

Private Charles Cleveland Stephinson[©]

Regimental number: 307234

1st/8th Battalion, West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince of Wales's Own)

born: 1893 - died: 24 July 1917

Private Charles Cleveland Stephinson¹ was born in 1893 in Sunderland, Durham, the son of John Charlton and Ina Ardella Stephinson.² John was born in 1859, also in Sunderland. Ina (nee Monroe) was born in Missouri, United States, the daughter of Franklin Monroe, a farmer. At some point John moved to the United States because, on 29 January 1885, he and Ina, a dressmaker, married in Lexington, Lafayette, Missouri. John and Ina's first son, Frank Charlton., was born in the United States in about 1888.

In 1892, John, a labourer, returned to the United Kingdom with his young family.³ They sailed on SS *Ethiopia*, arriving in Glasgow, Scotland, on 15 June 1892. They probably established themselves in Sunderland, where Charles was born the following year.

In 1901, the family was living at 118 Victor Street in Sunderland, where John was a painter and window glass dealer.⁴ Soon after Charles' father died on 31 January 1910,⁵ the family moved to 32 Tetland Street in Sunderland.⁶ In 1911, Ina, a widow, and her two sons were still in the house painting and decorating business. Ina was working from home in the business and was an employer. Her son Frank was assisting in the business and Charles was an apprentice house painter.

Charles enlisted in the West Yorkshire Regiment (Prince of Wales's Own) in Sunderland⁷ in about July 1915.⁸ Two years later, he was serving with the 8th Battalion, which was stationed near Nieuport, Belgium. The battalion was subjected to heavy gas shelling.

On the night of the 21/22nd Nieuport was subjected to severe bombardments of gas shells mixed with H.E. [high explosive]. These bombardments took place at 9 pm and 11 pm on the 21st and again at 2 am on the 22nd, each bombardment lasting for half an hour. The wind was about 3 mph, warm and ideal for gas shells. On each occasion the gas shells were mixed with H.E. thus causing the gas shells to be mistaken for "duds" in the first bombardment. After the first bombardment the effects of the gas seems very slight. About midnight many men became sick and started vomiting, and in consequence could not keep their box respirators on. Undoubtedly many casualties were caused by the mixture of H.E. with gas shells, the latter being mistaken for "duds," and by the smell being unfamiliar. The main symptoms were intense pain in the eyes, and conjunctivitis, vomiting of the seasick type, sometimes Diarrhoea and abdominal pain, skin - erythema. Later on it was found that Bronchitis developed in a number of cases, turning in some instances to Broncho-pneumonia. The shells appear to have been of the 77 m/m type with single copper driving band, shoulder painted a drab yellow, body painted blue with a small drab cross. The smell of the gas was that of mustard and slightly of garlic. About 7 am on the 22nd, the men's eyes became so affected the blindness came on. Every officer and man with the battalion in Nieuport was affected and, with the exception of 4 officers and 40 men, had to be sent to hospital on the 22nd. The total casualties of the battalion up to the night of the 22.7.17 were 18 officers and 662 other ranks.⁹

Charles may have been one of these wounded soldiers, because he died at No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station on 25 July of gas poisoning, at the age of 23.¹⁰

At the end of July 1917, No. 1 CCCS was located in Adinkerke, Belgium.¹¹ Charles was buried in Coxyde Military Cemetery (Grave Reference: Plot I, Row F, Grave 23) and his mother requested the following inscription for his gravestone:

EVER REMEMBERED BY
HIS LOVING MOTHER

Coxyde Military Cemetery (located near the village of Koksijde in Belgium) is located about 7 kilometres from Adinkerke and was about 10 kilometres behind the front line in 1917. Commonwealth troops had relieved the French forces in the area and the village was used for rest billets. Although the village was occasionally shelled, the cemetery, which had been started by French troops, was reasonably safe. "It became the most important of the Commonwealth cemeteries on the Belgian coast and was used at night for the burial of the dead brought back from the front line."¹² There are now just over 1,500 Commonwealth graves from the Great War in the cemetery.

