Arras 1917 - The Shetlanders

(This is part of the epic history written by Jon Sandison about the part Shetlanders played on the Western Front during World War One)

*War does not determine who is right - only who is left.* Bertrand Russell

Our trip to the World War One battlefields continued with the steady car run south to the fields of the Somme and Cambrai. The striking thing about the roads in these parts of France is the lack of traffic. The roads just seemed to meander along after the slow bumper-to-bumper crawling out of London just the day previously before heading onto the 'Chunnel'. Plenty of time then to think about other things as we travelled. The journey was interspersed with white dotted graveyards by the side of the road, or a signpost name or point of significance. Glancing fervently out of the car window, it was an effort to take it all in. Here we were in the midst of a battlefield almost 100 years ago. Our journey was then broken up by a brief pause at a supermarket in a peaceful French town.
Like anywhere, people rushed around, traffic streamed by outside, locals yarnd to each other while pleasantly going about their daily business getting groceries. An inconspicuous place; or so we thought while bundling out of the car to stretch the legs. But this was Arras, with its own close connection to the Shetland men on the Western Front. Another spiritual link to our own islands. So it was that a brief, yet sombre stop, in our journey to Cambrai, ignited vivid thoughts about what many called the ‘forgotten battle’ of the Western Front. A short insight into a wider story, and an inescapable urge from that moment to find out more. Here many Shetland men endured their next major ‘fight’ following the Ancre. Little chance of this battle being a forgotten struggle in Shetland in 1917 given that just over four months had elapsed since the fateful days at the Ancre. At that time, all that separated both black days back home was the passage of time between the heart of winter and the onset of Spring.

A trawl through records has accumulated a number of local lads who were killed at Arras. Sadly, as is ever the case with the Great War, many of the men about whom we can tell a story now were those that did not come home. It was a testimony borne by date killed, the Battalion in which each soul served, a plot set in French soil, or a name engraved on a memorial. Those that survived who would have been left to tell it, have since passed. The part played by our men in this massive confrontation was significant. Boys from home who were involved in big events are forever wedged in a grain of time. Within this ‘forgotten battle’ and these ‘forgotten divisions’ are etched the stories of Shetlanders who were part of the Scottish Regiments within the 51st Highland Division, as well as others such as the 3rd, 4th and 9th.

The story of the local Gordons continues. Others too were lost. Lost. For this is as much a tale about other Scottish Regiments as it is about the Gordons. Unlike the Ancre the Shetland contribution in turn reflected a massive Scottish involvement, within Scottish Regiments and wider Imperial forces.

Shetland men were spread across different Divisions and Battalions as well as in various positions on the line. The attack was to witness the concentration of 44 Scottish battalions and seven Scottish-named Canadian battalions, out of 120, attacking on the first day. This made it the largest body of Scots to have fought together.

Battles need great plans and planners. Like all the major offensives, it required long preparation. General Nivelle had replaced General Joffre as Commander-in-Chief of the French forces in December 1916. He proposed a large Allied offensive in Artois and Champagne for the spring of 1917. The British Expeditionary Force was to carry out diversionary attacks as part of an offensive at Arras. A battle classed by many sources as a ‘diversion’ because of the aim of holding up German troops, possibly attracting re-enforcements in the North, while the French attacked soon after in the South. It was a major operation in its own right with more divisions in the attack than on the Somme! The British offensive was to be a two-pronged attack towards Cambrai, the Northern attack would be mounted from Arras and the Southern one from the Somme. But the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line rendered the Southern attack redundant and all effort was then concentrated at Arras.
Late 1916 had witnessed steady rain in the area where the Highland Division Gordons were. The 51st Highland Division had taken over the Courcelette sector, on the north side of the Albert-Bapaume road, some distance south of Arras, within hours of departing the battlefront of Beaumont Hamel. A rest period was before them. Their morale was not at its best, and they suffered dreadfully from the grim weather conditions. The 51st had now been in the line for around a year, and had endured two awful phases of trench warfare, including the fighting in July and August on the Somme, and the Battle of Beaumont Hamel. For fresh troops, this would have perhaps been less of an issue. Further ominous thoughts would have passed through these Shetlanders' minds when they learned on 30 January 1917 that the 8th Royal Scots and Highland Field Companies had moved to Arras to work within the Third Army area. The 8th Royal Scots were the 51st Highland Division's Pioneer Battalion. This could only have one end result; preparation was in hand for another battle.

