. Strict orders were issued that all troops moving forward must keep to the saps. The main sap leading from the crest of the hill forward to the assembly point was crowded and stoppages frequent, and all night long German gas shells burst on the slope resulting in many casualties.¹⁴

General Plunder's objective was the Messines-Wytschaete Ridge, which was the buttress of the German line in the north. The New Zealand Division was given the task of storming Messines itself, and of passing through some five hundred yards to the reverse side of the hill.¹⁴

At 3.10 am the earth shook! A column of leaping flame quickly obscured by smoke and debris and then a muffled roar – the mines had gone up! After a brief pause there came the sudden rattle of thousands of machine-guns, a flash around the horizon followed by a thunder-blast of sound. A great barrage fell on the German line.¹⁴

The Auckland Battalions remained in the assembly trenches until 3.55 am by which time dawn had broken. They moved forward by half-platoons in file across the Douve and the old front line. Heavy shrapnel burst overhead but did little damage. Gas was met in the valley and respirators had to be worn during part of the ascent. Fortunately, with no lachrymatory mixed in with the phosgene chlorine preparation it was only necessary to adjust mouthpiece and nose clip to ensure perfect safety. Along the way troops passed the wounded going back and Allied dead, stark reminders success had been won at a high price.¹⁴

The attack staggered the enemy army in the salient and for two or three hours the Germans were utterly demoralised. A bold sweep forward while the Allied Battalions were still comparatively fresh and little reduced in numbers might have led to great results. Instead a policy of safety was adopted and the consolidation of the newly gained ground was the prime objective. The Germans recovered quickly however, and what guns were still in position and undamaged opened a furious fire on the lost ground.¹⁴

From this time on there was nothing to be done except watch, wait, endure and hold the ground taken. Under cover of darkness organisation, impossible during the latter part of the afternoon, was carried out. The men nerved themselves to resist and took courage from the bursts of fire which rattled overhead from the machine-guns massed in rear. 1st Auckland remained holding the ground they had won, during which time there was no slackening of the German fire.¹⁴

The continuous strain of the three days began to tell on all ranks and the order received that night to return to Bulford and Kortypyp Camps was received gratefully. The journey back was slow and tedious. Once across the old front line and passing along the saps to the crest of Hill 63 every man was carefully checked at Brigade Station, offering the tired troops an opportunity to doze leaning against the trench wall or lying flat on the duckboards while they waited. Up again and moving down the slope they passed through a mass of heavy guns. Brilliant green and yellow flames stabbed through the darkness followed by a bellowing crash of sound, a moment of intense blackness and then once more the flame of fire and the shock of the discharge. For half a mile, on both sides of the track, batteries were in action – the return journey a seemingly endless ordeal for the troops. Losses for 1st Auckland were significant: 3 officers and 39 other ranks killed; 4 officers and 228 other ranks wounded and 16 missing – a total of 290 casualties.¹⁴

From 11th- 18th June the Aucklanders rested, re-equipped and re-organised. With fine weather the few days spent out of the line were pleasant – after a battle it was always good to reflect on the fact one was alive and in possession of the correct number of limbs.¹⁵

On 30th June 1st Brigade moved back to the training area and 1st Auckland to Bleu for a fortnight's training. The weather was fine the billets good and training easy. Bailleul was quite close by and during the long evenings the troops visited shops and restaurants in the quaint old town.¹⁴

On 19th July the Brigade went back into the line, 1st Auckland going into the Prowse Point sub-sector. Shelling was heavy and continuous and the Germans made liberal use of poison gas – Ploegsteert Wood drenched with it.¹⁵

The Third Battle of Ypres – the bloodiest most terrible fight of the war – commenced on 31st July, when the British and French attacked from Dixmude to La Basse Ville. On the extreme left flank the New Zealand Division had the task of storming the latter village and advancing its line in conformity with the forward thrust of the Army. 2nd Wellington, 1st and 2nd Auckland were detailed for the purpose.¹⁵

They arrived in the line during the night of the 29-30th and ready to carry out their raid when, with little warning, the German barrage came down. It was heavy and destructive. The men lying in shell-holes and shallow trenches suffered severely. After some hours of heavy shelling the German infantry came on the heels of their barrage and, penetrating the gap between two of the outposts, got right in amongst the New Zealand troops. There was a confused and bloody fight in the darkness – the North Aucklanders maddened by their losses and glad of the opportunity to get amongst the enemy fought savagely. There was little opportunity for direction or cooperation. Every man fought as best he could with revolver, bayonet and bomb. With most of their party killed very few of the Germans returned to their own line.¹⁵

