

World War I Profile: John William Lancaster 1895-1988

*John William Lancaster
1895-1988*

*Grifton, Pitt County, NC
U.S. Army, Private
Served: Oct. 5, 1917 –
March 31, 1919*

*Overseas: May 10, 1918 –
March 22, 1919*

John William Lancaster was born and raised in Supply, Brunswick County, the only son of seven children. A partial family tree is located in FamilySearch.

The 1910 Census, where he was reported as 14 years old, shows he was working on the family farm in Supply. The neighboring farms included boys his age such as Herman Dan Fulford, Samuel Goodman Fulford and John Hillery Caison, all wounded during WWI. With 60 men from Supply who served in WWI, the community and their generation clearly felt the effects of the war.

Willie's draft registration from 1917 shows he was single, now living in Grifton (Pitt County), and employed by E.W. Causey for farming. (His name was written as "Willie" in the signature.)

Willie was ordered to report for duty on Sept. 18, 1917, and then sent to Camp Jackson, S.C., for training. Although the date he and the men arrived at Camp Jackson was recorded as Oct. 7, his final acceptance did not occur until Nov. 16, 1917. Only four of the 19 men were recorded as having a final acceptance at this date.

The most likely explanation may be found in Carl Jefferson Danford's WWI Profile, which described the quarantines occurring in Southern camps at this time. Because many men were living in isolated areas, when they joined together in camps, illnesses that had otherwise not circulated were suddenly active and spread easily. Measles, in particular, is extremely contagious. It often leads to pneumonia, which was the cause of death for Carl Danford. It's possible that Willie had contracted measles

or mumps and needed to recover before his final acceptance.

Checking the other three men who were drafted with Willie and experienced a month delay until final acceptance, the NC WWI Service Cards of (Craven County men) William T Atkinson, Lee J French, and Joseph C Grady show they spent time in the infirmary. Despite Willie's NC WWI Service Card not indicating time in the infirmary, it is the likely explanation. Like all historical documents, the service cards have been shown to have inaccuracies.

Because of the delay while in the infirmary, all four men were not assigned to infantry like the other men ordered to duty at the same time, but were placed in the Medical Detachments in sanitary trains/ambulance companies. Their survival of what was likely measles may have spared them the fates of Willie's neighbors mentioned above, all serving in the infantry. However, we know from Robert Guy Farmer's WWI Profile that the cause of death during WWI, either serving in the military or not, was most likely from influenza. Of the 2,370 NC military deaths, 1,542 died of disease; 13,644 non-military NC deaths were reported from influenza while safely at home.

Pvt. Lancaster was a member of the Medical Detachment for the 115th Machine Gun Battalion, in the 30th "Old Hickory" Division, the division that included most Brunswick County men. To read more about the experiences of the division, start with Samuel Claudius Swain's WWI Profile.

Boarding SS Haverford in Philadelphia on May 11, 1918, Pvt. Lancaster and the 115th Machine Gun Battalion began the trip to France.

Haverford was named for a suburb in Philadelphia and was launched in May 1901. Beginning in 1915, the ship was used for British troop

transportation. In 1917, a German U-boat torpedo damaged it. After six months of repairs, in April 1918, it was again damaged by a German submarine. Pvt. Lancaster and the 115th Machine Gun Battalion boarded it the next month. After the war, it returned to passenger service and was scrapped in 1925.

After the war ended on March 10, 1919, Pvt. Lancaster sailed on USS Finland from St. Nazaire, France, to Newport News, Va., arriving on March 23, 1919. He was mustered out on March 31, 1919. The Field Artillery of the 30th Division had sailed with Pvt. Lancaster and the machine gun battalion, but most of the 30th Division did not depart France until April 1 due to a last minute change to send the division to land at Charleston, S.C. This left most of the 30th Division very disappointed.

The 115th Machine Gun Battalion's Banner is now in the care of the NC Museum of History.

Almost immediately after returning to America on May 4, 1919, Willie married Oran Thelma Sellers in her home. According to the 1920 Census, they settled in Wilmington while he worked in furniture sales.

Ten years later, the 1930 Census shows three children, John Jr., Victoria ("Vickie") and Jessie. The family now resided on Dry Street in Southport, with John a grocery store merchant.

