

410523 Private George Miller Laird



George was born in 48 Victoria Street, Kirkwall on 16th May 1895, the youngest son of merchant seaman William Laird and Martha Laird (née Taylor). When George left the Burgh School he worked as a farm labourer, but also served four years as a Territorial in the Royal Garrison Artillery and he was a member of the St Magnus Cathedral Congregation. On 29th March 1913 George, with friends Robert Ritch of Deerness and James Foubister of Holm, sailed from Liverpool on the White Star liner *Arabic*, bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia and onward to Portland, Maine. On arrival in Canada George made his way to Ottawa, where he worked as a labourer, then as a clerk.

George volunteered for overseas service with the Canadian Army at Smiths Falls, near Ottawa on 10th March 1915. George initially trained in the 42nd (Lanark & Renfrew) Regiment, until 8th May, when he sailed to join the Canadian garrison on Bermuda. George joined 59th Battalion on 25th May and sailed from Bermuda four days later on the troopship *Grampian*. On landing at Plymouth on 9th June George's draft travelled to Bramshott Camp in Sussex, where 4th Canadian Division was forming. On 22nd June George joined 38th Battalion and after two more months training he crossed to France to land at Le Havre on 14th August.

After difficult fighting to stop a German offensive at Mount Sorrel in Flanders during June, the divisions of the Canadian Corps were preparing to move to join the Battle of the Somme before it entered a third month. 4th Canadian Division took over part of the front line in Flanders to spend a few weeks on the learning curve in trench warfare. George was probably involved in some of the trench raids and small attacks that 4th Canadian Division made, before it followed the other Canadian divisions to the Somme battlefield. The Canadian Corps had replaced the Australians in the Pozières sector and, at great cost, advanced slowly towards the village of Courcellette.

4th Canadian Division moved south in early October and began to replace 3rd Canadian Division in the left of the Canadian Corps' front on the 10th. 4th Canadian Division moved right on the 14th to start relieving 1st Canadian Division, when completed on the 17th 4th Canadian Division came under the command of British II Corps.

38th Battalion had made the journey south, passing through the town of Albert to move into Tara Camp on 12th October. It began sending out work parties next day, while long-range German artillery shells landed in the camp area. There was a trickle of casualties both in work parties and in camp, before 38th Battalion moved into the line during the night of 26th/27th October at chalk pits on the Le Sars–Pys road. Shell-fire on the trenches was heavier, so were the casualties which it inflicted. On 29th October George Laird was reported to have been killed in action two days earlier, aged 21.

George's body was probably buried in the trenches, but it was not identified when recovered and he has no known grave. After the war the Canadian Government, to commemorate the country's 60,000 soldiers who died in France and have no known grave, decided to build a single national memorial on Vimy Ridge, the site of a notable Canadian Corps triumph in May 1917. George Laird did not live to take part in the fighting there, but he is one of the 18 Orcadian Canadians commemorated on the Vimy Memorial. It was unveiled by King Edward VIII on 26th July 1936, in probably his most significant official duty as king. In 2006 the Canadian Government funded a major refurbishment of its stone work.

