

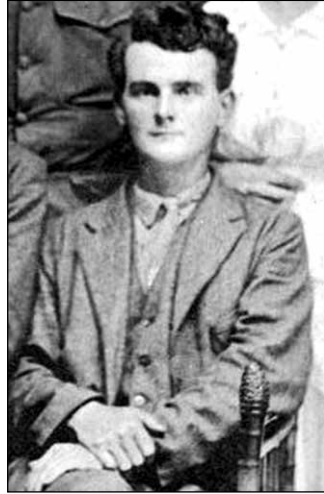
World War I Profile: Private William Edgar Willetts 1890-1972

By **NORMA ECKARD**
GUEST COLUMNIST

*William Edgar Willetts
Winnabow, Brunswick
County, NC
U.S. Army, Private
Served: July 30, 1918 – Feb.
20, 1919*

William Edgar Willetts was born and raised in Winnabow in Brunswick County. He was the oldest child of William Henry Sherman and Annie Eliza Arnold Willetts. Two of his brothers also served, George Finnis Willetts and Fredrick Arnold Willetts.

His Draft Registration shows



Photos contributed

William Edgar Willetts (photo contributed by Mary Willetts Earp, daughter).

he was single, living in Winnabow, and farming. He stated he was supporting his father, two brothers, and two sisters. His physical description was medium height and weight, with grey eyes and dark brown hair.

William was the second Willetts brother to receive orders to report for duty. He reported for duty on July 31, 1918, and was sent to Camp Hancock, Ga. He was assigned to 53rd Depot Brigade where his NC WWI Service Card indicated he remained throughout the war. The Depot Brigade was to receive recruits, train them, then send them where needed.

The NC WWI Service Cards have inconsistencies for some veterans and appear to have more if the veteran did not serve overseas. For example, Joseph S. Smith reported for duty with Pvt. Willetts on July 31, 1918. Pvt. Smith's NC WWI Service Card shows he served in the Machine Gun Training Center at Camp Hancock. Yet his application for military headstone and his military flat marker in Brunswick County show he served in

the 13th Provisional Company at Camp Johnson. Walker O. Smith shows the same.

Offline research into Pvt. Willetts records would be needed to determine exactly where he served during the war. The Headstone Applications for Military Veterans in Ancestry are only available from 1925-1963.

Pvt. Willetts was honorably discharged on Feb. 20, 1919, with a 16-2/3 disability, indicating that the disability was a result of his military service.

According to the Library of Congress blog, injured veterans helped push forward the disability rights movement. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs was eventually created for the treatment of veterans' disabilities. In addition, the important recognition of psychological injuries began around this time. These three important advances were a result of the physical disabilities of veterans, such as the one that resulted from Pvt. Willetts' service.

During the war, 224,000 soldiers suffered injuries that sidelined them from the front. Roughly 4,400 returned home missing part or all of a limb. Of course, disability was not limited to missing limbs; a soldier could come home with all limbs and digits intact yet struggle with mental wounds. Nearly 100,000 soldiers were removed from fighting for psychological injuries; 40,000 of them were discharged. By 1921, approximately 9,000 veterans had undergone treatment for psychological disability in veterans' hospitals. As the decade progressed, greater numbers of veterans received treatment for "war neurosis." Ultimately, whether mental or physical, 200,000 veterans would return home with a permanent disability.

"A man could not go through that conflict and come back and take his place as a normal human being," veteran and former infantry officer Robert S. Marx noted in late 1919. Marx played a critical role in establishing the organization Disabled Veterans of the World War (DAV) in 1920. He knew well the sting of disability: Just hours before the war's ceasefire, he suffered a severe injury after being wounded by a German artillery shell.

With the larger American Legion, founded in 1919, the DAV worked to raise public awareness about disabled veterans, while pressuring the government to adopt programs to address their rehabilitation and reintegration into American society.

Together, the two organizations placed veterans' disability

at the forefront of the push for veterans' rights and benefits, including for "shell shock" or what today would be classified as PTSD. Due to the organizations' efforts, in 1921 the U.S. government established the United States Veterans Bureau, a precursor to today's U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

WWI Service Cards don't include the injury, but additional records have provided details of injuries such as those sustained by POW/wounded Robert Bollie Stanley and wounded Lindsey Pigott.

A clue to Pvt. Willetts' injury may be found in Cpl. John Burt Exum's letters home, used in George Finnis Willetts' WWI Profile. Cpl. Exum wrote the following on June 11, 1918, less than a month after he began training:

"Russell Peacock and Turl Flowers are in the tent with me. One on one side and the other on the other."

Charles Russell Peacock and Jarvis Lester Flowers (assumed to be Turl) were ordered to report to duty with John Burt Exum on May 26, 1918 [Source: Ancestry]. On June 14, 1918, Cpl. Exum wrote:

"I think Turl will get a discharge on account of a broken foot."

Jarvis Lester Flowers was honorably discharged on Aug. 5, 1918, with a Surgeons Certificate of Discharge and a 16-2/3 percent disability, which matches the disability percentage of Pvt. Willetts.

It's possible that Pvt. Willetts' disability was related to his foot, as percentages are determined based on appendage, etc. There are no records to confirm.

After his honorable discharge, Pvt. Willetts returned home to work on the family farm. A few years later he married and began raising a family, continuing to farm throughout his life.

William Edgar Willetts passed away on June 12, 1972, just three days after his younger brother, Frederick Arnold Willetts. On June 14, 1972, the following obituary was published in The Wilmington Morning Star:

William E. Willetts
William Edgar Willetts of Rt. 3 Box 200A, Leland, died in the Cape Fear Memorial Hospital at midnight Monday, following an extended illness. He was born in Winnabow, the son of the late Williams and Annie Arnold Willetts. He was a retired farmer. The funeral will be held Thursday at 2 p.m. in the Chapel of the Andrews Mortuary by the Rev. C.B. Hicks. Burial will be in Mill Creek Church Cemetery. The family will receive visitors



William Edgar Willetts was laid to rest in Willetts Cemetery in Mill Creek. A military headstone is shown.



The construction of Camp Hancock began on July 18, 1917. Construction was completed in November 1917. The camp was abandoned in March 1919 (Source: Library of Congress).

Wednesday from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. at Andrews Mortuary.

Survivors include two daughters, Mrs. Wilbur E. Earp of Winnabow, Mrs. Wayne Lewis of Leland, one step-daughter, Mrs. Fred Hansen of Wilmington; two step-sons, W.A. Smith and H.R. Smith, both of Leland; three brothers, F.S. Willetts of Garland, Sidney Willetts of Supply, J.C. Willetts of Winnabow, two sisters, Mrs. Eula Bolling of Leland, Mrs. Eliza Singletary of Supply; six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Read more about the Willetts brothers' family donation at caswellriflerange.com.

If you would like to help us

honor William Edgar Willetts or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com or go to caswellriflerange.com.

A future fundraiser, Oktoberfest In Caswell Beach, is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12, at the Caswell Beach town public service facility building (fire station) to raise funds for publishing the book of Brunswick County men and women that served in WWI; to continue historic preservation of the rifle range memorial; and to honor Brunswick County WWI veterans. There will be authentic German food and drink as well as a dance

with music by The Back Porch Rockers. A Polka Dance Contest and Best Dressed Oktoberfest Outfit will be awarded.

The Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range are in need of vendors to participate in the Oktoberfest In Caswell Beach event from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 12.

Don't forget to read about the nurses that served at Fort Caswell during WWI on our website (caswellriflerange.com).

Another Roll Call is planned for Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, at 11 a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell Beach. The public is welcome.