

A SOLDIER
OF THE GREAT WAR



Private John Thomas

WILLISON

Service Number: 20-489

20th Battalion Tyneside Scottish

Northumberland Fusiliers

Died 1st July 1916 aged 43

Commemorated on Thiepval Memorial

Pier and face 10B, 11B and 12B

WW1 Centenary record of an

Unknown Soldier

KNOWN UNTO GOD



Recruitment -Tyneside Scottish 20th, 21st, 22nd and 23rd Service Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers. Private John WILLISON was a member of the 20th Battalion of the Tyneside Scottish Northumberland Fusiliers. The Tyneside Scottish Service Battalions were 'Pals' regiments raised in the North East at the end of 1914. The first Battalion (1,150) was raised between 9th October and 25th October. So great was the response that the Tyneside Scottish asked for permission to raise a second battalion and this was complete by the 4th of November (1,158).

Authorization was granted for the third battalion on the 9th of November and by the 11th of November, it was announced that the battalion was full with 1,169 men enlisted. This is a recruiting record that is unlikely to be surpassed in the history of the British Army. Anticipating a fourth battalion, recruitment continued and an extra 400 men enrolled.

On the 16th of November permission for a fourth battalion was granted and within 24 hours, it was announced that the fourth battalion was full, with 1,920 men enlisted. The Tyneside Scottish Brigade was now a reality and it had taken exactly thirty-four days to complete.

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 WILLISON and the Tyneside Scottish 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.

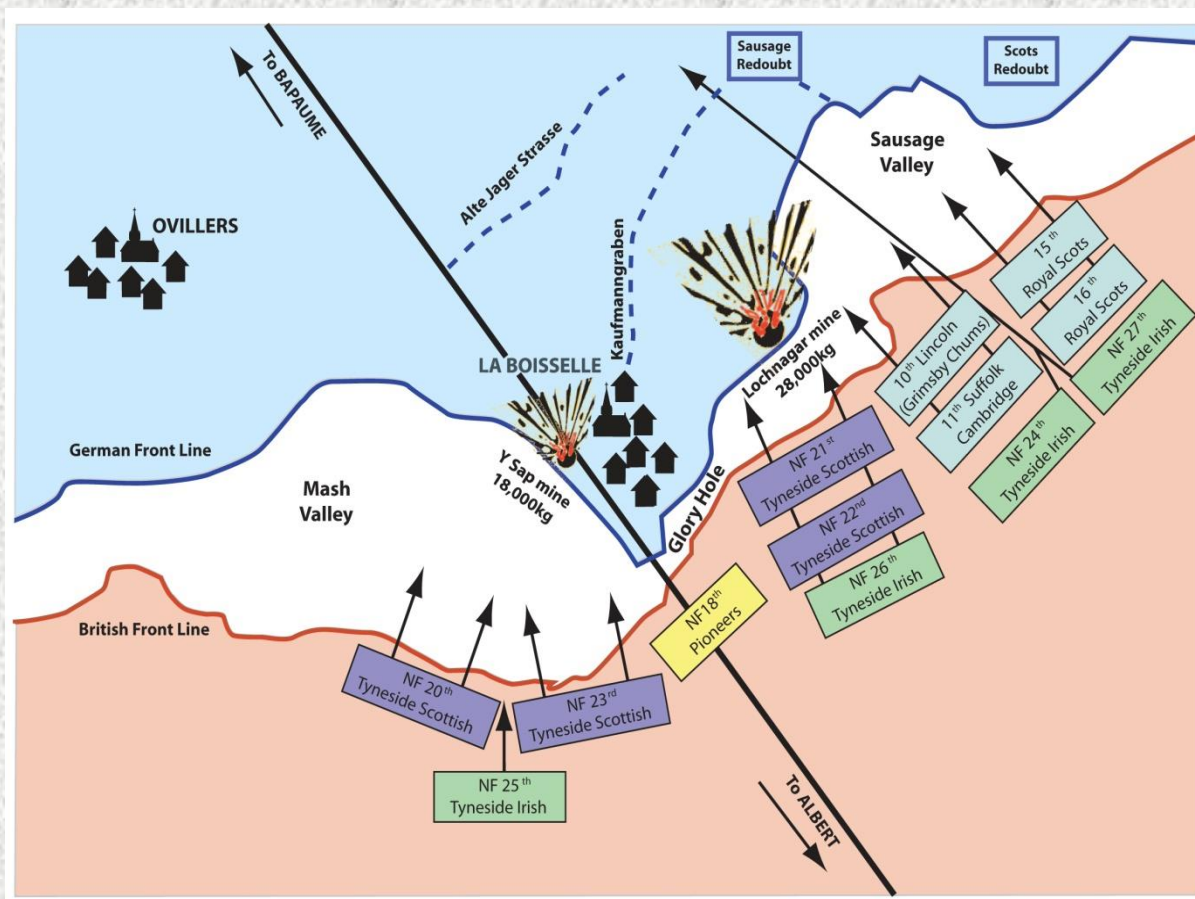


Fig.1 – Attack on La Boisselle

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 – 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 **John WILLISON** 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 defences of the Germans meant that the 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 **John WILLISON** and the British troops had first to advance downhill (in full sight of the Germans) then across a short flat and then uphill. The Germans held the high ground and could see the British troops at all time. 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 and the 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. **John WILLISON** was one of these soldiers. Eighty-five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield, 1,927, have are unknown soldiers. **John WILLISON, aged 43, 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 Willison of 5 Edwin's Avenue, Forest Hall, Nthd.**

The record of **Private John WILLISON** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **John WILLISON** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Reece Smith, Wolfreton School, Willerby, Hull, December 2017.**

References: The historical information used in this document has been abridged from the following sources.

Tyneside Scottish – Graham Stewart and John Sheen

One Day On The Somme – 1st July 1916 – Barry Cuttall

La Boisselle – Somme – Michael Stedman - Map La Boisselle – Dr. J.P. Normington