

CASE STUDY TWO

My great-uncle's memory

Forgotten by the authorities, John Stephenson was determined to get his great-uncle the commemoration he deserved

The names PT Stephenson and CC Stephenson are engraved with 263 other casualties of World War I on a local memorial. I knew that they were my grandfather's brothers and that they had died in the War, but nothing else.

In the late 1980s, an uncle awakened my curiosity in family history by telling me the story of how the Stephensons had originally come from Bamburgh in Northumberland to the Midlands in the middle of the 19th century. One of my father's cousins was able to give me a few additional names and dates, and this oral history laid the foundations for my future research. I had also visited the family grave on several occasions – and on the bottom it said: "And of their two eldest sons Percy and Charley who did not return from the 1914-18 War."

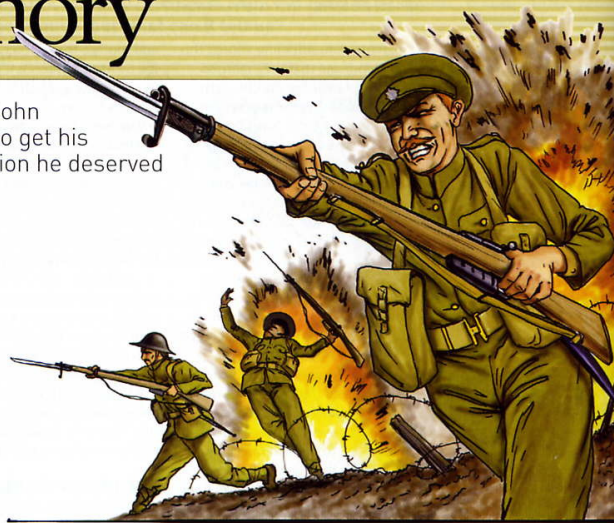
GREAT-UNCLE PERCY

Percy's full name – Percival Thomas Weir Stephenson – led me to discover some more details about the family. Looking at the censuses for 1841-71 at the Northumberland County Record Office in Morpeth (this was before they were available online), I discovered that his father's mother had a sister called Mary who had married Thomas Weir.

Percival's father had been born in their house and was brought up by Mary and Thomas Weir as his mother was unmarried. The 1881 Census showed that Mary Weir (now a widow) with her immediate family and a few Stephensons (including Percival's father) were living near Tamworth.

Wanting to discover more, I visited Birmingham Central Library in order to search the General Register Office quarterly indexes. Sending off for the certificates, I soon discovered that my grandfather's parents married in central Birmingham in September 1886.

Settling in Tamworth, Thomas and Elizabeth had three daughters and four sons. Meticulous reading of the census returns on microfilm at Tamworth



Library provided me with a fuller picture. When the 1901 Census became available in 2002, I saw the family all together for the first time.

GROWING UP

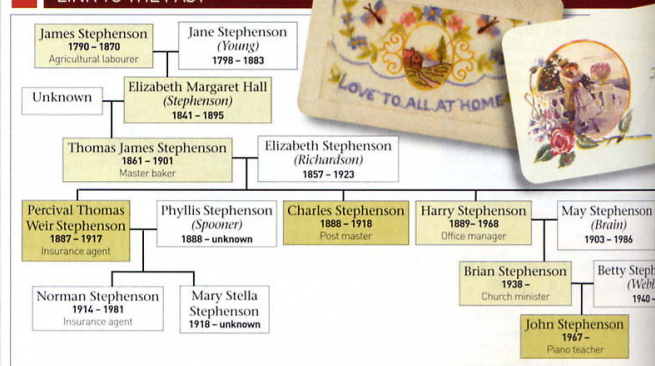
Unfortunately Thomas, a master baker and confectioner, died in November 1901. His eldest son, Percival, at the age of 14, had to become the 'man of the house'. The bakery business was sold and the family moved into a rented

house – some of the family lived there for the next 90 years. Even though Percival got a job and his mother was busy as a seamstress, it was difficult to manage. One of the daughters had to live with friends.

Gradually the family began to get on its feet; going to church and playing sport were favourite pastimes. Percival was a good water polo player, Charles keen marksman and Harry was captain of Tamworth Castle football team.

BEST WISHES: A series of postcards sent home by one of the brothers to Lizzie, their sister

LINK TO THE PAST



In 1912 Percival married Phyllis Spooner. By 1914 promotion to assistant superintendent with the Refuge Assurance Company necessitated a move to Northampton for the little family, and a son arrived. Then the Great War cast its shadow.

CASUALTY OF WAR

All four brothers joined up, trained and then went to the front. Edgar received the Military Medal for bravery. Percival joined the Army Service Corps, and was then transferred to The Royal Fusiliers (2nd Battalion).

In 1917, aged just 30, Percival was killed at Passchendaele. What might have been read casually in the newspaper as just another death by many residents of Tamworth, was devastating news to Percival's mother, family and pregnant wife. A daughter was born a few months later and Percival was described as 'deceased' on the birth certificate.

