

A SOLDIER  
OF THE GREAT WAR



**Private John Selby**

**JOHNSTONE**

Service Number: 18637

15th Battalion (Manchester Scots)

The Royal Scots

Died 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 aged 26

Commemorated on Thiepval Memorial

Pier and face 6D and 7D.

WW1 Centenary record of an

Unknown Soldier

KNOWN UNTO GOD





## **Recruitment - Royal Scots 15th Service Battalion (Manchester Scots)**

**Private John JOHNSTONE** was a member of the 15th Battalion of the Royal Scots a service battalion (pals) formed at Edinburgh in September 1914 by the Lord Provost and City. Some 550 men were recruited in Manchester and for this reason the Battalion is sometimes referred to as the Manchester Scottish.

## **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 John JOHNSTONE** and the 15th Royal Scots 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 is 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.



**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 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 - 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots, 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots and 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish**

**John JOHNSTONE** was with the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots who advanced in the night across No Man's land to within 200m of the German Lines to reduce the amount of ground they had to cross in Sausage Valley. This still left them in a valley 600m wide and open to fire from all directions. They were supported by the 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots and the 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish. The battalion to their left, the 10<sup>th</sup> Lincolns, had retreated to the second line and waited an extra 5 minutes in their trenches to allow for the debris of Lochnagar Crater to fall. This meant that for the first five minutes the Royal Scots had no support to their left.



At the sound of the whistle The Royal Scots stood up in the battlefield, only to come under instant machine gun fire from Sausage Redoubt and from their left in the direction of La Boisselle. Instead of heading north east to attack Sausage Redoubt the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots bunched together with the 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots and veered east (towards the right) ending up in Birch Tree and Shelter Woods around the back of Scots Redoubt. Having crossed the German lines, they found themselves surrounded with Germans to their left, front and rear. In spite of the situation the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots re grouped and found themselves fighting off German counter attacks. The 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots, along with soldiers from the 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish and Suffolks managed to capture Scots Redoubt. The result of veering to the right however, meant they did not manage to capture Sausage Redoubt which dominated the surrounding area for the rest of the day.

The cost to the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots was 513 casualties. **John JOHNSTONE** was one of these soldiers

**Outcome of the battle:** Very little gain on the day, the Lincolns captured ground up to the crater and the Royal Scots, Suffolks and 27<sup>th</sup> 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. Eighty-five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield – 1,927 are unknown soldiers. **John JOHNSTONE, aged 26, died at La Boisselle** and has no known grave.

**Commemorated at:** Thiepval Memorial – Pier and face 6D and 7D.

**Additional information:** **Son of Thomas and Margaret Johnstone of Manchester, came from Detroit in Dec 1914 to enlist.**

The record of **Private John JOHNSTONE** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **John JOHNSTONE** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Robyn Metcalfe, Farnley 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 – 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 – Barry Cuttall

La Boisselle - Somme – Michael Stedman

Map La Boisselle – Dr J.P.Normington