

Jesmond's Worst Week – The Somme 1916

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The Presbyterian Church in Jesmond had already lost 3 servicemen in the Great War but now, in the first week of July 1916, things were to become much, much worse. In 1914 many members had joined up in response to Kitchener's plea for volunteers. Those young men and women - for three had volunteered to become VAD military nurses - had come from a well-educated and professional community and, as a consequence, an unusually large proportion had been commissioned into the officer corps. They had joined a wide range of regiments and services and as a result the church might have been expected to avoid the worst of the problems that were afterwards to be associated with the Pals Battalions, like the Accrington Pals. They had recruited everyone from a few streets and were to live and die together; 584 were casualties out of 720 on 1st July 1916. However, as might be expected, many from the Northeast had joined the various battalions of the Northumberland Fusiliers, and because many were in business they had joined the Commercial Battalion, the 16th. A member of the church was James R. Hall, a solicitor in Newcastle who was the Secretary of the Tyneside Scottish Association, which had set out in 1914 to recruit men from a Scottish background, who lived in large numbers in the Northeast, to serve in a Scottish branded battalion of the Northumberland Fusiliers (NF). On the south side of the Tyne, where there was a large Irish community, a similar group recruited for a Tyneside Irish (TI) Battalion. Both had been astonishingly successful in recruiting and were each able to field an entire brigade of four battalions. Because of Hall's link to the church, which itself as Presbyterian tended to attract any Scots who came to north Newcastle, several joined one or other of the Tyneside Scottish (TS) battalions. The (TS) Association's base was at 12 Eskdale Terrace, only a hundred yards from the church, and the 4th Battalion (23rd NF) became linked to it. Some of those who joined the TS from distant areas associated it with the church and became members. Hence over the next months the church was to gain a substantial number of recruits who all were part of Kitchener's New Army.

This army was now the Fourth Army and was commanded by General Sir Henry Rawlinson and was tasked with the role of attacking across the centre of the Somme battlefield from the river Somme north to Gommecourt towards the German forces dug in on the high ground to their east. It included the Tyneside Irish and Scots, who were both part of the 34th division under the command of General Ingouville-Williams, affectionately known as 'Inky Bill'. The TS had spent the late winter and spring of 1916 in the Armentières area where they had got used to shelling, sniping, trench raids, wiring in No-Man's-Land and lots of work and a bit of fighting. They were to attack on either side of the village of La Boisselle which sat along the Roman Road from Amiens to Bapaume. The 16th battalion NF, which was part of the 32nd division under the command of Major General W H Rycroft, had been recruited somewhat earlier than the TS and landed in France on 22 November at Boulogne. From there they marched to Dernancourt and Meaulte near Albert where they had their baptism of fire in the trenches. They moved about more than the TS and by the beginning of 1916 were north of Albert at Martinsart where, on the 10th, Corporal Ballantyne of the church was involved in saving several men who had been buried by soil collapsed into the trench by a heavy mortar attack, and on the same day the Duke of Northumberland inspected some of the battalion. From then on they were in and out of the trenches in the same locality and in May training for attacks began, to prepare them for the coming offensive. Men from the church also joined the 15th battalion DLI and the 13th NF and they too were to take part in the opening day of the Battle.

The villages that the Northumbrians were to attack had been fortified, with the defenders well dug-in, not only in trenches but in deep bunkers and blockhouses of concrete. To try and deal with some of these sophisticated defences, which were proof to all but the most powerful artillery bombardment, sappers had dug tunnels under the front line trenches and had packed these with explosives to destroy some of the fortifications. The enemy replied by countermining, resulting in underground battles with picks and shovels as well as more conventional weapons. Many of the Tyneside Scottish and Irish were miners and must have taken great interest in what was going on under their feet. There was a lot of tunnelling under the La Boisselle area and many mines had already been exploded. In addition, the

Northumbrian miners spent some of their time behind the front on what were now called, due to the Irish link, Tara and Usna hills, digging a number of considerable tunnels and chambers to be used as secure shelters for troops waiting to go into action.

