

Sergeant William Freeman Military Medal

William was the sixth child of John Pridmore Freeman and his wife Elizabeth (née Bennett) who married in Kirby Muxloe in 1874 when John was working as a railway clerk. He was originally from the adjoining parish of Desford but Elizabeth and her older sister, who was a witness at the wedding, were both born in Australia. William's four oldest siblings were born in Kirby and another in Syston, but by 1891 the family was settled in Leicester at 24 Down Street, Belgrave. Bill (as he would be known) was born in that year on 17th May and was baptised at St Michael's church, just two streets away, on 6th August.

Family life was upended when his mother died early in 1894, along with a new baby named George, leaving John with their large family to care for. But by the time Bill was nine only he and his older brother Joseph remained at home, now in Asfordly Street, with both still at school. Their father had spent some time as a gardener and a shoe hand, but now worked as a window cleaner.

Only a fragment of Bill's army record survives, but the 1911 Census shows that in April that year he was on military service with the 11th Brigade Royal Field Artillery (RFA) 85th Battery, at Saint Thomas Mount in India, and he was a Driver. When in 1919 Bill was awarded the Silver War Badge on his discharge from the army through ill health, the record says he enlisted on 9th November 1908 when he would have been 17½ years old. As for many of his Leicester contemporaries, life in the army may have been an attractive prospect in a period when steady work was in short supply. An older brother, Henry, had enlisted in May 1898 at a similar age, initially in the Coldstream Guards before transferring to the Army Service Corps, so perhaps his was an example Bill followed.

The 11th Brigade RFA was stationed at Kirkee, India, prior to the start of the war¹ but, being recalled to Europe, Bill (service number 53326) disembarked on 7th November 1914. As one of the band of 'Old Contemptibles', those soldiers in the British Expeditionary Force who served in France or Belgium between 5th August and 22nd November, he would be awarded the 1914 Star worn with a clasp which showed that he had been under enemy fire in that time.

He is next heard of in December 1915 when writing to thank the *Leicester Daily Post* for a Christmas parcel funded by readers and sent to troops on active service:

"I am writing these few lines to thank the people of Leicestershire and Rutland for the gifts I received through the medium of your paper. I am sure all of the boys appreciate how your staff and self have worked to get them all despatched for Xmas. Wishing you all a Merry Xmas and a Bright New Year."

He signed himself as Bombardier Freeman of the 85th Battery RFA, 2nd Canadian Division Artillery, with which unit his Brigade was fighting that winter and well beyond.²

In 1917 Bill received the Military Medal, an honour always inscribed as awarded for "bravery in the field", and it was announced in the *London Gazette* on 18th July.³ At this point he was serving with the 84th Battery and had now been promoted to Sergeant. Bill would later be recorded as being involved in the Battle of Vimy Ridge, in which the artillery played a key role by bombarding enemy positions for a prolonged period before the battle commenced in April, and that he had led men 'over the top' with their 18-pounder guns.⁴ It is possible that his bravery award relates to this period. He himself said that in addition to receiving the Military Medal he had been Mentioned in Dispatches during his war service.⁵

This was a hard time: Bill would be twice wounded in 1917 and his father also died in this year. The surviving fragment of his service record shows that on 3rd September he was discharged from No 26 General Hospital in Étaples on the French coast to No 6 Convalescent Depot. He had been wounded in the arm some weeks earlier, probably during August, but the press notification of his injury did not appear in Leicester until 27th September.⁶ Established in 1915 the vast Étaples camp was, amongst other things, a training base and a supply depot for the Allies, as well as the site of almost twenty hospitals, eventually capable of treating 22,000 patients.

