

A GRAND ADVANCE
AT GREAT COST

SCOTLAND AND LOOS

WW100
SCOTLAND

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM ALL THIS?

PTE MCLAREN



A GRAND ADVANCE
AT GREAT COST

The battle of Loos

25 September 1915

THE CHANGE OF FOCUS TO THE WESTERN FRONT

The desperate state of the Russian Army in 1915 demanded a change of focus, a major effort in the West was required. The Allies therefore launched a significant joint offensive that the French General, Marshal Joffre, promised would 'compel the Germans to retire to the Meuse and probably end the war'. The British sector centred on the mining region of Loos.

On 25 September long lines of British infantry advanced on heavily defended German positions in and around the small coalmining town of Loos, in the heart of the industrial area of northeast France. The attack was preceded by an artillery bombardment that began on 21 September. After much agonised debate, chlorine gas and smoke was discharged at 5.50 a.m. on the morning of the battle. The decision was finally reached in order to compensate for what Sir Douglas Haig, Commander First Army, whose men would execute the advance, considered insufficient artillery support. This was the first time the British would use gas as a weapon in the Great War.



Leaving for battle



Only one of these officers would survive

Loos was not a battle of Britain's choosing. It was fought in support of French operations in Artois and Champagne. Politically, it was important that Britain was seen to be playing her part in support of her French ally. The British Expeditionary Force would attack on a wide front extending from the La Bassée Canal to Loos.

At the outset Haig had serious reservations about the proposed offensive. The German defences overlooked the British front line along its full length, and the ground between was open, devoid of cover, and studded with industrial buildings and mine workings, which presented a difficult challenge to Haig's First Army.² The advantage as regards the Loos battlefield was clearly with the German defenders. The advance would be made by six divisions, with three in reserve, supported by over one hundred heavy guns.³

The attacking force included three Regular, one Territorial Force and two New Army divisions - 9th and 15th (Scottish) Divisions.⁴ Thirty-six battalions, half the number which participated in the opening stages of the battle, were from Scottish regiments.⁵ In total, over 30,000 Scots would take part in the attack, most serving in the two Kitchener Divisions, complemented by a core of regular soldiers, and territorials, representing communities from across Scotland.⁶ The ranks of these battalions, representative of each of the ten Scottish infantry regiments, were not exclusively 'Scottish'. The kilt and Scotland's martial traditions had broad appeal. But, the disproportionate number of Scots who went over the top at 6.30 a.m. on 25 September 1915 ensured Loos would be remembered as a Scottish battle.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ T. Royle, The Flowers of the Forest (Edinburgh, 2007), 85.

⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁶ Ibid., 86.



Corp. A. CRAWFORD. L. Corp. A. BURKE.
Mrs Crawford, 89 Burgher Street, Parkhead, has received official intimation of the death of her son, Corporal Andrew Crawford, 10th H.L.I., in action in France on September 25. Corporal Crawford, who was 20 years of age, enlisted a few days after the declaration of war, before which he was in Messrs Templeton's Carpet Factory, Greenhead. Another son, Pte. Allan Crawford, 7th Seaforth Highlanders, was wounded in the left hand last week in France.

Cpl Andrew Crawford
died in a trench on the
Loos battlefield.

Before enlisting with the
10th Highland Light
Infantry, Andrew worked at
Jampleton Carpet Factory in
Bridgeton, Glasgow. It is thought
Andrew died due to gas released from
his own trenches or heavy
machine gun fire from a German
railway viaduct in the early hours of
the morning.

The streets of Los



DUNDEE'S CONTRIBUTION

Dundee's contribution to the Battle of Loos was remarkable. The war exacted a heavy toll on the city, perhaps more than that paid by anywhere else in Scotland. By the Armistice some sixty-three per cent of eligible men had served with the colours, and over 4,000 made the ultimate sacrifice.⁷ This contributed to one of the highest casualty rates in Scotland.

However, Dundee's experience of the Great War has become synonymous with the fate of its Territorial Force battalion, 4th Black Watch, 'Dundee's Own'. The battalion was recruited almost exclusively in Dundee and represented all ranks of local society; 'it represented a Scottish city at war'.⁸

On leaving for the front on 24 February 1915, with a strength of almost 900 all ranks, an article in the local press affirmed, that 'in a very special sense 4th Black Watch is Dundee's regiment, and it carries with it the honour of the town. This special intimacy of relationship was in the minds of the people who lined the streets for hours to bid farewell to the soldiers as in successive detachments they marched to entrain'.⁹ This closeness helps explain how the fate of 4th Black Watch shaped Dundee's collective memory. The battalion had already lost heavily at Neuve Chapelle and Aubers Ridge earlier in 1915, before making its contribution to the Battle of Loos. Belonging to the Bareilly Brigade, 7th Meerut Division of the Indian Army Corps, 4th Black Watch was part of a diversionary attack, intended to draw German reserves from the districts east of Loos.¹⁰

7 People's Journal War Supplement, 16 May 1925, 5.

8 A. G. Wauchope, A History of the Black Watch in the Great War, Vol. II (London, 1926), 3.

9 People's Journal, Saturday, 27 February 1915, 9.

10 A. G. Wauchope, A History of the Black Watch in the Great War, Vol. II (London, 1926), 16.



In preparation for the attack a mine was detonated under the German front line at 5.48 a.m. This was followed by a 'terrific bombardment' of enemy positions, and gas and coloured smoke was released, making it 'impossible to see more than a few yards in front of our own parapet'.

The attack was launched at 6.00 a.m. on 25 September. 'Dundee's Own' made steady progress across No Man's Land but had barely left their trenches when they were met with a steady fire from the German lines.