Because of the scale of what was happening, it was obvious to both sides that a major offensive was planned, though exactly where and when the attack was to occur had scope for misinformation and diversion. The Anglo-Australian attack north of the battlefield at Fromelles, nearer Armentières, was such a diversion, though the scale of the casualties was not part of the original plan. Also unplanned, by the Allies, was the German attack at Verdun, which served to divert from the Somme a large part of the French force that would have attacked at the south of the battlefield. The French suffered devastating losses and the politicians forced Sir Douglas Haig into attacking earlier than he wished at the Somme. The result was that the British forces were spread over a longer length of front and the preparation was less thorough than had been intended. In all of this one has to question how good the security along the front was, for when the 16th NF had arrived in their first trench near Meaulte in December they had been greeted by a board held up by troops in the opposing trench saying 'Hallo Northumberlands'!

The orders for the attack when they came assumed that the enemy barbed wire would be destroyed by a week-long artillery barrage and that the effect of this would be to cow the enemy and destroy the trench system, ensuring that the attackers had a literal 'walkover'. None of this was to prove generally correct. The wire in large part remained uncut and the enemy were more irritated than obliterated, while their bunkers, men and machine-guns were operational over much of the front. Furthermore the German artillery had spent their time destroying the front line British trenches and the men in them, and, as these trenches were more perfunctory affairs than their enemies, the men suffered correspondingly more. Also, the overall command was uncertain of the ability of the troops to perform any complex manoeuvres and hence arranged that the attack would occur in daylight and at a walking pace beginning from the trenches. Part of the request for a daylight attack was justified by the request of the French, who at the very south of the battlefield wanted to be able to observe their artillery fire. Interestingly, the French attack took place 2 hours later than the British, so the British one could just as well have occurred in darkness which would have spoiled the aim of the machine gunners. The order was to prove disastrous although in many places it seems to have been at least partly ignored with men crawling out into No-Man's-Land during the night before the attack to shorten the distance to the enemy trenches.

In the run up to the attack, British trench raids probed the German lines and also looked at the condition of the wire. Near La Boisselle two raids had disastrous results for church members in Jesmond. On the night of the 23rd of June Captain Price of the 3rd TI had been on a trench raid and on returning he noticed that one of his men was missing, and returning to look for him was killed by a shell. He had earlier been awarded the MC for a similar action, in that case delaying his return until he was certain that all the men were safe. On the 29th June Lieutenant Hall of the 4th TS, son of the man who had raised the battalion, had taken command of a party cutting wire in No-Man's-Land, as it had been realised that the shelling had not been very effective in this. It was an ill-timed action for the Germans opposite had been roused by an earlier large scale trench raid by the TS. He was killed by a sniper at midnight. Both of these were very popular junior officers whom their men respected and would willingly follow according to the commanders. They were a great loss to their battalions.

The detailed plan for the attack at La Boisselle was for there to be a huge mine exploded to the south of the village under the German defences and a smaller mine just on the north edge of the village. These are known now respectively as Lochnagar and Y-sap and the vast crater of the former is now a pilgrimage site for the remembrance of the Tyneside Scottish. The intention of these was not only to destroy some of the German defences but to disorient the defenders who were not directly killed. To the south of Lochnagar the 101st Brigade - mostly Royal Scots - were to attack, while between Lochnagar and the edge of the 34th Division's area near Ovillers the four battalions of the TS were to attack, two to the north of the village and two to the south. In reserve behind them were to be the four battalions of TI who would attack after the TS had taken the front line German trenches. To ensure all

this worked, it had been decided that the TS near Lochnagar would be pulled back into the reserve trench to avoid them being hurt by their own explosion and the TI behind them were pulled back even further onto the hill. The intention was not to attack the strongly defended village of La Boisselle but to by-pass and surround it, dealing with its defenders at leisure. As the attackers moved forwards the artillery bombardment was to be 'lifted', increasing the range and firing on the defenders behind the front line. This was fine so long as the attack took place on time and proceeded smoothly as the artillery range progressively lengthened. As soon as the artillery fire did cease, the defenders would rush out of their bunkers and set up machine guns to fire over the British attackers, so any delay in the attack would be disastrous.