Conditions for the forward troops were miserable in the extreme with heavy shell fire causing numerous casualties. Rain turned the battlefield into a quagmire, the posts filled with water and mud and the men, wet and chilled to the bone, were unable to rest or sleep. Even when parties carried hot food up through smashed trenches where duckboards swam on top of three feet of water, or sank out of sight under the depth of mud, the food was wasted because dixies were lost in the slime, or so coated with filth they became useless. The troops stood in a narrow ditch facing the front, their feet buried deep in the slush at first became numbed then hot and burning as the first symptoms of trench foot made itself felt. Clothes were wet and stiff with clay, fingers frozen and useless, rifles breech and barrel choked with mud. They stood and waited in imminent deadly danger without food and without sleep while the German artillery shelled them heavily.¹⁵

On 17th August the two Battalions moved from Canteen Corner, 1st Auckland to the hutment camp at Romarin and 2nd Auckland to the line in front of La Basse Ville. The new trenches were in fair condition and a continuous front line had been established on the near side of the Lys. Shell-holes full of mud, water and mosquitoes with voracious appetites were covered over with camouflage netting formed the outpost line. German aeroplanes cruised overhead taking photographs and dropping bombs – control of the air seemed to have passed entirely to the enemy. At dawn heavy barrages went down on the front and support lines, and the men stood-to in expectation of a raid or an attack.¹⁵

By this time, the Division was heartily sick of the whole area from De Seule and Canteen Corner to Messines, Warneton, La Basse Ville and Ploegsteert. There had been one day of excitement followed by months of hard work and miserable conditions, with heavy shelling, gassing, bombing and the continual drain of killed and wounded. Orders for the Divisional relief were eagerly anticipated and greatly appreciated when they eventually came. On 25th August 1st and 2nd Auckland Battalions proceeded by motor-lorry and train to villages of the Lumbres area.^{15,16}

During August and September blow after blow was struck with the final objective brought nearer but two things saved the German Army, bad weather and the pill-box system – thousands of concrete forts which rendered a position impregnable to infantry attack.¹⁶

On 1st October the Auckland Battalions marched along the crowded highroad into and through the town of Ypres. All around there was desolation – the debris of the battlefield everywhere. Tangled heaps of rusty wire, broken rifles, smashed field guns, rotting pieces of equipment, filthy and torn clothing, empty shell-cases, old tins, riven helmets and all the ruined litter that makes the ugly desolation of an old battlefield. The villages were heaps of rubble, the streams and valleys bogs. For mile after mile shell-hole touched shell-hole with here and there a gaping crater torn by a mine explosion. As far as the eye could see the landscape was a wide expanse of ploughed and torn earth.¹⁶

And another great battle was at hand, and for the first time since the fight for Sari Bair practically the whole of the Australian and New Zealand troops were fighting together. On 1st October 1st Auckland billeted in the Ypres north area and throughout the night and the following day there was desultory shelling which caused a few casualties. Then on the night of the 2nd- 3rd October 1st and 3rd Auckland took over the front line.¹⁶

Two attacks were planned for the New Zealand Division. The first, to be undertaken by 1st and 4th Brigades, had the Gravenstafel Heights section of the Broodseinde Ridge as its objective. Success in this operation would clear the way for the final assault on the Belle Vue Spur and Passchendaele, which was to be undertaken in part by 2nd and 3rd Brigades. For the Gravenstafel action the orders were to penetrate the enemy defence for about 1,700 yards. Crossing the Hannebeek Stream 1st Auckland, 1st Wellington, 3rd Otago and 3rd Auckland were to take the enemy system of trenches, pillboxes, and strong points.¹⁶

On the night of 3rd- 4th October 1st Auckland, lying close to the enemy strong points at Winzig and Aviatik Farm, throughout the night came under considerable machine-gun fire causing many casualties.¹⁶

Between the jumping-off point and the first objectives was the bed of the little brook of Hannebeek, which heavy shell fire had turned into a wide bog. Crossing this swamp was a challenge and progress slow. German shell fire was playing with great accuracy on the narrow tracks and only the softness of the ground in which the shells failed to explode or were smothered saved the attacking troops from significant losses. Immediately on the other side of the swamp resistance was met. Up the hillside were groups of the enemy, some demoralised and ready to surrender while others fought desperately. The leading Companies of 1st Auckland had a bitter fight for Winzig – the garrison of this stronghold were brave and fought with desperate courage – all night their machine-guns were active as the Aucklanders closed in on them.¹⁶

Men went down fast and Frank, with a gunshot to the left side of his chest, was one of the casualties. Instant death probably being avoided by the bullet hitting a bible, card and photo of his baby brother which he had in his top pocket. He was picked up by the NZ field ambulance and transferred to No 3 Australian Casualty Clearing Station. The Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) was part of the casualty evacuation chain, further back from the front line than the Aid Posts and Field Ambulances it was manned by troops of the Royal Army Medical Corps, with attached Royal Engineers and men of the Army Service Corps. The job of the CCS was to treat a man sufficiently for his return to duty or, as in most cases, to enable him to be evacuated to a Base Hospital. It was not a place for a long-term stay. CCS's were generally located on or near railway lines to facilitate movement of casualties from the battlefield to the hospitals. Although large CCS's moved quite frequently.^{1,17,22}