Sergeant Thomas Bowman, 4th Black Watch, who had been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for gallantry at Neuve Chapelle in March, doubled across a battlefield 'swept by rifle fire'. He wrote,

'It was a very hazy morning and you couldn't see far ahead. We had to keep close together to keep in touch with each other'.¹¹

He had only gone a short distance when he encountered his brother, Sergeant John Bowman, whose right leg had been shattered by a bullet. The brothers shook hands and Bowman resumed the advance. Both men survived the battle but John Bowman's leg would be amputated as a result of his wounds.¹²

'Stand after stand was made, the men of the 4th halting and firing as they retired'.¹³ Bowman wrote, 'Men were falling thick. I realised we would have to retreat. I jumped into the open with the intention of making a race for our own trenches. Immediately there was a burst of fire... Afterwards we realised how serious were the losses sustained by the 4th Black Watch'.¹⁴

Corporal William Linton Andrews, a D.C. Thomson journalist, and one of Dundee's renowned 'Fighter Writers', took part in the charge.

'Our Companies moved steadily into the enemy's front line. Those Germans who survived surrendered in batches. Most of them were young and well built, but pale compared with our weather beaten veterans'.¹⁵

11 The Courier and Advertiser, Saturday, 28 September 1933, 4.

12 The Courier, Monday, 18 October 1915, 4.

13 A. G. Wauchop, A History of the Black Watch in the Great War, Vol. II, (London, 1926), 20.

14 The Courier and Advertiser, Saturday, 28 September 1933, 4.

15 The Evening Telegraph, Monday, 5 May 1936, 3.

The 4th Black Watch captured the German front line and support trenches, but the Brigade's flanks were unprotected and the men were subjected to increasingly heavy German artillery fire and counter-attacks.

Lieutenant-Colonel Harry Walker, 4th Black Watch, ordered his battalion to consolidate the captured trenches, but the situation had become critical.

The 4th Black Watch had lost almost half its strength and most of the officers were killed or wounded. In an effort to hasten reinforcements, Colonel Walker attempted to reach Brigade Headquarters, but fell mortally wounded. The battalion was forced to withdraw from its forward positions.

The War Diary records that 4th Black Watch had gone into action with 21 officers and about 450 men. Casualties amounted to 20 officers and some 240 other ranks, killed wounded and missing.

The fact that only one officer returned unwounded meant the account of the battle was largely pieced together from information supplied by non-commissioned officers.



Loos Batteryground

PURE HELL

To the south, Scotland's two New Army Divisions would take a leading role in the main assault. The 9th (Scottish) Division was tasked with capturing a series of heavily defended German positions beginning with the formidable Hohenzollern Redoubt.

Only two hundred yards from the Scots' trenches and set forward from the German front line, the Redoubt had a commanding view over No Man's Land both north and south. To the left, 28th Brigade, comprising the 10th Highland Light Infantry and 6th King's Own Scottish Borderers, with 9th Cameronians and 11th Highland Light Infantry in close support, came under withering machine gun fire as soon as the leading battalions crossed the parapet. Finding the German barbed wire intact, and with casualties mounting, there was no option but to withdraw.



Destruction



Emilienne Morcan,
seventeen year old school teacher,
helped the Scottish identify
German strong points
and establish a
first aid post.



Major John Stewart
and
Lieutenant Colonel John
as Owen Lloyd,
Black Watch, June.



Pte Macleod
in the trench

The Lone Tree
The Germans used the tree
for target practice until a
group of Cameron Highlanders
cut it down under the cover
of darkness.



THE LONE TREE.
A WELL-KNOWN LANDMARK FOR THOSE ENGAGED IN THE FIGHTING NEAR LOOS
SEPTEMBER 1915.

44 NW 3

EDITION 9 B

LOOS



77 B.M.
GERMAN FIELD GUN
CAPTURED BY
4th BATT. COR. REG.
AT LOOS
ON 23rd OCTOBER 1914

His Grace
The Duke of Richmond and Gordon, K.G.
Unveiling Gun at Keith 15th Dec. 1915.



Maps of Loos



Some few days later

Private James McMinn, 6th King's Own Scottish Borderers, wrote to his parents in Dumfries from hospital in Norwich, describing his experiences.

'I was shot three times, twice in the left leg and through the left shoulder. I had a very trying time of it. It was a pure hell. I thought my time had come... There were dead men everywhere, and the groans of the wounded were pitiful'.¹⁶

Private McMinn served alongside his brother, Corporal Charles McMinn, who was to become one of the many hundreds reported missing after the battle.

'I have been asking all the wounded men of our battalion if they knew anything about Charlie, but I have not heard anything yet. He might be all right. It is to be hoped so. You will all have to keep your hearts up and look for the best'.¹⁷

Despite his brother's optimism, Corporal Charles McMinn would be numbered with over two hundred men of the 6th King's Own Scottish Borderers killed in action on 25 September 1915.

¹⁶ Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser, Wednesday, 6 October 1915, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid

THE DEAD LYING FIVE DEEP

Opposite the Hohenzollern Redoubt, 26th Brigade, consisting of the 5th Cameron Highlanders and 7th Seaforth Highlanders, supported by 8th Black Watch and 8th Gordon Highlanders, would also encounter significant resistance. Lochiel's 5th Camerons and the 8th Black Watch came under close machine gun fire from the left flank and suffered heavy casualties. Private James Laidlaw, 5th Cameron Highlanders, a native of Penpont in Dumfriesshire, wrote a short account of the action.

