

## Lieutenant Robert William Taylor, M.C.



Robert was born at Mounthoolie, Flotta on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1893, the only son of Robert Taylor and Jane Taylor (née Sutherland). Robert had a sister, Mary, who was 14 years older. Their mother died, of meningitis on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1901, when aged only 44. After he completed his schooling in Stromness, Robert joined the National Bank of Scotland. He had transferred to its branch in Thurso, when he completed his exams and was admitted to the Institute of Bankers in Scotland on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1914. Robert had been promoted and returned to Stromness when he decided to enlist. He did so in Kirkwall on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1915 and then travelled to Glasgow to join No. 6 Depot, Royal Field Artillery as a Gunner.

Robert was posted to 4th Battery, 1 B Reserve Brigade R.F.A. at Ipswich, soon promoted to Bombardier, then Lance Corporal. After his commanding officer recommended Robert for a commission, he was appointed 2nd Lieutenant in the Special Reserve on 1<sup>st</sup> October 1915.

Robert joined D Battery, 83rd Brigade R.F.A. in the field on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1916. D Battery was the only one of the four in the Brigade that was equipped with the 4.5 inch howitzer, the others firing 18-pounder field guns. 83rd Brigade was in 18th (Eastern) Division, recruited mainly from the Home Counties and East Anglia.

18th Division attacked at Montauban on 1<sup>st</sup> July, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, when it was one of the few British divisions to take all its objectives, at the cost of 3,115 casualties. 18th Division lost 2,726 more casualties between 14<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> July, fighting at Trônes and Delville Woods.

After a couple of months in the line near Armèntieres, 18th Division returned to the Battle of the Somme in September to take part in the attack on Thiepval. 83rd Brigade moved into position near Contalmaison, from where it supported the Canadian Corps attacking German positions between Courcelette and Martinpuich. Robert was lightly wounded on the 12<sup>th</sup>, but returned to duty three days later. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, 83rd Brigade supported Canadian 28th Battalion in a successful attack east of Courcelette on 26<sup>th</sup> September. Robert was admitted to No. 3 Casualty Clearing Station during the next day, then to 14 General Hospital at Boulogne two days later, with gun shot wounds to his left arm and right shoulder. After treatment Robert was evacuated to England, where he made a good recovery.

Robert was able to return to Orkney for a short leave in early 1917. His family enjoyed seeing him home again, but sadly he would not return again. Robert rejoined his battery on 10<sup>th</sup> April. 18th Division took part in the Battle of Arras, when it attacked Cherisy on 3<sup>rd</sup> May, but failed to capture the village. Robert survived the fierce fighting there unscathed.

In July 18th Division moved into the Ypres Salient, where its artillery supported 30th Division's attack on the Gheluvelt Plateau on the 31<sup>st</sup>, the first day of the Third Battle of Ypres (better known as the Battle of Passchendaele). It was probably during his own division's attacks there (after it had relieved 30th Division on 4<sup>th</sup> August) that Robert Taylor earned the award of a Military Cross. He did so by directing the fire of his battery's guns to break up two German counter-attacks, when his signallers had become casualties.

Robert was also promoted to full Lieutenant before his division returned to the front to begin the relief of 11th Division on 10<sup>th</sup> October at Poelcapelle. Robert's battery supported attacks on Poelcapelle on the 12<sup>th</sup>, also a successful attack by 53rd Brigade on the 22<sup>nd</sup> that captured the Brewery, Noble's Farm, Meunier House and Tracas Farm. However, Robert was seriously wounded by the "daily hate" of German artillery fire on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, a "quiet day" for his battery. Robert survived the difficult evacuation to No. 47 Casualty Clearing Station at Dozinghem, but died there of his wounds on 24<sup>th</sup> October.

Robert's CO was greatly saddened by his death and recorded a touching tribute to Robert that was published in *The Scotsman* of Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1917: 'Lieut. R.W. Taylor, M.C., R.F.A. (died of wounds) was a highly popular and efficient young officer, who had been through nearly two years of the hardest fighting, and won the Military Cross last August by a rare exhibition of tenacity and skill in sending back information of the highest value while acting as forward observation officer. He had been all the time with one battery, and his major, an officer of the old Regular Army, had formed a high opinion of his capacity and character. "He was", he wrote, "my best subaltern officer, and I have seldom met one so good. He was besides one of the most unselfish and cheerful fellows I have ever been lucky enough to soldier with, and we all feel his loss as a friend as much as a soldier". Lt. Taylor who was only 24 years of age, was a native of Flotta, Orkney, and was in civil life, in the service of the National Bank of Scotland'.

Robert Taylor is buried in Grave IX.C.18 in Dozinghem Military Cemetery, Poperinge, West-Vlaanderen, Belgium. He is commemorated on Stromness War Memorial, also on a gravestone and on the war memorial in Flotta churchyard, while his photo is inside the church. His Military Cross is in Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall, having been donated by his niece, Mrs. Clara Sutherland.

