

Information supplied by Bob Jones, grandson.

Abel Neal was born in 1878 in St Tudy. His father Samuel was the village carpenter and his mother Ann (nee Thomas) moved from Wales to the village as the school teacher. They had one other son called Seth who died when very young from scarlet fever. Both Samuel and Ann died young and left young Abel in the care of an uncle who soon farmed him out to the Onslow family at Hengar Manor where he became the stable boy. At the age of 20 he decided to get away from Hengar by joining the Army and walked into Bodmin to sign up with the DCLI.

Unfortunately the age of majority was then 21 and as the Onslows were reluctant to lose a valued employee they blocked the move. Fed up with this Abel found out that the furthest Light Infantry from Bodmin was the Durham Light and he walked into Bodmin again, got on a train and bought a ticket to Durham and this time lied about his age just in case. Subsequently he had two ages, one his real age and the other his army age.

The year was 1898 and within a short while Britain was engaged in the Boer War in South Africa. There the Durhams were part of Buller's Army and its drive to relieve Ladysmith. By now Abel was a corporal and proved himself by winning the DCM (Distinguished Conduct Medal). This he received for crawling into no-mans land to pick up ammunition pouches from the dead when his company became very short of ammunition. He was involved in battles on the Tugela River and at Laings Nek and eventually took part in the relief of Ladysmith.

Between the Boer War and the Great War (1914) he served mainly in India but on leave in England in 1908 he returned to Cornwall and married Clara Maud Roose (born 1889) the second of two sisters who lived at Stokely Farm, Poundsconce. The sisters were Minnie, Clara, Ellen (Nell) and Else.

Clara went to India when Abel returned and must have found life very different to that on Bodmin Moor. While in India they had a daughter Elsie Doreen Neal (born 1909).

They eventually returned to the DLI depot at South Shields where my mother Olive Maud Neal was born in 1911.

Abel was commissioned in 1914 just before war broke out with Germany. His main role was training recruits for service at the front at a reception camp in Flanders with occasional periods in the front line with the Durham Pals (18th battalion). By 1918 he was promoted to the rank of Captain and was a Company Commander. As such in August 1918 he planned a daring trench raid in which his number two, Lt Perry received the MC (Military Cross) when they captured a whole enemy trench without loss to themselves. A machine gun captured on that day is still on display at the DLI museum in Durham.

He retired from the Army in 1920 and returned to Bodmin where he became a smallholder, renting fields from the Bodmin Council where the Kinsman's Estate is now situated. In the middle twenties he was a member of the Town Council and was a founder member of the Bodmin British Legion. He owned all the land on the west side of Westheath Road and built "Westover" (now the home of Barry Stevens) in 1936.

The trench raid that led to the capture of the MG 08 machine gun.

Like most World War I veterans my grandfather, Abel Neal, was very reluctant to talk about the war. He did though talk extensively about the Boer War which generally did not involve the horrors of trench warfare. The only story he did tell me was about a very successful trench raid he planned on the 6th August 1918. It was during a hot, dry spell of summer weather when he received the order to conduct the trench raid. Now these were hated by the troops and took place at either dawn or dusk in failing light. However, looking around him that lunch time he saw his men stripped to the waist, lying back and enjoying the sunshine. It came to him that the Germans would be doing the same thing. So, he immediately ordered six of his men under Lt L G Perry, to conduct the raid during the middle of the day. This was not playing by the book and caught the enemy completely by surprise and was a total success. They crossed 350 yards of No Man's land into the German trench system opposite, killed several Germans and captured 14 prisoners and the gun. The gun is now on exhibition at the Durham Light Infantry museum. By this time Abel was 40 years old, a company commander and had been in France since 1914 so presumably he was thought to be too old and too valuable to go on such raids himself. Lt Perry was awarded a Military Cross for his leadership on that day which is probably why the event is so well recorded at the DLI museum.



D.C.M.
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distinguished conduct medal

Queen's medal
S.A. War

King's medal
S.A. War

Mons Cross
BEF 1914

WWI
France

WWI
Victory
medal

WWII
defence
medal
(Home Guard)