'We lost heavily during the advance. When we started we were 1,100 strong. We returned with 261. So that will give you an idea of what we had to face. It was a terrible scene on the battlefield. The noise of the shells bursting and the cries of the wounded were terrible to listen to. A trench we occupied on our left flank had been strongly protected with barbed wire entanglements, and scores of our brave Camerons were slain here... In some places the dead were lying five deep - Camerons on the top of Germans and Germans on the top of Camerons. It was awful to march over the bodies of our own comrades, but we had to go on.'¹⁸

Private Robert Blelock, 8th Black Watch, writing to friends and family in Perth, recalled that at the moment his battalion advanced 'it seemed as if hell had been let loose'.¹⁹

THE BIG ADVANCE

Meanwhile, on the right, 7th Seaforth Highlanders and 8th Gordon Highlanders made steady progress. Describing 'the big advance', a Glencaple soldier remarked on how the 8th Gordons 'pushed forward to gain more ground, and went as if on parade'.²⁰

Within an hour, 7th Seaforth Highlanders had negotiated the southern part of the Hohenzollern Redoubt and captured all its objectives. However, this came at a high price. In consolidating the captured trenches, 7th Seaforths were 'exposed to a murderous fire from the enemy's guns', and 'the behaviour of the men was worthy of the very highest praise'.

By 9.30 a.m. the 7th Seaforths had successfully made contact with the 8th Black Watch to the immediate left, and 26th Brigade was holding the Dump, Fosse No. 8 and the Corons - a large slagheap, pithead and small coalmining village.

In an attempt to exploit 26th Brigade's success, 9th Cameronians and 11th Highland Light Infantry, both 28th Brigade, were ordered to launch a further attack on the 9th (Scottish) Division's left front position at 12.15 p.m.

The situation was no different than it was at 6.30 a.m., and as soon as the support battalions left their trenches the men were subjected to heavy rifle and machine gun fire. Some seven officers and 235 other ranks were killed as the attempt collapsed. The divisional reserve, 27th Brigade, was ordered forward in support of the increasingly hard-pressed Highlanders still holding hard-won defensive positions around Fosse No. 8 and the Corons.

The reserve battalions of 27th Brigade, comprising 11th and 12th Royal Scots, 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers, and 10th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, found progress difficult. The men soon discovered that 'all the carefully drawn-up plans for the regulation of traffic in the communication trenches broke down during the stress of battle, and the advance to the front line was a **dreadful nightmare**. Not only were the troops exhausted by the halts which they were compelled to make every few minutes, owing to wounded men pushing their way down the same trench, but they suffered many casualties from the shells with which the enemy sprinkled our hinterland'.²¹

On finally reaching No Man's Land, 27th Brigade 'came under a deluge of bullets' from the high ground to the left. Despite their losses, 11th and 12th Royal Scots established contact with 26th Brigade by 11.00 a.m., and were advancing against the village of Haisnes. But it was too late. German reinforcements had been brought forward, and by dusk the Royal Scots' position was untenable. Rain was falling heavily as the exhausted soldiers withdrew to the area around Fosse No. 8.

18 Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser, Wednesday, 6 October 1915, 3.

19 The Evening Telegraph and Post, Thursday, 21 October 1915, 2.


20 Dumfries and Galloway Standard and Advertiser, Saturday, 6 November 1915, 8.

21 J. Ewing, The Royal Scots 1914-1918, Vol 1 (Edinburgh, 1925), 188.

HILL 70

Further south, 15th (Scottish) Division had orders:

'to advance nearly five miles, taking two villages and at least three well-fortified trench systems... a difficult task even for well-seasoned troops'.²²



The Division's objectives included Loos village and Hill 70, a natural feature, which, although only seventy metres above sea level, dominated the battlefield. Chlorine gas was discharged at 5.50 a.m. in support of the infantry assault scheduled to start at 6.30 a.m.

Gas had proven to be a less than reliable weapon, but 15th (Scottish) Division were slightly more fortunate than most with the wind blowing in more or less the correct direction, carrying the gas towards the German lines.²³ Still, it caused confusion in the leading ranks of 46th Brigade, on the left of 15th (Scottish) Division's allotted front.

²² J. Stewart and J. Buchan, The Fifteenth (Scottish) Division 1914-1919 (Edinburgh, 1926), 28.

²³ G. Corrigan, Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle (Stroud, 2006) 69.

²⁴ People's Journal, Saturday, 27 November 1915, 1.



Here, Piper Daniel Laidlaw, 7th King's Own Scottish Borderers, would receive a Victoria Cross for an act of remarkable bravery.

In an interview with the Dundee People's Journal, Laidlaw described an explosion which sent a gas cloud back towards the King's Own Scottish Borderers' trenches.

'You've seenskittles go toppling and staggering in all directions when a ball hits them; for a moment it was like that with my company, and then a voice rang out, "For God's sake, Laidlaw, pipe 'em together!" It was the voice of Lieutenant Young, and somehow or other I got a breath of clean air into my lungs, and I struck up the Borderers' Regimental March'.²⁴

Despite the gas, smoke, and heavy German rifle and machine gun fire, Laidlaw calmly mounted the parapet playing 'Blue Bonnets over the Border'. His example rallied the 7th King's Own Scottish Borderers 'and sent them racing like mad towards those trenches'.²⁵

Recalling the charge, Laidlaw mentioned

'There was smoke everywhere; the air simply sizzled with bullets, the wet, whitey-grey ground squirted hell-fire on every side as the big shells burst'.

Piper Laidlaw was wounded twice in the advance, but only sought treatment after his battalion was in the third line of German trenches.

'Funny, but having been hit twice I wasn't worrying a bit about getting plugged again, but I remember feeling horribly afraid a bullet might puncture the bag, and so put the pipes out of action'.²⁶

Daniel Laidlaw was a 40 year old, time-expired soldier. On the outbreak of war he was married with four children, and employed as a warehouseman with Alnwick Co-Operative Society. Whilst conscious of his commitments, like many others he was keen to volunteer and 'do his bit'.