Only a few weeks later the 11th Brigade War Diary lists Bill as one of 13 men wounded and/or gassed on 29th September and the diary records the conditions on that date: "A very bad night. The enemy fired large quantities of gas shell (*sic*) for 5 hours from 1-5am possible 3-4000." Bill was one of the soldiers gassed and he experienced the after-effects on his eyes all his life. Of the men wounded on that occasion 7 were from Bill's Battery, all of them suffering as a result of the prolonged gas attack. The entry for the following day describes the relentlessness of their experience:

"Another bad night from hostile shelling and the batteries got no rest, the positions were heavily shelled for 5 hours and one was gas. The enemy keeps up each day his counter battery work to the fullest extent and thereby making the gunners suffer more than ever."⁷

Bill may have recovered sufficiently to return to some form of service as he was not discharged from the army until 25th March 1919, when in October of that year he was awarded the Silver War Badge, indicating that his injuries contributed to his discharge and for which he received a pension. Along with the 1914 Star, he received the British War Medal and Victory Medal.

With over 300 fellow members, including the other men who had won gallantry awards, Bill was present at the Belgrave Working Men's Club and Institute in Leicester on the evening of Tuesday 11th November 1919 at a supper and entertainment to welcome back all those members who had served in the war and to commemorate those who did not return. The Club's magnificent Roll of Honour was unveiled and each medal winner was presented with a framed photograph of the eight of them together.⁸

After leaving the army Bill was resident at 21 Checketts Road, Leicester, the home of the Belgrave Working Men's Club. He was still there in 1921, boarding with Albert and Lily Hewes, steward and stewardess at the Club. Bill was related to the Hewes family through his older sister Mary who in 1914 had married George Hewes; George was a fellow Club member and Great War medal recipient, and brother to Albert Hewes. Bill was now working as a shoeman at the British United Shoe Machining Company in Leicester.

On 3rd April 1923 he married Florence Norman in St Andrew's Church, Leicester. He was recorded as living in Gisling Street (but perhaps this should have read Gosling Street) and working as a gardener, whilst Florence's home was in Asylum Street; she was a shoe worker. They went on to have two sons and a daughter. In the later 1920s Bill became the landlord of the Griffin Inn in Belgrave Gate which he ran until 1952, after which he was Steward of the British Legion Club in Bond Street until retirement. The newspaper report of his death noted that Bill was a keen golfer and as a member of Birstall Golf Club had won the Kenilworth Cup there in 1944. In his later years he and Florence lived in Moira Street, Leicester.

Bill was a staunch member of the Leicester branch of the Old Contemptibles' Association, formed in 1931 from those men who had been awarded the 1914 Star for serving in the earliest weeks of the Great War, and he felt strongly about the support old soldiers, especially the injured, should receive. On

occasion he was moved to write to the press about the paucity of continuing assistance for war veterans like himself, notably in 1964, the 50th anniversary of the Great War, when he described himself as 'disillusioned'.⁹ He was treasurer of the Leicester branch which had once had 600 members but by 1966 had only 65. As the men grew older and some fell on hard times the welfare section became increasingly stretched. Reporting in 1966 on what would be the national Association's final annual parade in London due to its ageing and dwindling membership, Bill was quoted in the *Leicester Daily Mercury*: "Some of us would like to go back and see the war graves in France, but I do not think we would ever raise enough money."¹⁰

Bill died on 3rd February 1977 at the age of 85 and his funeral was held at Gilroes Crematorium, Leicester, on 8th February. Florence had died two years earlier and they were survived by their three children.

¹ <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/other-aspects-of-order-of-battle/british-army-units-stationed-in-india-in-july-1914>

² *Leicester Daily Post*, 19th December 1915, p5.

³ *The London Gazette*, 18th July 1917, supplement, p7278.

⁴ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 10th September 1970, p13.

⁵ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 7th December 1964, p4.

⁶ *Leicester Daily Post*, 27th September 1917, p3.

⁷ The National Archives, WO95/293/1, p9-10.

⁸ See *Leicester Evening Mail*, 12th November 1919, p2, and *Leicester Daily Post*, 12th November 1919, p2

⁹ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 7th December 1964, p4.

¹⁰ *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 19th May 1966, p6.