

Frank Ernest Don aka Walter Ernest Nicol

Frank Ernest Don

Born 28/06/1889 Dunedin

Died 04/05/1966 aged 76 Dunstan Hospital, Clyde

Buried Andersons Bay Plot 263, Block 455

Married 1935 /2092

Georgina 'Joyce' Don nee Radford

Born 02/07/1915 Leamington, Cambridge

Died 27/09/2008 aged 93 Ripponburn Home and Hospital, Cromwell

Buried Alexandra Cemetery

Children

1/ Alexander Frank Nicol Don

Born 11/09/1936 Otorohanga

Married

Divorced 1959

Minnie Louisa Don nee Denniston

Born 27/09/1931 Dunedin

Died 18/11/2013 aged 82 Oamaru

Children

1/ Leilan Gay Green nee Don

Born 1951

Died 11/08/2015 aged 64 (Heart attack/ car accident)

2/ Ernest Warne Radford Don

Born 01/07/1938 St Helens Dunedin

Died 12/12/2007 aged 69 (Cancer) Dunstan Hospital

Buried Alexandra Cemetery

Married- 15/11/1958 St Enoch's Presbyterian Church, Alexandra

Bertha Lillian Don nee Denniston

Born 06/06/1935 Dunedin

Died 23/12/1996 aged 61 (Heart Attack) Market Place, Twizel

Buried Alexandra Cemetery / Ashes scattered Clock Hill

School Teacher / Office Executive

Children [2]

1/ Deborah Lee Don

Born 1959

2/ Sandra Claire Townend nee Don

Born 26/08/1962 Clyde

Lives in South Australia

3/ Beryl Eva Amelia Orme nee Don

Born 1943

NB. Bertha and Minnie Denniston were sisters, who married brothers Alexander and Ernest Don.

Early life

Frank Ernest Don was born on 28 June 1889 in Dunedin. His father, Rev. Alexander Don, was a Presbyterian missionary who ministered to the Chinese men living in Central Otago, Dunedin and Southland. He also established the Canton Villages Mission in China.

Rev. Don and his wife Amelia 'Millie' Don nee Warne raised seven children who were all educated, in Dunedin.

When WW1 broke out, the Dons were living in the North Island occupied with duties to the church and the Chinese people.

Frank moved to Timaru and was noted as living at the Excelsior Hotel when he decided to enlist to serve in WW1, along with his friends.

However, Frank enlisted under the name of Walter Ernest Nicol, 23/113, and changed his birth year to 1896. Nicol was his grandmother's maiden name.

It is uncertain why Frank changed his name and date of birth, as he was eligible to enlist at the age of 26. He had nothing to gain by doing this.

Frank enlisted on 29 May 29 1915. His records showed his next of kin was his mother, 'Mrs A Don', living at 80 Oban Street, Roslyn, Dunedin. He was described as '5 ft 6 in, fair complexion, green eyes and brown hair'.

By 1916 three other Don children were serving in WW1; Amelia (Amy) Prior, John Thomas, and Alexander William.

Frank served in D Company, 1st Battalion in the NZ Rifle Brigade, embarking on 10 September 1915 from Wellington to the Suez, Egypt. He fought in Egypt and at Gallipoli, surviving to be awarded the British War Medal and Victory Medal 1914-15.

Frank was discharged by the doctors in the NZ General Hospital in Cairo on June 30 1916, due to a deformed foot. He returned to New Zealand on the *Ulimaroa*. Frank's war service, under the name of Walter Ernest Nicol, had been for one year and 33 days.

Post War service

On returning to New Zealand, Frank reverted to his given name of Frank Ernest Don and went back to working as a motor mechanic, at Otira until 1919. Otira was then a small township north of Arthurs Pass in the central South Island, where the trains would stop between Greymouth and Christchurch.

Frank, changed his trade to that of carpentry and was employed at Lake Pukaki, along the northern edge of the Mackenzie Basin. Frank worked in this isolated place from 1925 to 1928.

Then Frank moved north to Otorohanga, situated in the King Country, not too far from Hamilton, and worked as a carpenter through to 1935.

In Otorohanga, Frank met a very young girl, Georgina Radford. They were married in 1935 in Otorohanga, when Georgina was only 19 and Frank was 46.

Georgina, became known as Joyce.

Frank's father Rev. Don died in 1934 and his mother Amelia died in 1937.

In 1938 Frank and Joyce were living near Dunedin at Tomahawke.

Around 1946 Frank, Joyce and their children moved to Alexandra in Central Otago to 23 Clutha Street, a small cottage, near the river. Frank was 57 years old and Joyce was 31 years old.

Frank was working as head carpenter for the Ministry of Works in Alexandra, which was a good job. However, retirement was getting closer and Frank was feeling his age. In 1961, Frank, aged 72, was retired and living on limited income. Maybe he was estranged from his wife as he was living at the Bendigo Hotel on Tarbert Street in Alexandra, when he wrote a letter to the Army requesting a pension.

Because, at the time of enlistment, Frank had changed his name and year of birth, Frank was not yet eligible for a war pension.

He wrote, "When I joined the forces in 1915, I thought I was born in 1896, making me under age. There were four of us, so we changed our names, a very foolish thing to

do, but we were young and foolish. I joined the NZRB as Walter Ernest Nicol 23/1133, 1st Batt, D Coy, 15th Platoon, under Tom Wilfred, Lieutenant. My next of kin in my pay book was my mother, Mrs Milly Don, No 8 Oban St, Roslyn Dunedin. I was born in Dunedin on June 28th 1889 as Frank Ernest Don, so that makes me 72 on June 1961. I was head carpenter for the MOW here for over 20 years. I knocked off in 1957 at 68 years of age and did not know that I could have been drawing 100 pounds a year after I had reached 65, so I lost 300 pounds ... I am receiving 70 pounds a year ... I haven't got any clothes; my shoes are worn out and I have to wait for a cold day so I can wear an overcoat to cover my dingy clothes. Is there any chance you could help me?"

The Army made extensive enquiries and confirmed Frank's claim and decided to award poor Frank a pension.

I don't think Frank can have been living with his wife Joyce, who was 46 in 1961 and young enough to work and provide some income.

Raised in a Presbyterian family, with a Reverend as a father, his falsifying of his records would not have been approved by his family.

However, Frank's enjoyment of his pension was short lived. His health was failing with chronic bronchitis. Frank died on 4 May 1966 in the Dunstan Hospital in Clyde aged 77 from major coronary issues. His death certificate says he had a daughter born in 1943, and sons born in 1937 and 1938. Actually 1936 was the birth year of his son Alexander Frank Nicol Don.

Frank was cremated and his ashes are buried in Andersons Bay Cemetery Block 455, Plot 263

In the 1970s, his wife Joyce was a beneficiary of Frank's older sister Amelia's will.

Joyce continued to live at 23 Clutha Street, until her death on 27 September 2008, aged 93. She spent her last days at the Rippon Home and Hospital in Cromwell, dying from heart disease and renal failure. Her death certificate said there was one daughter aged 65 surviving her.

While Frank was hoisted on his own petard and was clearly not quite a chip off the 'Rev. Don' block, he did fight for his country, was awarded war medals and on return to NZ proceeded to forge his own life with his wife and children, ultimately holding down a very respectable and responsible job with the Ministry of Works.

Adrienne Shaw

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Sources

- My Heritage – Sandra Don and Deborah Don [Ernest Don's daughters]
- BDM
- Auckland Cenotaph
- Archway Archives
- Notes by Carol Bell, Sahiban Kanwal – South Canterbury Museum

