Serjeant John Owen HARRIS

Service Number: 21-836

21st Battalion Tyneside Scottish

Northumberland Fusiliers

Died 1st July 1916 aged 29

Commemorated on Thiepval Memorial

Pier and face 10B, 11B and 12B

WW1 Centenary record of an

~~Un~~known Soldier

Recruitment -Tyneside Scottish 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd Service Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers. Serjeant John HARRIS was a member of the 21st Battalion of the Tyneside Scottish Northumberland Fusiliers. The Tyneside Scottish Service Battalions were 'Pals' regiments raised in the North East at the end of 1914. The first Battalion, (1,150) was raised between 9th October and 25th October. So great was the response that the Tyneside Scottish asked for permission to raise a second battalion and this was complete by the 4th of November (1,158).

Authorization was granted for the third battalion on the 9th of November and by the 11th of November, it was announced that the battalion was full with 1,169 men enlisted. This is a recruiting record that is unlikely to be surpassed in the history of the British Army. Anticipating a fourth battalion, recruitment continued and an extra 400 men were enrolled.

On the 16th of November permission for a fourth battalion was granted and within 24 hours, it was announced that the fourth battalion was full, with 1,920 men enlisted. The Tyneside Scottish Brigade was now a reality and it had taken exactly thirty-four days to complete.

Battle of the Somme

The plan was for the British forces to attack on a fourteen mile front after an intense week-long artillery bombardment of the German positions. Over 1.6 million shells were fired, 70 for every one metre of front, the idea being to decimate the German Front Line. Two minutes before zero-hour 19 mines were exploded under the German lines. Whistles sounded and the troops went over the top at 7.30am. They advanced in lines at a slow, steady pace across No Man's Land towards the German front line.

Objective 9 – La Boisselle – The Somme – See Fig 1. Attack on La Boisselle

Serjeant John HARRIS and the Tyneside Scottish were assigned Objective 9, an attack on the village of La Boisselle. The village of La Boisselle was of huge strategic importance as it would open up the road to Bapaume. This would allow the Allies to attack Poziers, the next town further up the road then from there Thiepval.

The Germans held the best positions overlooking the two valleys – one to the left hand side of Lochnagar Crater- this was nicknamed 'Sausage Valley' by the British as it usually had an airship above it on reconnaissance. The other valley, which is on the other side of the road, was nicknamed 'Mash Valley'. This was the largest piece of No Man's Land on the whole Somme battlefront (700m wide). Rather than try a head-on attack at the village of La Boisselle, the Allies decide to attack either side. As part of this offensive they set off two huge mines, one near the road at the side of the village (18,000kgs) and one at Lochnagar, the biggest mine set off that day

at 28,000kgs. The shelling stopped and the mines were blown at 7.28am. At 7.30am the soldiers went over the top.

