

A SOLDIER
OF THE GREAT WAR



Private Thomas EXLEY

Service Number: 26-210

26th 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 EXLEY was a member of the 26th 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. By the 4th of November the Battalion was full (1,737).

On 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. The British shells increased just prior to zero-hour and merged with 19 mine explosions. The troops went over the top at 7.30am and advanced in lines at a slow, steady pace across the expanse of No Man's Land.

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

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



Fig1. 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, 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 battalion deep. The Plan was for the 21st Battalion to

capture and hold the front line trench. The 22nd would advance further to take the second trench (Kaufmanngraben) and finally **Thomas EXLEY** and 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. The 26th Tyneside Irish advanced with bayonets fixed and helped take the German second line. As they moved deeper behind the German lines however, they found themselves lacking in numbers and support and retreated back to hold part of the second line (Kaufmanngraben). Although they had to retreat from some of their earlier gains, the advance into part of the German second line 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 26th Tyneside Irish totalled 489 casualties of whom 156 were killed.

Casualties for 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. **Thomas EXLEY** was one of these soldiers. Eighty-five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield, 1,927, are unknown soldiers.

Thomas EXLEY 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 EXLEY** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **Thomas EXLEY** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Sam Lancaster, 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