Sadly, his wife Oran Thelma Sellers Lancaster fell into a diabetic coma at age 38 and passed away on Aug. 18, 1937. She was laid to rest in Sabbath Home Baptist Church Cemetery in Holden Beach. Her obituary was published on the front page of The State Port Pilot on Aug. 25, 1937:

Funeral services for Mrs. Lancaster

Funeral services for Mrs. John W. Lancaster, 40, who died at her home here Wednesday morning,

were conducted Thursday afternoon at 2 o'clock from the cemetery at Sabbath Home Baptist church, six miles southwest of Supply. The services were in charge of the Rev. A.L. Brown, pastor of the Southport Baptist church.

The death of Mrs. Lancaster, wife of one of Southport's leading businessmen, was unexpected. She had been ill only four days.

In addition to the husband, Mrs. Lancaster is survived by three children, John, Victoria, and Jesse Lancaster, four brothers, C.L., R.E., Hubbard and Yates Sellers, all of Brunswick County, and one half-brother, E. Sellers of Whiteville; four sisters, Mrs. W.J. Sellers, of Supply; Mrs. J.W. Hewett, of Southport; Mrs. J.N. Lancaster, of Supply, and Mrs. B.K. Caison of Southport and one half-sister, Mary Lou Sellers of Whiteville.

Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese on Dec. 7, 1941. Within a few weeks, their son, John, Jr. enlisted in the U.S. Navy, serving throughout WWII. When the war ended, this was published in The State Port Pilot on Dec. 12, 1945, page 3:

Expected Home

John W. Lancaster, Jr., son of Mr. and Mrs. J.W. Lancaster of Southport, was one of the 2,000 High Point Navy veterans who arrived in San Francisco the first of this month aboard the USS West Virginia. The West Virginia left Pearl Harbor on November 23rd as a part of the "Magic Carpet" fleet. It is understood that young Lancaster will have received his discharge and return home this week.

At the end of WWII, Operation Magic Carpet was the 14-month operation to return almost 8 million Allied military personnel home. USS West Virginia made three trips from Hawaii to transport veterans home. "High-point" personnel were those first in line for discharge, while "low-point" personnel were the replacements.

On July 3, 1988, at age 92, John William Lancaster Sr. passed away. The following was published in The Brunswick Beacon on July 7, 1988, page 4-B:

John William Lancaster Sr.

John William Lancaster Sr., 92, of Route 1, Supply, died July 3 at his residence. The funeral was held July 5 in the Brunswick Chapel of Coble Ward Smith Funeral Service, Supply, with Rev. Franklin Myers and Rev. Weston Varnam officiating. Burial was in Sabbath Home Baptist Church Cemetery.

Born in Brunswick County on Oct. 3, 1895, he was the son of the late Jessie L. and Victoria Holden Lancaster. He owned and operated a general mercantile store in



Photo contributed by Marilyn Aldridge Swain, granddaughter

John William Lancaster



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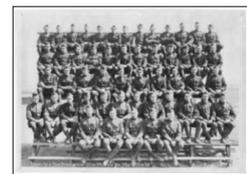
the Holden Beach area for many years. He was a World War I U.S. Army veteran, serving in France during the battle for the Hindenburg Line.

Survivors include his wife, Mrs. Susie Clemmons Lancaster of the home; a son, John W. Lancaster Jr. of Supply; three daughters, Mrs. Victoria Aldridge of Southport, Mrs. Jessie Walker of Wilmington and Mrs. Geraldine (Jeri) Hatcher of Supply; 11 grandchildren; 12 great-grandchildren and four step great-grandchildren.

John William Lancaster was laid to rest in Sabbath Home Baptist Church Cemetery with military honors.

If you would like to help honor John William Lancaster or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell

Rifle Range at ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com or go to caswellriflerange.com.



Headquarters Company and Medical Detachment of the 115th Machine Gun Battalion; March 25, 1919. Pvt. Lancaster is in the second row, seventh from the left.



This photo from the National Archives shows a soldier in the 115th Machine Gun Battalion. Pvt. Lancaster served in the Medical Detachment for the battalion. There is little information available online regarding the training and duties. Enlisted men were chosen to provide treatment of casualties in the trenches or carrying the injured men to company aid stations.



Photos contributed

Pvt. John William Lancaster's headstone.



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