

USE THIS COPY Biog 7 George Cockburn, 15th HLI

Morag Cross 3 Jan 2014

***7.1

There was no official Scottish equivalent of the well known English 'Pals' battalions, but the famous Highland Light Infantry units raised by members of the Boys Brigade, Chamber of Commerce and Corporation Tramways staff were based on comparable principles. Men sharing similar occupations joined a 'themed' battalion, and the 15th (Service) Battalion of The Highland Light Infantry (HLI) was fully assembled from tramways department staff in under two days, an almost unbelievable achievement.

***7.2

On 6 August 1914, a notice appeared in all tram depots: *We are sorry that circumstances have arisen under which you have had to change your uniform this morning*', as about 500 reservists were called up for immediate military service. In response to an appeal by the War Office, the Lord Provost, Sir D M Stevenson, on Thursday 3rd September, recommended that Glasgow *'raise at least two battalions'*, at the City's expense. Overnight, by Friday, *'700 men of the tramways department had ... offer[ed] themselves'*, and just two days later, on Monday, 7th September, *'over 1100 men in the Tramway service have applied'*. However, the confident assertion that *'it will not be necessary to accept the offers that have been made by many women to take temporary situations as conductors or drivers'*, was to prove quite wrong, as illustrated by the (separately told) story of tramdriver Eliza Orr. [Sources: *Glasgow Herald*, 6 Aug 1914, p7; *The Scotsman*, 6 Aug 1914, p7; 5 Sept 1914, p10; 7 Sept 1914, p8].

***7.3

Since 25 August, the general public had been *'enrolling faster than the military authorities could absorb them'*, and by 5 September, over 15,700 Glaswegians had enlisted in Kitchener's 'New Army'. [Sources: *The Scotsman*, 5 Sept 1914, p10].

On Monday, 7 September, the new civic *'Glasgow Tramwaymen's Battalion ... to the number of 1102 ... marched to the City Chambers ... headed by a pipe band ... crowds gathering and cheering... in the green uniform of the motormen and conductors'*. Simultaneous units were being organised by the business community, and as with the 15th (Tramways) Battalion, they were attached to the HLI, forming what became known as the 16th (Boys Brigade), and 17th (Chamber of Commerce) Battalions. [Source: *The Scotsman*, 8 Sept 1914, p7; *Glasgow Herald*, 14 September 1914, p11].

***7.4

The first company of *'sturdy fellows'* left Coplawhill Tram Depot for a final inspection by the Lord Provost in George Square, on 14 September, before beginning training at Gales Camp near Ayr. The recent increase in the minimum height, from 5ft 3ins to 5ft 6ins, had an immediate effect on enlistment, as so many youths were physically below that height, due to poor diet and living conditions, and so-called 'bantam battalions' were formed in due course. [*Glasgow Herald*, 14 Sept 1914, p11; 15 Sept 1914, p11].

***7.5

One of the members of the 15th HLI was George Cockburn, formerly a driver with the Tramways Department, who by October 1915 was a Lance Corporal with 'C' Company. He was born to the coachman for a large mansion house in Polmont, near Falkirk, in October 1884. After his father's early death his mother became a cleaner in Edinburgh to support her children, and by 1901, George was working in an Edinburgh whisky distillery. [Sources: Statutory Registers of Births, Marriages, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; Census 1891, 1901, at www.ancestry.co.uk; Personal information, John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

***7.6

George, now a shipyard labourer, was living in Barloch Street, Possilpark in 1907, when he married Australian-born dressmaker Mabel Turner. He joined the tramways department in 1910, listing his occupation as conductor, when his third child, Christina was born that year. Unfortunately, she died at the age of only 11 months, from tuberculosis. [Sources: Registers of Births, Marriages, Deaths, 1911 Census, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk].

***7.7

George probably enlisted in 1915, and soon became a lance corporal in 'C' Company of the 15th (Tramways) Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry, as befitted a tramdriver (as he was by 1915). He was evidently a loving father, for he sent home a series of illustrated postcards, addressed to his young family Agnes, George, Mary and 'Willie'. In October 1915, 'Aggie' wrote to him at Codford Camp in Wiltshire, *'Dear Daddy, Thank you for the flags, I wish you was home to make something for me, love from Aggie'*. [Source: Personal information, John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