Within six months his brother Charles was also killed in action. Charles' widow lived another 48 years, and never remarried. They had been engaged for six years and spent most of their two years of marriage apart due to the War. Their mother died three days after the War Memorial in Tamworth Church was dedicated. The death certificate said it was due to a cerebral haemorrhage, but perhaps it was simply her grief.

ABOVE LEFT: Percival in his Army uniform
ABOVE: Percival's brother, Edgar, survived the War

MEMORIAL

TYNE COT
The memorial bears the names of almost 35,000 officers and men whose graves are not known. The semicircular flint wall is over 150 metres long. The cemetery contains the graves of nearly 12,000 Commonwealth servicemen from WWI. Of this total, 70 per cent are unknown. It is the largest British war cemetery in the world.

TIMELINE

A hero's life

16 June 1887: Percival is born in Tamworth
12 September 1912: Married Phyllis Spooner in Wilnecote
9 June 1914: A son, Norman, born in Northampton
26 October 1917: Percival killed in action aged 30
16 April 1918: Charles killed in action aged 30
1 May 1918: A daughter, Mary, born in Wilnecote
7 October 1922: Phyllis (described as widow) married again in Tamworth
27 May 1923: War Memorial in Tamworth dedicated
28 February 2005: MoD agrees that Percival should be commemorated by the CWGC
11 October 2005: Percival's death certificate is finally issued by the GRO
Percival's name will be added to the Tyne Cot memorial eventually

If this was the end of the story, it would have been sad yet fairly common. Thousands of families in many countries experienced the loss of loved ones during this time. But when I started to search for more information on Percival, his story turned out to be different.

MISSING DEATH CERTIFICATE

I'd taken a family and local history course with the Open University in the early 1990s so had a long list of places to visit and documents to search. This I did over several years. I visited St Catherine's House in London to search the WWI death index. But Percival wasn't mentioned. I tried all the variations of his name with different spellings too – nothing. (Since 1997 the Family Records Centre have held all of the GRO indexes.)

I went to Birmingham Central Library again. Checking only the relevant

volumes of *Soldiers who died in the Great War* – no Percival. Eventually I found his Medal Index Card at The National Archives, but his death was not here either. I even looked in both WO 363 (The Burnt Series) and WO 364 (The Unburnt Series) at TNA to see if he or his brother's Service Records had survived the bombing in WWII. Only Charles' had.

Once the Commonwealth War Graves Commission had put their database of War casualties on the internet (www.cwgc.org), I searched for Percival. But again with no success. So, in 2003 I contacted the CWGC to try to find out more. They were very helpful and said that if I could supply them with Percival's death certificate to show that he had died as a result of the War and maybe his service record, they would get the Ministry of Defence to decide whether he should be commemorated or not.



Annie Smith Stephenson
1891 - unknown
Maggie Williams Stephenson
1893 - 1975
Edgar Stephenson
1894 - 1984
Archdeacon
Lizzie Dakin Stephenson
1896 - 1980

DEATH CERTIFICATE: Percival's death certificate was finally issued on 11 October 2005 – nearly 88 years late

CERTIFIED COPY OF ENTRY OF DEATH SAW 023502
Application Number 12005/015/16
Registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages (Special Provisions) Act 1957

Return of Warmer Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Men of the 2nd Battalion The Royal Fusiliers
Killed in Action at the time of the Battle of Passchendaele, 1917. War of 1914 to 1918.

Rank	Name (Full Name)	Age	Country of Birth	Date of Death	Place of Death	Cause of Death
Lt Col	STEPHENSON Percival Thomas Weir	30	England	26/10/1917	France and Flanders	Died of Wounds

For Entry relating to the deceased: Percival Thomas Weir STEPHENSON

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of the certified copy of an entry in a Service Departments Register.
Given at the General Register Office, under the seal of the said Office, the 11th day of October 2005

By the Registrar General

NOTE: This is a certified copy of the original entry in the Service Departments Register. It is not a legal document for the purpose of proving death. For legal purposes, the original entry in the Service Departments Register must be produced.

NATIONAL DEATH AND OBITUARY RECORDS TO BE AVAILABLE FOR ACCESS BY THE PUBLIC ON THE GRO WEBSITE (WWW.GRO.CO.UK) FROM 1 JANUARY 2006

WARNING: A CERTIFICATE IS NOT EVIDENCE OF IDENTITY



"In 1917, Percival was killed at Passchendaele. What was just another death in the newspapers, was devastating news to his family"

I had neither of the documents. Reading through postings on The Great War Forum at www.1914-1918.net, I discovered that Percival wasn't alone – there were a number of other men who hadn't been commemorated by the CWGC.

EXPERT ADVICE

Being unable to discover Percy's death in the indexes, I even tried sending off for his death certificate using his age, date of death, service number, and regiment as qualifying information. I was told that there was no such entry, but all of the evidence I had suggested there should be. Where to turn next?

ABOVE LEFT:
A family photo
taken in 1908/9.

