

20340 Private James Cooper



James Cooper was born on 7th February 1894, the second son of Master Mariner William Cooper and Annie Cooper (née Sinclair), in their home in Junction Road. The family had moved to Garden's Buildings in Catherine Place when William Cooper died suddenly on the Kirk Green in Broad Street on New Year's Day 1903. Annie Cooper was left as a single parent with nine children, three boys and six girls.

When he left school James joined the Royal Navy as a Boy Sailor, but did not sign up to serve the usual commitment of 12 years when he reached age 18. James returned home to Kirkwall and started work as a baker, staying with the family which had moved to 13 School Place, Kirkwall. James gave his age as 24 (but was not quite 21 years-old) when the RSM of the Orkney Territorial Gunners, Thomas Bond, persuaded him to enlist in Kitchener's New Army on 22nd January 1915. James travelled to Edinburgh, where he tried to join the Royal Scots Greys. On 29th January he signed up at Glencorse Barracks to join the Royal Scots. Two days later James joined the Regiment's 3rd Battalion at Weymouth.

James trained to become an infantry soldier, but spent over a fortnight in hospital being treated for a bacterial infection. On 19th May 1915 James landed in France with a draft for 1st Royal Scots, then serving in Flanders as part of 27th Division. James was fortunate to join 27th Division while it was resting, after losing over 7,000 casualties in the Second Battle of Ypres.

After a short rest, 27th Division moved to the relatively quiet Armentières sector on the French side of the French/Belgian border. In September 27th Division took over the sector near Fontaine Les Cappy, as the first British formation to campaign south of the Somme since the Battle of the Aisne. French troops took over the sector again in October and 27th Division enjoyed a month of rest and training. This included re-equipment for service at Salonika in Greece, as 27th Division had been selected to serve there. 27th Division entrained for Marseilles on 10th November, but various problems with transport availability and political negotiations with the Greek Government (which stayed officially neutral, but did approve the deployment) meant it did not finish disembarking at Salonika until 13th February 1916.

Allied forces in Salonika included French, British, Serbian, Italian and a few Russian troops, under French command. They were opposed by mostly Bulgarian troops, but with a significant German contribution that included the overall command. 27th Division moved into the east of the line on the Gulf of Orphani. The climate in Salonika and sanitary conditions in the field were difficult and James Cooper was admitted to 4th Canadian General Hospital on 12th December 1915 with a fever. He did not re-join 1st Royal Scots until 6th January 1916.

In August, 27th Division moved into the Krusha Balkan Mountains, overlooking the Struma Valley. 27th Division attacked into the valley at dawn on 30th September. 2nd Camerons and 2nd Gloucesters swept into the village of Karadzakaj-Bala, but 1st Argylls took heavy losses from Bulgarian shells and machine-gun fire and they were stopped short of Karadzakaj-Zir. 1st Royal Scots took Zir just before dark and then beat off five counter-attacks that night.

James Cooper was killed in action in the early hours of 1st October 1916, in one of the Bulgarian counter-attacks on Karadzakaj-Zir. James was buried then close to the village, but his body was exhumed after the war ended and he is now buried in Grave IV.E.3 in Struma Military Cemetery. The cemetery contains 896 identified casualties and is about 50 miles north-east of the city of Thessaloniki, as Salonika is now known.