***7.8 a and b

The 15th HLI left Codford, sailing to Boulogne on 23 November, and spent the next two weeks marching between billets en route to Pierregot, and then Martinsart near the River Somme in northern France. *'December 14, Officers and NCOs [sergeants and corporals including Cockburn] of C and D companies into trenches for individual training. December 15 to 17, Companies in trench training. December 18 Battalion ... in trenches at Martinsart'*, where they remained for several days. Christmas 1915 was spent *'in billets at Aveluy, intermittent bombardment by shrapnel and HE [high explosive] shells'*. On 27 December, they replaced their compatriots, the 16th HLI in the front line trenches. The 16th HLI say of their Christmas there, *'In occupancy of F1 sector [North East corner of Authuille Wood]'*, which couldn't be more unrevealing. [Sources: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, April 1916, pp69, 70; 'December 1915', *War Diary, 16th (Service) Battalion, The Highland Light Infantry*, Courtesy of The Royal Highland Fusiliers Museum, Glasgow].

***7.9

Cockburn sent various French souvenir postcards back, one of a mother and baby, dreaming of their absent soldier in French uniform, marked *'Quand tu reviendras'* (When you come back). George writes *'Is this anything like wee Willie ... We have shifted again you will know it is all right we are not so near the post office. Hope you will have a merry Christmas ... I will tell you what it feels like in my*

next letter fondest love'. [Source: Personal information, John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

***7.10

The 17th HLI, the adjacent battalion, satirised their trenches and billets for December 1915, '*Since the Corporation covered in all the open sewers there is no feature of a Glasgow landscape to be compared to a trench*'. And in January, 1916, '*Rats! There are thousands ...in my billet ... last night I counted 34*'. [Source: *The Outpost* (17th HLI Magazine), Jan 1916, pp149, 156].

***7.11

On January 10, 1916, the Tramways Battalion returned to the front line near Bouzincourt, and remained there on and off, rotating between quarters behind the lines, and dugouts when they relieved variously The Northumberland, The Inniskilling, and The Lancashire Fusiliers. On a card showing a French and British soldier holding a French flag between them, George wrote: '*What do you think of this pc. I have got through this first spell of the trenches we are out for a rest for three or four days and we are glad I can tell you. How is Marnie [Mary] and Aggie and Willie Are you looking after them did Santa Claus come ... I would have like to see you ... be a good boy till I come back and we will have a great time. Ta ta for now, Love from Daddy*'. [Source: Personal information, John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

An officer's diary, the 15th HLI, February 1916, '*13th to 28th, in billets at St Gratien, weather very bad, with heavy snow. Brigade cross-country run on 27th, distance about 5 miles ... 15th HLI [came] third. Casualties for the month, 9 ... wounded*'. On the 9th April, '*the enemy put up a notice opposite the battalion, thus - Great Victori near Verdun! 28,000 prisonners, 187 kannons*', and ... *an effigy with a German helmet. On April 11, 2nd Lieut Macfarlane and five [men] left the trenches at 2am to bring in the notice board ... [they] cut the cardboard notice out of the frame, and returned, bringing the notice ... and the wood and sacking forming the effigy, into our trenches at 3am*'. [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, July 1916, p97].

***7.12

A woven fabric card, embroidered 'Souvenir of Senlis', undated - '*Dear Marnie ... Have you got over your illness alright ... There is something doing here soon so I hope it will help to finish the war soon and let us get home again. See and look after Sonnie and Billy and be a good lassie ... live from Daddy*'. [Source: Personal information, John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

On the notorious and bloody first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916, the 15th HLI attacked at Theipval. Two years later, in 1918, a journalist chronicling the 15th HLI visited the battlefield. '*Among the abandoned trenches, the battered foundations of vanished villages ... and the plentiful wooden crosses ... broken rifles and bayonets, unexploded shells, fragments of clothing ... litter the ground at every step ... deep cellars, half filled with earth and pounded masonry are still visible*'. [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, April 1918, p62].

***7.13

Back in Glasgow, life continued for Mabel and the children in Barloch Street. The two boys were both baptised on 26 July 1916, at Possilpark Free Church, when they were respectively 1 and 2 years old. Mary (by now around 9), and Agnes (aged 7), were attending Possilpark Public School, in Allander Street, which took children up to school leaving age. [*Baptismal Register 1882-1919*, Possilpark Free Church (Henry Drummond Memorial), CH3/1183/23, p37, Glasgow City Archives; Possilpark Public School, Admissions Records, 1911-1917, D-ED7/169/4/5/2, pp25-6, 45-6, Glasgow City Archives].