'I told the missus I couldn't stick at home. I'd have to be out in France and in the thick of it'.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

1 British
1 Mac
2 Tun
1 Pr
5 Pos
1 Pair
1 Pa
3
1
1
2
2
1
15
3
1



Miss Mary
Mrs. D. P. Sanders & Co

Scottish soldier

writing home



The 46th Brigade had made good progress. Many men of 7th King's Own Scottish Borderers, 10th Cameronians, and 12th Highland Light Infantry had been gassed before leaving their own trenches, but by 7.00 a.m. all three battalions were successfully through the German front lines. However, the losses were heavy.

Private Thomas Bisset, 12th Highland Light Infantry, writing from hospital at Shorncliffe, explained how 'he was hit on the left breast by a bullet, which went through five rounds of cartridges, a little gift Testament, and a notebook which he carried in his pocket, but did him no injury. The butt of his rifle was also shattered, and his watch smashed'.²⁸

Private Wilfred Stanley Devey, a young Walsall soldier serving with the same battalion, described how 'bullets were whistling all round... it was awful to see your comrades falling, some never to rise again'.²⁹

KILT AND JACKET COMPLETELY RIDDLED

On 15th (Scottish) Division's right, 44th Brigade, led by 8th Seaforth Highlanders and 9th Black Watch, supported by 7th Cameron Highlanders with 10th Gordon Highlanders in reserve, advanced on the German front-line trenches.

Recounting the opening moments of the attack, an officer serving with 8th Seaforths wrote,

'What a hail of shell and bullets! The Germans had the range to a nicety; and burst high explosive and sprayed shrapnel over us in a deluge. Of course they made hits; they could not help making hits among us; but nothing could stop the elan of that charge for which the officers and men of the 8th Seaforth Highlanders had made up their minds... Down went one officer, another, and yet another, and still the remainder directed and cheered the men on. In perfect order, their lines extended and unbroken, our men reached the German wire... No troops could face that awful charge'.³⁰

Sergeant Nisbet, 8th Seaforths, wrote to his mother in Carronshore, informing her he was wounded and in hospital at Liverpool.

'If there is anything to be done, simply ask the Highland Brigade to do it, and the thing is all right; I am speaking about the whole Highland Brigade of course'.³¹

Nisbet gave clear indication of the severity of the fighting.

'There are very few of our battalion left... My kilt and jacket were completely riddled with shrapnel and shot, and I will need a new suit to come home in'.³²

28 The Newcastle Daily Journal and Courant, Saturday, 23 October 1915, 3.

29 The Walsall Advertiser, Saturday, 16 October, 1915, 7.

30 Dumfries and Galloway Saturday Standard, Saturday, 6 November 1915, 8.

31 The Falkirk Herald and Scottish Midlands Journal, Saturday, 16 October 1915, 5.

32 The Falkirk Herald and Midlands Journal, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 6.



WIVES, MOTHERS, SWEETHEARTS

On the Seaforth's right, 9th Black Watch also encountered determined opposition. Formed in early September 1914, 9th Black Watch recruited from across Scotland as well as the traditional Black Watch recruiting areas of Fife, Dundee, Angus and Perth.

Many volunteers came from Lanarkshire, with distinct groups from Lancashire and South Wales. The battalion's first objective was the heavily defended Lens Road Redoubt. Major John Stewart, second-in-command of the battalion, had taken an opportunity to survey the battlefield some days before.

'The German wire is damned strong and will take some crossing but I don't think there will be very much left of it when once we get to work with our guns'.³³

The men of 9th Black Watch awaited the order to advance.

'Prior to getting over the parapet... many of the men, in the knowledge of what lay before them, but confident and cheerful, brought out the portraits of their nearest and dearest - wives, mothers, sweethearts, as the case might be - and said to each other as they gazed upon the faces that were an incentive and inspiration, "Better let's us have a last look at them, boys"'.³⁴ At 6.30 a.m., the men received word to 'mount the parapet'.

The battalion's War Diary describes the attack on the German front line.

The Battalion gallantly charged out of our trenches and captured the enemy's first line trenches. The portion of enemy's line allotted to the Battalion was extremely strong our casualties here were far heavier than any other Battalion of the Brigade. Between our own trenches and the German fire trench 6 Officers were killed, one mortally wounded and about 100 Other Ranks killed.

Three of four 9th Black Watch company commanders were killed in the opening moments of the action. Major Michael William Henderson, joint agent of the Linlithgow branch of the Commercial Bank, was mortally wounded. His last words to his company were 'Keep going'.³⁵ Major Stewart made an entry in his diary, describing the costly struggle for the 9th Black Watch's

first objectives. 'The enemy's machine guns got to work and our men dropped right and left, but they never wavered for a second, on they went, line after line, into and over the German front line trenches, on into the second and third lines and bang into Loos itself, nothing stopped them; it was a perfectly magnificent show but alas, alas, it was only a remnant of a Regiment'.³⁶

Lieutenant-Colonel Sir John Burnett-Stuart, serving with the General Staff, described the advance of 9th Black Watch as the finest sight he had ever seen.³⁷ 'It seemed impossible to realize that these lines of disciplined soldiers had been, twelve short months before, almost all civilians. Perfect steadiness prevailed, regardless of the heavy fire which swept the ground over which they had to cross. There was no shouting or hurry; the men moved in quick time, picking up their "dressing" as if on a ceremonial parade'.³⁸

My darling sweetheart, Betty



³³ Black watch Castle and Museum, BWA 0171 Major J. Stewart, Diary, 21 September 1915

³⁴ The Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Herald, Wednesday, 16 February 1916, 3.