Arras was a town that had been near to the front for over two years. It had been relentlessly shelled and much of it lay in ruins. Unlike Ypres to the north, it was not destroyed. The accommodation below ground was relatively free from shell fire and surviving buildings had been taken into use. Its streets, or at least what was left, had been cleaned and tidied. The infantry battalions that inhabited them needed something to do to pass time, and keep the mind off what lay ahead. For soldiers it was a resting place in the middle of a battle. It was also an important meeting place for the regiment. It had many associations for the Gordon Highlanders. There was apparently a genuine if not very comfortable social life.

A local Gordon who was in Arras Town Hall was George Stephen. There are pictures of various regiments taken at this location during World War One.

A place where men would stop for a photo, most likely with a civilian photographer allowed to remain in the town and ply his trade. They were adept at running off copies in a few hours to sell to the troops before they moved on. A snapshot for some; a moment to keep or send home or for others, but sadly a picture to treasure and hold as a memory. George served as a Lieutenant in the 4th Gordon Highlanders. He was wounded in August 1918. Along with the 1/7th Gordons, the 1/4th took part in the Battle of Scarpe, the second Battle of Arras, which lasted until late August. He was repatriated to Edinburgh where he died at Craigleith Military Hospital on 26 October 1918 of pneumonia. When war broke out, George was a Bank Clerk with what was then the Union Bank of Scotland in Lerwick.
His position at the bank was kept for him, and offered to his oldest sister Flora MacDonald Stephen (Grandmother of young Magnie Shearer) for the rest of the war. Flora served in this job from 1916 to 1919. A very moving story of loyalty in the midst of war.

On 5 February, the division moved north to join the Third Army. The march to Arras lasted six days, with icy roads and it was tough going. The official history mentions this experience in graphic detail. It was noted that ‘one had lived in the fogs which were a match for London, and mists and rain which compared favourably with the Western Highlands, and degrees of frost, wind and snow which could hardly have been improved upon in Caithness’. One wonders what Shetland men made of this. The sweeping winds of our islands had perhaps prepared them well for such an exposure. Perhaps a jovial Shetland character helped them through this time. The 51st Division had its rear area around Maroeuil, which is about five kilometres north-west of Arras from early February 1917. The various Scottish battalions, when not in the line at Roclincourt, were in villages such as Ecoivres, Frevillers, and Caucourt some of which were several kilometres to the west. All battalions, with Shetlanders amongst them, would have no doubt ‘done the rounds’ of these places in the weeks leading up to the 9 April attack.

By the end of February 1917, the German army began a planned withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line. It started just to the south-east of Arras. This did not cause too much disruption to British plans. It ran south, removing the salient formed on the Somme, as well as another larger salient in front of St Quentin, where the withdrawal was about 30 miles. Stretching from Arras to Aisne, the manoeuvre took around five weeks to complete. During the withdrawal, the Germans intentionally destroyed buildings, damaged wells, roads and railway tracks to prevent their pursuing enemy from taking over abandoned ground in a good state. The immediate, inevitable devastation of war and an impact of conflict we have thankfully not had to witness in our own country or community.