Between Lochnagar and the Albert road the attackers of the 21st battalion TS only had a short distance to cover and were able to take the German front line trench before the defenders got reorganised. However machine gun fire from La Boisselle massacred the TI who were following up, even before many of them reached the British front line, and with lack of support the TS were unable to move forward and were trapped in the trench from which they developed a communication trench and used one of the old mine tunnels to communicate with the British forces behind. This was as far as they got. Nearer Lochnagar, machine guns hidden behind the German front line trench caused heavy casualties, and fire from them and La Boisselle forced the attackers of the 22nd TS and 101st Brigade further east than intended. The TI behind were gunned down before reaching the British front line. Isolated parties did penetrate deeply nearly to the day's objective, Contalmaison, but with no support coming up from behind they had major problems as the Germans recovered, including running out of ammunition. Major William Herries of the church and his men mostly from the 22nd TS were pinned down by intense German fire. He organised a machine gun (probably a Lewis gun) which produced effective fire against the enemy, but he progressively ran out of men and ammunition and no reinforcements reached him as his force had attacked through the remains of the 21st battalion, and the supporting TI who had been held far back on Tara Hill had been massacred. His men advanced through the enemy positions but were then progressively pushed back by the enemy counter attacks. He was one of the few officers to survive the day apparently uninjured, and had been one of the most successful. To the south of Lochnagar the attack worked relatively well for the Royal Scots, though the Pals Battalions of the 101st Brigade suffered badly, and the Germans were pushed back while the 21st Division made substantial progress to their right (see later).

To the north of La Boisselle the attack by the TS was even more disastrous than to the south of it. No-Man's-Land was even wider, most of it over 800 yards, and also the Germans had withdrawn from near where the Y-sap mine was to be exploded on the basis of intelligence information. The result of this was that the 20th and 23rd battalions attacked after the mine blew but were then subject to immediate machine gun fire from both Ovillers and Boisselle. Many were hit crossing No-Man's-Land, though some parties did reach the German trenches and fought their way through into the second trench. However, as the machine gun fire was not suppressed, and though La Boisselle was subject to heavy mortar fire, the supporting troops of the 25th battalion (TI) were mostly gunned down in No-Man's-Land. Lieutenant William Tytler of the church, though a native of Newtonmore in Scotland, took part in this disastrous operation. From information subsequently received it appears that although suffering from repeated wounds he was the only officer of his battalion (the others being killed or out of action) to reach the German 3rd trench line, continuing to hold the position and cheering the survivors of his men although himself dying. One of his men attempted to carry him back but was unable, and his place of burial is unknown. Lieutenant William McIntosh of the 23rd TS was also involved in this attack and was injured. It may be that this occurred near the British lines for he was recovered and sent for treatment to hospital at Rouen where he died and is now buried. Brothers Ralph and William Pritchard respectively of the TI and TS were both injured but survived. The scale of casualties was such that it was impossible to continue the action, and the remaining men withdrew to end up, depressingly, where they had begun that morning. Troops of the 19th Division, which was in reserve, were sent to their aid but by the time they arrived it was too late, and a night operation to attack was cancelled, as the TS and TI had lost so many men, and especially officers, that further action by these two brigades was impossible. Out of those from the church who had served with the

TS and TI at La Boisselle only one out of six was fit to fight the next day! As soon as darkness fell they were withdrawn and the survivors marched back to Millencourt where there were so few remaining that some of the men had four helpings of stew before collapsing onto beds made using chicken wire in barns.

At this point the scale of the loss was becoming clear. Figures are shown below for the casualties of the 8 battalions of the TS and TI. A casualty is someone who was present at the previous roll call and is now missing for whatever reason. These could include Killed in Action (KIA), wounded, captured, trapped and unable to return, or lost, which itself might include deserted, shell shocked, or simply wandered into the wrong unit and not got back yet. Numbers would probably improve as the 'trapped' and 'lost' categories extracted themselves and found where their unit had got to, which in this case was some distance away. The nominal numbers for the strength of a battalion were 1007 ranks and 30 officers though many units were probably under strength; nevertheless the story that Brigadier Ternan had addressed his 80 officers in a large barn the night before the attack and had been able to get the 10 who remained into his office that next evening gives another confirmation of the scale of the loss. The numbers of other ranks could be made up readily with a draft but the loss of officers on this scale made the units unworkable and they were now transferred to the 37th division on what was considered a quiet section of the front further north near Arras. Other battalions lost more men, as described later, but it was to transpire that the losses for the Tyneside Scottish and Irish at La Boisselle were the greatest of any brigade on the front; an unfortunate distinction to gain.

