

## Who Was Valentine Joe Strudwick?

Born on February 14, 1900, Joe Strudwick, known throughout his short life as “Valentine” because of the holiday he was born on was a British soldier who was killed in the First World War. He enlisted when he was 14 years old and was one of the youngest soldiers to die in the war on January 14, 1916, just one month short of his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

It has often been claimed that Strudwick was the youngest soldier to have been killed in World War I, but multiple younger soldiers who were killed in the war have been confirmed by historians, such as Aubrey Hudson and Robert Barnett, both killed at 15 years of age. Nevertheless, young Joe Strudwick’s grave at Essex Farm Cemetery is often visited by British school groups touring the Ypres Salient who leave remembrance poppies and Royal British Legion wooden crosses in his memory. He is also remembered on Dorking’s war memorial and at St. Paul’s Church close to St. Paul’s School, where students are still taught about him. Strudwick represents all the young men who have died on the battlefield, who perhaps ought to have been playing baseball on the neighborhood schoolyard instead of fighting wars..

Born in Dorking, a small town in Southeast England about 21 miles south of London to laundress Louisa Strudwick and gardener Jesse Strudwick, Valentine Joe Strudwick lived with his parents and five siblings until he left school at the age of 13 to work at a brewery in neighboring Croydon.

In January 1915, the 14-year-old Strudwick enlisted in the army to serve in the First World War, falsely claiming to be 18. He walked from his home to London, a distance of about 20 miles, to enlist, but was initially rejected because he looked too young. He returned the following day and tried again at another recruiting station. This time he succeeded.

After six weeks of training, Strudwick was sent to the Western Front, disembarking in France on August 12, 1915, as a rifleman in the 8<sup>th</sup> Battalion Rifle Brigade. Shortly after arriving, two of his friends were killed in action and Strudwick was gassed. He spent three months recovering in hospital before returning to combat. On January 14, 1916, just one month before his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, Strudwick was killed by an artillery shell. He was buried at Essex Farm Cemetery on Flanders Fields.

Valentine Joe Strudwick’s story is not an isolated one. In 1943, my father’s First Cousin (*making him my First-Cousin-Once-Removed*), 15-year-old Percy Columbus Albritton hitched a ride from his home in Dry Springs, Florida, to Pensacola and signed up for the U. S. Marine Corps. Everybody called the boy “PC” (*you can sort of understand why, right?*). PC was a big boy and looked older than he was, so the Recruiter signed him up.

The Marine Corps Recruit Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina was all filled up due to the war effort, so they sent PC to San Diego, California for his boot camp training. He performed well and can be seen in his June 22, 1943 Recruit graduation photo as his Platoon Guidon Carrier and wearing the single

stripe of a Private First Class (PFC), his first promotion, both the markings of an outstanding Marine Recruit.

PC turned 16 years old the following day. His orders were already written, assigning him to the North African front. PC Albritton, however, was luckier than Valentine Joe Strudwick was. As it turned out a wizened, compassionate First Sergeant at Camp Pendleton, California, discovered that this big, brave young man was only 16 years old and quipped, "You are too young to die, Boy. I am getting your orders changed."

And so, PFC PC Albritton, to his great disappointment, did not get to go to The Big War. He spent the rest of the war safely ensconced at Camp Pendleton, California. PC reenlisted in the Marine Corps after the war and stayed for additional 30 years. He saw other wars, that's for sure, but by that time he was a grown man and plenty old enough to die for his country. But, he never did. PC Albritton retired as a Master Gunnery Sergeant (E-9), the highest enlisted rank in the Marine Corps, with a chestful of war ribbons.

We Albrittons have always been mighty proud of Cousin PC Albritton for his military service. Many other young Albritton men followed his example in the ensuing years by joining the Marine Corps and fighting in America's wars. His own son, Mark, became a Marine Corps Aviator. I and two other of my five brothers became Marines because of PC's influence, as did many of my other cousins. Those were heady days when young men took great pride in serving in their nation's military uniform. I am proud of those brave young men who served then and the ones who serve today, but there are far too many who are choosing not to serve today and even decline to support those who do. This must change!

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