³⁵ A.G. Wauchope, A history of the Black watch in the Great war, Vol. III (London, 1926), 124.

³⁶ Black watch Castle and Museum, BWA 0171 Major J. Stewart, Diary, 30 September 1915.

³⁷ A.G. Wauchope, A history of the Black watch in the Great war, Vol. III (London, 1926), 124.

³⁸ Ibid

THE SLAUGHTER AND THE BLOOD

Loos was reached at around 7.25 a.m. The depleted 9th Black Watch and 8th Seaforth Highlanders, now supported by 7th Cameron Highlanders, the 'Shiny Seventh'³⁹, fought their way through the village. The advancing battalions encountered fierce German resistance, resulting in a desperate hand-to-hand struggle to clear the area. Writing to a friend in Warwick, an officer with a Highland regiment gave a graphic account of the battle.

'The slaughter and **blood, blood, blood** everywhere was frightful, but all stuck to it. I saw wonderful heroism; the Germans fought well, too. The whole thing is utterly beyond descriptor - the enormous shells and explosions of all kinds, the flying earth, **the shaking and concussions, the falling houses, the terrible shrieks and cries and curses and cheers**, and the mad rushing forward, the horrible sights and corpses... I am on the awful job to-day of writing home to my dead and wounded men's mothers and people.'⁴⁰

In a letter to his father in Sanquhar, Private W. W. Johnston, 7th Camerons, recalled the fight for the village.

'When we came to the first house in the village of Loos we made a line round it, and the sergeant had a peep through a hole in the wall. No sooner had he his head round than he made a dive back again. A German in the house had a pop at him... It wasn't long until we had them all out of that house. Two or three bombs soon settled them. We went right through the village, clearing the Germans out of it. At the end of the village we found that one of the houses was inhabited by two French people, an old man and woman. They gave us a great welcome, shook us by the hand, and said "**Brave I'Ecosais**". They were overcome with joy.'⁴¹

A HAIL OF LEAD

By 8.20 a.m., Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Owen Lloyd of Minard, commanding officer, 9th Black Watch, received word that the Black Watch, Camerons and Seaforths, reinforced by 10th Gordon Highlanders were advancing up the western slope of Hill 70. On reaching the summit the Highlanders found it lightly defended.

Passing over a half-finished redoubt, the leading elements of 44th Brigade advanced over the hill, driving the German defenders before them. However, due to the confused nature of the fighting, lack of obvious landmarks, and the large number of officers and non-commissioned officers who had become casualties, the attacking units became increasingly fragmented.

Exposed to heavy fire from the Dynamitière, a group of houses on the southern slope, and the Cité St Auguste, the few survivors were compelled to fall back to the redoubt on top of the hill. Recounting the attack, a Falkirk soldier with 10th Gordons, told how 'every window was lined with machine guns. That's where we got stuck. We dug ourselves into the trenching in a hail of lead, and held the place for quite a long time, but our rifles were no use against such a number of machine guns. Their being in the houses, too, gave them a great advantage over us in the open... We had to retire about 100 yards and take up a position on the brow of the hill'.⁴²

But the Germans were fully aware of Hill 70's strategic significance and were determined that it should be held. The 'History' of 15th (Scottish) Division describes the nature of the struggle. Redoubling their efforts, the enemy swept the crest of the hill with artillery, rifle and machine-gun fire. Time after time did men of the 44th and 46th Brigades enter the redoubt only to be driven back, and about 11 A.M., finding it an impossible task, what was left of both brigades began to retire.⁴³

39 R. Burns, Once a Cameron Highlander (West Sussex, 2000), 41.

40 The Midland Daily Telegraph, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 2.

41 Dumfries and Galloway Saturday Standard, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 9.

42 The Falkirk Herald and Scottish Midlands Journal, Saturday, 16 October 1915, 5.

43 J. Stewart and J. Bunchan, The Fifteenth (Scottish) Division 1914-1919 (Edinburgh, 1926), 38.

MANY YEARS LIVED IN 14 HOURS

Finally, orders were given to consolidate the position and dig in on a line just below the western crest of the hill.

Private Liddell, 7th Cameron Highlanders, compared 44th Brigade's tenacious defence of Hill 70 with one of the greatest examples of Scottish military valour. 'The Thin Red Line was a glorious thing but the thin line of the Brigade on Hill 70 was as glorious if not, more so, holding at bay thousands of Germans...

We stuck on the Hill for 14 hours, and I lived many years in that time'.⁴⁴ The 44th Brigade had captured some four lines of German trenches, Loos village, and was holding the western crest of Hill 70, but had lost 75 per cent of its overall strength. It was in no condition to continue to hold its gains for a prolonged period, and was relieved in the early hours of 26 September.

The 9th Black Watch had gone into action with some 940 men. When it arrived at Philosophe at 3.30 a.m. only about 95 returned.

In the opinion of Major Stewart, 'By God's grace alone we stood it'.⁴⁵ Sergeant Isaac Green, a native of Old Kilpatrick in Dunbartonshire, was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his part in the battle. Describing the morning of 26 September, he wrote 'About a company was gathered together, out of a whole battalion. An English regiment relieved them, and when what was left of the 9th Black Watch got back to Quality Street (where the charge started) the Guards thought they were a company of some regiment. When told that they were all that remained of a battalion tears could be seen in many a stalwart Guardsman's eyes'.⁴⁶ The 9th Black Watch had suffered the heaviest casualties of any battalion of the regiment in any conflict.



On visiting the battlefield some few days later, Brigadier-General Henry F. Thullier, made the following observations.