Casualties of the Tyneside Scottish and Irish at La Boisselle 1 st July 1916							
Tyneside Scottish				Tyneside Irish			
Battalion	NF number	Officers	Men	Battalion	NF number	Officers	Men
1	20	26	564	1	24	18	616
2	21	22	578	2	25	18	491
3	22	20	628	3	26	19	470
4	23	16	668	4	27	20	519

To the north the 16th Battalion also had a bad day. They and the 1st and 2nd Salford Pals were taxed with attacking Thiepval village on its ridge. This village consisted of the church, chateau and about 100 other buildings many of which had been fortified and well equipped with machine guns, and in the surrounding countryside were at least another 30 machine gun positions. All of these had been sited to give complete command of the slopes approaching the village. This type of attack is often described militarily as a 'forlorn hope', in other words it is worth a try if it works, but the chance of that is small - and it was - and the attackers are expendable - and they were. The artillery bombardment had been particularly ineffective and the wire was largely uncut. The Pals on the left were mown down as they left the trenches but some got across the wire and into Thiepval where they were seen and the artillery barrage called off. There were pitifully few and they were 'dealt with' by the defenders and then the now unmolested garrison stood on the parapets of their positions and swept fire over the 16th NF who never even reached the German front line. They all ended the day back in their trenches. 21 out of 24 Salford Pals' officers were casualties as were 449 out of 650 other ranks. The 16th lost 19 officers as casualties and over 350 other ranks killed; 8 officers and 279 other ranks returned. On the night of 2nd July they moved back to Aveluy wood but were back in the line on the 11th at Owillers. Of the men from the church Corporal James Ballantyne, the earlier rescuer of men

buried by a trench collapse, was seen returning to the Dressing Station suffering from wounds but was not seen again. He was reported as 'missing in action'. Private James Ashton Black was slightly injured in the course of this fighting. He was subsequently gazetted as a 2nd Lieutenant and posted to the 3rd DLI. William Cruickshank Brown served as first a private and then corporal and was wounded while serving in No 7 platoon and his officer was killed. Captain Percy George Graham was killed by machine gun fire 'almost as soon as he got over the top' leading B Company. Corporal William George Simon was reported missing and later presumed killed in action. Of Sergeant George Watt's actions we know nothing, by which we must assume that he was one of the fortunate who took part and returned to his trench after the attack failed, and almost certainly breathed a sigh of relief. With so many dead and injured, the attention of the coming days would be on them rather than those who now had to clear up the mess and look out over the bodies of their comrades to the hateful wire and machine guns on the slope above them, and thank their lucky stars.

Just south of 34th division at La Boisselle was the 21st Division and in it the 13th Northumberland Fusiliers were part of 62nd Brigade and 15th DLI of 64th Brigade. They were to attack on the northern side of the Fricourt salient, while the 7th division was to attack to the south of it in an attempt to surround it and force an enemy withdrawal. This was to prove a more successful attack, although the casualties were still horrendous, and the 10th West Yorkshires were to suffer the greatest casualties of any battalion (710). The explanation for the greater success seems to have been that Field Marshal Haig's orders were interpreted to the full, and that a creeping barrage rather than the range extending regularly in hops was used for the artillery, giving the infantry better protection from machine gun fire, and the infantry crawled out into No-Man's-Land during the night, shortening the distance over which they attacked. There was at least one Russian sap dug; this is a shallow tunnel under No-Man's-Land through which the attackers can crawl, and this allowed them to surface beyond the enemy wire. On top of this the wire was much more effectively cut by the artillery. Nevertheless machine gun fire from Fricourt and La Boisselle caused many casualties. In this attack the 13th Northumberlands were acting as support but were carrying up supplies and ammunition to the developing new front line during the day and were closely involved in action, especially with the 64th Brigade on the boundary with the 34th Division to their left. The penetration was deep but could not all be held and a front developed at 'sunken road' a major feature in the landscape and now the metalled road to Contalmaison. The troops of 4th Battalion TS who had penetrated well into the German lines, and possibly including Major Herries, had been forced right into 21st Division's area by machine gun fire from La Boisselle, but had the beneficial effect of causing troops defending Round Wood to issue forth to drive the TS off, and 64th brigade were able to occupy it in their absence. The subsequent withdrawal of the unsupported TS and TI exposed 21st Division's left flank and that was defended by troops redirected by Brigadier Headlam. It had been an expensive but strategically beneficial day for the 21st Division and resulted in the Fricourt salient being abandoned overnight by the Germans without a costly assault. The Germans' account of the day makes it clear that it had not been a good one for them either, in spite of the casualties they had inflicted. Around Fricourt, the British artillery fire had destroyed much of their artillery and many machine guns and positions, and the men in them too. The combinations of mines near the Tambour, gas, smoke and fog had conspired to blunt their responses, and they had insufficient men to man all of the trenches; in many cases only the front line trench was manned. 15th DLI were also taking part in the attack at Fricourt as support troops to 64th Brigade, but no record has been found of Lieutenant Wilson's actions over this period.