The main Arras front was about 15 miles, the distance from Lerwick to just beyond Levenwick. In the north four Canadian Divisions, and the 24th Division of the First Army, commanded by General Horne, attacked Vimy Ridge. By 11 April the ridge had famously been secured. Two Shetlanders were to play their own part in that story. Robert Gunn, aged 43, 7th Battalion Canadian Infantry, from Laxfirth Tingwall, died of shrapnel wounds. Also killed was William Laurence Henry, aged 29, of the 72nd Canadian Infantry, third son of George and Helen Henry, Gott. Further south, the British Fifth Army, led by General Gough would attack. In the middle, around Arras, the Third Army led by General Allenby attacked from Arras down to Bullecourt. This is where our story is rooted. The Third Army attack in the north was led by 51st Highland Division. The 4th Gordons and 5th Seaforths were in the 51st Highland Division, due east of Arras, the 9th Division, the 8/10th Gordons and 2nd Seaforths, south east of Arras, towards Tilloy, were the 1st Gordons. Shetlanders were in all groupings.

The 51st Highland Division attacked from Roclincourt, just to the North of Arras. This phase lasted from 9 to 14 April. Within this assault were the 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th Gordons, as well as the 5th Seaforths. On their right, further south, the 34th Division, with the 9th (Scottish) Division next taking the line down to the River Scarpe.
It is an emotional thought today to think that Shetlanders were fighting in the same assault, within both Gordons and Seaforths. It would not have mattered which regiment they were in that day. They would have been as one.

The order of battle had the 4th Gordons, of the 154th Brigade, placed behind the 4th Seaforths. This was a day of tragedy for the battalion. The German front line was little damaged by artillery fire and the Germans got their machine guns directly into action as soon as the barrage lifted. The 51st Highland Division suffered terribly. The German line fell – but with some loss. The 4th Gordons had taken heavy casualties at a temporarily defended position. The 4th Gordon Highlanders had endured such heavy losses that their two remaining companies were sent forward to consolidate the line. A Shetlander killed as part of the 51st Highland Division on this day was Andrew Halcrow, 4th Gordons, from Swinister, Sandwick.

The impact of the battle was described by Lerwegian Private James Stout, of the 2nd Seaforths as they proceeded to their position slightly further south.

_We left on the morning of the 9th and marched for miles, passing many a battery of artillery who were all going ahead, pouring shells by the hundred at the Huns. We knew by this time that the 'Big Push' had started._

_At last we came to a halt and settled down just off the road for a rest. We rested there for a few hours and had some dinner, and also got picks and shovels issued out and material for wiring. It was when we halted here that we saw the first signs of the great battle in the shape of walking wounded cases. There were really some pitiable sights among them, but all seemed more or less glad to be out of it._

To the 4th Gordons right, the 6th Seaforths experienced some heavy fighting in reaching their next two objectives. Here, James Pottinger from Burra notes how the 7th Gordons were in reserve to the Seaforths who had gone over the top and had heavy casualties. At one point the 5th Seaforths, just behind the 6th, came through to discover the mêlée.

The 6th Seaforths had encountered stiff resistance on the German second and third lines, losing 326 officers and men in capturing a further line. Only one officer detailed for the capture of the next line reached it. The remainder were all either killed or wounded. The 5th Seaforths attempted to advance through them to form up under the barrage and found the 6th still engaged with the Germans. They joined in the fight. One company of 5th Seaforths suffered more than 90 casualties.
Killed amongst them was Karl Manson, 5th Seaforths, son of Thomas, editor of the *Shetland News*. It was noted that Karl’s company had been the first to go over at 5:30 on the 9th. Karl and his mate, Charles Davidson, had just reached the German third line when Davidson was hit in the hand. Karl dressed the wound, then went on to reach their objective. In a letter to Karl’s mother, Davidson wrote, “*I cannot say more Mrs Manson only I am just beginning to realise that I’ve lost one of the best and truest pals I have ever had*.”

Bob Gray, who was with Karl said, "*The Company was under heavy machine gun fire but pressed forward regardless of everything and did splendid work*." Willie Irvine informed Mrs Manson that Karl’s death was instantaneous. “*He was shot through the heart by a sniper and was lying with a smile on his face*.”