*** 7.14

A visitor to the 15th HLI wrote: *'Cepé Farm, St Quentin 4th-5th April 1917, was the scene of the battalion's most notable exploit ... the taking [of six German] guns ... hauled by hand for ... fifty yards before horses could be used ... One ... is to be a Glasgow trophy of war.'* Meals were different from those served at home. *'Tea', said the Major, 'is one of the two things [he doesn't name the other essential] without which a war cannot be carried on'... These men have to stand in knee-deep water ... includ[ing] the decaying bodies of horses and men and the accumulated debris of months. Tea for them is a God-send. Hot porridge is also sent up ... when the field kitchens can be pushed well forward'*. [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, April 1918, pp62-3].

***7.15

Cockburn says of the food, *'Tell Grammie [grandmother] a good fill-up would just about put me right, fondest love, Daddy'*. And snatching a moment while travelling on a train, *'I am just about sleeping sitting in this carriage. There is eight of us sitting in it all night. I posted this pc at the last station we stopped at, fondest love, from Daddy'*. [Source: Personal information, John Messner, Aileen Strachan, Riverside Museum, Glasgow].

***7.16

By April 1918, there were *'only sixty out of the original tramwaymen'* of 1100 remaining, and the time left to George Cockburn had also run its course. *'April 3rd [1918] Avette itself, an ugly heap of shattered masonry ... The object was the capture of Avette [village near Arras] ... D, B and C [probably Cockburn's unit] Companies ... were to assault and take [the village]... For nearly two hours prior to Zero [hour, 2am] there was ... the silent bustle that [is] the essential prelude ... Platoons laden down with ... Lewis guns and their bombs moved ... shadows in the darkness, to their appointed places, lay down ... motionless ... a German 'verey' light traced a lofty trajectory through the blackness ... Then 2 o'clock ... suddenly broke forth the deadly shrapnel-shower of our barrage ... prone groups of men ... sprang to life ... Slowly forward ... is there any more harrowing experience than scrambling through a wire entanglement? ...From this point any history must necessarily be incomplete ... during that early morning ... ['A' Company] was entrusted with... 'mopping it up', to use another popular phrase... Other men indulged in ... a meal of captured German bread'*. [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, April 1918, pp62; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, July 1918, p94; *Evening Times*, 25 April 1918, p12].

***7.17

Over a dozen machine guns were captured, but *'casualties totalled well towards a hundred'*. George Cockburn, Acting Company Quartermaster Sergeant, 15th HLI, was killed on 3 April 1918, aged 33,

and was posthumously awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre. He is buried 18km from Arras, in Bienvillers Military Cemetery, which was on the front line in April 1918. [Source: *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, April 1918, pp62; 'Bienvillers Military Cemetery: Cemetery Details', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, at www.cwgc.org; Supplement, *Edinburgh Gazette*, 15 July 1918, p2441; *Highland Light Infantry Chronicle*, July 1918, p94; *Evening Times*, 25 April 1918, p12].

***7.18 a and b

The Corporation unveiled the large and impressive bronze war memorial to the '15th Battalion Highland Light Infantry, City of Glasgow Regiment, (Tramways Battalion)', on 9 April 1933. George Cockburn's name was among the 671 names (1933 newspaper accounts say '651' names) of the 'officers, warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and men, who made the supreme sacrifice'. The speed of enlistment was remembered, twenty years after the event, as being even faster than the contemporary newspapers of 1914 suggest. 'We telephoned ... our depots ... by nine o'clock the following morning, 16 hours afterwards, we had a battalion fully raised'. And in another report of the ceremony, 'Within sixteen hours – believed to be a record, they had received 1100 volunteers, and the Battalion was filled up'. There were also 2,500 of the battalion wounded while on active service. [Source: 15th HLI War Memorial, Accession No T.1982.25, Riverside Museum, Glasgow; *The Scotsman*, 10 April 1933, p10; *Glasgow Herald*, 10 April 1933, pp5, 12].

Mabel Constance Cockburn died of heart disease at 191 Bardowie St, in 1934. George Barnley Hough Cockburn joined The Scottish Rifles, and like his father, was killed in action, in October 1944. He lies at Bergen-op-Zoom War Cemetery, in the Netherlands. [Source: Statutory Register of Deaths, at www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk; 'Cockburn, George B H: Casualty Details', and 'Bergen-op-Zoom War Cemetery: Cemetery Details', *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, at <http://www.cwgc.org/>].

***7.19