

A SOLDIER
OF THE GREAT WAR



Private James PURCELL

Service Number: 25-516

25th Battalion Tyneside Irish

Northumberland Fusiliers

Died 1st July 1916 aged 25

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 James PURCELL** was a member of the **25th Tyneside Irish Service Battalion**. This was a 'Pals' regiment of the Northumberland Fusiliers, 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 James PURCELL 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.



Fig 1. 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 – 20th, 23rd Tyneside Scottish and 25th Tyneside Irish

The attack on Mash Valley was led by the Northumberland Fusiliers Tyneside Scottish 20th and 23rd battalions with the Tyneside Irish 25th in support. At its maximum, Mash Valley was 700m wide and for **James PURCELL** and the troops to have any chance of crossing this expanse, they were dependent on the artillery barrage having destroyed the German frontline. In addition to the artillery barrage, the Y Sap mine (18,000kg) was also planted alongside the village of La Boisselle. As the Germans were aware of this mine, they had retreated reducing its impact.

Although the seven-day barrage had obliterated the village, the deep underground defences of the Germans meant that their front-line soldiers were able to man what was left of their trenches and mount a remarkable defence.

The geography of Mash Valley meant that **James PURCELL** and the British troops had first to advance downhill (in full sight of the Germans), cross a short flat and then move uphill. The

Germans held the high ground and could see the British troops at all time. Both the Scottish and Irish battalions were played into battle by their pipers, who continued to play until they fell. The Irish troops advanced from the reserve trenches in support of the two Scottish battalions. Many of the 25th Tyneside Irish were shot before they even reached the British front line. Others perished on the downward slopes into the valley.

The Germans allowed the British to advance across the valley until they reached a point of no return, maximising the number of soldiers in Mash Valley. The German machine guns opened fire and annihilated the advancing troops, followed by snipers picking off anyone left moving in No Man's Land. For all the brave efforts of the Northumberland Fusiliers at Mash Valley there was no gain by the end of the day. The battalions in Mash Valley suffered the following casualties:

20th Bn. – 590 men 23rd Bn. - 684 men 25th Bn. - 509 men.

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 Allies failed to achieve their overall objective of opening the road to Bapaume but they had achieved a foothold in the German defences, however, at a great cost to the Battalions involved.

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. **James PURCELL** was one of these soldiers. Eighty-five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield, 1,927, are unknown soldiers.

James PURCELL, aged 25, 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 Ann Kemp Whiteman (formerly Purcell) of 3 Thames St West, Wallsend, Northumberland**

The record of **Private James PURCELL** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **James PURCELL** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Hashir Khan, Morley Academy, May 2018.**

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 Cuttell

La Boisselle - Somme – Michael Stedman

Map La Boisselle – Dr J.P. Normington