Further south on the right hand side, the 34th Division, with the 9th Scottish Division next to them, took the line to the River Scarpe. Directly east of Arras, the 8/10 Gordons advanced within 9th Scottish Division on the north side of the River, ending up as far as the village of Fampoux. Moving over 2,000 yards, a distance counted considerable in trench warfare, the 8/10th Gordon Highlanders dispersed deeply.

Two half-companies led following the barrage and reached the first objective. At 7:50am, their advance continued with the other two companies. They ran into difficulties, advancing 150 yards then brought to a standstill by machine gun fire from a German position. They eventually took the position with the aid of a tank and continued to advance.

Apparently this was one of the ‘*best performances of the day and the 8/10th Gordon Highlanders had played a fine part in this*’. They also took a strong position along a railway line known as the Railway Triangle, a formidable wide expanse of ground. It seems likely during this attack that Alex Laurenson, aged 22 years, from Vidlin was killed. For those that survived, the 8/10th spent a night in the snow at its objective, and was not engaged on 10 April.

From the village of Fampoux, the 2nd Seaforths were to launch an attack down the open slop towards the village of Roeux on 11 April. Before this day, Lerwigian Private James Stout mentioned that they journeyed on from what had been their front line trenches across No Man’s Land, and the German line. He stated that ‘*almost every yard of ground had been torn up by our shell fire*’ that they had to ‘*proceed by platoons in single file*’ to get across it. He noted that where they were was in the range of German guns, and that ‘*occasionally one would burst around us*’. But, at last they ‘*got to the line of trenches where we were to spend the night, and at once started to make suitable dug-outs for protection from shells*’.
James added how they ‘lived there for two nights and found it pretty cold with the snow and no great coat, only a waterproof sheet’. They then moved off the next morning of 11 April, and they ‘passed through a village which had been used quite recently but is in ruins now’. This village he described was Fampoux. Their next stop was Roeux, a small village next to the Arras-Douai railway line. In the village there was a small chateau and agricultural chemical works. It was to prove one of the most formidable sections of the Arras battlefield in April and May 1917.

James mentioned that the barrage was starting at noon so ‘we knew when we’d begin’. Apparently it was decided to attack in daylight as few of the troops knew the ground. They then got to a sunken road, and crouched down, advancing in small rushes, or on hands and knees so as to avoid enemy machine guns that were spitting above our heads. When the barrage started and they had got their proper positions, over we went. James also wondered how his comrades got through this hell. The bullets seemed to go over my head by the hundred. I kept my steel helmet well down over my face and my head down, rifle with bayonet fixed slung over right shoulder, and my spade in my left hand as a protection for my throat. I had got about 300 yards when something struck me on the top of the head and I fell flat. I was stunned for about 10 minutes, and when I put my hand up expecting to find a gash in my head, lo and behold there was nothing but a small lump about the size of a shilling! I ventured to take off my helmet because the bullets seemed to be flying at a higher range and found that a bullet had penetrated my helmet, followed the curve of the crown inside, and found a way out over my back and shoulder. It gave me a bit of a shock at first to think of the narrow shave I’d had. By this time our chaps were a good bit ahead.

James then moved forward about 50 yards when he got hit by a bullet in his right knee. As his knee was broken, he could not crawl back. So he got some field dressing on the wound. With the help of his shovel, he managed to place his right foot and leg on top of the left. Using the entrenching tool handle as a splint, he wound his puttees around both legs binding them together. He could pull himself backwards by lying on his back, but got no further than 100 yards where he bumped into another wounded man.

James then went on to mention that ‘snow began to fall so I put on my waterproof sheet over me and lay patiently waiting for stretcher bearers to come’. He added that they ‘came once or twice but took some cases from further down the field’.