In a serious condition Frank was transferred and admitted to No 57 General hospital in France on 7th October. General Hospitals were often just temporary stays for the wounded needing specialist work, who would then be transported by rail to a nearby port then across the Channel by hospital ship to one of the English Hospitals.^{1,18}

On 13th October Frank was transferred to a hospital ship and arrived in England where he was promptly admitted to No 2 New Zealand General Hospital London (Walton on Thames). It was the first hospital in the United Kingdom used specifically for soldiers of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. During the war approximately 27,000 New Zealand soldiers were treated at the hospital which opened in 1915 by requisitioning of the 15th century Mount Felix Estate, a grand house with beautiful gardens.^{1,19}

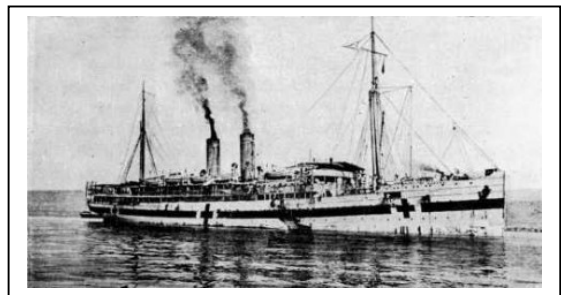
It was found Frank's gunshot wound had entered below the left nipple and exited through the left thoracic wall leaving him with chest pain, diminished breath, sounds and vocal resonance but no cough. On 10th November a medical board recommended Frank be returned to New Zealand for a six-month recuperation in Hospital. As a result, on 11th November 1917 Frank was declared unfit for war service.¹

Frank's platoon sergeant remarked *One of the last things Frank did for me was to volunteer to get water for the platoon, on the night previous to our attack at Passchendaele. A journey back through a sea of mud to the accompaniment of heavy shelling is not one to be undertaken with a light heart. But his fine behaviour was not confined to this one incident. I found I could rely on him always and he never failed in courage and perseverance.*³

On Christmas Eve 1917 Frank embarked on *SS Maheno* to return home.¹

SS MAHENO

*An ocean liner belonging to the Union Company of New Zealand operating in the Tasman Sea. The 5,000-ton steel-hulled ship was powered by three Parsons turbines, giving a speed of 17.5 knots. It could carry up to 420 passengers and had a refrigerated cargo hold. During WW I Maheno was converted into a hospital ship using money raised by an appeal by the Governor-General. It was fitted with eight wards and two operating theatres and had a medical team of five doctors, 61 orderlies from the Army Medical Corps, a matron, and thirteen nursing sisters.*²⁰



On 1st February 1918 he disembarked and was admitted to Auckland Hospital. Four weeks later he was taken off strength, considered no longer physically fit for war service on account of wounds received in action. World War One brought sadness to the family with the only son of fighting age, coming home injured after a German sniper hit him at Passchendaele.^{1,5,22}

On his discharge from the Military Frank entered the Auckland Training College to resume his Teacher Training.^{1,5}

Sadly a year later on 27th January 1919 Frank Rupert Wooster aged 24 passed away in the Rawene Hospital in Northland. Death was due to the stomach entering the thorax through the perforation in the diaphragm causing acute vomiting, from which he died.^{1,5}

The medical review team remarked: Death attributable solely to the fact that examining military doctors failed to find out the cause of his illness. An X-ray examination should have revealed the perforation – NO X-ray examination took place! While nothing can bring this boy back to life, an investigation may force the military authorities to be more careful with the examination of other wounded soldiers in the future.¹



Frank was entitled to the British War Medal (17th August 1923), the Victory Medal (17th August 1923) a Plaque (16th August 1923) and a Scroll (16th August 1923) .¹

British War Medal, 1914-18²¹

The silver or bronze medal was awarded to officers and men of the British and Imperial Forces who either entered a theatre of war or service overseas, between 5th August 1914 and 11th November 1918 inclusive. The front of the medal depicts the head of George V. The recipient's service number, rank, name, and unit was impressed on the rim.

Approximately 6.5 million British War Medals were issued.



Allied Victory Medal²¹

Eligibility for this medal was more restrictive and not everyone who received the British War Medal 'Squeak' also received the Victory Medal 'Wilfred'. However, in general, all recipients of 'Wilfred' also received 'Squeak.' The medal, designed by W. McMillan, depicts a winged classical figure representing victory on the front. The recipient's service number, rank, name, and unit were impressed on the rim.

Approximately 5.7 million Allied Victory Medals were issued.



Memorial Death Plaque²¹

The New Zealand Memorial Plaque was awarded to the next of kin of New Zealand servicemen and women who were killed while serving overseas, or who died of wounds received while serving overseas, during the First World War.

The plaque is not designed to be worn.



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