'In front of the remains of that work known as the 'Lens Road Redoubt', the dead Highlanders, in Black Watch tartan, lay very thick. In one place, about 40 yards square, on the very crest of the ridge, and just in front of the enemy's wire, they were so close that it was difficult to step between them. Nevertheless the survivors had swept on and through the German lines. As I looked on the smashed and riven ground, the tangled belt of wire still not completely cut, and the thick swathes of dead, every man lying as he had fallen, face to the enemy, I was amazed when I thought of the unconquerable, irresistible spirit which those newly raised units of the 'New Armies' must possess to enable them to continue their advance after sustaining such losses'.⁴⁷

44 Daily Record and Mail, Tuesday, 12 October 1915, 6.

45 Black Watch Castle and Museum, BWA 0171 Major J. Stewart, Diary, 30 September 1915

46 The Post, Sunday, 27 February 1916, 7.

47 J. Stewart and J. Bunchan, The Fifteenth (Scottish) Division 1914-1919 (Edinburgh, 1926), 49.

MOST CONSPICUOUS BRAVERY

Despite the sacrifice of 44th and 46th Brigades, Hill 70 remained in German hands. The 15th (Scottish) Division's 45th Brigade, comprising 13th Royal Scots, 7th Royal Scots Fusiliers, and 11th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was given responsibility for its capture. The assault began at 9.00 a.m. on Sunday, 26 September, but the attackers found it impossible to force the Germans from the redoubt, and were eventually forced to retire.

During the action Private Robert Dunsire, 13th Royal Scots, a miner from Buckhaven in Fife, rescued two wounded men from between the firing lines, under continuous enemy fire. 'I can't tell you how I escaped being hit, as I was a good target running about 100 yards with a man on my back'.⁴⁸ When a senior officer congratulated him on his conduct, Dunsire replied 'anybody could have done the same'.⁴⁹ He would receive the Victoria Cross for his 'most conspicuous bravery'.

THE VICTORIA CROSS

The initiative was now with the German defenders, and in an attempt to salvage the situation Lieutenant-Colonel Angus Douglas Hamilton, the 54 year old commanding officer of 6th Camerons, personally led his battalion against Hill 70 on four occasions before he was mortally wounded. With the words 'I must get up, I must get up!', he passed away.⁵⁰ Douglas Hamilton was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross for his selfless gallantry, one of five awarded to Scots for the battle of Loos.

Further north, 9th (Scottish) Division were also enduring German counter attacks. The inexperienced 73rd Brigade, 24th Division, had relieved 26th Brigade on 26 September, but were soon in difficulties. Posse No. 8 was recaptured on 27 September, and the enemy now threatened the Hohenzollern Redoubt. Captain Fergus Bowes-Lyon, 8th Black Watch, fourth son of the Earl of Strathmore, with a small composite force of Black Watch and 5th Camerons, was sent forward to secure the ground. He successfully stopped the German advance but was killed in a bombing attack.⁵¹ Later, 26th Brigade would hold the Hohenzollern Redoubt under heavy shrapnel fire until relieved early on the morning of 28 September.

48 The Edinburgh Evening News, Saturday, 20 November 1915, 4.

49 Ibid.

50 J. Stewart and J. Bunchan, The Fifteenth (Scottish) Division 1914-1919 (Edinburgh, 1926), 44

51 A. S. Mauchoppe, A History of the Black Watch in the Great War, Vol. III (London, 1926), 14.

Robert Dunsire VC
13TH BATTALION OF
THE ROYAL SCOTS

Robert Anderson Dunsire VC signed up on 6 January 1915 along with many men in Denbeath, where he lived with his wife Kate, and he became Private Dunsire (18274) of 13th Battalion of The Royal Scots. The Battalion's first serious action was at The Battle of Loos. Day 2 witnessed Robert Dunsire perform an act of conspicuous bravery carrying a wounded man to safety in full sight of enemy fire. This led to him being awarded the Victoria Cross.



'I got underneath him (the wounded man) and struggled to my knees and then to my feet. By this time the Germans had spotted me and machine guns and rifles were going galore, while the shells were bursting overhead. It was impossible to run with this man, as his injured leg was dangling down, and any attempt to run on my part made the pain of his wounds unbearable. I stood, therefore, a good target for the Germans, but it just seemed as if the Lord, in His good providence, was looking after me.

I got to within 25 yards from our own trenches when I had to let him drop, as it was impossible for me to carry him further. I asked one of my pals, a north country chap called Dewar and a really good fellow, to help me bring him in the remaining distance, and this we safely accomplished. Both the men I brought in belonged to the East Yorkshire Regiment, so I did not know them, neither have I heard anything since.'

Robert's VC was announced in The London Gazette on 18 November 1915, and he went to Buckingham Palace to receive his VC medal from King George V on 7 December 1915. He told a newspaper reporter "Oh, it was naethin' ata. I couldnae let the puir chaps lie there on the brae withoot makin' an attempt to help them."

Sadly, just after 7pm on 30 January 1916, Robert was severely injured by a German trench mortar and was declared dead shortly afterwards.

ADVANTAGE

The two Scottish New Army Divisions performed magnificently on their baptism of fire. The Kitchener volunteers, with their regular and territorial counterparts, who participated in the battle, were justifiably proud of their achievements.

Despite their losses the men had maintained the high standards of martial glory expected of the Scottish soldier.