On the back row
are Lizzie, Harry,
Annie, Margaret
and Edgar. On
the front are
Percy, Elizabeth
and Charles
ABOVE: Percy
and Phyllis with
their son, Norman
– taken in 1917

Anthony Adolph was the expert in the firing line on the *Your Family Tree* online forum's first live Q&A session in 2005. I decided to give him the facts that I had and see if he had any expert suggestions to offer. He did! I followed his advice and wrote off to the Overseas Section of the General Register Office enclosing all of the documentary evidence that I had and waited. They had to check with the MoD that a death certificate should be issued for my great-uncle. Amazingly about three weeks later, almost 88 years late to the day, they issued my great-uncle's death certificate. But there was more to come.

For a few months I'd been trying to arrange to visit my father's cousin. At last a time and date was decided. I gathered together lots of information to share: certificates, photos, newspaper clippings, wills, maps... I knew we would have a good time, but I wasn't prepared for what she gave me. There before my eyes was a photo of my grandfather with all his siblings and his mother. My brother is the spitting image of Percival. She also gave me some photos of Percival with his family and Charles with his wife.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

But it was in June 2005 that I got the real surprise. I was reading the latest *Tamworth Herald* when I saw a grainy photo of Percival! The headline said, "WWI soldier to be honoured – 87 years after he fell in battle." A local historian who had been researching WWI casualties in the district had also discovered that Percival hadn't been honoured by the CWGC. He'd written to them in 2001 about the matter. Four years later, the Ministry of Defence decided that it was right to commemorate Percival.

OFFICIAL RECORD: A copy of Percival's Medal Index Card

Name		Service No.		Remarks	
STEPHENSON		2-10-1917		Pte	
Residential		7/10/1917		3023	
Medal		Date		Remarks	
Victory		1917			
Service		Date		Remarks	
Date		Date		Remarks	
Honours of War		Date of entry		Remarks	

INSIDER INFO

The importance of local newspapers

Microfilm copies of the *Tamworth Herald* in the local library were a key source of evidence

Through local newspaper reports I discovered a lot about the family and the times in which they lived. Sports events were covered in great detail, as were obituaries and other family announcements. Percival's widow and some of the extended family placed In Memoriam adverts on the anniversary of his death for four years (she remarried then).

Duty called, and he was there, to do his bit and take his share; his heart was good, his spirit brave, his resting place is a hero's grave. (1918)

In loving memory of my dear husband and daddy. A light is from our household gone, a voice we loved is stilled, a place is vacant at our hearth, which can never be filled. Never forgotten by his loving wife and children. (1920)

In proud and loving memory of my dear husband. We do not know the pain he bore, we did not see him die, we only know he closed his eyes, without a last goodbye. Too dearly loved to be forgotten. From his ever loving wife and children. (1921)

It was reading these personal statements of grief and loss that spurred me on to continue to make sure that Percival was remembered by the authorities. Today, many local newspapers regularly print photos from their archives. I try to imagine my ancestors walking through the picture. Such contemporary accounts really make the dates come alive.

CONTACT

BIRMINGHAM LOCAL STUDIES AND HISTORY SERVICE

6th Floor, Birmingham Central Library, Chamberlain Square, Birmingham, B3 3HQ
[w] www.birmingham.gov.uk

TAMWORTH LIBRARY

Corporation Street, Tamworth, Staffordshire, B79 7DN
[e] tamworth.library@staffordshire.gov.uk

GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Overseas Section, General Register Office, Trafalgar Road, Birkdale, Southport, PR8 2HH
[w] www.gro.gov.uk
[e] overseas.gro@ons.gov.uk (overseas section)

THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU
[w] www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

THE FAMILY RECORDS CENTRE

1 Myddelton Street, LONDON, EC1R 1UW
[w] www.familyrecords.gov.uk

THE PASSCHENDAELE ARCHIVES

Jan Van der Fraenen, Ieperstraat 5, B-8980 Zonnebeke, Belgium
[e] archives@passchendaele.be

NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY RECORD OFFICE

[w] www.northumberland.gov.uk/cs_archives.asp

COMMONWEALTH WAR GRAVES COMMISSION

[w] www.cwgc.org

FURTHER READING

ALL QUIET ON THE HOME FRONT

R van Emden and S Humphries, Headline Book Publishing, 2004, ISBN: 0755311892

It took about four months before the CWGC next updated their online database, but Percival's name is now where it belongs. Eventually he will be added to the official Tyne Cot Memorial where his brother Charles' name is already engraved. My next step is to scan the precious photos of Percival and send the scans to the Passchendaele Archives. They are preparing to remember the 90th anniversary of the Third battle of Ypres, immortalised as Passchendaele 1917, by assembling as many details and photos of the soldiers who fought.

Last year's Remembrance Sunday was particularly special. It seemed that it was not just my family remembering and honouring Percival – the nation was too. ■

BY JOHN STEPHENSON

John is a piano teacher in Warwickshire and is married with one son. He has been tracing his family's history for about 15 years.

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