It seems that at least 14 men from the church took to the field in the week leading up to and including the attack on the 1st July. In that period 7 of them had been killed or would die of injuries sustained, and that at the end of the day 4 were injured and only three were left to answer the roll call the next morning. This is a much worse outcome than the battle as a whole and is due to the appalling casualties suffered by the TS, TI and 16th NF. On the following Sunday it must have been a daunting prospect for the Minister to enter his pulpit and read to the congregation the list. Perhaps the impact was dulled in that not all the news came in that first week and that the reports in the newspapers had in some way readied the people for what was to come.

What happened after that dire day? In the south Fricourt, Mametz and Montauban were all secure by the 2nd July but Contalmaison took until the 10th and cost 12000 more casualties and resulted in the dismissal of the commander of the 17th Division. What hope had Major Herries! Attacks with fresh troops began at La Boisselle and took it over the next two days at great cost and with the award of at least 2 VCs including for an inspirational attack by Lieutenant Colonel Carton le Wiart who, with one arm, bombed his way into a German trench and turned defeat into victory. To the north, Thiepval was not to fall until the end of September and this new attack was over four days and involved four divisions, 800 guns and 6 of the new-fangled tanks. What hope had the 16th NF and the Salford Pals?

In subsequent days the 13th were in fighting mode for the attack on Shelter Wood. The final step in this operation was to be the capture of Mametz Wood, the village having been captured by the 7th division on the opening day, and though the 13th does not seem to have been in action on 13th July Lieutenant Feggetter of the church was shot in the shoulder and invalided home via the London 4th General Hospital, King's College Hospital in Denmark Hill. No record has been found of his actions in the 13th Battalion during the earlier part of the battle nor of how he came to be injured. No other members of the church are known to have served in this unit.

The battle of the Somme was not over yet though, except for the TS and TI sent north. The 16th NF after a few days around Senlis and Bouzincourt were sent back into the line near Ovillers on the 11th and on the 14th were involved in an attack to consolidate the hold on two high points (45 and 63). Then on the 16th after a night out at Bouzincourt they began the long march up to Bethune. They got 160 fresh men to bolster their ranks on the 1st August and on the 21st went in and out of the line at Cambrin, east of Bethune on the old battlefields of the previous year, until the 18th September. After a break they were in an out of the front near Cuinchy, again close to Cambrin, from 26th to 10th October. On the 13th October they received 279 other ranks in a large draft and then, after training with these new men, marched south, returning to near the Schwaben Redoubt beside Thiepval on 14th November. Even at this late date attacks were being planned but the ground conditions were so wet and muddy these were cancelled, often after the preparations had been made. The 16th were then give a task, probably worse than attacking, which was to recover their own dead from field of the 1st July! It seems remarkably tactless to send men back to collect the skeletons of their friends from a slope up which some of them had struggled and then come back down in retreat, passing the dead and dying, nearly 5 months earlier. On the 23rd November they were in the front line for another abortive attack and lost men due to 'shorts' from the British artillery. It was a pathetic end to what had been an awful summer and they were no doubt glad to withdraw to Valheureux for Christmas and a well-deserved break. There is no record over this later period of any injuries or deaths of men associated with the church, though over much of it those who had been injured on the 1st were away recovering and there were few others left from that original band.