

A SOLDIER  
OF THE GREAT WAR



**Private William DURKIN**

Service Number: 27-1436

27th Battalion Tyneside Irish

Northumberland Fusiliers

Died 1<sup>st</sup> 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 24<sup>th</sup>, 25<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Service Battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers.** Private William DURKIN was a member of the 27<sup>th</sup> 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 31<sup>st</sup> of October to shame those who had not enrolled. Over 100 men enrolled at the meeting and by November 2<sup>nd</sup> the Battalion was over 900. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November the Battalion was full (1,737).

By the 10<sup>th</sup> 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.

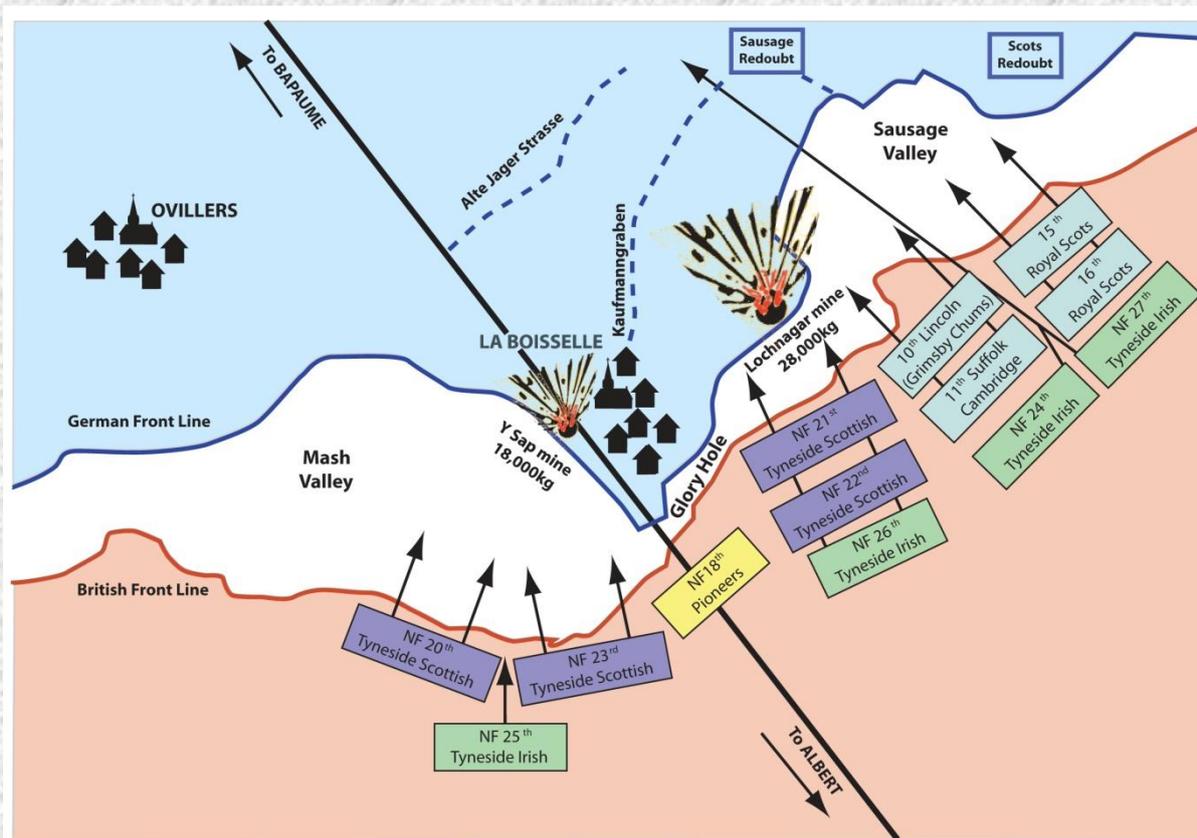
### **Battle of the Somme**

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

The 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish provided the third wave of attack in Sausage Valley behind the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots. The 15<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots had advanced in the night across No Man's land to within 200m of the German Lines in order 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. The battalions on the left of Sausage Valley 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 the Royal Scots had no support to their left.

The weight of machine gun fire from Sausage Redoubt and from their left, in the direction of La Boisselle meant the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Royal Scots bunched together and veered towards the right ending, up at Birch Tree and Shelter Woods. The 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion re-grouped with the part of 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish and the 11<sup>th</sup> Suffolks and successfully captured Scots Redoubt. The result of veering to the right however, meant they did not manage to attack Sausage Redoubt, which dominated the surrounding area for the rest of the day.

The remaining 27<sup>th</sup> Irish merged with the 24<sup>th</sup> Irish and pushed forward past Scots Redoubt towards the outskirts of Contalmaison. This would be the greatest distance covered by any battalions on the day, over 2½ miles from where they started.

**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. This was one of the few successes on the day. The casualties on the day for the 27<sup>th</sup> Tyneside Irish totalled 539 including 159 killed.

**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. **William DURKIN** was one of these soldiers. Eighty-five per cent of the soldiers who died on this battlefield, 1,927, are unknown soldiers. **William DURKIN 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 William DURKIN** has been compiled as part of the World War 1 Centenary and **William DURKIN** who is an unknown soldier, is now known by **Toby Johnson, Wolfreton School, Dec. 2017**

**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