Lance-Corporal Paddy Fee, 11th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, a former amateur boxing champion, wrote 'I have often bragged about my Irish blood, after that glorious 25th and 26th, I was proud I was a Scotsman born, for they fought that day like heroes and devils'.⁵² Writing to his father in Selkirk, Private Christopher Reekie, 10th Gordons, had a similar view of the Scots' contribution. 'Everything was a great success, and not only were the trenches taken, but soon we captured the village; prisoners galore; and up the Hill, as only Highlanders can go'.⁵³

Lance-Corporal Philip Kerr, 8th Seaforth Highlanders, a footballer with Longcroft Thistle, was of the same opinion. 'I believe we have made a great name. We were left pretty much to ourselves, and it says a lot for the individual Scottish Highlander that the work was so well done. There were hordes of Germans killed - it was awful. There will be a lot of sad homes in bonnie Scotland; but, thank God, I am a Scotsman - they are bonnie fechtters... The Germans are afraid of the 'kilties''.⁵⁴

There is no doubt that the men were convinced of their reputation as 'The Ladies from Hell'. In a letter to his sister, Private Thomas Brown, 9th Black Watch, a Dumfries soldier, described his battalion's role in events. 'The Germans have a terrible dread of the Black Watch boys'.⁵⁵ The men felt a unique pride in their regiments. Notwithstanding its losses, an officer maintained 'the spirit of the 8th Seaforths is undaunted'.⁵⁶

52 The Fife Free Press, Saturday, 6 November 1915, 2.

53 The Southern Reporter, Thursday, 7 October 1915, 6.

54 Daily Record and Mail, Tuesday, 12 October 1915, 6.

55 Dumfries and Galloway Saturday Standard, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 9.

56 Dumfries and Galloway Saturday Standard, Saturday, 6 November 1915, 8.

In a letter to friends in Perth, a Black Watch soldier wrote, 'There is only one thing I should like to say. I am proud to belong to the 8th Battalion, which has kept up the traditions of the famous Black Watch. Scotsmen proved their worth last Saturday, Sunday and Monday'.⁵⁷ Reflecting on the losses incurred in the battle he was similarly bullish.

'I am only sorry to say that Scotland paid heavily for the advance, and so did some of the English regiments, but the Scotsmen died fighting'.⁵⁸ These sentiments are evident in Lieutenant-Colonel Lloyd's speech to the remnants of 9th Black Watch.

'My comrades ... just about a year ago, when we were first formed into a battalion, we hoped to be able, by our conduct, to prove ourselves at any rate worthy descendants of our two great parent battalions, the 42nd and the 73rd. And now, whenever you look back on Saturday, the 25th September 1915, you will do so with conscious pride, that not only have you proved yourselves trustworthy, and upheld those great traditions, but that on the very first day the 9th Battalion went into action they themselves wrote a fresh and glorious page in the history of the regiment; and what more could man desire?'⁵⁹

In the opinion of Sergeant A. Wright, a Motherwell man in the 9th Gordons, 'It was the flower of Scotland who led the charge, and carried it through successfully. When I say the flower of Scotland, I mean the young men of Scotland, who are just in their prime and never soldiered before'.⁶⁰ The fighting spirit of the Scottish soldier was still very much intact.

⁵⁷ Perthshire Advertiser and Strathmore Herald, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 3.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ The Evening Telegraph and Post, Monday, 11 October 1915, 1.

⁶⁰ The Motherwell Times, Friday, 29 October 1915, 7.



A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

However, on reflection, Loos was something of a missed opportunity. The reserve divisions who could have possibly exploited the gains of 9th and 15th Divisions were too far from the battle area.

Overcrowding in the rear of the British line made any movement difficult, and the roads leading to the front line were heavily congested.⁶¹ But most significantly, failure to deploy reserves was down to tensions between the Commander in Chief of the BEF, Sir John French, and his subordinate, Haig, over who should control them during the battle. Whether their speedy release to Haig would have made any difference to the outcome after 25 September is a moot point, but French's delay played a contributory role in his removal and replacement by Haig.⁶²

61 G. Corrigan, Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle (Stroud, 2006), 144.

62 T. Royle, The Flowers of the Forest (Edinburgh, 2007) 90;

G. Corrigan, Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle (Stroud, 2006), 146.



Officers of 10th S. Buffs. The Green Buffs.
in France 1915.

Officers of 10th Battalion,
The Gordon Highlanders before Loos



Officers 10th Gordon Highlanders
Summer 1915, before battle of Loos.

THE DEATH TALLY

The battle would continue until 13 October 1915, but any hopes for a major breakthrough had long since evaporated. Scottish regiments would participate in the later stages of operations, but it was their disproportionate contribution to the 'great advance' on 25 September that sees Loos justifiably ranked as a Scottish battle.

This is clearly reflected in the extensive casualty returns. Official sources record some 470 officer and 15,000 other rank casualties on the first day of the battle, although it has been suggested that the figure could have been as high as 19,000.⁶³ Because Scottish Divisions were making the main attacks, they suffered particularly heavily.⁶⁴ The 9th (Scottish) Division sustained some 5,868 casualties, while 15th (Scottish) Division lost 6,606 men killed or wounded.⁶⁵ Both 9th and 15th Divisions lost more men on 25 September 1915, than the average number of deaths per division on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, the worst day in the history of the British army.⁶⁶

Of the twelve battalions which lost more than 500 casualties, eight were Scottish.⁶⁷ Major John Stewart, second-in-command, 9th Black Watch, left a detailed account of the battle's impact on his battalion.