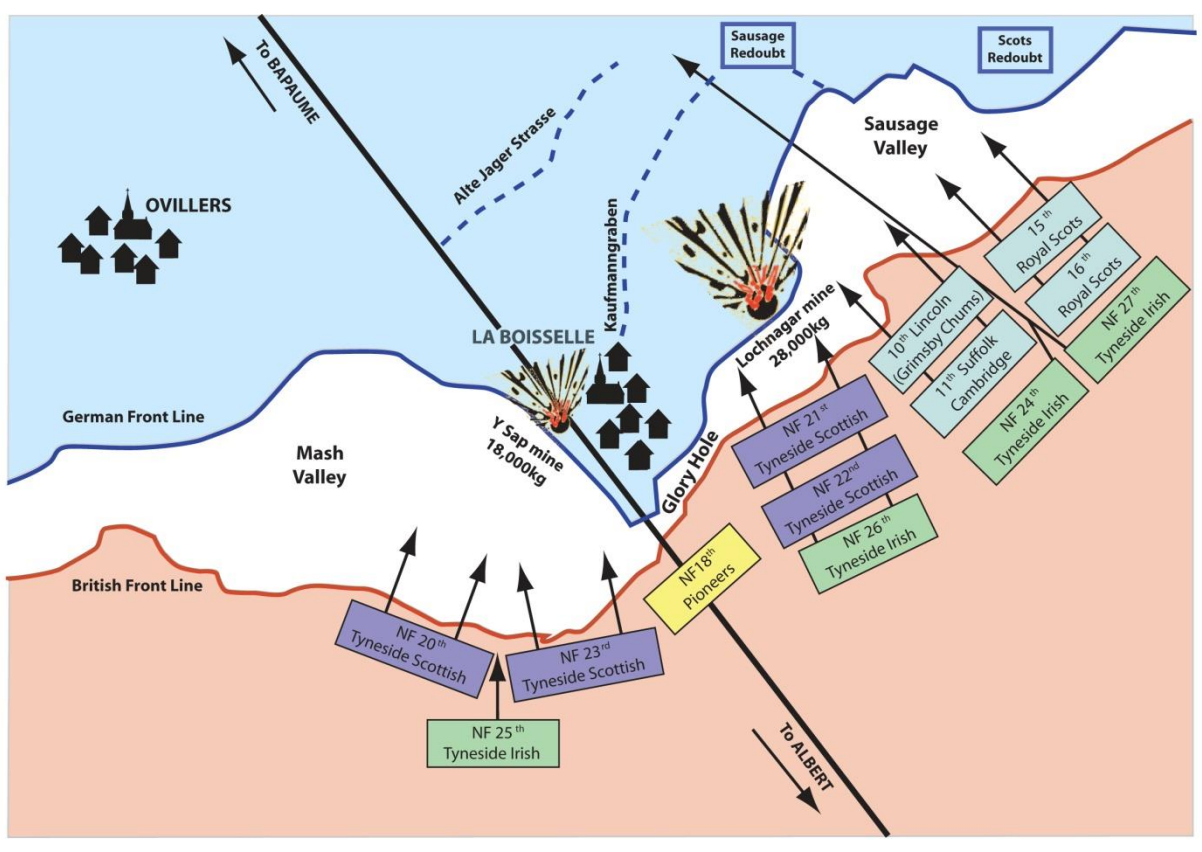

Fig. 1 Attack on La Boisselle

The debris from the Lochnagar mine rose over twice the height of the Eiffel Tower. Limbs were broken 250m away with the shock waves. The debris came down in seconds – so the extra time allowed for the debris to settle, actually gave the Germans more time to prepare. The Allied troops advanced down the Tara and Usna hills opposite La Boisselle and Lochnagar. The German machine gunners took up their positions in their trenches and redoubts and waited. Once the Allies were far enough down the hillside to prevent a retreat, the guns opened fire. The machine guns ran along the lines and the advancing soldiers fell row by row.

Final Action - 21st Scottish Tyneside, 22nd Scottish Tyneside, 26th Tyneside Irish

Between the road and Lochnagar crater was a German stronghold called Schwaben Hoe. At this point the lines were close (200m), so the British planted a mine at Lochnagar Crater. This was the largest mine to be detonated in WW1 and would be the biggest man made explosion at that point in history. As well as removing the threat posed by Schwaben Hoe, the lips of the crater would also provide cover for the advancing troops.

Both the Y Sap mine (18,000kg) and Lochnagar Mine (28,000kg) were detonated at 7.28am. Although the Germans had prior knowledge about the Y Sap mine, they knew nothing about Lochnagar. The advance was in a column three battalions deep. The Plan was for John HARRIS and the 21st Battalion to capture and hold the front line trench. The 22nd would advance further to take the second trench (Kaufmanngraben) and finally the 26th battalion would push through to the third line Alte Jager Strasse.

Lochnagar mine caught the Germans by surprise and the Tyneside battalions quickly took the front line before pushing on to both the second and third line. As they moved deeper behind the German lines however, they found themselves lacking in numbers and support and retreated back to the second line Kaufmanngraben. Although they had to retreat from some of their earlier gains, the advance in to Kaufmanngraben proved to be one of the few advances on the day.

Outcome of the battle: Very little gain on the day – The Lincolns captured ground up to the crater and the Royal Scots, Suffolks and 27th Tyneside Irish took Scots redoubt. The casualties for the Tyneside regiments were 21st – 578 men, 22nd – 628 men, and the 26th 489 men.

Casualties at La Boisselle: La Boisselle had the highest casualty rate of the day with over 6,380 officers and men either killed or wounded. Of these, 2,267 were dead. John HARRIS was one of these soldiers. Eighty five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield, 1,927, are unknown soldiers. John HARRIS, aged 29, died at La Boisselle and has no known grave.

Commemorated at: Thiepval Memorial – Pier and face 10B, 11B and 12B

Additional information: Husband of Elizabeth Harris of 7 Juliet St, Elswick, Newcastle on Tyne.

The record of Serjeant John HARRIS has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and John HARRIS who is an unknown soldier, is now known by Bobby McGoldrick, Corpus Christi Catholic College, June 2018.

References: The historical information used in this document has been abridged from the following sources.

Tyneside Scottish – Graham Stewart and John Sheen
One Day On The Somme – 1st July 1916 – Barry Cuttell
La Boisselle – Somme – Michael Stedman - Map La Boisselle – Dr J.P. Normington