

Rifleman John Lewis[©]

Regimental number: 2200

3rd Battalion, Rifle Brigade (The Prince Consort's Own)

born: 3 January 1897—died: 13 May 1916

Rifleman John Lewis was just 19 years old when he died in 1916. According to his attestation for service, he was also 19 when he enlisted two years earlier.¹ He probably lied about his age—then 17—in order to be able to enlist. At the beginning of the Great War, a man had to be 18 years old to enlist and could not be sent overseas until he was 19.²

John was born in Chorlton, Manchester, on 3 January 1897,³ the son of William Lewis and the former Annie McKay.⁴ He was baptized in St George's Church in Hulme, Manchester, a month later. At the time, the family was living at 5 Runcorn Street in Hulme, where John's father was a dock labourer.⁵ Neither of his parents were from Lancashire—his father William was born in about 1868 in Clockenoy, Denbighshire, Wales, and his mother in about 1868 in Ardywanig, Kincardineshire, Scotland.⁶ They married at Booth Chapel in the parish of Walton on the Hill in Lancashire on 24 August 1892.⁷

William and Annie had eight children.⁸ The first son, Hugh, was born on 1 March 1894,⁹ followed by a daughter, Bessie, born on 6 August 1895.¹⁰ John followed. Then there were four more children: Ellen (born on 28 December 1898),¹¹ Margaret (born on 5 June 1902),¹² Jane (born on 19 August 1906)¹³ and William (born on 7 July 1909).¹⁴ The family lost three children in childhood. Their first child, Hugh, died when he was just 6 years old. He was buried on 27 June 1900 in Southern Cemetery, Manchester.¹⁵ Their youngest daughter, Jane, also died at the age of 2 in 1908.¹⁶ It is not known who the eighth child was, but he or she probably died in infancy.

In 1901, the family was living at 13 Nancy Street in Hulme.¹⁷ They lived at that address until at least 1911. By then, John's father was working on the Manchester Ship Canal and John had become a greengrocer's porter.¹⁸

The ship canal is a 36-mile-long waterway that links Manchester to the Irish Sea, near Liverpool. It was opened in January 1894 and, at the time, was the largest river navigation canal in the world. Two years after its opening there began the development of Trafford Park, which eventually became the largest industrial estate in Europe.¹⁹

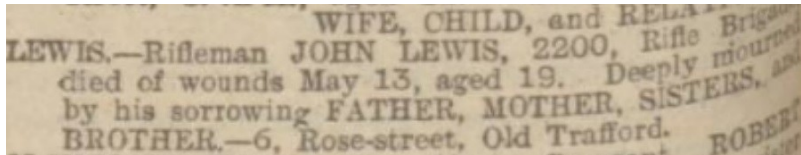
This is perhaps why the family had moved to Old Trafford, next to Trafford Park, by the time John enlisted.²⁰ John was obviously keen to serve. He enlisted in Manchester on 2 September 1914—just a month after war was declared. He said that he was 19 years and 241 days old—in fact, he was 17 years and 241 days old. He was 5' 6" tall and had a fresh complexion, blue eyes and black hair and was working as a clerk.

He transferred to the Front with the 3rd Battalion of the Rifle Brigade nearly six months later—he was probably anxious to see action by then. He arrived on the Western Front on 23 February 1915—just a month after his 18th birthday. A month after arriving, he received a gunshot wound to arm. A year later, he had some dental issues that were treated in the field. Then, on 10 May 1916, he was wounded again—this time fatally.

In May 1916, John's battalion was at Hill 63, near Messines, south of Ypres, in Belgium.²¹ It would be the site of major battle a year later but, in 1916, the British troops were bogged down in low-lying land around Messines Ridge, with the German troops observing them from the higher ground.²² In early May, John's battalion was relieved by the 8th Battalion of The Buffs (East Kent Regiment) and moved into Brigade Reserve. For five days, the troops were divided into working parties. What they were doing was not noted in the war diary but, on 10 May, John was injured, receiving a shell wound to his head. He was one of 140 admitted to No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station. He died three days later²³—he may have been one of only three soldiers to die at No. 1 CCCS that day.

He was buried in Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension, Nord (Plot II, Row B, Grave 86). Bailleul is in France, but near the Belgian border, about 15 kilometres southwest of Ypres. It was occupied in October 1914 and became an important hospital centre not just for No. 1 CCCS but also for No. 1 Australian and five British Army casualty clearing stations.²⁴

A letter was sent to his mother at 6 Rose St., Old Trafford, Manchester,²⁵ and his father received the monies owing to him from the army upon his death.²⁶ His parents received the few possessions that John had when he died: a disc, nine letters, three photos, a prayer book, a notebook, a badge, a postcard and a purse.