'We stayed at Mazingarbe all the 27th, a few men dribbled in from Hill 70 where they had been with other units, but it was a mere remnant that was left. In all, counting transport, details on other jobs etc., we mustered 8 officers and 326 men; out of the officers only two came back (Lloyd and myself) the other six we had were made up of the 4 we had left behind, the Q.M. and the Transport Officer, and out of our 326, about 250 had been through the battle, and about 60 of these had slight wounds; we went into action about 20 officers and about 900 other ranks, but though our losses were heavy, we did our job all right and the K Battalion of The Black Watch well upheld the traditions of The Regiment.'⁶⁸

63 F. Lloyd, Loos 1915 (Stroud, 2006), 156.

64 Ibid, 157.

65 Ibid, 157.

66 Ibid, 156; G. Corrigan, Loos 1915: The Unwanted Battle (Stroud, 2006) 77.

67 T. Royle, The Flowers of the Forest (Edinburgh, 2007), 92.

68 Black Watch Castle and Museum, BWA 0171 Major J. Stewart, Diary, 30 September 1915.

69 Dumfries and Galloway Saturday Standard, Saturday 6 November 1915, 8.

70 Ibid, 92.

71 I. Hay, The First Hundred Thousand (Edinburgh, 1915)

This was far from unusual. The 8th Black Watch lost almost seventy-five per cent of its strength, while an officer with 8th Seaforths wrote 'We went into the fight 21 combatant officers; we came out 2. We went in 1000 men; we came out 300... The dead - well the dead died gallantly and splendidly - and they died for Britain.'⁶⁹ The number of Scots who lost their lives at Loos is difficult to calculate with real accuracy, but it has been suggested that one in three of over twenty thousand names on the memorial to the missing at Loos is that of a Scot.⁷⁰

The battle's impact on Scotland was eloquently summarised by the writer Ian Hay who served at Loos, which provided the backdrop to his book 'The First Hundred Thousand'. He wrote

'never a Scottish regiment comes under fire but the whole of Scotland feels it. Scotland is small enough to know all her sons by heart. You may live in Berwickshire, and the man who has died may have come from Skye; but his name is quite familiar to you.

Big England's sorrow is national;
little Scotland's is personal'.⁷¹



Memorial card

THE MASSIVE EFFECT BACK HOME

Few areas in Scotland were unaffected by the battle, some far more than others. Families were devastated. Mr and Mrs Richard Dunn, 527 Dalmarnock Road, Glasgow, lost three sons on 25 and 26 September.⁷² The youngest, Col MacDonald Dunn, was serving with 9th Cameronians at the time of his death. His elder brothers, Archibald and Richard Dunn, were both serving with 6th Cameron Highlanders. The names of all three brothers appear on the Loos Memorial. Local newspapers were strewn with obituaries, accounts of the battle, and letters from friends and relatives desperate for any news of missing soldiers.

The date became seared in Scotland's collective memory. Dundee arranged a memorial service for 4th Black Watch, 'Dundee's Own', in St Mary's on 6 October 1915, a day 'set apart by the city for giving public expression to the sorrow and pride with which the recent victory in Flanders had endowed it'.⁷³

Each year the anniversary of Loos had a particular resonance in Dundee. On Sunday, 25 September 1921, an open-air commemorative service on Magdalen Green marked the occasion. The Reverend Mr Bruce 'reminded those present that six years ago that day the dead were lying in great numbers on the field of Loos. These men fell for liberty, and we owed a deep debt of gratitude to them'.⁷⁴ This debt saw the Loos anniversary occupy a prominent place in Scotland's annual calendar in the immediate post-war decades until the renewal of hostilities in 1939.

Each September Dundee's ex-service associations staged a well-attended drumhead service in Dudhope Park. This solemn act of remembrance was repeated in communities across the country. But it was Dundee's War Memorial, unveiled on 16 May 1925, that proved a lasting monument to the Battle of Loos. The bronze brazier at its summit, an integral part of its design, is lit each anniversary to commemorate the city's losses on 25 September 1915, 'her fallen heroes'.⁷⁵ The beacon, clearly visible on the height of Dundee Law, has been a fixed reminder of the men who went 'over the hill', its light an appropriate tribute to all who gave their lives at Loos.⁷⁶

72 Daily Record and Mail, Tuesday, 26 October 1915, 3.

73 People's Journal, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 9.

74 The Courier and Argus, Monday, 26 September 1921, 3.

75 People's Journal, Saturday, 9 October 1915, 9.

76 T. Royle, The Flowers of the Forest (Edinburgh, 2007), 91.

Captain Kirklands
last message

From O.C. Co
7th Cam.
To C.O.
7th Cam.
I have reorganized a line
of 300. The platoon
Captain Cameron and
with me. We are
advancing over Hill
70. There are two
troops in front.



CHARLIE JAMES PETER DAVID (T. WOOD BROTHERS)
JOHNNIE MUÑOZ WILLIE

The seven Wood Brothers, The Gordon
Highlanders. Company decimated at Loos



The Royal Flying Corps in the Battle of Loos

By September 1915 the overall strength of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) had increased to 12 Squadrons and 161 aircraft. The main role of the aircraft was reconnaissance although some squadrons would fly missions to bomb railway tracks and other lines of communication.

For the first time in WW1 the RFC was noted for reporting accurate information on artillery falls of shot, thus saving thousands of costly shells. During the first few days of the battle, the RFC target-marking squadrons with their recently improved air to ground radios and better cameras helped ensure that German targets were heavily pounded by the British artillery.

Aircraft carried out multiple sorties, dropping many 100-pound bombs on German troops, trains and marshalling yards. During the air battle, the superior German fighter, the "Fokker Scourge" began to have an effect on allied aircraft; however, the impact of German air superiority was diminished by their doctrinal reluctance to risk their pilots being captured by fighting over Allied held territory.

Mourn for the brave!
The brave that are so rare:
Each in a soldier's grave,
Far from his native shore.

Now for the brave who fell,
A so solemn requiem sing,
Let children's children tell,
How they served land & king.

Text edited by Stuart Delves from original text by Dr Derek John Patrick of the University of Dundee. With grateful thanks for contributions and verifications of facts by Trevor Royle and Sir Hew Strachan.
Text on page 45 by Group Captain Bob Kemp CBE.

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