

A SOLDIER
OF THE GREAT WAR



Private Thomas McGRATH

Service Number: 24-247

24th Battalion Tyneside Irish

Northumberland Fusiliers

Died 1st July 1916

Commemorated on Thiepval Memorial

Pier and face 10B, 11B and 12B

WW1 Centenary record of an

Unknown Soldier

KNOWN UNTO GOD



Recruitment -Tyneside Irish 24th, 25th, 26th and 27th Service Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers. **Private Thomas McGRATH** was a member of the **24th Tyneside Irish Service Battalion.** Tyneside Irish Service Battalions were 'Pals' regiments raised in the North East at the end of 1914. Enrolment was slow and a meeting was arranged for the 31st of October to shame those who had not enrolled. Over 100 men enrolled at the meeting and by November 2nd the Battalion was over 900. On the 4th of November the Battalion was full (1,737).

By the 10th of November, a second battalion (1,547) was officially sanctioned and within two days, the battalion was almost full. The War Office sanctioned a third battalion (1,487) and then a fourth battalion (1,560) creating a Tyneside Irish Brigade. In 96 days the Tyneside Irish had managed to recruit 5,331 soldiers.

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

Private Thomas McGRATH and the Tyneside Irish 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, 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 battlefield (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 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. 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.



Fig1. Attack on La Boisselle

The Allied troops advanced down the Tara, 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 -10th Lincoln, 11th Suffolk and Cambridge and 24th Tyneside Irish

Three battalions the 10th Lincolns, 11th Suffolk and Cambridge and the 24th Tyneside Irish and **Thomas McGRATH** were in trenches directly opposite Lochnagar Crater. As nobody knew what was likely to happen when such a large mine exploded, they retreated back to their second line. In addition to this, they were instructed to wait an additional five minutes to allow for all the debris from the mine to clear.

The extra five minutes allowed the Germans ample time to man their damaged trenches and redoubts. They advanced under machine gun fire from Sausage Redoubt, Scots Redoubt and fire from the rear of La Boisselle. The Lincolns made it to the eastern lip of the crater whilst the Suffolks and Cambridge pushed on to the German Line. One terrible incident of note was that of soldiers from the Suffolk and Cambridge battalion trying to fight their way into Sausage Redoubt only to be burnt to death by flame throwers as they reached the parapet.

The remaining Suffolks merged with the 27th Irish Tyneside on their right and managed to attack and seize Scots Redoubt, which was a major achievement given the events of the day. British observers noticed that Sausage Redoubt had not been taken and sent out the order for the support battalion of the 24th Tyneside Irish to hold their advance. The order was received too late and **Thomas McGRATH** and the 24th Irish were already on their way down towards the British front line. They presented an easy target for the German machine gunners and within ten minutes many had perished.

The remaining 24th Irish fought on, merging with the 27th Irish on their right and fighting their way two and a half miles from where they started. This was to be the greatest distance any battalion made on the day. They were last seen on the outskirts of Contalmaison, a small village a long way behind the German lines - they were never seen again.

Outcome of the battle: Very little gain on the day – The Lincolns captured ground up to the crater. The Suffolks, Royal Scots and 27th Tyneside Irish took Scots Redoubt. This was one of the few successes on the day. By the end of the day the 24th Tyneside Irish had suffered 634 casualties including 147 killed.

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

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

Additional information:

The record of **Private Thomas McGRATH** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **Thomas McGRATH** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Tyler Cummings, St Thomas More RC Academy, May 2017**

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

Tyneside Irish – John Sheen

One Day On The Somme – 1st July 1916 – Barry Cuttall

La Boisselle - Somme – Michael Stedman

Map La Boisselle -Dr J.P. Normington