

Lance Corporal William Sevier

WR/254732 Royal Engineers

07 February 1920



William was born in Blissford on about 29 Aug 87. He was the son of agricultural labourer Henry Sevier, later a dealer and gardener, born in 1853 and his wife Sarah Charlotte (51), née Ings, an agricultural labourer's daughter from Frogham. William had four sisters, Elizabeth (73) who was born before Sarah's marriage to Henry on 07 May 76, Ada Kate (80), Ethel Elsie May (90) and Winnie (94), and two brothers, Edward (82) and Walter Henry Albert (89)¹.

In 1891, the Seviers were living at Hungerford, Hyde where presumably 13-year-old William was still at school, but by 1901, 23-year-old William was lodging at 212 Earlsfield Road, Wandsworth with Fordingbridge-born Emily Marshman and was a bricklayer. George Kenchington also lived there, another Fordingbridge connection. By 1911 William was living on his own at The Garage, Moundsmere Manor, Preston Candover where he was a domestic groom employed by farmer Wilfred Buckley who owned that stately pile.

Unlike about 80 percent of WW1 Soldiers' Records (SRs) that were destroyed in the World War 2 (WW2) London blitz, fortuitously William's survives. Still single, he was attested into the Army Service Corps (ASC) in Aldershot on 14 Apr 15 giving his address as Rowton House, Hammersmith and his trade as labourer. Rowton Houses was a chain of hostels built in London by the Victorian philanthropist Lord Rowton to provide decent accommodation for working men in place of the squalid lodging houses of the time.

William was given the regimental number of T4/096349. His enlistment date and the T4 prefix indicate that he was one of the last of 'Kitchener's Volunteers' that formed the British 4th Army. William was recommended to be a packer and loader. Posted to the ASC Depot for training, he was raised to the position of Lance Corporal (LCpl) on 12 May 15. This early elevation was a temporary appointment, not a paid rank, but whatever supervisory talents William had, it seems that his age and experience was deemed useful. He then joined his first operational unit, the 28th Railway Supply Detachment (RSD), part of the 19th (Western) Division.

Railways were the backbone of the Western Front, serving as the primary lifeline that sustained the massive industrial armies. Without them, the static trench warfare of WW1 would have been logistically impossible to maintain. A single division required around 1,000 tons of supplies daily. Only extensive rail networks could haul the millions of tons of ammunition², food, and building materials to the front.

The railway supply chain was highly specialized, broken into distinct tiers: mainline railways connected national ports and industrial hubs to massive supply depots situated miles behind the front lines. Mainline, standard-gauge railways were also vital for rapidly shifting troop reserves to critical defensive points or staging areas for offensives.

As the ground near the front was heavily shelled and rendered impassable to heavy trucks, the British Army alone built over 1,100 kilometres of 60cm 'trench railways'. These narrow-gauge trains could weave through destroyed terrain directly to artillery batteries and front-line trenches without

¹ Walter served in the Hampshire Regiment, then the Labour Corps in WW1, including overseas, but was discharged in Sep 18 suffering from neurasthenia.

² The British army alone fired some 170 million shells.

damaging the ground. Understandably, railway tracks and supply dumps were frequent targets for enemy artillery and bombing.



Unloading flour from ships and loading into railway trucks. Calais, Mar 17 (IWM (Q 4783).

An RSD was mobilised for each division, but they were Lines of Communication units rather than divisional troops. RSDs consisted of one officer and 61 other ranks, and they were specialized ASC logistical units tasked with unloading a division's daily supplies (rations, forage, water, and ammunition) at the railhead. The RSD crews would then pass these materials onto the Divisional Supply Column to take forward by road, or directly load incoming supply trains at base ports.

While RSDs managed the cargo at the terminal end, the actual building and physical operation of the military trains in combat zones was handled by the Railway Operating Division (ROD) of the Royal Engineers (RE). The ROD was

formed in 1915 to operate railways in the many theatres of the war. It was largely composed of railway employees and operated both standard gauge and narrow-gauge railways.

William deployed to France on 17 Jul 15, travelling from Ludgershall to Southampton by train, then to Le Havre on the *PS Empress Queen*³, remaining on the Western Front throughout the war until 30 May 19.

On 22 Oct 15, William was moved to the 11th RSD, seemingly employed either as a train conductor or coordinator (the SR is indistinct). Sadly, the actual operational whereabouts of these specialised RSD units has not been discovered. Notwithstanding, on 18 Mar 16, William re-badged into the RE⁴ with the new regimental number of 153500. On 14 May 16 he was appointed as a paid LCpl. The number of paid positions in a unit was strictly regulated by the Army Council based on establishment quotas. They received a slight pay increase over a Private (typically earning 3d to 4d more per day).

Name.	SEVIER	Rank	Pvt. T. 1096219	Regt. No.	WR/254732
	William				153500
Medal.	VICTORY	Roll.	P. 102864	Page.	13120
	BRITISH		17. 6/19. C.		710
	15. STAR				
Theatre of War first served in	1.				
Date of entry therein	17. 7. 15				

William's Medal Index Card (TNA WO 372/17/227974).

It is assumed that William's overall employer thereafter was the ROD, but again his places of employment have not been detected. Nevertheless, he was awarded a 1st Good Conduct Badge on 14 Apr 17. In 1918, the War Office authorised the renumbering of men serving as Royal Engineers waterways, railways, road and quarrying troops. The new numbers had a 'WR' prefix and William's was WR/254732.

³ 19 Div HQ GS War Diary (WO 95/2052).

⁴ Photograph of cap badge by kind permission of Badges of the World at: www.badgesoftheworld.com/british-military/cap-badges/ (Accessed on 16/02/17).



British troops remained in France and Germany into 1919 primarily to enforce the Armistice terms, ensure a secure military occupation until the Paris Peace Conference finalized treaties, and manage a phased demobilization designed to prevent mass unemployment in Britain's transition to a peacetime economy. Presumably, William was still needed to help run the railways after the Armistice as he remained abroad. On 11 Apr 19, he was re-mustered as a Sapper Clerk (Checker).

William finally returned to England on 30 May 19, and on 28 Jun 19 he was transferred to the Class 'Z' reserve on demobilisation.⁵ It seems that he returned to the family home at Hungerford thereafter. Sadly, William became ill and was admitted into the Fordingbridge Workhouse Infirmary. He died there on 07 Feb 20 of 'asthma, tuberculosis and cancer'. He was aged 42.

William is interred in a Commonwealth war grave⁶ at Stuckton Congregational Chapel Yard.⁷ His mother Sarah had his headstone engraved with: *'Thy will be done. Gone but not forgotten'*.

It seems that Sarah applied for a service pension after William's death, however this was refused. In WW1, the British government provided war graves for all fallen soldiers to honour their ultimate sacrifice, but pensions for mothers were strictly means-tested. If a mother did not face severe financial hardship or could not prove her son regularly sent money home before enlisting, she was denied a pension.

William was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.

Researched by Mike Richardson.

This information has been gathered using records held by Ancestry.com, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, The National Archives, and in on-line and published histories. The photographs are the copyright of their owners, as shown. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this article is correct.



⁵ The Class Z Army Reserve was a contingency created in Dec 18 to ensure a rapid recall of trained soldiers. It was designed as a safeguard in case Germany rejected the peace treaty. Veterans mobilized 'for the duration of the war' were placed in this reserve. It was abolished on 31 Mar 20.

⁶ Service and ex-Service personnel who died from causes attributable to their service between 04 Aug 14 and 31 Aug 21, including illness, were entitled to a CWGC war grave.

⁷ See: <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/casualty-details/362517/william-sevier/>.