

A SOLDIER  
OF THE GREAT WAR



**Private John Elliot**

**SPEIRS**

Service Number: 19655

16th Battalion (McCrae's Battalion)

The Royal Scots

Died 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 aged 22

Commemorated on Thiepval Memorial

Pier and face 6D and 7D.

WW1 Centenary record of an

Unknown Soldier

KNOWN UNTO GOD



## **Recruitment - Royal Scots 16th Service Battalion (McCrae's Battalion)**

**Private John SPEIRS** was a member of the 16th Battalion of the Royal Scots, formed at Edinburgh in late November 1914 by Lt-Col. Sir George McCrae, MP. Sir George was a keen supporter and Director of Hearts of Midlothian Football Club and having enrolled 11 players, six from the first team and five from the second team, he found supporters quickly followed and within seven days, over 800 men had signed up.

They famously paraded around the Hearts ground at half time during the derby game with Hibs to encourage more supporters and within seven days the total for the battalion had risen to over 1350. Other clubs followed the example and over 30 professional players are listed as joining the 16th Battalion. By December 1914, supporters from seventy-five football clubs had joined the 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots, more commonly known as McCrae's Battalion.

## **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 SPEIRS** and the 16th 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, 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 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 SPEIRS** was with the 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots who advanced in support of the 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots up Sausage Valley. This left them in a valley 600m wide and open to fire from all directions. 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 five minutes there was no support to their left, leaving them open to machine gun fire from the German second line.

The weight of machine gun fire was so heavy that instead of heading in a north easterly direction, the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots bunched together and veered east (towards the right) ending up in Birch Tree and Shelter Woods. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion re grouped with the 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish and the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks and successfully captured Scots Redoubt. However, the result of veering to the right meant that the Royal Scots failed to capture Sausage Redoubt which dominated the surrounding area for the rest of 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 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish managed to take Scots Redoubt in almost undamaged condition. By the end of the day, despite their valiant efforts the cost to the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion of The Royal Scots was 472 casualties. **John SPEIRS** was one of these soldiers.

**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 SPEIRS, aged 22, died at La Boisselle** and has no known grave

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

**Additional information:** **Son of William and Hannah Elliot Speirs of 128 Croft St, Galashiels, Selkirkshire.**

The record of **Private John SPEIRS** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **John SPEIRS** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Daniel Evans-Smith, Tour Guide, 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