

Second Lieutenant Colin Mackenzie Selbie



Colin was born in the Birsay United Free Church Manse on 24th February 1889, the second son of the Reverend John Selbie and Margaret Selbie (née Mackenzie). The boys had an elder sister, Jane, and a younger sister, Eleanor. After serving over thirteen years as the minister of Twatt Church, John Selbie moved with his family to Maryculter, where Colin attended Maryculter East School and then Aberdeen Grammar School. Colin studied at Aberdeen University, graduating B.Sc. with distinction in Geology in 1910. Colin's father was then a professor at Aberdeen United Free College.

In September 1911 Colin was appointed Assistant Naturalist in the National Museum, Dublin, where he specialised in the study of Myriapodia and Crustacea. Colin had published a book on crustaceans of the Irish shore and almost completed another on hermit crabs, when he decided to enlist.

Colin joined 15th Royal Scots in Edinburgh as a private on 4th November 1914. His Commanding Officer recommended Colin for a commission and he became a Second Lieutenant in the Scottish Rifles (Cameronians) on 7th January 1915. Colin landed in France on 21st November and was attached to 9th Scottish Rifles, serving in 28th Brigade of 9th (Scottish) Division. It was then in the line near Zillebeke, in the southern part of the Ypres Salient. The winter months that 9th Division spent there was the most difficult period of trench warfare that it ever experienced. Colin was one of many junior officers who took on the responsibility for maintaining the troops' welfare and discipline in these trying conditions.

9th Division enjoyed a month in billets around Merris, from 20th December. Training averaged five hours a day, but there was also time for sporting contests, concert parties and festive season celebrations. 9th Division started on 24th January 1916 to relieve 25th Division in the Ploegsteert sector, where conditions in both the trenches and rest billets were much improved. 9th Division carried out frequent trench raids to dominate No Man's Land. Colin was briefly hospitalised (as a precaution against septic poisoning), after a smoke grenade burst in his hand on 9th February. After the South African Brigade arrived to join 9th Division at the end of April, 28th Brigade was broken up. 9th Scottish Rifles transferred to 27th Brigade on 6th May.

9th Division left Ploegsteert at the end of May and spent a fortnight in billets near Bomy. It then travelled by rail to join Fourth Army for the Battle of the Somme. On 1st July 9th Division was in reserve to XIII Corps, which successfully captured Montauban on the right of the British line next to the French. On the night of 2nd/3rd July, 9th Scottish Rifles took over the east side of Montauban, where the battalion lost 139 casualties (most to heavy German shell-fire) before it was relieved on the 8th.

9th Scottish Rifles was on the left flank of 9th Division's attack on Longueval, a key position in the German second defence system. After the undetected assembly in darkness of thousands of infantry close to the German lines, the attack began at 3-25am on 14th July, behind an intense creeping barrage of mainly high explosive shells. Colin Selbie led his men into the village, where he was killed by a rifle bullet while leading a bombing attack. Colin, then aged 27, was among the 8 officer and 200 other rank casualties of 9th Scottish Rifles that day.

Colin's body was not identified, after the consolidation of Longueval following nearly a week of bitter fighting involving troops from two divisions that eventually completed capture of the devastated village and the adjacent Delville Wood. Colin Mackenzie Selbie is commemorated on Pier and Face 4D of the Thiepval Memorial to the Somme Missing, also on the Birsay War Memorial in Orkney and in the Roll of Honour of Aberdeen University.

Colin's older brother, William Philip Selbie, also studied at Aberdeen University and graduated M.A. He was commissioned into the East Surrey Regiment on 29th April 1915. On the day during which Colin was killed, William arrived in France to join 8th East Surrey Regiment. He served in Italy from December 1917 until March 1918, when he returned to France. He won the Military Cross, and was wounded in the thigh, leading night patrols near Albert in August 1918. William finished the war as a Captain and continued to serve in the British Army after it, in the Army of Occupation in Germany and in its Educational Corps.