

A SOLDIER
OF THE GREAT WAR



Private Herbert COLES

Service Number: 16555

11th Battalion (Cambridge Pals)

The Suffolk Regiment

Died 1st July 1916 aged 23

Commemorated on Thiepval Memorial

Pier and face 1C and 2A

WW1 Centenary record of an

Unknown Soldier

KNOWN UNTO GOD



Recruitment – 11th Battalion Suffolk Regiment – Suffolks/Cambs – (Cambridge Pals)

Private Herbert COLES was a member of the 11th Suffolks, which was a service battalion known as the Cambs/Suffolks or Cambridge Pals. At the outbreak of the war, men of the County enlisting for Infantry were sent to the Suffolk Regiment Depot at Bury St Edmunds. This soon became overcrowded and a relief camp was formed in Cambridge.

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 Herbert COLES and the 11th Suffolks 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 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 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.

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 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 -10th Lincoln, 11th Suffolk and Cambridge and 24th Tyneside Irish

Three battalions, the 10th Lincolns, 11th Suffolk and Cambridge and the 24th Tyneside Irish attacked the eastern lip of Lochnagar crater and the east side of Sausage Valley. **Herbert COLES** and The Suffolks were in the second line trenches directly opposite Lochnagar Crater. As nobody knew what was likely to happen when such a large mine exploded, they were instructed to wait an additional five minutes to allow for all the debris from the mine to clear. In fact, the debris cleared very quickly.

The extra five minutes allowed the Germans ample time to man their damaged trenches and redoubts. The Suffolks advanced under intense 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 in to Sausage redoubt, only to be burnt to death by flame throwers as they reached the parapet.

The remaining Suffolks merged with the 27th Tyneside Irish 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 as 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 behind the German lines. This was to be the greatest distance any battalions made on the day. They were last seen on the outskirts of Contalmaison, a small village behind the German lines - they were never seen again.

Outcome: Very little gain on the day – Lincolns captured ground up to the crater and The Suffolks, Royal Scots and the 27th Tyneside Irish managed to take Scots Redoubt. The cost to The Suffolks was 527 officers and men.

Casualties: The highest casualty rate of the day with over 6,380 officers and men either killed or wounded. Of these 2,267 were dead. **Herbert COLES** was one of these soldiers. Eighty-five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield, 1,927, are unknown soldiers. **Herbert COLES, aged 23, died at La Boisselle** and has no known grave.

Commemorated at: Thiepval Memorial – Pier and face 1C and 2A.

Additional information: **Son of Mr and Mrs D. Coles of Nag's Head Cottages, Factory Rd, Whittlesey, Cambs.**

The record of **Private Herbert COLES** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **Herbert COLES** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Max Crawford, Bruntcliffe 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 Cuttall

La Boisselle - Somme – Michael Stedman

Map La Boisselle -Dr J.P. Normington