John's death in action was announced in the *Manchester Evening News* on 30 May 1916.²⁷

Death announcement, *Manchester Evening News*, 30 May 1916

Source: "British newspapers," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk)

John was awarded posthumously the British War Medal (for service overseas between 1914 and 1918), the Victory Medal (for service in an operational theatre) and the 1914–15 Star (for service in the war against Germany between 5 August 1914 and 31 December 1915).

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¹ "British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 4 August 2018), entry for John Lewis. Unless otherwise noted, all information about John's military career comes from this source.

² "The British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918," *The Long, Long Trail* (<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/soldiers/a-soldiers-life-1914-1918/enlisting-into-the-army/>: accessed 16 September 2018)

³ "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 26 September 2018) entry for Lewis, John, Registration district: Chorlton, Volume 08C, Page 938

⁴ "Manchester, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 August 2018), entry for John Lewis, Reference Number: GB127.M383/1/1/8

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 January 2018), entry for John Lewis, Registration district: Chorlton, Registration district number: 464, Sub-registration district: Hulme, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 41, Piece: 23906

⁷ "Liverpool, England, Church of England Marriages and Banns, 1754–1932," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 27 September 2018), entry for William Lewis

⁸ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 January 2018), entry for John Lewis

⁹ "Manchester, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 September 2018), entry for Hugh Lewis, Reference Number: GB127.M383/1/1/8

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- ¹⁰ "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 26 September 2018) entry for Lewis, Bessie, Registration district: Chorlton, Volume 08C, Page 967
- ¹¹ "GRO online index–birth," *General Register Office* (<http://www.gro.gov.uk/gro/content/>: accessed 26 September 2018) entry for Lewis, Ellen, Registration district: Chorlton, Volume 08C, Page 931
- ¹² "Manchester, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 September 2018), entry for Margaret Lewis, Reference Number: GB127.M383/1/1/8
- ¹³ "Manchester, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 September 2018), entry for Margaret Lewis, Reference Number: GB127.M383/1/1/8
- ¹⁴ "Manchester, England, Church of England Births and Baptisms, 1813–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 September 2018), entry for William Lewis, Reference Number: GB127.M383/1/1/9
- ¹⁵ "England & Scotland, Select Cemetery Registers, 1800–2016," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 August 2018), entry for Hugh Lewis
- ¹⁶ "England & Wales, Civil Registration Death Index, 1837–1915," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 21 January 2018), entry for Jane Lewis, Registration district: Chorlton, Inferred county: Lancashire, Volume: 8c, Page: 555
- ¹⁷ "1901 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 11 January 2018), entry for John Lewis, Registration district: Chorlton, Sub-registration district: Hulme, Enumeration district, institution, or vessel: 52, Piece: 3707, Folio: 54, Page: 34, Household schedule number: 189
- ¹⁸ "1911 England Census," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 January 2018), entry for John Lewis
- ¹⁹ "Manchester Ship Canal," *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manchester_Ship_Canal: accessed 29 September 2018)
- ²⁰ "British Army WWI Service Records, 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 4 August 2018), entry for John Lewis. Unless otherwise noted, all information about his military service comes from this source.
- ²¹ "UK, WWI War Diaries (France, Belgium and Germany), 1914–1920," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 5 August 2018), Regiment or Unit: Rifle Brigade (The Prince Consort's Own), Sub-unit: 3rd Battalion, Division: 24th Division, Diary dates: 1915 Nov 1–1917 Mar 31, Piece description: Piece 2206/1-7: 17 Infantry Brigade: 3 Battalion Rifle Brigade (1915 Nov–1919 Apr), Piece number: 2206
- ²² "Actions in the Spring of 1916 (Western Front)," *The Long, Long Trail* (<https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/battles/battles-of-the-western-front-in-france-and-flanders/actions-in-the-spring-of-1916-western-front/>: accessed 27 September 2018)
- ²³ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 5 August 2018), entry for Lewis, J.
- ²⁴ "Bailleul Community Cemetery, Nord," *Commonwealth War Graves Commission* (www.cwgc.org: accessed 17 January 2017)
- ²⁵ "No. 1 Canadian Casualty Clearing Station," *British Isles Family History Society of Greater Ottawa* (www.bifhsgo.ca: accessed 5 August 2018), entry for Lewis, J.
- ²⁶ "UK, Army Registers of Soldiers' Effects, 1901–1929," *Ancestry* (www.ancestry.co.uk: accessed 26 September 2018), entry for John Lewis
- ²⁷ "British newspapers," *Findmypast* (www.findmypast.co.uk: accessed 26 September 2018), entry for John Lewis, *Manchester Evening News*, 30 May 1916