Charles' mother was notified of her son's death. She also received the monies owing to him from the army upon his death.¹³ Charles was awarded the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918) and the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre).¹⁴

Charles' older brother Frank also served and lost his life in the Great War. In 1912, he had travelled back to the United States—the country of his birth.¹⁵ It is not known when he returned to England, but he enlisted in the Durham Light Infantry (Regimental number: 205143) in December 1915.¹⁶ He was a master painter and decorator. He first spent a couple of years in the Army Reserve, but was mobilized in April 1917. He joined the Western Front in Etaples, France and transferred to the 8th Battalion of the Yorkshire and Lancashire Regiment (Regimental number: 235547) in July 1917. He was killed in action on 21 October 1917—just three months after his brother. Frank is commemorated on the Tyne Cot Memorial, near Ypres, Belgium, which bears the names of almost 35,000 soldiers whose graves are not known.¹⁷ Like his brother, Frank was awarded two medals—the British War Medal and the Victory Medal.¹⁸

In December 1919, a friend wrote a letter on behalf of Frank's mother, requesting information on his burial place. Despite having lost her only two children within three months in 1917, Ina kindly acknowledges the receipt of the private belongings of her son and expressed her appreciation to the army for "the system & care necessary to enable you to return articles from deceased soldiers, as without doubt, it will be a huge undertaking."¹⁹

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¹ The family name appears as both Stephenson and Stephinson but, since the birth record for both Charles and his father shows it as Stephinson, this spelling has been retained for this biography.

² *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org; accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Stephinson, Charles Cleveland, Service No: 307234

³ "UK, Incoming Passenger Lists, 1878–1960," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk; accessed 2 July 2017), entry for John C Stephenson, Official number: 68064

⁴ “1901 England Census,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 May 2017), entry for Charles E Stephenson [*sic*], Registration district: Sunderland, Sub-registration district: Monkwearmouth, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 6a, Piece: 4721, Folio: 206, Page: 22, Household schedule number: 149

⁵ “England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1966,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 May 2017), entry for John Charlton Stephenson [*sic*]

⁶ “1911 England Census,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 May 2017), entry for Charles C Stephenson, Registration district: Sunderland, Registration district number: 555, Sub-registration district: Sunderland North, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 14, Piece: 30226

⁷ “UK, Soldiers Died in the Great War, 1914–1919,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 23 May 2017), entry for Charles Cleveland Stephenson

⁸ Based on “War Gratuity Calculator” (<https://wargratitude.wordpress.com/2015/08/16/gratuity-calculator/>: accessed 18 May 2017); “UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Charles Cleveland Stephenson [*sic*]

⁹ “UK, WWI War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914–1920,” Regiment or unit: Prince of Wales's Own (West Yorkshire) Regiment, Sub-unit: 1/8th Battalion, Division: 49th Division, Diary dates: 1915 Apr - 1917 Dec, Piece description: Piece 2795/2: 1/8 Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment (1915 Apr - 1917 Dec), Piece number: 2795

¹⁰ “No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station,” *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 5 July 2017), entry for Stephenson, C.

¹¹ “War Diaries of the First World War: 1st Canadian Casualty Clearing Station 1914/08/13-1919/03/31,” *Library and Archives Canada* (<http://data4.collectionscanada.gc.ca/>: accessed 7 September 2014)

¹² “Coxyde Military Cemetery,” *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 10 July 2017)

¹³ “UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Charles Cleveland Stephenson [*sic*]

¹⁴ “British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Charles C Stephenson

¹⁵ “New York, Passenger Lists, 1820–1957,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Frank Charlton Stephenson [*sic*]

¹⁶ “British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Frank Charlton Stephenson [*sic*]. Unless otherwise noted, all information about Frank's military services comes from this source.

¹⁷ *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (<http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/85900/TYNE%20COT%20MEMORIAL>: accessed 11 July 2017)

¹⁸ “British Army WWI Medal Rolls Index Cards, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 11 July 2017), entry for Frank C Stephenson [*sic*]

¹⁹ “British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920,” *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 10 July 2017), entry for Frank Charlton Stephenson [*sic*]