At this point, James lay for a while, and the snow came further down, with no sign of help. As the night came down on 11 April, with flares in the sky, he thought that all hope of recovery had gone. Then, at 12:30am, he was finally taken to a dressing station back at Fampoux. James went on to stress how much he had enjoyed a cup of hot Horlicks Malted Milk at this moment. Reflecting in hospital back in England, he added that he still had his ‘souvenir helmet – had carted it about everywhere I went so wouldn’t like to lose it now’. Quite ironically, James then reflected on how many of the men in the hospital were nearly all Canadians.
He went on that 'there was a fellow called William Ward, who came from Burra Isle, Shetland, who was in their battalion, 7th Canadians, and that he thought I might know him. Have to stop now as this is a beastly awkward position I'm writing in, lying on my back'.

Although wounded, James Stout, second son of Mr and Mrs C B Stout, Medical Hall, Lerwick, was fortunate. Writing all of this to his parents, his account was published in the Shetland Times. Along with the 1st Royal Irish Fusiliers, the 2nd Seaforths suffered very heavy casualties on the assault on Roeux. The 2nd Seaforths lost seven officers and 143 men. One not so lucky was William Henry, 2nd Seaforths, son of Mrs Joan and James Henry, Bridge of Walls, who was killed on the 11th.

The Southern Flank

The 3rd Division, containing the 1st Gordons, attacked almost south-east out of Arras towards the Arras – Cambrai road. It was here that the Shetland Gordons endured their biggest loss. The 1st Gordons marched into Arras on 7 April and were lodged in the cellars. Next day they drew their stock of grenades, shovels and signalling flares. The first company entered the tunnels at 6.00pm, and the battalion reached the assembly position without the loss of a man. They sheltered in the caves and tunnels below the town until just before the attack. Two tunnels pierced up to the front line 3,000 yards away, lit by electricity and provided with piped water. The Shetland Gordons within the 1st Gordons would have come out here. The 1st Battalion war diary states that the battalion attacked, and the bombardment began at around 5:30am. The 1st Gordons attacked an objective of four lines of trenches close together; a distance of 430 yards. The battalion attacked in waves of two companies. The first objectives were taken with little opposition. There were 60 casualties. "At zero hour, 5:50 am, the leading battalion, 1st Gordon Highlanders went in under cover of a bombardment of Stokes mortars and indirect machine gun fire. Here it reached and captured the German fourth Line".
The Scottish Attack at Arras,

A new attack was launched at 5:50pm by two battalions of the 76th Brigade, the 1st Gordon Highlanders, and the 8th King’s Own which had seen little engagement. Unfortunately, the King’s Own did not get the order until 6:35pm, and having a mile and a quarter to cover did not get up in time to assault at 6:45.

The 1st Gordons attacked alone! They went forward and carried their assault to within 300 yards of the foremost German trench. But, they could no longer endure the fire faced, and fell back and dug themselves in.

Of the Shetlanders in the 1st Gordons, as part of the 3rd Division, four were killed, as listed through the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.
Charles Sinclair, Burgess Street Lerwick, aged 21, Benjamin Craik from North Ness Lerwick, aged 21, Walter Shewan, St Magnus Street Lerwick, aged 25. Another, John Sim, Quendale Lane, Lerwick, aged 22, was wounded, and died at home in Lerwick on 12 January 1919. Also, killed within the same area was James Fraser from Unst, part of the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers.

Scottish soldiers attack east from Arras. © IWM Q2104.

The 1st Gordons were exhausted by exposure at this stage. They had been three days in the open in bitter wind and frequent snow. Their losses including 13 officers and 263 other ranks killed, wounded or missing, were far above the average. They now moved back to the underground world of Arras, arriving at 8am on 12 April in a state of extreme fatigue. Events in this battle moved quite quickly, especially for the Gordons who were part of the 51st. By the end of April, a new major offensive was launched to break the stalemate.

Once more, thoughts turned to those boys, some of whom had sailed out of Lerwick on the SS Cambria, on 13 June 1915, and the others since who left to join them determined to ‘do their bit’, to be part of this ‘Great Adventure’ in a foreign land. Was this what they imagined it would be? Only those who were left could say. Whether they would ever feel like doing so was a different story.

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