

10716 Private Ian Edward Andrew Merrilees



Ian was born on 21st June 1897 in the School House at Binbister in Harray, the fourth son of school master Archibald Merrilees and Letitia Merrilees (née Kelly). Archibald was a native of Stirling and he taught there briefly after qualifying, but came to Orkney in 1886. After short spells at Wasbister in Rousay, where the first two sons were born, and Flotta, Archibald was appointed the school master at Harray. Letitia taught music there, also gave birth to three more sons and two daughters, during the nine years the family enjoyed there.

The Merrilees family moved to Cogarff in Aberdeenshire and then to Shettleston in Glasgow. Tragically, Letitia contracted cerebro-spinal fever in the epidemic that broke out in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 1906 and died after ten days of illness. Letitia's father served as a Quartermaster in the Cameron Highlanders. Probably stirring stories that she passed on to her sons about Army life influenced two to join the Regular Army soon after completing their schooling.

When the Great War broke out, second oldest Merrilees son James was 25 years old and serving in the 6th Dragoon Guards (Carabiniers). James landed in France with his regiment on 16th August 1914 and was on the BEF right flank at Mons. Second youngest son Ian had landed in France in 1st Battalion, The Royal Scots Fusiliers two days before James. Ian was just over a month past his seventeenth birthday and overseas service was restricted to soldiers over 18 years-old, so either Ian gave a false age when he joined up or his battalion turned a "blind eye" to his age at mobilization.

Archibald Merrilees had married again and was aged 53, when he enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders on 12th September 1914. Archibald gave his age as 44 years and 2 months then and must have proved himself fit to be a soldier, as he landed in France on 11th November as one of the very few early wartime volunteer recruits to reach the Western Front during 1914. Archibald joined 1st Battalion, The Gordon Highlanders, which was rebuilding its decimated personnel after three quarters were lost when it was surrounded during the retreat from Mons.



1st Royal Scots Fusiliers and 1st Gordons both served in British 3rd Division in France. In a letter home to a niece in March 1915, Archibald stated that he had met his son Ian twice in France, giving details of one meeting when they passed in a trench as Ian's unit relieved his Dad's in the line. Archibald's health eventually failed, after he transferred to 1st Garrison Battalion, Seaforth Highlanders and served in Greece, so he was discharged, as unfit due sickness in November 1917.

All five Merrilees brothers served during the Great War; four in the Army, the youngest, Quintin, in the Navy. The middle son, Robert, served in France in the Army Service Corps. He was also discharged as unfit due sickness in 1917 and died in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary on 3rd October.



British 3rd and 14th Divisions attacked a strong German position at Bellewaarde near Ypres on 25th September 1915, as a subsidiary attack to the start of the Battle of Loos. 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers followed the explosion of four small mines to capture their objective, but German counter-attacks drove them out. The Royal Scots Fusiliers lost 33 killed, 126 wounded and 162 missing, with Ian Merrilees among the missing. He had been taken prisoner wounded and died in a German field hospital two days later, aged only 18. Ian was buried by the Germans and he now lies in Grave A.2 in Halluin Communal Cemetery, Nord, France. The grave there was visited in 1990 by two members of his family, a niece and a nephew.